

Islam, Once a Hopeless Frontier, Now?

Part I: Living like Jesus, a Torah-Observant Jew: Delighting in God's Law for Incarnational Witness to Muslims

by Joshua Massey

Introduction

Christian missionaries have a serious problem when trying to proclaim good news to devout Muslims. Without major life adjustments, even the most spiritually vibrant among us tend to appear to orthodox Muslims as unclean pagans, whose devotion is often mistaken for irreverence toward God. Many of these Muslims would not dare enter a Christian home lest they become ritually defiled. Missionaries who embrace contextualization and adjust their diet accordingly may grow a beard and don local clothes, but the actual practice of their faith often does not always communicate holy living to onlooking Muslims. Such missionaries generally do not pray liturgically in a particular direction, perform ritual ablutions before prayer, or pray at set times throughout each day. In short, most missionaries to Muslims, even pro-C4 and pro-C5 workers,¹ simply do not live and worship according to Muslim categories of righteousness, which we typically perceive as legalistic and works-oriented. As a result, most missionaries ultimately fail to earn the spiritual respect needed to be effective witnesses among devout Muslims. This, of course, does not imply that most missionaries fail to earn the *respect* of all Muslims, or even the *spiritual respect* of nominal or less devout Muslims. The emphasis here is on God-fearing, devout and orthodox Muslims, whose religious worldview is deeply immersed in ritual purity and other Islamic categories of righteousness. Ironically, however, these categories of righteousness are extremely similar to Jewish Torah-observance as practiced by Jesus and his earliest followers. Therefore, if Gentile missionaries to Muslims begin to live more like Jesus and his apostles lived—like Torah-observant Jews—we will be far more likely to earn the spiritual respect of Muslims, and thereby be more effective messengers of the Gospel.

In order for Gentile Torah-observance to be genuine, and not some kind of contextual façade or legalistic delusion, we need to take a fresh look at the role of the Law in the New Covenant, and Gentile freedom to obey it. We will be greatly helped in this task by surveying the theological work of several Messianic Jewish theologians.

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Why spend so much time building a foundation for incarnational living on the Torah when Paul's example of becoming *all things to all men* is far simpler and more than adequate? A cursory look at Paul's example in 1 Cor 9 may suffice for ministry to Gentiles, but we must go much deeper into Paul's understanding of the Law if we want to minister effectively to peoples whose worldview is dominated by divine law and religio-legal categories of thought, as is the case with both Jewish and Muslim peoples. In ministry to Muslims then, we need to look less at Paul's approach to Gentiles, and closely study how he, Jesus and all Christ's apostles lived amongst and ministered to Jews.

A better understanding and appreciation of the Law is therefore critically important for four salient reasons:

- 1) Knowing the difference between legalism and being free to obey the Law will help prevent the inconsistencies of "contextual chameleons," whose behavior oscillates according to the people they are with at any given moment (e.g., Muslims or Christians), often resulting in a nagging incongruity that can pester missionaries about their own authenticity, i.e., "if my Muslim friends saw me now, might they feel I misled them to think I live differently than I actually do?"
- 2) Rooting incarnational witness in the Law frees a missionary from the occasional discomfort of wondering whether or not it is healthy to adopt Islamic forms which are ultimately rooted in flawed theology. However, when Torah-observance guides our personal liturgical practice and diet (among other things), it becomes clear that we are actually living more like our Lord and his Jewish apostles.
- 3) The Torah provides a much firmer foundation to explain our lifestyle adjustments to accusing Christians who think we've abandoned the faith or succumbed to syncretism.
- 4) Fourthly, understanding the Law as interpreted by the world's

preeminent rabbinic theologian (i.e., Jesus Christ our Lord) will not only help us live incarnation-ally among Muslims, but it will help us preach a Gospel *with* Law that truly is good news to Muslims. A gospel without Law may have been good news to Gentiles in the first century who didn't want to keep the Law in the first place, but it is *not* good news to most Muslims, who share a Jewish appreciation of delighting in the Law as "*a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path*" (Ps 119:105). A gospel without Law is to most Muslims

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more akin to antinomianism, a lawless, chaotic existence that demands unbridled freedoms and eventually results in what we see today in the "Christian" West: the virtual rebirth of Sodom and Gomorrah.

"*The Law*," Paul taught "*is good if one uses it properly*"² and doesn't pervert it into burdensome legalism. How then are we to understand the Law in order to use it properly?

Understanding the Law

"The Law," according to David Stern, author of *The Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, "is the great *terra incognita* (the unexplored territory) of Christian theology" (1991:126). Stern maintains that the church hardly knows what to make of the Torah or how to fit it together with the New Testament, then concludes that Gentile Christianity has gone far astray in its understanding of the Law. Therefore, according to Stern, the most urgent task of theology today is to correct its view of the Law (:125). How could

Christian theology have strayed so far in this matter of the Law?

First, we have confused an abuse and perversion of the Law (called legalism) with the beauty of the Law as God intended it. The Psalmist sings of his love for and delight in the Torah in Psalm 119,

1. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!
18. Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.
34. Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart
44. I will keep thy law continually, for ever and ever;
51. Godless men utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from thy law.
53. Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake thy law.
55. I remember thy name in the night, O LORD, and keep thy law.
61. Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget thy law.
70. their heart is gross like fat, but I delight in thy law.
72. The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.
77. Let thy mercy come to me, that I may live; for thy law is my delight.
92. If thy law had not been my delight, I should have perished in my affliction.
97. Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day.
113. I hate double-minded men, but I love thy law.
126. It is time for the LORD to act, for thy law has been broken.
136. My eyes shed streams of tears, because men do not keep thy law.
142. Thy righteousness is righteous for ever, and thy law is true.
150. They draw near who persecute me with evil purpose; they are far from thy law.
153. Look on my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget thy law.
163. I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love thy law.
165. Great peace have those who love thy law; nothing can make them stumble.³

Jesus also made his attitude toward the Law crystal clear in Matthew 5:17-18,

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an

iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Strangely, these verses are often understood by Gentile Christians to mean that Jesus *did* abolish the Law *after* he fulfilled it with a perfect life. However, even a cursory look at this verse makes it clear that Jesus taught the Torah will retain its validity “*till heaven and earth pass away.*”

Furthermore, no Jew would ever accuse a rabbi of putting “an end” to the Law for his very vocation was to *teach* the Law. Instead, the Greek terms for “abolish” and “fulfill” are technical terms in rabbinic argumentation. An accusation of “abolishing” (*kataluo*) the Law was levied against one who *misinterpreted* it as a poor exegete. The term “fulfill” (*plerosai*) implies “to cram full, bring to full expression, show forth the intended meaning” (Fischer 1990: 23). Therefore, the end of the Law, as Christians often suppose is being discussed, is not at all the issue here. Instead, Jesus is saying he has not come to give yet another misleading interpretation of the Torah, but rather to help people understand it *fully*.

David Bivin, director of the Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research, has accurately paraphrased Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:17–18,

“Never imagine for a moment,” Jesus says, “that I intend to abrogate the Law by misinterpreting it. My intent is not to weaken or negate the Law, but by properly interpreting God’s Written Word I aim to establish it, that is, make it even more lasting. I would never invalidate the Law by ... removing something from it through misinterpretation. Heaven and earth would sooner disappear than something from the Law. Not the smallest letter in the alphabet, the yod, nor even the decorative spur,⁴ will ever disappear from the Law.” (1983:115)

“Filling” the Law with all the meaning God intended was actually a commonly expected role of the Messiah in Second Temple Judaism, as articulated by the Samaritan woman at the well. Jews everywhere were arguing whether Shammai or Hillel’s interpretation of the Torah was correct. Some favored one sage, while others favored another. How was the common person to sort out so many divergent views among Torah commentators? “*When the*

Messiah comes,” the Samaritan woman said, “*he will explain everything to us*” (John 4:25 NIV). This same verse in the ancient Aramaic *Peshitta* makes this expectation even clearer, “*... he will teach us everything*” (Lamsa 1990). And that is exactly what Jesus did.

As seen in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ commentary on the Law didn’t really lower any of its requirements at all; it heightened them. The Law simply stated one must not commit adultery; but Jesus taught that if a man merely *looks* upon a woman with lust in his heart, he has already committed it (Mt 5:29). The Law states one must not commit murder; but Jesus taught that anyone who is angry with his brother or insults him will be in danger of hell fire (Mt 5:22). In short, Jesus taught people that the Law is concerned with the attitude of our hearts, not just what is acted out in behavior.

Jesus surely showed contempt for some of the Oral Law, also known as the “tradition of the elders” (Mt 15:2), which was believed to have been given by God orally to Moses on Sinai.⁵ According to rabbinic interpretation, God enjoined Moses not to record these additional laws, maxims, and explanations of the Written Law, but to deliver them to the people by word of mouth. They therefore remained unwritten for centuries before finally being recorded in the Mishna at the beginning of the third century CE. This Oral Law was believed to provide a hedge of protection around the Written Law. Unfortunately, it sometimes missed God’s purpose in the Law and therefore, according to Jesus, hindered proper obedience to the Law, e.g., regarding ritual purity, *Corban*, and Sabbath observance (Mt 5:2–9, 12:2). Jesus also disagreed strongly with more than a few *halakhic* laws (a form of rabbinic legislation derived from biblical texts) when these, like the Oral Law, misinterpreted God’s intention in the Law. We should not conclude therefore that all oral and halakhic law missed the mark. Indeed, as we shall see later, Jesus and his apostles fully observed many of these traditions and extra-biblical laws. Furthermore, where Jesus does take issue with oral or halakhic misinterpretations of the Law, as Arthur Patzia notes, “it is important

to realize that Jesus is not condemning the Law of Moses as such—a law that he too would have regarded as divine revelation,” (1995:38) retaining its validity *till heaven and earth pass away* (Mt 5:18).

This is, in fact, the position of a great number of Messianic Jews today. The Law of Moses, they say, remains in full force today—for *Jewish people*. This was clearly the position of early Jewish Christians, as seen in Acts 21:18–26, where Luke writes,

... Paul went in with us to James; and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or *observe the customs*. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that *you yourself live in observance of the law*. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity.” Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself with them and went into the temple, to give notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for every one of them.

For James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem Council, Paul’s course of action was clear. Paul not only had to show Jewish believers that he was Torah-observant, but that he was also still living according to Jewish customs.

Paul’s epistle to Galatians clearly taught *Gentiles* not circumcise their sons or live according to Jewish customs. Nevertheless, Gentiles aren’t Jewish, and need not convert to Judaism or live like Jews to follow

Jesus. The Jerusalem Council had already made this clear in Acts 15, as James reminded us above. However, James knows it is inconceivable that Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, would teach *Jews* not to circumcise their sons or live according to the Torah. Such baseless slander needed to be exposed, so Paul did not hesitate to do exactly as James prescribed so *many thousands* of Jewish Christians—all *zealous for the Law*—could see that Paul himself was living *in observance of the law* (Ac 21:20,24).

We could add countless biblical examples showing that Jesus, Peter, Paul and other apostles remained Torah-observant throughout their lives (Friedman 2001; Young 1995, 1997; Stern 1991), and more will be mentioned below as we explore how the Law guides us in incarnational witness to Muslims.

The Clash of Jewish Missiologies

However, if Jesus and his apostles remained Torah-observant and believed that the Law would retain its validity until heaven and earth passed away, how then could Christian theology have strayed so far off the path of exegetical integrity and confused proper Torah-observance with a perversion of the Law called legalism? Acts 15:1 reveals the source of an early conflict that arose between various Jewish followers of Jesus, “*Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’*” Paul and Barnabas took the matter directly to the highest authority, the Jerusalem Council, where “*some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses’*” (15:5).

To process what happens next, we need to review some basic Jewish missiology during the Second Temple period, before Jesus was born. Jewish missionaries acknowledged two different kinds of Gentile converts. *Proselytes of righteousness* (*ger tsedek*) were full converts to Judaism, adopted Jewish identity, were baptized in a *miqveh*,⁶ circumcised if male, and required to obey all the Law of Moses. They were considered like “a new-born child,”

given a Hebrew name, and called a son or daughter of Abraham. By contrast, *proselytes of the gate* (*ger ha-sha’ar*) were half-converts, also called “God-fearers”, and did not assume Jewish identity (Ac 10:22, 13:26). These were not baptized, circumcised or required to obey all the Mosaic Law. Instead, they were only required to obey the seven Noahic Laws, which were believed to have been given to Noah and therefore binding upon both Jew and Gentile.⁷ These were to abstain from (1) idolatry, (2) blasphemy, (3) murder, (4) sexual immorality, (5) theft, (6) eating a portion of a living animal, and (7) to establish a legal system administering justice and enforcing the prior six commandments when living in lands where they are not already codified as law. God-fearing Gentiles (i.e., half-converts) were therefore free to remain uncircumcised, eat non-kosher, and do “as they please” on the Sabbath. As you might imagine, absence of a circumcision requirement alone was enough to insure that the number of God-fearers far exceeded that of full-proselytes.

But if Jewish missionary practice already had two categories of Gentile converts, and one was not required to be circumcised and obey all the Mosaic Law, why then did these believing Pharisees insist before the Jerusalem Council that all Gentiles do so? The answer may lie within their understanding of the Great Commission itself, where Jesus clearly taught that *baptism* was to be part of discipling *all nations* (Mt 28:19). Given the two categories of proselytes already operational at the time, and the fact that proselyte baptism was reserved only for full converts to Judaism, who were also circumcised and required to obey all of the Law, it is highly likely that many Jewish Christians naturally concluded Jesus was not interested in making half-converts to Judaism. Surely, they may have reasoned, Jesus wants Gentiles to enjoy and delight in *all* of the Law. Did he not teach, “*Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven*” (Mt 5:19)?

One can almost hear these believing Pharisees put forth their case to James and the elders:

How did the Lord reply to the rich young ruler who asked how to inherit eternal life? Did Jesus not reply that he should “*keep the commandments*”?⁸ Do not the Scriptures tell us that Gentiles must first be circumcised before they celebrate the Passover with us? As it is written, “*No uncircumcised male may eat of it*.”⁹ How then can Gentiles eat the body and drink the blood of Christ, our Passover lamb, without first being circumcised?¹⁰ Even if Jesus left room for two kinds of converts to Messianic Judaism, why should Gentiles settle for becoming half-converts when they can delight in and benefit from all of God’s glorious Law? Circumcision is not just Law; it *precedes* the Law by several centuries! It is the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham to bless all nations of the earth! Why should those nations not also carry the same sign of the covenant in their flesh after they have been blessed by him who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, who was himself circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law of Moses?¹¹ God almost struck Moses down when he failed to circumcise his son.¹² Rabbi Paul, you yourself circumcised Timothy before allowing him to journey with your team.¹³ Why such inconsistency? You teach the Law is good if used properly,¹⁴ so why should we water down the expectations for following the Messiah, endorsing a position that will encourage Gentiles to live without the glorious guiding light of God’s Law? As the Psalmist wrote, “*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night*.”¹⁵ The Law is no burden; it is a light unto our feet!

Clearly, there were no easy answers to settle this dispute. “*After there had been much debate,*” Peter reminds them that God fully accepted the Gentiles who believed, as evidenced by “*giving them the Holy Spirit*” (Ac 15:7–8), even though they had *not* become Jewish or submitted to the whole Torah. Peter then adds another jaw-dropping statement regarding Jewish identity,

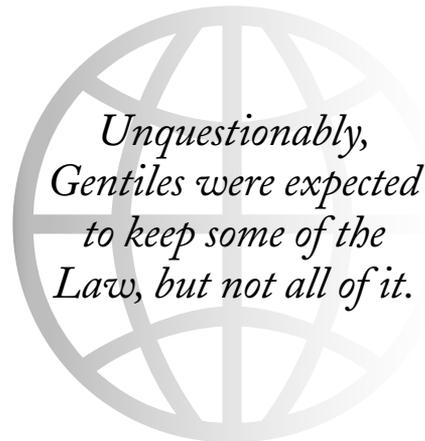
“God made no distinction between us and them” (15:9), showing their distinction between God-fearers and full-proselytes to be superfluous. Therefore, Peter could boldly baptize Gentiles without them first becoming Jewish (10:47).

James then pronounced the Council’s final decision on the matter, requiring Gentile Believers to abstain from (1) food polluted by idols, (2) sexual immorality, (3) the meat of strangled animals, and (4) blood (15:19–20). The first two prohibitions seem clear enough, but the third and fourth often require clarification for Gentile readers. A common Greek delicacy involved roasting an animal which had been killed without the shedding of blood, usually accomplished by strangulation or drowning. If the blood of an animal does not drain according to Biblical Law, it congeals in veins and makes the meat illegal to eat. God commanded Moses,

If any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, No person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood. Any man also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood.... (Lev 17:10-13)

According to Mosaic Law, eating blood was illegal for both Jews and Gentiles. The penalty for such an offence would not only result in being “cut off from among his people,” but God himself testifies, “I will set my face against that person”—a punishment reserved throughout Scripture only for those who offer their children to Molech (Lev 20:3), turn to mediums and wizards (20:6), and reject God’s Law or spurn his commandments (26:15–17).¹⁶ Naturally, with such severe consequences for both Jewish and Gentile offenders, the Jerusalem Council forbade Gentile believers from eating the meat of strangled animals.

But if eating the meat of strangled animals was forbidden because of blood, why then is abstinence from blood repeated as a fourth item? In view of the fact that the Greek for blood $\alpha\iota\mu\alpha$ (*baima*) is sometimes used idiomatically for murderous “bloodshed,”¹⁷ some scholars believe this may be a reference to murder. Others believe it refers to the eating of blood, e.g., Greek dishes cooked in blood stew. Risking redundancy, the council may have mentioned blood directly because Gentiles unfamiliar with Torah needed both kinds of blood cuisine spelled out clearly to avoid confusion.



Either way, the Jerusalem Council’s ruling helps us see that the apostles did *not* expect Gentile Believers to keep *all* of the Mosaic Law—opposing Judaizing believers who insisted otherwise—but *did* expect them to keep *some* of it. Why? “To keep peace when fellowshiping with Jews,” is a typical Gentile Christian understanding of this ruling, as if we can now enjoy blood sausage and blood stew¹⁸ at church pot lucks, especially given the unlikelihood that Jews might visit on any given Sunday. Unfortunately, this understanding doesn’t explain the additional command to abstain from sexual immorality. Can we now be sexually immoral if Jews don’t attend our congregations? Surely not.

Unquestionably, Gentiles were expected to keep *some* of the Law, but not *all* of it. In fact, the Law that the Jerusalem Council expected Gentiles to keep is remarkably similar to the Seven Noahic Laws. If blood is understood as bloodshed, the council then affirmed four of the six prohibi-

tions—the seventh, you will recall, is not a prohibition but an injunction to establish a legal system to administer justice. The two omitted by the council were theft and blasphemy, which hardly needed mentioning since theft was already illegal throughout the empire and blasphemy was rather obvious, even for Gentiles, since “Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times” (Ac 15:21 NIV).

If the Law is indeed still in full force for Jews today (as many Messianic Jewish scholars firmly believe), and if the Jerusalem Council did not require Gentile believers to keep it all, are we to conclude that God still expects Jews to keep all of the Torah—as interpreted by Jesus and his apostles—and Gentiles to keep only some of it? A growing number of Messianic Jewish theologians agree that the testimony of Scripture does point in this direction. David Stern, author of the *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* and the *Jewish New Testament*, reminds us,

The Jerusalem Council made no change whatever in the Torah as it applies to Jews, so that a number of years later there could still be in Jerusalem “tens of thousands” of Messianic Jews who were “zealots for the Torah.”¹⁹ It should not surprise us if New Covenant Torah specifies different commandments for Jews and Gentiles. The Five Books of Moses have commands which apply to some groups and not others—to the king but not to his subjects, to *cohanim* (priests) but not to other Jews, to men but not to women. [Similarly], the New Testament too has different commands for different categories of people—men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters, leaders and followers, and widows as distinct from other women. (1991:156)

Different contexts and parties require different laws. Surely the Israelites, God’s firstborn among the nations, are a unique party in a unique context of God’s plan for redemptive history.²⁰ Therefore, it is not difficult to conceive that God may desire this “holy, set apart nation” to observe unique laws which are not required for all peoples. To insist otherwise is to disregard the plain meaning of terms like “everlasting” and “forever” which God used

to describe the Israelites' contractual obligation to, for example, laws of circumcision and Sabbath.²¹

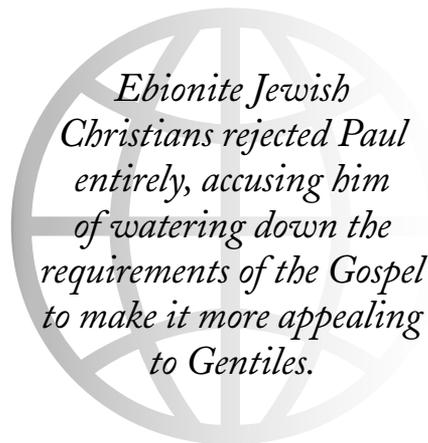
It is interesting to note which commandments of the Decalogue are missing from the Noahic Laws: (1) Honor your father and mother. (2) Do not covet your neighbor's property or wife. (3) Do not bear false witness or give false testimony. (4) Keep my Sabbath day holy by doing no work. Which of these four commandments are Gentile Christians exempt from obeying? Is it permissible for Gentile Christians to dishonor their parents, covet their neighbor's wife and property, lie, or profane the Sabbath? There is surely a wide range of Christian opinion about the Sabbath, coverage of which would take us far from the focus of this paper.²² However, few would argue that Gentiles would do well to obey *more* of the Mosaic Law than what is contained in the Seven Noahic Laws, especially laws affirmed by Jesus' teaching in the Gospels.

In fact, Gentiles are free to obey *as much* of the Mosaic Law as they like. As long as Gentile Christians understand that they will gain no extra points with God for self-Judaizing, and they do not allow their Torah-observance to inhibit fellowship with other believers (Gal 2:12), they are completely free to delight in all of God's Law because, as Paul wrote, "*the law is holy, righteous and good*" (Rom 7:12), and "*the law is good if one uses it properly*" (1 Tim 1:8).

The Law was never meant to save anyone. Abraham's righteousness came by faith *before* he was circumcised. Circumcision was merely the sign of God's covenant with him. A renowned Pharisee of the first century wrote, "*We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith...*" (Gal 2:15–16). Justification never came through Torah-observance, but rather, the Torah is God's detailed answer to two very crucial questions: (1) How does God want to be loved by his firstborn among the nations, a holy priesthood set apart to bless all nations? And (2) how does God want them to love their fellow man? God's concise answer is what Jesus calls the two greatest commandments,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. (Mt 22:37–40)

God's expanded and detailed answer is the entire Law of Moses, a comprehensive extrapolation of these two great commandments. Would it not be wonderful to know how God wants to be loved, and how he wants us to love one another? Then meditate on the Law day and night, especially as taught



by the world's preeminent rabbinic theologian, Jesus Christ our Lord. As the Psalmist said long ago, "*Blessed is the man... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his Law he meditates day and night*" (Ps 1:1–2).

Judaizers and Legalism

If all Jewish Christians had been in agreement with the Jerusalem Council, early church history would have been different—*very* different. Unfortunately, we know the story does not end here. Some Jewish Christians, perhaps citing Jesus' command to baptize Gentiles, continued to insist that Gentiles convert fully to Judaism, be circumcised and required to obey all of the Law. Ebionite Jewish Christians rejected Paul entirely, accusing him of watering down the requirements of the Gospel to make it more appealing to Gentiles.²³ They also rejected the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John, preferring a Hebrew version of Matthew's Gospel,²⁴ in addition to the Bible Jesus read, the Old Testament.

Nazarene Jewish believers in the late second century appear to have accepted the four canonical Gospels as sacred Scripture, but did not accord Pauline epistles with similar approval (Bauer 1971:259–260). In short, some Jewish followers of Jesus (though by no means all) seem to have been unable to accept the legitimacy of "Gentile believers." Given that the Hebrew term גוי (*goy*) is sometimes translated in the Bible as *pagan*, sometimes *heathen*, and sometimes *Gentile*, we often have little comprehension of just how stigmatized and paradoxical the phrase *goyim believers* must have seemed to early Jewish followers of Jesus. Though most Bible translators diplomatically render its Greek equivalent as "Gentile believers" (Ac 15:23, 21:25), it could just as well have been rendered "pagan" or "heathen believers"—and doubtless would have by some first-century Jewish Christians. How else could they explain the propensity of Greek believers to eat blood cuisine?

Interestingly, recent scholarship has shown that the Judaizers of Scripture may not all have been Jewish followers of Jesus, but non-Christian Jews who preyed upon Gentile believers as easy converts to Judaism (Nanos 2002). Whatever the case may be, Scripture is clear that some Jews (be they all followers of Jesus or not) were teaching that Gentile followers of Jesus needed to follow the whole Law to be *saved*. Paul was quick to correct such legalistic perversion with very strong language.

Under the Law, Works of the Law, Curse of the Law

In Romans, 1 Corinthians and Galatians, we find ten occurrences of the phrase "*under the law*" (*upo nomon*), ten occurrences of "*works of the law*" (*erga nomou*), and one occurrence of "*curse of the law*." Whatever Paul was trying to communicate with these phrases, he clearly believed they had potential to ensnare or deceive. To be *under the law* is not to be *led by the Spirit* (Gal 5:18). We are *justified by faith*, not by *works of the law* (Rom 3:28). And *the curse of the law* is something from which Christ freed us (Gal 3:13). It may therefore seem that in contrast to Jesus' teaching on the Law, Paul taught that the Law is of little value to us today—

many Gentile Christian scholars have concluded. However, such conclusions are incongruous with Paul's teaching that the law is "*holy and just and good*" (Rom 7:12), and that "*the law is good if one uses it properly*" (1 Tim 1:8). How then are we to understand these apparent contradictions?

David Stern explains that Greek language in Paul's day had no single term like "legalism" to easily distinguish between a proper use of the Law and its perversion. Therefore, Paul used creative terms like *upo nomon* (under the law) and *erga nomou* (works of the law). Unfortunately, literal translations of these phrases do not really help us Gentiles understand the vital distinction Paul was trying to make. Though at first, they appear to belittle the Law, many modern scholars believe they are not actually directed against the Law itself but against its misuse and abuse.²⁵ In his *Jewish New Testament*, Stern therefore renders *erga nomou* (works of the law) as "*legalistic observance of particular Torah commands.*" Similarly, he renders *upo nomon* (under the law) as "*in subjection to the system that results from perverting Torah into legalism.*" Stern is convinced that if Bible translators used these renderings in the twenty verses where *erga nomou* and *upo nomon* occur, it would radically alter Christian theology of Torah for the better (1991:130).

Paul writes that "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*" (Gal 3:13). With a confused understanding of Torah, it's no surprise later Gentiles understood this to say that the Law *was* a curse. However, a moment's reflection on the covenant curses in the Law (Deut 27:14–30:19) make it clear Paul is teaching that Christ redeemed us from the curse pronounced *in* the Torah by becoming cursed for us. In other words, Christ himself suffered the covenant curses so others would not.

If all of these New Testament passages are so clear, how then could church history have failed so miserably to understand the Law properly?

The Rise of Christian Anti-Semitism

The issues leading to the rise of anti-Semitism among early Gentile believers are complex and disturbing. Emperor Hadrian outlawed Judaism and expelled all Jews from Jerusalem in 135 CE after crushing the Second Jewish Revolt. After the practice of Judaism became illegal, living or worshipping in a way that might *appear* Jewish became very dangerous. Gentile Christians therefore began to systematically purge the church of any observance or symbol that might look Jewish. This intentional differentiation from all things Jewish was understandable for survival, and surely within the rights of Gentiles who were free to magnify Christ within the richness of their own culture. However, Gentile exercise of freedom soon led them to challenge the Apostolic tradition itself, which in turn paved the way for unsettling developments in Gentile Christian attitudes toward Jews, Judaism and the Jewish context of the Gospel.

Sometime after 135, a dispute broke out at the church in Jerusalem about whether or not to celebrate Jesus' crucifixion on 14 Nisan, the eve of Jewish Passover when paschal lambs were slain. Prior to 135, all fifteen Jewish bishops of the Jerusalem church celebrated Passover with all other Jews on 14 Nisan (the date of Jesus' crucifixion, which didn't always fall on "Friday"²⁶), followed by the Feast of Resurrection on 16 Nisan (which similarly didn't always fall on "Sunday"²⁷). But after the exodus of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem in 135, some Gentile Christians no longer wanted to observe Passover on 14 Nisan (also called the Quartodeciman Passover), lest they be accused of being Jewish. Others insisted they should, based on the example and teaching of the Apostles, later documented in *Apostolic Constitutions* (an apparent compilation of apostolic instruction and tradition), which reads, "you shall not change the calculation of time, but you shall celebrate it at the same time as your brethren who came out from the circumcision. With them, observe the Passover" (5:17). Who had authority to settle such a dispute?

In 135 when Jerusalem was evacuated by Jewish Christians—many fleeing east beyond the reach of Roman oppression—Christianity essentially lost its center for church authority. Many Western Gentile Christians later alleged this authority shifted to Rome, though both Greek and Aramaic-speaking Eastern Gentile Christians insisted otherwise, as they do today.²⁸ Nonetheless, Western Gentile Christians were determined to break dependence on the Jewish lunar calendar by eventually developing their own solar calendrical system to calculate alternate dates for Passover (renamed "Good Friday"²⁹) and the Feast of Resurrection (renamed "Easter"³⁰).

Throughout the second century, all churches of Asia Minor continued to commemorate Christ's crucifixion (called "Passover" by Jewish Christians) on 14 Nisan. According to Irenaeus, Polycarp (69–155) left Asia in 150 to visit Rome, where Pope Anicetus tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to relinquish his Quartodeciman Passover observance. Polycarp insisted his observance of Passover on 14 Nisan was learned directly from the Apostle John himself (Eusebius, *Church History* 5:24). Nevertheless, Pope Victor (c. 189–99) rashly condemned Asian Christians as heretics for their unwillingness to abandon Quartodeciman observance. Latin propensities to break all ties with Judaism made little sense to most Eastern Christians. By the fourth century Gentile Christians throughout Syria and Mesopotamia continued to observe Passover on 14 Nisan, causing Constantine no small concern since Easter was then celebrated in the important city of Antioch on a different day than in the West—as it is today. Nicene efforts to reconcile these differences ultimately failed. But when Eastern bishops were coerced at the Council of Antioch (341) to accept the Western system of reckoning Easter after the spring equinox, the break from the Jewish calendar was complete. Good Friday and Easter became solar dates for Gentile Christians, whereas Passover has always been lunar for Jews and Jewish Christians—on the fourteenth day of the new moon of Nisan. Nonetheless,

many Messianic Jews today still do not celebrate Jesus' resurrection according to a western or eastern solar-reckoning of "Easter", but by the lunar *Sfrat Haomer*, the Feast of First Fruits (sometimes called *Yom HaBikkurim*) on 16 Nisan (Kasdan 1993:39–47).

Concurrent with paschal reckoning debates in the second century, a strident anti-Semitism began to permeate the Gentile church, albeit gradually and with significant regional variation. Gentile church fathers—mostly Western—like Tertullian and Hippolytus wrote lengthy polemics entitled *Against the Jews* to show their Roman rulers that they were upstanding citizens of the empire, while Jews persisted in violent national aspirations and superstitions. Cyprian, John Chrysostom, Augustine, and many others continued this *adversus Judaeos* literary tradition in subsequent centuries.

The tension between Gentile and Jewish Christians wasn't goaded only by ongoing efforts of Judaizers, but also by strong opposition from non-Christian Jewish leaders. After vast numbers of God-fearing Gentiles left the synagogues to join Christian churches, Jewish leaders opposed Christians in open debates. Hebrew-knowing rabbis would often humiliate Gentile Christians who could only use the Greek Septuagint to advance their arguments. Any non-Arabic-knowing Christian who has tried to use a translation of the Qur'an to evangelize an Arab Muslim will understand when I say that Jews were less than impressed with Gentiles quoting a questionable Greek translation of the Old Testament to convince them that Jesus was Messiah.³¹ But unlike Paul who was willing to be "*cursed and cut off from Christ*" if it could save his Jewish brethren (Rom 9:3), many Gentile Christians did not respond to Jewish hostility by "loving their enemies."

Ironically, by the third century anti-Semitism led Gentile Christians to repeat the same errors of early Judaizers whom Paul loathed so much. Instead of Judaizing Gentiles, Christians began Gentilizing Jews. By the fourth century, Christians demanded that Jews renounce all

things Jewish as satanic before they could follow Christ (Parkes 1974: 397). When the christological controversies heated up in the fourth century, a common strategy to mock one's opponent was to accuse them of using "Jewish ideas".

The church had become so thoroughly purged of its Jewish heritage by the fourth century that many Gentile church fathers believed Jewish followers of Jesus were not "true Christians." In his exhaustive refutation of eighty heresies, Epiphanius of Salamis (315–403), a bulwark of Nicene theology, describes fourth-century Nazarenes whom he credits as being heirs of first-century Jewish Christianity, but maligns as "nothing but Jews" in *Panarion* 29:7–9,

The Nazarenes are simply complete Jews. They use not only the New Testament but the Old Testament as well, as the Jews do. They have no different ideas, but confess everything exactly as the Law proclaims it and in the Jewish fashion—except for their belief in Christ. They acknowledge both the resurrection of the dead and the divine creation of all things. They declare that God is one, and that his Son is Jesus Christ. They are trained to a nicety in Hebrew. They are different from Jews, and different from Christians. They disagree with Jews because they have come to faith in Christ; but since they are still fettered by the Law—circumcision, Sabbath, and the rest—they are not in accord with Christians. Today, Nazarenes are found in Beroea, near Coele-Syria, in the Decapolis near Pella, and in Bashanitis at the place called *Khokhabe* in Hebrew. For that was their place of origin, since the disciples had settled in Pella after... Christ told them to abandon Jerusalem and withdraw from it because of its coming siege. People like these are refutable at once ... they are nothing but Jews. Yet they are very much the Jews' enemies. The Jewish people have a hatred of them. Three times a day they say, "God curse the Nazarenes," for despite their Jewishness, they preach that Jesus is the Christ. (Williams 1987:117ff)

Epiphanius concludes his description of Nazarenes by likening them to an insect, "though small yet still causes pain with its poison" which he has

"squashed with the truth" of his refutation (Williams 1987:119). Who among first-century Jewish followers of Jesus could have imagined the irony that lay ahead when "orthodox" Gentile church fathers would be unable to accept the legitimacy of "Jewish believers"?

Christian hatred toward Jewish "Christ killers" escalated to unbelievable levels, then became codified in the anti-Jewish edicts of Emperor Theodosius in 378. Harnack comments,

Such an injustice as that done by the Gentile church to Judaism is almost unprecedented in the annals of history. The Gentile church stripped it of everything; she took away its sacred book; herself but a transformation of Judaism, she cut off all connection with the parent religion. The daughter first robbed her mother, and then repudiated her! (1962:69)

Sadly, this repudiation continued for many centuries.³² Hitler need only quote the writings of German-born Martin Luther, father of Protestantism, to sell his holocaust to German Christians. "What then shall we Christians do," Luther asked, "with this damned, rejected race of Jews?" Luther's answer still haunts us today:

First, their synagogues or churches should be set on fire. Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down. Thirdly, their prayerbooks and Talmuds should be taken from them. Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. Fifthly, you ought not, you cannot, protect them, unless in the eyes of God you want to share all their abomination. Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury. Seventhly, we ought to drive the rascally lazybones out of our system. To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden—the Jews. (Pelikan 1962:268)

Elsewhere, Luther wrote, "Therefore, dear Christian, be advised and do not doubt that next to the devil, you have no more bitter, venomous, and vehement foe than a real Jew who earnestly seeks to be a Jew" (1543). Hitler extolled Luther not only as a great reformer, but also as a "one of the great warriors in this world who ... [was] pre-

pared to carry the fight for their ideas and ideals to their end” (1971:213).

Naturally, such events and attitudes toward the Jewish people and Judaism greatly affected the way later Gentile Christians understood the Jewish context of Jesus, his apostles, and the New Testament. Furthermore, these misunderstandings were not only reflected in the theology of post-second-century Gentile church fathers, but they also inevitably affected countless Gentile Bible translations which fail to help the reader distinguish between the proper use of Torah and its perversion. This unfortunate reality prompted David Stern, among others, to retranslate the entire New Testament to “restore its Jewishness” (1989). It has also prompted a refreshing and vigorous scholarly quest today for what has been termed “the historical Jesus.”³³ According to N. T. Wright, whom Tim Stafford of *Christianity Today* profiled in 1999 as one of five “new” theologians (new in the sense of replacing scholars in top academic positions) who have something of importance to say to the church,

Many Christians have been, frankly, sloppy in their thinking and talking about Jesus, and hence, sadly, in their praying and in their practice of discipleship. We cannot assume that by saying the word *Jesus*, still less the word *Christ*, we are automatically in touch with the real Jesus who walked and talked in first-century Palestine.... Nor will it do to suggest that because we have the Gospels in our New Testaments, we know all we need to know about Jesus.... Christian traditions have often radically misunderstood the picture of Jesus in those Gospels, and only by hard, historical work can we move toward a fuller comprehension of what the Gospels themselves were trying to say (1999:10).

Delighting in the Law then is not to be “under the Law” or to submit to its legalistic observance. Both Messianic Jews and Gentile missionaries to Muslims, must, of course, be careful not to pervert the Law into legalism. The liberating Gospel of the Kingdom is meant to permeate every culture and put its worldview to the service of the Gospel without need to Judaize, Gentilize, or Westernize (Bosch 1991:

50–51; Walls 1996:7–8). However, because the worldview of Muslims is ultimately Semitic and extremely similar to Hebraic categories of thought, we may be wise to exercise our freedom by living more like Jesus and his apostles, emulating their deep respect for and observance of the Torah. The Law is good if one uses it properly (1 Ti 1:8). For incarnational ministry to Muslims, I submit, the Law is crying out to be used properly, and truly is, as the Psalmist wrote, “a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path” (Ps 119:105). **IJFM**
To be continued in Volume 21:2 of IJFM.

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- ⁵ Jesus evidenced strong disagreement with this rabbinic theory that the entire corpus of tradition termed "Oral Law" was of Sinaitic origin (Mt 15:6–8), as have many other Jews based on Deut 4:2. However, according to Jeremiah, God had previously given specific commands regarding Sabbath observance, commands which are not found in the Pentateuch (Jer 17:21–22). Nehemiah reports the same (Neh 10:29–31). Therefore, it may well be that *some* Oral Law does indeed legitimately originate from God, which would explain why many early Jewish Christians continued to obey much of the Oral Law, alongside Biblical Law.
- ⁶ A collection of "living water" (rain, spring, or running water from a flowing river) for the purpose of immersion for ritual purification (Lev 11:36).
- ⁷ Modern Jewish scholars are divided on the date when Noahic Laws gained prominence in Jewish missiology. Some argue these seven laws were formulated during the Hasmonean period (166–37 BCE), while others assert they originated in ancient Hittite law (Werblowsky 1997:504).
- ⁸ Mt 19:16–17.
⁹ Ex 12:48.
¹⁰ Joh 6:53–56; 1 Cor 5:7, 11:27.
¹¹ Mt 28:18; Lk 2:21.
¹² Ex 4:24–26.
¹³ Ac 16:3.
¹⁴ 1 Tim 1:8.
¹⁵ Ps 1:1–2.
¹⁶ cf. Jer 21:10, 44:11.
¹⁷ e.g., Mt 23:30, 27:6; Rev 19:2.
¹⁸ *Dimuguan*, for example, is a Filipino delicacy of cow intestines cooked in blood stew.
¹⁹ Ac 21:20, *Jewish New Testament*.
²⁰ Ex 4:22.
²¹ Gen 17:12–13; Ex 12:17, 31:16.
²² Several excellent studies of the Sabbath deserve review (Bacchoiocchi 1977, 1988; Carson 1999; Heschel 1996).
²³ See Jean Daniélou's classic work on Ebionites (1964:55–64), as well as Gerd Luedemann's *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (1989).
²⁴ Some scholars assert that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts were in fact originally written in Hebrew, then immediately translated into Greek (Bivin 1994:1–65). Still others have insisted for centuries that the entire New Testament was originally written in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus and his apostles, and that many discrepancies in Greek manuscripts are a consequence of their being *translations* of the Aramaic originals, preserved today in the ancient *Peshitta* text (Lamsa 1990:ii,vi).
²⁵ See the stimulating work of David Stern (1991:129ff), C. E. B. Cranfield (1981:

853), James D. G. Dunn (1990:219ff; 1998: 140–43, 354–66; 2001), and E. P. Sanders (1977:474ff), whom N. T. Wright credits as "probably the most influential NT scholar in the English-speaking world" (1997b:155).

²⁶ Unlike the Julian calendar operational at the time, Jewish "weekdays" did not have names but numbers, one through seven.

²⁷ See previous note.

²⁸ Namely, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East <www.cired.org>.

²⁹ Western Gentile Christians emphasized the Julian weekday "Friday" on which the crucifixion occurred, not the lunar day of the Jewish month reckoned significant by Jewish and Eastern Gentile Christians due to its proximity to Passover and its theological relation to Jesus' crucifixion (Joh 1:29, 1 Cor 5:7).

³⁰ Space does permit a fuller discussion on the etymology of *Easter* from *Eostre* (*Ostara*), the Teutonic goddess of the rising sun, or from *aster*, the Greek for "star" in Revelation 22:16. However, the growing anti-Jewish climate of the day and the potential for "contextual" wordplay surely would have contributed to its perceived suitability among Gentile Christians eager to differentiate their faith from Judaism.

³¹ Given widespread acknowledgement that the quality of translation in the Septuagint was sorely lacking in many texts, three new Greek translations of the Old Testament were done in the second century CE—two by Ebionite Jewish Christians, Symmachus and Theodotion, and one by a non-Christian Jew named Aquila (Brenton 1970:v).

³² For the sordid details of Christian anti-Semitism over the centuries, see the work of Dan Cohn-Sherbok (1997), Michael Brown (1992), and the voluminous work of Leon Poliakov (2003).

³³ In addition to the formidable work of N. T. Wright (1992, 1997a), see E. P. Sanders' celebrated volume, *Jesus and Judaism* (1987), and James D. G. Dunn's phenomenal study, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (2003), about which *Christianity Today* said, "This book needs to be read. Dunn combines immense erudition with deep Christian commitment. Those who would correct Dunn have their work cut out for them."

Footnotes

¹ "Pro-C4" and "pro-C5" refer to missionaries who favor the use of biblically permissible Islamic forms by "C4" Muslim background believers and "C5" Muslim followers of Jesus (cf. Massey 2000; Travis 2000).

² 1 Tim 1:8 NIV.

³ All biblical citations are from the RSV, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ The tittle of the *yod* is the small point projecting from its upper edge.