

# **Is the Torah Only for Jews?**

The Relationship of Jew and Non-Jew  
in God's Covenant:  
a response to the  
"Definition of Messianic Judaism"  
by the  
Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations

by  
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## Table Of Contents

<b>Section 1 Introduction</b> .....	4
1.1 “Torah is Only For Jews” – The View of the Rabbinic Literature.....	4
1.2 “Torah is Only for Jews” – The Current Controversy.....	7
<b>Section 2 A Scriptural &amp; Historical Inquiry</b> .....	9
2.1 Terminology: Words Used to Designate a non-Jewish Covenant Member.....	9
2.11 נֵיכָרִי / נֵכְרִי / זָרַ (neicher/nochri/zar).....	9
2.12 גֵּר (ger).....	10
2.2 “Proselyte” in the Lxx, Philo, Josephus, and Inscriptions.....	13
2.3 Ger /proselutos in the Apocryphal Literature.....	14
2.4 Ger in the Qumran Literature.....	14
2.5 אֶזְרָח (‘ezrach) - “Native born”.....	15
2.6 Summary: Words Used to Designate a non-Jewish Covenant Member.....	17
<b>Section 3 Proselytism in the Rabbinic Literature</b> .....	19
3.1 The Shift to a Religious Meaning of Ger.....	19
3.2 The Rabbinic Ritual of Proselytism.....	21
3.21 The Requirement to Accept the Torah.....	22
3.22 The Requirement of Circumcision.....	23
3.23 The Requirement of Mikvah.....	24
3.24 The Requirement of Sacrifice.....	25
3.3 The Status of “True Proselytes”.....	25
3.4 God-fearers.....	27
3.5 Summary: The Rabbinic Ritual of Proselytism.....	31
<b>Section 4 The Covenant People</b> .....	33
4.1 Israel: A Mixed Multitude.....	33
4.2 Diminished Jewish Identity.....	33
4.3 The Covenants Envisioned the Ingathered Gentiles.....	35

4.4	Foreigners Who Attach Themselves to Israel .....	37
4.5	Adoption.....	40
4.6	Summary: The Covenant People.....	44
<b>Section 5 Specific Torah Instruction Regarding the Foreigner (<i>ger</i>).....</b>		<b>46</b>
5.1	The Commands Regarding Sabbath .....	46
5.2	The Commandments Regarding the Festivals.....	46
5.3	The Ger and Sacrifices.....	47
5.4	The Ger and Other Ordinances of the Torah .....	49
5.5	Summary: Specific Torah Instruction Regarding the Foreigner ( <i>ger</i> ) .....	50
<b>Section 6 Apostolic Examples &amp; Instructions: Jews &amp; Gentiles.....</b>		<b>51</b>
6.1	The Book of Acts.....	51
6.11	Peter’s Vision and the Inclusion of the Gentiles.....	51
6.12	Intepreting the Vision.....	52
6.13	The Command to “Kill and Eat” is in the Context of Sacrifices .....	52
6.14	The Command to “Kill and Eat” is Parallel to Ezekiel 4.....	54
6.15	The Giving of the Ruach to the Gentiles.....	56
6.2	Epistle to the Romans .....	57
6.3	First Epistle to the Corinthians.....	58
6.4	Epistle to the Galatians.....	59
6.5	Epistle to the Ephesians.....	59
6.6	Epistle to the Philippians .....	60
6.7	Epistle to the Colossians.....	60
6.8	First Epistle to the Thessalonians.....	61
<b>Section 7 Conclusion: The Torah is Equally the Possession of All Covenant Members .....</b>		<b>63</b>

# Section 1

## Introduction

A wonderful thing is happening in our times: there is a renewed awakening to the beauty of the Torah (God's teaching found in the first five books of the Bible). Many are realizing that it is the foundation of God's gracious covenant relationship with those He has called to be His people. Decades of anti-Torah bias in the Christian Church are being set aside as individuals return to the study of the Scriptures themselves, and find in them God's enduring message of grace, righteousness, and promise.

Such a revival, however, is not without its opponents. As in the early decades of the emerging Christian Church which saw her leaders speaking against the Torah, so we regularly hear those who continue to teach that the Torah was abolished by the coming of Yeshua, and that His death and resurrection has ushered in a "new way," a salvation that is in every way superior to what the Torah teaches. As a result, charges of "legalism" and "going back under the Law" are not uncommonly lodged against those of us who are teaching the enduring viability of the Torah in the lives of believers. I have attempted to deal with some of these issues in the forthcoming booklets, *It is Often Said* (FFOZ, 2003).

In this study, however, I want to deal with a belief not only held by some in mainline Christian theologies, but also heard from teachers within "Messianic Judaism." This is the view that the Torah is the special possession of the Jewish people, and that many of its stipulations are therefore directed toward Jews, not Gentiles. Those who take this position believe that while the moral aspects of the Torah are universal for all of God's children, the various stipulations of the Torah which are particularly covenantal are for the Jewish people only, given to them as distinct marks of their unique position in the covenant made with Israel. These could include such things as the Sabbath, Festivals, kosher laws, wearing of *tzitzit*, and generally all of those things in the Torah which mark Israel out as distinct from the nations. In some cases, non-Jews who wish to obey these aspects of Torah are criticized as taking to themselves those things which belong uniquely to the Jewish people. Furthermore, the teaching that the whole Torah is the possession and responsibility of all of God's children is labeled as theological error and therefore dangerous for the body of Messiah, because when non-Jews live out Torah, the lines of distinction between Jew and non-Jew are blurred.

### *1.1 "Torah is Only For Jews" – The View of the Rabbinic Literature*

The idea that the Torah is uniquely the possession of the Jewish people, and that its stipulations define Jewish identity, is not something new in our times. The standard rabbinic view was that the Torah distinguished Israel from the nations. The evidence abounds. For instance, in midrashic comments on Esther and the edict "Go, gather together all the Jews,"<sup>1</sup> the issue of what characterizes the Jews as distinct from the Gentile population is raised:

Said the Attribute of Justice before the Holy One, blessed be He: Why this difference between these and the others? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Israel busy themselves with the Torah, the other nations do not busy themselves with the Torah...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Esther 4:16.

In fact, it was the view of the Talmudic Sages that the Torah was offered to every nation, but only Israel accepted it.<sup>3</sup> For some of the rabbis, this acceptance of the Torah made Israel worthy of God's election:

Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, choose them (Israel)? Because all the nations rejected the Torah and refused to accept it, but Israel gladly chose the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Torah.<sup>4</sup>

The Torah, therefore, was the distinguishing mark (from the rabbinic viewpoint) that separated Israel from the nations. The Midrashim state this clearly:

If it were not for my Torah which you accepted, I should not recognize you, and I should not regard you more than any of the idolatrous nations of the world.<sup>5</sup>

'Yet for all that, in spite of their sins, when they have been in the land of their enemies, I have not rejected them utterly' (Lev. 26:44). All the godly gifts that were given them were taken from them. And if it had not been for the Book of the Torah which was left to them, they would not have differed at all from the nations of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The Sages of the Talmud, attempting to understand the universal language of the Tanach when speaking of the Torah as accepted by the nations in the end times,<sup>7</sup> formulated the so-called Noachide Laws as pertaining especially to the Gentile. This need to find a way for the Gentile to be counted as righteous *without becoming a proselyte* arose out of a struggle for Jewish self-identity. The Gentile could be righteous without the full Torah, since the fullness of the Torah was needed to define Israel as distinct from the nations:

'To the others I gave only single portions, but to you I give all.' So also God gave to the heathen only some odd commandments, but when Israel arose, He said to them, 'Behold the whole Torah is yours,' as it says, 'He hath not dealt so with any nation.'<sup>8</sup>

This belief, that the Torah is the sole possession of Israel, is the standard position within Orthodox Judaism today. As an example of this, we may note the manner in which the Siddur (Prayer Book) considers the Sabbath the possession of Israel alone. In the Morning service for Shabbat we read:

Moses rejoiced with the gift of his portion, for a faithful servant You called him. A crown of glory upon his head you placed when he stood before You on Mount Sinai; and two tablets of stone he brought down in his hand, upon which is written [the command] to preserve the Sabbath, and so it is written in Your Torah: "And the Children of Israel shall preserve the Sabbath, to maintain the Sabbath for their generations as an everlasting covenant. Between Me and between the Children of Israel, it is a sign for all time that in six days Adonai made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He abstained

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<sup>2</sup>b.Megillah 15b.

<sup>3</sup>t.Avodah Zera 2b.

<sup>4</sup>Mid. Rab. Numbers xiv.10.

<sup>5</sup>Mid. Rab. Exodus xlvii.3.

<sup>6</sup>Sifra 112c.

<sup>7</sup>Note the use of 2Samuel 7:19; Isaiah 26:2; Psalm 118:20; 33:1; 125:4 in the words of Sifra 86b (cf. b.Sanhedrin 86b) all of which are interpreted as applying to the Gentile who obeys Torah.

<sup>8</sup>Mid. Rab. Exodus xxx.9

from work, and rested.”<sup>9</sup>

Immediately following the recitation of the biblical text from Exodus 31:16-17, the following is added in the Siddur:

And You, Adonai, our God, did not give it to the nations of the lands; nor did You give it as an inheritance our King, to worshippers of idols, nor in its rest do the uncircumcised dwell. For only to Israel, Your people, did You give it in love—to the seed of Jacob whom You chose.<sup>10</sup>

Elbogen notes that though this paragraph is generally contained in the Siddurim since the time of Maimonides (though not always in the same section of the service), the words “You ... did not give it” are lacking in a number of the texts. The fragments of the Siddur from the Cairo Geniza begin the additional paragraph with “The Gentiles do not sit in its (Sabbath’s) shade, nor do the uncircumcised enjoy its rest.”<sup>11</sup> Here, the word “uncircumcised” encompasses all who are not Jewish or have not become proselytes by the rabbinic ritual.

Thus, the emphasis upon the Sabbath as a unique identity mark for Jews gave rise to strong denunciation of non-Jews who kept Sabbath:

Resh Lakish also said: A heathen who keeps a day of rest, deserves death, for it is written, And a day and a night they shall not rest, and a master has said: Their prohibition is their death sentence.<sup>12</sup>

Even teaching the Torah to Gentiles was discouraged:

R. Ammi further said: The teachings of the Torah are not to be transmitted to an idolater, for it is said: He hath not dealt so with any nation; and as for His ordinances, they have not known them.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it would appear that in vying for self-identity, the Jewish Sages who lived after the destruction of the Temple took the Torah (particularly the visible covenant signs prescribed by the written Torah and defined by the oral Torah) as the unique “badge” of Jewish identity, meaning it was no longer envisioned as something to be shared with the Gentiles.

This was particularly true of the Oral Torah (the traditions of the Sages passed down from generation to generation). Its unique role in establishing Jewish identity in the face of the emerging Christian Church who declared herself the “true Israel” is addressed in the rabbinic literature.

God gave the Israelites the two Torahs, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. He gave them the Written Torah with its 613 ordinances, to fill them with commandments, and to cause them to become virtuous, as it is said, ‘The Lord was pleased for His righteousness’ sake to increase the Torah and make it glorious.’ And He gave them the Oral Torah to make them distinguished from the other nations. It was not given in writing so that the

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<sup>9</sup>Metzudah Siddur, pp. 528-29. Cf. Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (Bloch Pub. Co., 1975), 457-59.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 529-30.

<sup>11</sup>Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (JPS/JTSA, 1993), 97.

<sup>12</sup>b.Sanhedrin 58b. It is possible that this statement by Resh Lakish was originally made against the Notzrim, or “Messianics.” Cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Gentiles,” 7:411.

<sup>13</sup>b.Chagigah 13a, cf. b.Sanhedrin 59a.

nations should not falsify it, as they have done with the Written Torah, and say that they are the true Israel. Therefore it says, 'If I were to write for him the many things of my Torah, they would be counted as strange' (Hosea 8:12). The many things are the Mishnah, which is larger than the Torah, and God says, If I were to write for Israel the 'many things', they would be accounted as strange (by the Gentiles).<sup>14</sup>

## 1.2 "Torah is Only for Jews" – The Current Controversy

I would suggest that the threat of a diminished Jewish identity fuels the current debate among Messianics as well. In a recent decision by the UMJC, Messianic Judaism is defined as a "Jewish people movement for Yeshua."<sup>15</sup> The expanded commentary of the official statement announces that this movement is "rooted in Torah" and "expressed in tradition," combining Written and Oral Torah along rabbinic lines.<sup>16</sup> In short, this position, put forward by one of the primary Messianic denominations, is a call for the Messianic movement to return to an identity based squarely upon ethnic status.<sup>17</sup>

Where does this leave the non-Jewish member of the Messianic congregation? This is clearly a problem for the definition's framers. For while they obviously feel the need to include the Gentiles (how else could the Scriptures be read?), *the need for clear, Jewish identity precludes the Torah being equally the possession of all.* And the motivation for obeying Torah by Jews is not first and foremost a dedication to obey God, but a need to maintain Jewish identity.

Torah remains a living and relevant document for all believers, Jewish and Gentile, but many of its specifics are intended for Israel alone. Messianic Jews are to draw upon the rich tradition of Torah, not necessarily because this tradition is mandated for all believers, but because we are Jews. Gentiles may be moved to participate in this tradition out of love for Israel and the God of Israel, but they must be careful to affirm the unique relationship of Israel to Torah . . . . Gentiles in Messianic Judaism are not here for themselves, but for Messiah's own people, who have been wounded in his name by other Gentiles. And Jews in Messianic Judaism are not here for themselves either, but must accept the rejection and misunderstanding that Messiah endures in the midst of his own people.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Mid. Rab. *Numbers* xiv.10. Also note *Tanchuma* Vayera, §5.

<sup>15</sup>As ratified by the delegates to the 23rd Annual UMJC Conference on July 31, 2002 and reported in the current issue of *The Messianic Times* (September, 2002) by Donita Painter (see online article at [www.messianictimes.com](http://www.messianictimes.com)). The UMJC defines Messianic Judaism as a "movement of Jewish congregations and congregation-like groupings committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant." The general secretary of the UMJC gave further explanation: "You have many Gentile congregations who are calling themselves Jewish because they practice Jewish festivals and love Israel," he said. "We think God raised up Messianic Judaism as a Jewish people movement for Yeshua."

<sup>16</sup>Note the following paragraph from Kinzer, Juster, "Defining Messianic Judaism:" "Messianic Jewish halakhah is rooted in Scripture (Tanakh and the New Covenant writings), which is of unique sanctity and authority. However, it also draws upon Jewish tradition, especially those practices and concepts that have won near-universal acceptance by devout Jews through the centuries." To accept halachah based upon "near-universal acceptance by devout Jews" is to raise the level of oral Torah to a dangerously high place of authority.

<sup>17</sup>That the issue of "ethnic status" was a primary one in the 1st Century is clear, both from the rabbinic writings as well as the Apostolic Scriptures. That the same issue has surfaced in our times, therefore, is not surprising.

<sup>18</sup>Russ Resnik, "Addendum 1. What do we mean by 'Jewish'?" pp 3-4.

This viewpoint holds that the body of Messiah is made up of two distinct groups: the “Gentile Church” and “Messianic Judaism:”

Jewish life is life in a concrete, historical community. Thus, Messianic Jewish groupings must be fully part of the Jewish people, sharing its history and its covenantal responsibility as a people chosen by God. At the same time, faith in Yeshua also has a crucial communal dimension. This faith unites Messianic Judaism and the Gentile Christian Church, which is the assembly of the faithful from the nations who are joined to Israel through the Messiah. Together Messianic Judaism and the Gentile Church constitute the one Body of Messiah, a community of Jews and Gentiles who in their ongoing distinction and mutual blessing anticipate the shalom of the world to come.<sup>19</sup>

According to this statement, the body of Messiah is made of two groups with distinct identities, and both are apparently valid expressions of genuine faith in Messiah. If, according to this view, the majority of Gentiles should find their faith-community within the “Gentile Church,” this can only mean that the framers of this theology find no God-given requirement for Gentiles to obey the Torah in the first place. For the “Gentile Church” has surely taken an anti-Torah view throughout her history, and does so to the present day.

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<sup>19</sup>These documents are available at: [www.umjc.org](http://www.umjc.org).



## Section 2

# A Scriptural & Historical Inquiry

The issue before us has many approaches, but we will limit ourselves to a few. First, it will be necessary to study the terms used in the Tanach for “foreigners” who were part of Israel as well as the native born. Secondly, I will look at the history of proselytism, and the rabbinic institution. Thirdly, the issue of what constitutes the Covenant People will be addressed. Fourthly, we will look at specific Torah instructions given to the foreigner. Fifthly, I will make a brief survey of the Apostolic teaching on the relationship of Jew and Gentile, and finally offer a conclusion to the study.

### 2.1 Terminology: Words Used to Designate a non-Jewish Covenant Member

#### 2.11 זָרִי/נֶחֱרִי/נֶכְרִי (*neicher/nachri/zar*)

Several words are used in the Tanach to describe those who are of foreign extraction in relationship to the native born Israelite. The word נֶחֱרִי/נֶכְרִי (*neichor/nochri*) usually describes something alien and to be excluded. This word group is regularly used of Israel’s enemies, and of the nations which are characterized by foreign gods and idolatry.<sup>20</sup> The foreigner designated by these terms is usually viewed as dangerous and hostile.<sup>21</sup> The word group regularly represents foreign peoples<sup>22</sup> or foreign wives.<sup>23</sup> The adjective is used to describe the “strange woman” of Proverbs who has betrayed her husband and family.<sup>24</sup> Only in Isaiah’s prophecy of the reign of Messiah is the *neichor* brought into Israel’s covenant, participating in the Sabbath as a the sign of the covenant.<sup>25</sup>

A second word, זָר, *zar*, is sometimes used in parallel with *neichor* to denote that which is foreign.<sup>26</sup> The word itself is used simply to denote something “different,” as in the difference between the priest and the non-priest,<sup>27</sup> but can denote a “different god,” that is, “strange gods.”<sup>28</sup>

We may conclude that *neichor* and its parallel, *zar*, do not designate the non-Israelite who has joined himself to Israel, but in general describes those people who are hostile to Israel, or whose allegiance is to false gods. In the Torah, no covenant provisions are made for the *neichor*. In fact, acts prohibited for covenant members (such as charging interest or eating meat that has been “torn”) are permitted to a *neichor*.<sup>29</sup> Only in the *eschaton* is the *neichor* (“hostile foreigner”) brought near to the covenant of Israel.

<sup>20</sup>Joshua 24:20; Jeremiah 5:19; 8:19; Malachai 2:11.

<sup>21</sup>Samuel 22:45, 46; Nehemiah 9:2; 13:30.

<sup>22</sup>Exodus 2:22; 18:3; 21:18; Deuteronomy 14:21; 17:15; Isaiah 2:6.

<sup>23</sup>1Kings 11:1; Ezra 10:2.

<sup>24</sup>Proverbs 2:16; 5:20; 7:5; 23:27.

<sup>25</sup>Isaiah 56:3, 6; 60:10; 61:5.

<sup>26</sup>Psalms 81:10; Job 19:15; Proverbs 27:2.

<sup>27</sup>Exodus 29:33; 30:33; Leviticus 22:10,13; Numbers 1:51; 3:10,38; 16:40; 18:4,7, translated “layman” or “outsider” by the NASB.

<sup>28</sup>Psalms 44:20; 81:9.

<sup>29</sup>Deuteronomy 14:21; 15:3; 23:20.

## 2.12 גֵּר (*ger*)

The primary word used throughout the Tanach for the non-Jew who has joined himself to Israel is the word גֵּר, *ger*. As we shall see, the word *ger* is sometimes coupled with other words to give it greater specificity. *Ger* gives rise to the denominative verb<sup>30</sup> גִּיר, *gur*, which generally describes “wandering,” or “sojourning,” and thus gave rise to the metaphoric sense of “straying” and “committing a trespass.” A *ger*, then, is one who, because of war, famine, or other factors, has left his village or tribe and sought refuge in another place in which his rights of land ownership and normal citizenship have been curtailed.<sup>31</sup> In the Tanach, *ger* is often found contrasted with אֶזְרָח, ‘*ezrach*, “native born,” “citizen,”<sup>32</sup> most often in those cases where the Torah enjoins equal treatment of both citizen (native born) and the *ger*.

The word *ger* is sometimes linked with other words, acting as modifiers or descriptors. It is found with verbs of motion: (1) גִּיר, *gur* “to sojourn,”<sup>33</sup> usually translated as “the alien who sojourns” or “the foreigner who sojourns;” (2) הָלַךְ, *halach* “to go or walk,” translated as “aliens (or foreigners) who live among you.”<sup>34</sup>

*Ger* is found with locative modifiers (usually with preposition ב, “in”): (1) שַׁעַר, *sha’ar*, “gate,” usually translated “the alien (or foreigner) within your gates;”<sup>35</sup> (2) אֶרֶץ, ‘*eret*, “land,” usually translated “the alien (or foreigner) in your land;”<sup>36</sup> (3) קֶרֶב, *kerev*, “midst,” usually translated “the alien (or foreigner) in your midst (or) among you;”<sup>37</sup> (4) יִשְׂרָאֵל, *yisrael*, “Israel,” usually translated “the alien (or foreigner) in Israel;”<sup>38</sup> We may also add the common “with you” (עִמָּכֶם, ‘*imchem*).<sup>39</sup>

As noted above, *ger* is often found in lists of disadvantaged people, particularly the orphan (יְתוּם, *yitom*) and the widow (אַלְמָנָה, ‘*almanah*).<sup>40</sup>

*Ger* is sometimes found constructed with the word תּוֹשָׁב, *toshav*, “sojourner,” a word built on the verb יָשַׁב, *yashav*, “to dwell.” The two-term combination may act as a hendiadys, “the alien who dwells.”<sup>41</sup> But the word *toshav* may stand alone as a designation for a foreigner (non-Jew) who has taken up residence in Israel.<sup>42</sup> The rabbis were concerned with the designation *ger toshav*, “resident alien,” for fear that this might

<sup>30</sup>So KB, “גִּיר.”

<sup>31</sup>KB, “גֵּר.”

<sup>32</sup>Exodus 12:19,48-49; Leviticus 16:29; 17:15; 18:26; 19:34; 24:16,22; Numbers 9:14; 15:29-30; Joshua 8:33

<sup>33</sup>Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 16:29; 17:8,10,12-13; 18:26; 19:34; 20:2; Numbers 15:15-16,26,29; 19:10; Joshua 20:9; Ezekiel 14:7; 47:22.

<sup>34</sup>Joshua 8:35. Note that this text uses the participle, הוֹלֵךְ, giving rise to the English translations “strangers who were living among them,” (NASB); “the aliens who lived among them,” (NIV); “the strangers who accompanied them,” (JPS); “the foreigners living with them,” (CJB); “the sojourners who lived among them,” (ESV).

<sup>35</sup>Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14; 14:21; 24:14; 31:12.

<sup>36</sup>Exodus 12:19; Leviticus 19:33; Numbers 9:14; Deuteronomy 24:14; 1Chronicles 22:2; 2Chronicles 2:17; 30:25; Psalms 119:19.

<sup>37</sup>Deuteronomy 26:11; 28:43; 29:11; Joshua 8:35.

<sup>38</sup>Leviticus 20:2; 22:18; Ezekiel 14:7; 1Chronicles 22:2; 2Chronicles 2:16; 30:25.

<sup>39</sup>E.g., Lev. 19:34; Num. 15:16,

<sup>40</sup>Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:11,14; 24:17,19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Psalms 94:6; 146:9.

<sup>41</sup>Genesis 23:4; Leviticus 25:6,23,35,45,47; Numbers 35:15; 1Chronicles 29:15; Psalms 39:12[13].

<sup>42</sup>Exodus 12:45; Leviticus 22:10; 25:40.

construe a non-Jew who was given covenant privileges without converting. They therefore introduced a new term, found only in the later rabbinic literature (not in the Tanach nor the Mishnah), namely, גֵּר צַדִּיק, *ger tzadik*, “righteous alien” to designate a convert. In contrast, a גֵּר שֶׁקֶר, *ger sheker* “false alien” (also not found in the Tanach) was an “insincere proselyte” (from impure motives).<sup>43</sup>

Below are two charts, the first listing the use of גֵּר and the times it is construed with other words to form what might be various categories of foreigners within Israel. The second chart collates the various translations of גֵּר and accompanied terms in the Lxx.

גֵּר	גֵּר + גוֹר גֵּר + הַלֵךְ	גֵּר + בַּשְׁעָרַיִךְ גֵּר + בְּאַרְצְךָ גֵּר + בְּקִרְבְּךָ גֵּר + בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גֵּר + בְּתוֹךְךָ	גֵּר + תוֹשָׁב	גֵּר + יְתוּם, אֶלְמָנָה
Ex 22:21[20]; 23:9[x2], 12; Lev 17:15; 19:10; 23:22; 24:16, 22; Num 15:30; Deut 1:16; 10:19 Josh 8:33; 2Sa 1:13; Is 14:1; Ezek 22:29; Job 31:32	Ex. 12:48, 49; Lev. 16:29; 17:8,10,12-13; 18:26; 19:33, 34; 20:2; Num. 15:15-16, 26, 29; 19:10; Josh. 8:35; 20:9; Ezek. 14:7; 47:22, 23	Gen 15:13; Ex. 2:22; 12:19,* 49; 18:3; 20:10; Lev. 16:29; 17:8,10,12-13; 18:26; 19:33, 34; 20:2; 22:18; Num. 9:14*; 15:14, 26, 29; 19:10; 35:15; Deut. 5:14; 14:21, 29; 16:11, 14; 23: 8[7]; 24:14; 26:11- 12; 28:43; 29:10; 31:12; Josh. 8:35; 20:9; Is 14:1; Jer 14:8 Ezek. 14:7; 22:7; 47:22, 23 Psa 105:23; 119:19; 1Chr 2:16; 22:2 2Chr 30:25†	Gen. 23:4; Lev. 25:23, 35, 47[2x]; Num. 35:15; Psa. 39:13; 1Chr. 29:15	Deut. 10:18; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13; 27:19; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Ezek 22:7 Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5; Psa. 94:6; 146:9
17 Total	21 Total	47 Total	8 Total	17 Total
* with construct rather than preposition † ביהודה				

Chart No. 1: Distribution of גֵּר in the Tanach

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, 263b; Cf. b.Gittin 57b; b.Kiddushin 20a; b.Bava Metzia 71a; 111b; b.Sanhedrin 96b. See the discussion below for more information on the rabbinic terminology.

גַּר	גַּר + גּוּר גַּר + הַלֵּךְ	גַּר + בַּשְׁעָרַי גַּר + בְּאֶרֶץ גַּר + בְּקִרְבֵּי גַּר + בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גַּר + בְּתוֹךְ	גַּר + תּוֹשָׁב	גַּר + יְתוֹם, אֶלְמָנָה
παροικος (1)	προσηλυτος – προσερχομαι (3)	παροικος (7) προσηλυτος – προσερχομαι (4)		
γειωρας (1)	προσηλυτος – προσκειμαι (11)	γειωρας (1) προσηλυτος – προσκειμαι (10)		
προσηλυτος (14)	προσηλυτος – προσπορευομαι (3) προσηλυτος – προσγινομαι (1) προσηλυτος – προσηλυτευω (1) προσηλυτος – παροικειω (1) προσηλυτος – προσηλυτος* (1)	προσηλυτος (13) προσηλυτος – προσπορευομαι (2) προσηλυτος – προσγινομαι (3) προσηλυτος – προσηλυτευω (1) προσηλυτος – παροικειω (2) προσηλυτος – προσηλυτος* (1) προσηλυτος – παροικος (2) γειωρας – προστιθημι (1)	προσηλυτος – παροικος (5)  παροικος – παρεπιδημος (2) παροικος – παροικειω (1)	προσηλυτος (17)
ξενος (1)				

\*έν φυλῇ προσηλύτων έν τοῖς προσηλύτοις τοῖς μετ’ αὐτῶν

Chart No. 2: Translation of גַּר in the Lxx

The charts above show the various categories in which גַּר is found in the Tanach, namely, as a single term (column 1), with a verb of motion (column 2), as a single term without verb of motion but followed by locative “in your gates”, “in the land”, “in your midst”, or “in Israel” (column 3), as a single term followed by תּוֹשָׁב and most likely forming a hendiadys meaning “resident alien” (column 4), and as a single term in association with words denoting members of the society with higher than normal vulnerability, e.g., orphans, widows, etc. (column 5). The second chart notes the same categories, but showing all possible Greek translations by the Lxx. The numbers following the Greek entries indicate the number of times that Greek term or phrase is used to translate the particular category. There was some overlapping between the columns, since in an number of cases, גַּר with verbal גּוּר or הַלֵּךְ was also accompanied by a locative: e.g., “the ger who sojourns in your gates.” In this case the same text will appear in columns 2 and 3.

When the charts are analyzed, we may discern the following:

- (1) It is clear that the word גַּר is used throughout the Tanach to designate various classes of foreigners within Israel. The fact that this word is used to characterize Israel while in Egypt is an indication of its basic sense, that is, “someone who does not have the privileges of a citizen.” It’s basic meaning in the Tanach is therefore sociological, not theological.
- (2) It is clear that the Tanach is most concerned with the גַּר who resides in Israel (גַּר with locative), since the Torah legislation is for Israel.
- (3) The use of תּוֹשֵׁב (“dweller”) as an accompanying term may function as a hendiadys, meaning “the foreigner who dwells.” That this is the case may be further substantiated from the fact the תּוֹשֵׁב may stand on its own to designate a resident alien (Ex. 12:45; Lev. 22:10; 25:6,40; Psa. 39:13; 1Chr. 29:15).
- (4) When גַּר is followed by a locative (“in your gates,” “in the land,” “in your midst,” “in Israel,” “among you”), this does not necessarily designate a specific class of foreigner as different from the use of גַּר as a single term, though most often it does appear in those contexts where the גַּר is someone who has accepted the rule of Israel (Torah) and is therefore accorded both a higher privilege and responsibility within the society.
- (5) In the Lxx, the term *πάροικος* is used to translate גַּר in those instances where *προσηλύτος* as a religious term (i.e., convert in the rabbinic sense) did not fit the passage (e.g., Gen 15:13; 23:4; Ex 2:22; 18:3; Dt 14:21; 23:8; Ps 39:13; 119:19). This would indicate that the Lxx translators were already influenced by the evolution of the word גַּר from a sociological to a religious term. However, since *προσηλύτος* is used of Jews (Ex 22:20; 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19), it is clear that the term had not completely shifted to a technical, religious term (i.e., meaning “convert”). This would not occur until sometime later.

The final development of “proselyte” as a technical term to denote the Gentile who becomes a full Jew by circumcision irrespective of his national or social position did not take place in Palestinian Judaism but in the Judaism of the Graeco-Roman *diaspora*.<sup>44</sup>

## 2.2 “Proselyte” in the Lxx, Philo, Josephus, and Inscriptions

In Philo, we see the final, fully developed religious use of the term *ger*. For the Gentile who converts to Judaism, Philo uses not only *proselutos* but also (and more frequently) the terms *ἐπηλυς*, *epelus*, *ἐπηλύτης*, *epelutes*, and *ἐπήλυτος*, *epelutos*, a word group meaning “foreigner,” “initiate,” “newcomer.” These words would have been more familiar to Philo’s audience since they were less acquainted with the Lxx use of *proselutos* and more aware of words used for initiates into religious sects. As such, Philo felt the need to define the word *proselutos* for his readers:

And he receives all persons of a similar character and disposition, whether they were originally born so, or whether they have become so through any change of conduct, having become better people, and as such entitled to be ranked in a superior class; approving of the one body because they have not defaced their nobility of birth, and of the other because they have thought fit to alter their lives so as to come over to nobleness of conduct. And these last he calls proselytes (*προσελψτους*), from the fact of their having come over (*προσελελψτηναι*) to a new and God fearing constitution, learning to disregard the fabulous inventions of other nations, and clinging to unalloyed truth.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Kuhn, “προσήλυτος” in *TDNT*, 6:730.

Further proof that Philo uses the word *proselutos* in a purely religious sense is his requirement that the proselyte not merely be one who has received physical circumcision, but one who is circumcised in regard to “lusts and desires and other passions of the soul” as well.<sup>46</sup>

Josephus avoids the word *proselutos*, most likely because, like Philo, his readers would have been unfamiliar with it as a technical, religious, term. He uses rather phrases like τὰ Ἰουδαίων ἔθη μεταλαβεῖν, *ta ioudaiwn ethe metalabein*, “come over to the Jewish religion”<sup>47</sup> or εἰς τοὺς ἡμετέρους νόμους εἰσελθεῖν, *eis tous hemeterous nomous eiselthein*, “come over to our laws.”<sup>48</sup>

Jewish inscriptions, mostly from the catacombs in Rome, use the word *proselutos* to denote full proselytes. These are in contrast to the God-fearers who had not become “full Jews” (from the rabbinic standpoint) and thus are never buried in Jewish tombs. The fact that proselytes were buried together with other native-born Jews is proof that they were accorded full, Jewish status.<sup>49</sup> This fact is emphasized by the utter lack of God-fearers buried in Jewish tombs.

### 2.3 Ger /proselutos in the Apocryphal Literature

*Proselutos* is found only one time in the Apocryphal literature, Tobit 1:8, but it is of interest because it shows the manner in which the common sociological terminology had evolved into a religious technical term.

Tob. 1:8 A third tenth I would give to the orphans and widows and to the converts who had attached themselves to Israel (προσηλύτοις τοῖς προσκειμένοις τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραηλ).

The use of προσηλύτος with πρόσκειμαι is common in the Lxx with locative “in Israel,” “in the gates,” “in your midst,” and so forth. In this case, however, the spacial locative has given way to “to the sons of Israel.” No longer is the “sojourner” defined by geographical boundaries. Now the “sojourner” has become the “convert” whose boundaries are theologically determined by the identity of the people called “Israel.”

### 2.4 Ger in the Qumran Literature

*Ger* is used with the sense of “alien” parallel with “poor” (יָפֵר):

CD 6:20-21 to offer the holy things according to their specifications; to love each his brother as himself, and to grasp the hand of poor and needy and alien . . .<sup>50</sup>

One passage appears to use *ger* in the sense of “convert” or “proselyte:”

CD 14:4-6 Then they shall be recorded by name, one after the other: the priests first, the

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<sup>45</sup>*Spec. Leg.* 1.51.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted from Kuhn, *TDNT*, 6.732.

<sup>47</sup>*Ant.* 20:139.

<sup>48</sup>*Apion* 2:123.

<sup>49</sup>See further, Kuhn, *TDNT*, 6:732-33.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. also 4Q367 f2a\_b:9.

Levites second, the children of Israel third, the proselyte fourth. In the same order they shall sit, and in the same order they will inquire of all.

When compared to 1QS 2:19f, it seems apparent that for the Qumran sect, *gerim* were not allowed:

1QS 2:19-23 They shall do as follows annually, all the days of Belial's dominion: the priests shall pass in review first, ranked according to their spiritual excellence, one after another. Then the Levites shall follow, and third all the people by rank, one after another, in their thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens. Thus shall each Israelite know his proper standing in the Yahad of God, an eternal society.

Here there is only a three-tiered ranking, unlike the former listing for four classes. Missing, of course, are the *gerim*. Yet it may be that the Qumran society adopted the minority rabbinic view, namely, that proselytes were assigned a lower rank than full Israelites.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the Temple Scroll expected that proselytes would be permitted to enter the Temple only in the fourth generation.<sup>52</sup>

While it is possible that the Qumran society accepted "proselytes," it is clear that their view was far more strict than the later Pharisaism reflected in the post-70 rabbinic literature.

Although Qumran law shares many of the presuppositions and rulings of this Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition, the sectarians were less willing than the Rabbis to embrace the vision of Israel's prophets, who anticipated that all the nations would one day come to worship God under Israel's leadership.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.5 אֶזְרַח - "Native born"

Often the word *ger* and accompanying terms are juxtaposed with אֶזְרַח, *'ezrach*, usually translated "native born." However, like *ger*, *'ezrach* is a purely sociological term meaning "native, full citizen."<sup>54</sup> The emphasis of the word is that the person so designated has full rights as a citizen, and particularly clan association to which is tied land ownership. The fact that in a number of instances the *ger* is compared to the *'ezrach* as having similar privileges within the society shows that *'ezrach* is functioning in a sociological manner.

The term *'ezrach* is found 17 times in the Tanach,<sup>55</sup> all but once used of people. In Psalm 37:35 the word appears to describe "native soil," but the Lxx translates κέδρος, "cedar-tree" which would be אֶרֶז in the Hebrew, an easy scribal variant from אֶזְרַח. In the remaining 16 times that the word describes people, all but two of these are in texts which juxtapose the term *ger*.<sup>56</sup> The point seems to be that the word is used most often

<sup>51</sup>Cf. t.Kiddushin 5.1.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. 11QT 40:6, and the remarks of L. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls* (JPS, 1994), p. 383-84.

<sup>53</sup>Schiffman, *Reclaiming*, p. 384.

<sup>54</sup>KB, "אֶזְרַח."

<sup>55</sup>Ex. 12:19,48-49; Lev. 16:29; 17:15; 18:26; 19:34; 23:42; 24:16,22; Num. 9:14; 15:13,29-30; Josh. 8:33; Ezek. 47:22; Psa. 37:35.

<sup>56</sup>Ex. 12:19,48; Lev. 16:29; 17:15; 18:26; 19:34; 24:16,22; Num. 9:14; 15:29; Josh. 8:33; Ezek. 47:22.

to legislate the privileges of the sojourner who enters the covenant as equal to the native citizen. This is particularly the picture in Joshua 8:33:

Josh. 8:33 All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger (*ger*) as well as the native (*'ezrach*). Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had given command at first to bless the people of Israel.

The majority of the time the Lxx translates *'ezrach* with *αὐτόχθων*, “indigenous, native.”<sup>57</sup> Another term, *ἐγγχώριος*, *egxorios*, “in or of that country,” “inhabitant, native”<sup>58</sup> is also used.<sup>59</sup> It is interesting that in the Psalm title of Psalm 88, the personal name “Heman the Ezrahite” (הֵמָן הָעֲזָרְחִי), is translated by the Lxx as *Αιμαν τῶ Ἰσραηλίτη*, “Heman the Israelite,” taking *עֲזָרְחִי* as a gentilic form of *עֲזָרָה*.<sup>60</sup>

Like the word *ger*, however, the word *'ezrach* moved from a purely sociological term to a religious one as Jewish identity was more defined in the emerging rabbinic Judaisms. As noted, the majority of the time the Lxx translates *'ezrach* with *αὐτόχθων*, “indigenous, native.”<sup>61</sup> Yet the word *'ezrach* in the Babylonian Talmud has become a purely technical, religious term meaning not only a full Jew, but a Jew upon whom the full responsibility of the laws are incumbent.

b.*Sukkah* 29a - WOMEN, SLAVES AND MINORS ARE FREE FROM THE OBLIGATION OF SUKKAH, BUT A MINOR WHO IS NOT DEPENDENT ON HIS MOTHER IS BOUND BY THE LAW OF SUKKAH. IT ONCE HAPPENED THAT THE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW OF SHAMMAI THE ELDER GAVE BIRTH TO A CHILD, AND HE BROKE AWAY THE PLASTER OF THE ROOF AND PUT SUKKAH-COVERING OVER THE BED FOR THE SAKE OF THE CHILD. GEMARA. Whence do we know this? For our Rabbis taught: [If Scripture had said] ‘homeborn’ [אֲזָרְחָה] [it would have included] every homeborn [אֲזָרְחָה], [but since it says] ‘the homeborn’ [הָאֲזָרְחָה] it excludes women. ‘Every’ includes minors.

In b.*Zevachim* 35b *'ezrach* is contrasted by “pagan” (עֹבְדֵי כּוֹכְבִּים, “servants of the stars”), not the normal *ger* of the Tanach, since by Talmudic times *ger* had evolved to the meaning “convert:”

‘And they cannot bring drink-offerings.’ Our Rabbis taught: [Scripture saith,] [All that are] home-born [אֲזָרְחָה] [shall do these things after this manner:] the home-born [אֲזָרְחָה] can bring drink-offerings but a heathen [עֹבְדֵי כּוֹכְבִּים] cannot bring drink-offerings. You might think then that his burnt-offering does not require a drink-offering; therefore Scripture teaches, Thus [shall be done for each bullock etc.]

The word *'ezrach* is found in no other Semitic cultures of the ancient Near East. Some

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<sup>57</sup>Note Jer 14:8 where the MT has *כְּאֲזָרְחָה*, “like a traveller” but the Lxx translates *ὡς αὐτόχθων*, “like a native,” no doubt having read *כְּאֲזָרְחָה*.

<sup>58</sup>J. Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1997), “ἐγγχώριος.”

<sup>59</sup>Ex. 12:49; Lev. 18:26; 24:22; Num. 15:29.

<sup>60</sup>On gentilic forms with *י*, —, cf. Gesenius, Kautzsch, Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, (Oxford, 1910), p. 240 [§86, h].

<sup>61</sup>Note Jer 14:8 where the MT has *כְּאֲזָרְחָה*, “like a traveller” but the Lxx translates *ὡς αὐτόχθων*, “like a native,” no doubt having read *כְּאֲזָרְחָה*.



have speculated an etymology tied to זרה, from Arabic *zarucha*, “to be of pure descent,” but this is speculative.

Most important for our study is the recognized fact that the word *‘ezrach* in the Tanach defines a “citizen” who received his status from physical attachment to the clan, or (in the case of a *ger*) who was accorded the legal status of citizen through dwelling with the clan. Since the land promised in the covenant was divided along tribal lines, and since the statutes of the Yovel (Jubilee) returned the land to its ancestral owners, land ownership was tied to physical descendency. However, the idea that physical birth secured religious status was a later addition in the evolution of rabbinic Judaism.

## 2.6 Summary: Terminology: Words Used to Designate a non-Jewish Covenant Member

We have seen that there is a clear distinction between *neichor* (“foreign” in the sense of hostile to Israel and Israel’s God, paralleled at times by *zar*, “strange” in the sense of opposed to what is right), and *ger* (“alien,” “one without clan identity”). While those who are designated as *neichor* are never provided with covenant protection, the *ger* who dwells in Israel or who is a permanent resident within a tribe of Israel is a participant in the covenant in full measure, including the privileges and responsibilities of Sabbath, festivals, kosher foods, purities, and civil justice. The term *ger* itself, however, must be interpreted within its immediate context, taking into account the modifying terms which accompany it. In some contexts, *ger* may simply designate a non-Jew without reference to his covenant status. In other cases, *ger* may denote a resident, non-Jew who has fully accepted the God of Israel and His Torah. The interpretation of *ger*, therefore, is entirely dependent upon the context in which it is found.

The fact that the term *ger* can function both to describe a person who has covenant status as well as a “visitor” in Israel who is not a covenant member, may help to explain at least one seeming contradiction in the Torah text. Compare Deuteronomy 14:21 with Leviticus 17:15:

Deut. 14:21 "You shall not eat anything which dies of itself. You may give it to the alien ( <i>ger</i> ) who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner ( <i>nachri</i> ), for you are a holy people to the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.	Lev. 17:15 "And when any person eats an animal which dies, or is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or an alien ( <i>ger</i> ), he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he will become clean.
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In the Leviticus text it is clear that a *ger* is not to eat of the unclean food (meat from an animal that has died on its own or been torn by a predator) while the Deuteronomy text appears to allow the *ger* to eat the unclean meat (i.e., he is not subject to the Torah commandments of clean and unclean foods). How might this be explained?

That Leviticus 17:15 begins with “any person” (וְכָל-נֶפֶשׁ, *v'kol nefesh*) and further adds “whether native or alien” (בְּאֶזְרַח וּבְגֵר, *ba'ezrach uvager*) shows that in this text the Torah was considered universal for all within the community of Israel. In contrast, the Deuteronomy passage allows the torn meat to be given to the “alien who is in your town” (לְגֵר אֲשֶׁר-בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ, *lager asher bish'arecha*), presumably because the alien (in this case) is allowed to eat what is unclean. But here the *ger* who is “in your gates” must denote a “visitor” not on the same level as the *ger* in Leviticus 17:15. The added phrase “or sell it to a foreigner” (אוּ מָכַר לְנָכְרִי, *o machor l'nachri*) further clarifies the *ger* in this context to be one who is not a covenant member and has not accepted upon himself the rule of Torah. We may rightly interpret the *vav* as pleonastic and translate: “You may give it to the alien (*ger*) who is in your town, so that he may eat it, that is, to a foreigner (*nachri*).”

The Lxx translators apparently recognized this distinction, for in Deuteronomy 14:21 they translate “alien who is in your town” (τῷ παροίκῳ τῷ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσίν σου, *to paroiko to en tais polesin sou*) while Leviticus 17:15 employs προσηλύτος (*proshlutos*, “proselyte”) to translate *ger*. I might suggest that in this case παροικος is a more general term, and that προσηλυτος a more specific term, denoting one who had become a part of the clan. This substantiates what Donaldson concludes when he writes:

With the experiences of the exile and the diaspora, the older understanding of Israel as an ethnic entity living on its ancestral land gradually gave way to that of a religious community defined by the Torah. Along with this shift came the possibility of the full assimilation of Gentiles into the community, that is, proselytism. But the link with the older notion is clear; except where ג clearly indicates the resident alien, the Lxx generally renders it by προσηλυτος (“proselyte”; πάροικος is the preferred term for the exceptions).<sup>62</sup>

The word *proselutos*, “proselyte” evolved into a purely technical, religious term by the time of the 1st Century CE. Its use in the Lxx shows the process of this evolution, but the works of Philo and Josephus and the later rabbinic literature confirm its technical usage. The Jewish catacomb inscriptions also show that by the time of the common era, the term had come to mean “a full proselyte,” that is, one who had undergone a religious ceremony in order to be given the ethnic status of “Jew.” That proselytes were buried in Jewish tombs, and that God-fearers never were, shows that the proselyte had a status above that of the God-fearer, and was not considered a Gentile as the God-fearer was.

The Qumran sect appears to have been less than open to the non-Jewish “convert,” reflecting the minority rabbinic view that held the “proselyte” in a lower rank than that of the full Israelite. That the Qumran literature anticipates the destruction of the nations in the final day also emphasizes their sectarian bias.

The majority view of the rabbis, however, as reflected in the later literature, shows clearly that the term *ger* and its parallel Greek word, *proselutos*, had acquired the meaning of “convert” (at least by the 1st Century CE) and that the convert was awarded the status of “Jew” in their opinion. The “convert,” therefore, was required to pay the Temple tax, something not required of the non-Jew. These data confirm that by the time of the 1st Century CE, the term *ger* meant a proselyte who, by undergoing the rabbinic ritual, was considered a Jew.

The word *ezrach*, “native citizen,” was used throughout the Tanach to denote physical descendency in distinction to the “foreigner” who had no claim to clan ancestry. The word functioned in a sociological manner until the later rabbinic theology evolved in which the sociological gave way to the religious meaning. Before that time, the word is most often found in the contexts which accord “citizenship” to the *ger* who had become part of the people of Israel, though land ownership was reckoned by physical lineage, not citizenship.

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<sup>62</sup>Terrence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Fortress, 1997), p. 55. Donaldson’s comments further on in this quote, that προσηλυτος and παροικος are distinguished by the Lxx, the former referring to a “convert” (except where ג is clearly a foreigner who has not accepted the God of Israel and His Torah) and the latter to a “resident alien.” This is true in number of instances, but these words are not consistently used in this manner, showing that the meanings of these terms were in the state of evolving at the time of the Lxx.

## Section 3

# Proselytism in the Rabbinic Literature

### 3.1 *The Shift to a Religious Meaning of Ger*

It is apparent that the rabbis of the early centuries of our era continued to develop the *halachah* of conversion, including defining terms that conveyed this *halachah*. It will be helpful, then, to briefly overview the rabbinic literature and its teaching on the proselyte.

It seems clear that the current issues facing Messianic Judaism are fueled by the influence of the rabbinic perspective. No one confined to the biblical record itself would come up with the idea that there should be two separate expressions of the body of Messiah, a “Gentile Church” and a “Messianic Judaism.” The very fact that such a proposal could find acceptance in our day stems back to the long-standing rabbinic perspective and the “box” in which Judaism is cast. To “think out of the box” is apparently difficult, if not impossible, for those who are proposing a thorough-going ethnicity as the standard for Messianic Judaism.

But what exactly was the rabbinic view of proselytism in the early centuries of the common era? Our sources are all post 70CE, though we may presume that they give us, to one extent or another, at least a glimpse of what might have been the rabbinic thought in the earlier decades.

Kuhn has shown that the meaning of *ger* and its Greek equivalent, *proselutes*, moved from its original sociological meaning to a purely religious, technical term in the late Second Temple period.<sup>63</sup> Whereas originally the terms simply identified a foreigner who had taken up residence in Israel (without being specific about his relationship to Israel’s God and Torah), by the 2nd Century BCE the words were being used more and more to denote a convert to Judaism.

This shift from a sociological term to the purely religious one may also be noted from the fact that the rabbinic literature does not consider the גֵּר תוֹשָׁב, *ger toshav*, usually translated “resident alien,” to be a Jew, and adopts alternative labels to differentiate the “resident alien” from a genuine “convert.” Thus, terminology was developed to add specificity to the word *ger*, differentiating non-Jews on the basis of various criteria.

Consequently, in Rabbinic Hebrew, in addition to *ger*, we find the words גִּיּוֹרָה, *giyoret*, a feminine form of גֵּר, *ger*, as well as the Aramaic גִּיּוֹרָא, *giyora’* and גֵּיּרָא, *geira’*.<sup>64</sup> Since the word *ger* had taken on a purely religious sense, a new verb was also constructed, הִתְגַּיֵּיר, *hitgayeir*, “to go over to Judaism,” “become a proselyte.”<sup>65</sup> Likewise, an active form appears in Late Biblical Hebrew (and incorporated into Rabbinic Hebrew), הִתְיָהַד, *hityahad*, “to make a Jew.”<sup>66</sup> The appearance of this verb in Esther has been used by some to suggest that the rabbinic ritual of conversion was extant during the Persian era. But the text is clear that they did not side with the Jews out of a

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<sup>63</sup>Kuhn, “προσῳλυτος,” *TDNT*6: 730-38.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 736.

<sup>65</sup>In Kuhn, *Ibid.*, 736, הִתְגַּיֵּיר [sic]. Note Jastrow, 226, who lists *b.Berchot* 57b; *b.Yevamot* 47b; *b.Avodah Zera* 3b as examples.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Esther 8:17, וְרַבִּים מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ מִתְיָהָדִים, “and many from the peoples of the land became Jews. . . .” The presence of the verb in Esther describes what took place without necessarily indicating divine sanction.

recognition that Esther's God was the true God, only that they feared the retaliation of the Jews. And even though the Lxx adds clarification here with the words "were circumcised,"<sup>67</sup> the fact that this single occurrence of the word is in the hitpa'el (reflexive, thus "made themselves Jews") most likely means "they sided with the Jews," not that they circumcised themselves.

Actually, the term may mean the Gentiles identified themselves with the cause of the threatened Jews and pretended to be Jews . . . .<sup>68</sup>

Of course, the rabbinic view is that the masses converted. The Midrash compares Mordecai to Abraham as one who made proselytes:

Some say he was equal to Abraham in his generation. Just as our father Abraham allowed himself to be cast into the fiery furnace and converted his fellowmen and made them acknowledge the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, And the souls which they had gotten in Haran (Gen. XII, 5), so in the days of Mordecai men acknowledged the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, And many from among the peoples of the land became Jews (Est. VIII, 17), and he proclaimed the unity of God's name and sanctified it. Therefore he was called YEHUDI, as it says, A JUDEAN MAN; read not YEHUDI but yehidi.<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, there is no evidence in this term for a "ritual of conversion," and the most obvious meaning is that the masses sided with the Jews in order to save their lives.

Nevertheless, since by the 1st Century the meaning of "ger" had taken on a purely religious sense, it was necessary for the ruling authorities to develop criteria to differentiate the genuine "convert" from the spurious one. Those deemed to be converts out of worldly or impure motives were labeled גְּרֵי (ה)שֶׁקֶר, *g'rei (ha)shaker*, "false proselytes." These might include Gentiles who converted in order to marry, or to receive benefits given the poor. The term גְּרֵי אֲרִיּוֹת, *g'rei 'ariot*, "lion proselytes" was also used of "false proselytes" who converted out of fear of persecution.<sup>70</sup> Other terms for false proselytes were גְּרֵי הַחֲלוּמוֹת, *g'rei hachalomot*, "dream proselytes" (who converted as a result of dreams) and גְּרִים גְּרֻרִים, *g'rim g'rurim*, "proselytes who press in" (as the Gibeonites in Joshua 9).

In order to designate the true proselyte, the term גְּרֵי (ה)צַדִּיק, *g'rei (ha)tzadik*, "righteous proselytes" was developed.<sup>71</sup> These were Gentiles who become proselytes out of a sincere religious conviction and in the Bavli were distinguished from the *ger toshav*, "resident alien."<sup>72</sup> The designation *ger (ha) tzadik* is not found in the Tanach nor the Mishnah which would confirm that this rabbinic terminology was solidified in the post-Mishnaic era.

That the word *ger* had taken on a purely religious sense by the 1st Century is also

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<sup>67</sup>The Old Latin version does the same.

<sup>68</sup>Carey A. Moore, *Esther in The Anchor Bible* (Doubleday, 1971), p. 82.

<sup>69</sup>Mid. Rab. Esther 6.2.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. 2Kings 17:25f.

<sup>71</sup>Note that *Mekilta* on Ex 23:12 has a discussion as to whether גֵר תוֹשֵׁב should be understood as "resident alien" or גֵר צַדִּיק (Lauterbach, 3.178). The very fact that such a question would arise indicates that the interpretation of גֵר תוֹשֵׁב was being debated.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. b. *Yevamot* 49b; b. *Gittin* 57b; b. *Kiddushin* 20a; b. *Bava Metzia* 71a; b. *Sanhedrin* 96b.

shown by the fact that the *gerim* are required to pay the Temple tax while the non-Jews were not.

m. *Shekalim* 1:3 Once they were set up in the Temple, they began to exact pledges. From whom do they exact a pledge? Levites, Israelites, proselytes (גרים), and freed slaves, but not from women, slaves, and minors.<sup>73</sup>

The use of the term גרים/גרים to denote “converts” from the rabbinic standpoint also found its way into the *Shemonei Esrei* in both the Babylonian and Palestinian recensions. The 13th benediction of the Babylonian recension reads:

Upon the righteous, upon the pious, upon the elders of Your people the House of Israel, upon the remnant of their scholars, upon the true proselytes (גרי הצדק), and upon us, may Your mercy be aroused, Adonai our God.<sup>74</sup>

The Cairo Geniza fragments read:

Show compassion to righteous converts (גרי הצדק), and give us a good reward with those who do your will. Blessed are You, Adonai, who is the trust of the righteous.<sup>75</sup>

That the Stone Chumash (1993-1997) regularly translates *ger* as “convert” or “proselyte” shows that the same perspective is in place in our times. That the translation of *ger* by “proselyte” is theologically driven is obvious by a verse like Leviticus 19:33:

When a proselyte (*ger*) dwells among you in your land, do not taunt him. The proselyte (*ger*) who dwells with you shall be like a native among you, and you shall love him like yourself, for you were aliens (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt—I am HaShem, your God.<sup>76</sup>

### 3.2 The Rabbinic Ritual of Proselytism

In the commentary on Numbers 15 (*Sifre*), we read:

Rabbi says, “Just as an Israel did not enter the covenant except by means of three things—circumcision, immersion, and the acceptance of a sacrifice – so it is the same with the proselytes (הגרים).<sup>77</sup>

Thus, the three necessary steps are (1) circumcision, (2) *mikvah*, and (3) offering a sacrifice. As we shall see, these were debated by the Sages. To these three must be added a fourth, though this is essentially presupposed, namely, (4) acceptance of the Torah (both written and oral).

In a Talmudic passage, which does not mention sacrifice and therefore must

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<sup>73</sup>Note also m.*Shekalim* 1:6.

<sup>74</sup>Quoted from the Metzudah Siddur (Metzudah Pub., 1990), p. 129.

<sup>75</sup>Quoted from Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed. *My People's Prayer Book - Amidah* (Jewish Lights, 1998), 2.41.

<sup>76</sup>*The Chumash: Stone Edition* (Mesorah Pub, 1993), p. 665.

<sup>77</sup>*Sifre* §108, quoted from Schiffman. Cf. b.*Keritot* 9a.

represent opinions after the destruction of the Temple,<sup>78</sup> the following is given:

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: 'What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions'? If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy', he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed thus: 'Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with kareth, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with kareth; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning'. And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity, or too much suffering'. He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much. If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith. Should any shreds which render the circumcision invalid remain, he is to be circumcised a second time. As soon as he is healed arrangements are made for his immediate ablution, when two learned men must stand by his side and acquaint him with some of the minor commandments and with some of the major ones. When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.<sup>79</sup>

Here several interesting things should be noted: (1) the proselyte is expected to understand that he is accepting upon himself the full measure of the Torah, both written and oral; (2) he will identify with Israel on a national level, and will therefore come under the same persecutions and troubles that the Jewish community experiences as those under the heavy hand of the ruling powers; (3) that whereas before he had no responsibility to the Torah, after conversion he would be responsible for all of it and would be liable to its penalties; (4) he would be required to receive circumcision as prescribed by the Sages, and (5) once the full process was completed, including a *mikvah*, he would have equal privileges and responsibilities with all other Israelites, meaning he was considered a Jew.

### 3.21 The Requirement to Accept the Torah

The well-known passage from tractate Shabbat illustrates the debate over whether a proselyte was required to submit to both written and oral Torah:

Our Rabbis taught: A certain heathen once came before Shammai and asked him, 'How many Torot have you?' 'Two,' he replied: 'the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.' 'I believe you with respect to the Written, but not with respect to the Oral Torah; make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the Written Torah [only]. [But] he scolded and repulsed him in anger. When he went before Hillel, he accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day, he taught him, Alef, beth, gimmel, dalet; the following day he reversed [them] to him. 'But yesterday you did not teach them to me thus,' he protested. 'Must you then not rely upon me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah] too.'<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>So Schiffman judges, since it does not mention sacrifice, Lawrence Schiffman, *Who Was A Jew* (KTAV, 1985), 20.

<sup>79</sup>b. *Yevamot* 47a-b from the Soncino edition.

A passage from the Tosefta affirms this same position:

A proselyte who took upon himself all the obligations of the Torah except for one item, they do not accept him.<sup>81</sup>

After noting the description of the conversion of Helena of Adiabene and her son, Izates in Josephus,<sup>82</sup> Schiffman concludes:

While we cannot document the requirement of acceptance of the Torah for conversion before 30 CE, this requirement must have existed from the very beginnings of proselytism in Second Temple times.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.22 The Requirement of Circumcision

Circumcision was given to Abraham as the “sign of the covenant” (Genesis 17:11ff). Though existing in other cultures,<sup>84</sup> circumcision became a unique sign of Jewish identity in the Second Temple period. Judith 14:10 tells of the requirement of circumcision for “joining the house of Israel”:

When Achior saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly in God. So he was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day.

Conversely, Maccabees relates that those who desired to Hellenize attempted to reverse their circumcision.<sup>85</sup> And its importance as an identity mark for the Jews may be seen by the fact that it was outlawed by Hadrian as an attempt to diminish their influence.<sup>86</sup>

That there was debate on the issue of whether there could be a valid proselyte without circumcision seems clear from a Talmudic reference:

Our Rabbis taught: ‘If a proselyte was circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution, R. Eliezer said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that our forefathers were circumcised and had not performed ritual ablution’. If he performed the prescribed ablution but had not been circumcised, R. Joshua said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that the mothers had performed ritual ablution but had not been circumcised’. The Sages, however, said, ‘Whether he had performed ritual ablution but had not been circumcised or whether he had been circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution, he is not a proper proselyte, unless he has been circumcised and has also performed the prescribed ritual ablution.’<sup>87</sup>

Though this may well indicate that the issue was debated, it seems equally clear that the majority considered circumcision a necessity for the proselyte, and indeed, this became

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<sup>80</sup>b. *Shabbat* 31a.

<sup>81</sup>t. *Demai* 2:5, from Jacob Neusner, *Tosefta*, 2 vols. (Hendricksen, 2002), 1:85. This line is missing in the Vienna edition.

<sup>82</sup>*Ant.* 20.2.3-5 (34-53).

<sup>83</sup>Schiffman, *Who was a Jew?*, 23.

<sup>84</sup>See my article, “The Theological Significance of Circumcision,” available at [www.torahresource.com](http://www.torahresource.com).

<sup>85</sup>1Maccabees 1:15.

<sup>86</sup>Schiffman, *Who was a Jew?*, 24.

the received *halalchah*. What is more, it was the wide-spread perception of the Graeco-Roman society, that Jews were circumcised,<sup>88</sup> meaning that it would appear impossible that a genuine convert could be accorded the status of Jew without circumcision.

### 3.23 The Requirement of *Mikvah*

The debate between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai over whether a person who becomes a proselyte on the eve of Pesach could eat of the Pesach sacrifice, appears to interpret the requirement of *mikvah* for the proselyte as a purification ritual:

A proselyte who converted on the eve of Passover [the fourteenth of Nisan]— the House of Shammai say, “He immerses and eats his Passover offering in the evening.” And the House of Hillel say, “He who takes his leave of the foreskin is as if he took his leave of the grave [and must be sprinkled on the third and seventh day after circumcision as if he had suffered corpse uncleanness].”<sup>89</sup>

The House of Shammai seems to rule that a Gentile is not unclean, and thus the *mikvah* is simply part of the conversion ritual. The House of Hillel, however, appears to consider the Gentile to be unclean on the level of corpse impurity, which requires a full seven day period for cleansing (with *mikvah* on the third and seventh days). However, the whole issue of whether Gentiles were considered unclean by pre-rabbinic Judaisms is debated.<sup>90</sup> As b.*Yevamot* 47 indicates (it is quoted above), the Gentile before becoming a proselyte is not subject even to Torah commandments that carry capital punishment as their penalty. One Talmudic passage suggests that the reason for the *mikvah* in the conversion ritual was to teach the convert that corpse defilement required a full seven days, so that he would not mistakenly enter the Temple precincts while defiled by a corpse, and a corresponding Tosefta may support this view.<sup>91</sup>

Regardless of the exact reason for the *mikvah* as part of the conversion ceremony, by the Amoraic period, it was well established that *mikvah* was a necessary part of the conversion process:

For R. Zera said in the name of R. Johanan: One does not become a proselyte until he has been circumcised and has performed ablution; and so long as he has not performed ablution he is a gentile.<sup>92</sup>

Given the fact, however, that Sages who lived early in the 1st Century CE are cited as requiring the *mikvah*, we should conclude that it was the common practice in the 1st Century to require a *mikvah* as part of the proselyte ritual. Furthermore, this would be the only ritual exercise for women who desired to convert, and all indications are that women outnumbered men in terms of proselytes. Moreover, the fact that the *mikvah* is presumed to be understood in Yeshua’s instructions regarding the drawing in of Gentiles (e.g., Matthew 28:19-20) would support the idea that it was an established

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<sup>87</sup>b.*Yevamot* 46b.

<sup>88</sup>See Louis Feldman, *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1993), 153ff.

<sup>89</sup>m.*Pesachim* 8:8.

<sup>90</sup>See the remarks of E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63BCE–66CE* (Trinity, 1992), 72ff.

<sup>91</sup>b.*Pesachim* 92a, cf. t.*Pesachim* 7:14. Note the remarks of Schiffman, *Who was a Jew?*, 27.



element of the proselyte ritual in the 1st Century CE.

### 3.24 The Requirement of Sacrifice

The Mishnah states (m.*Keritot* 2:1):

[There are] four whose atonement is not complete [until they bring an offering]. And four bring [an offering] for [a transgression done] deliberately as for [one done] inadvertently. These are those whose atonement is not complete [until they bring an offering]: (1) The Zab, and (2) the Zabah, and (3) the woman who has given birth, and (4) the mesora. R. Eliezer b. Jacob says, "A proselyte is one whose atonement is not complete until the blood will be sprinkled on his behalf." And the Nazir as to [observing prohibitions against] wine, shaving, and uncleanness [has not completed atonement until he has brought his offering].<sup>93</sup>

While there may appear to be a debate over whether a convert was required to bring a sacrifice as part of the conversion ritual, Schiffman has shown that the debate actually related to the reason for the sacrifice, not its necessity.<sup>94</sup>

The Sages, following the destruction of the Temple, ruled that in lieu of the sacrifice an equivalent payment of money was required:

Our Rabbis taught: A proselyte in these days has to put aside a fourth [of a denar] for his sacrifice of birds. Said R. Simeon: R. Johanan b. Zakkai held a vote on this rule and abolished it for fear of misuse. Said R. Idi b. Gershom in the name of R. Adda son of Ahaba, The decision is according to R. Simeon.<sup>95</sup>

Once again, the fact that a Sage of the stature of Johanan b. Zakkai should seek to abolish the *halachah* because he saw it as potentially dangerous should tell us that this requirement was also in some state of flux before the destruction of the Temple.

### 3.3 The Status of "True Proselytes"

The rabbinic literature is clear that the proselyte was to be considered equal with the native born, and even in some cases, more precious in God's eyes.

When he comes up after his ablution he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects.<sup>96</sup>

In this regard, it was considered wrong to remind a proselyte that his family were pagans and carried out pagan practices:

If there was a penitent, one may not say to him, "Remember what you used to do!" If he was a child of proselytes, one may not say to him, "Remember what your folks used to do!" For it is said, And a proselyte you shall not wrong nor oppress (Ex. 22:20).<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>b.*Yevamot* 47b. R. Zera, the disciple of R. Yochanan, lived in the late 3rd or early 4th Century CE.

<sup>93</sup>From Neusner's translation.

<sup>94</sup>Schiffman, *Who was a Jew?*, 30-31.

What is more, there are voices within the post-destruction, rabbinic Judaism that attribute a high status to the proselyte. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish is quoted as saying that the proselyte is dearer to God than the native-born Jew because the Jew would not have accepted the Torah except he had seen the miracles, while the proselyte saw none of these yet took the yoke of the Torah upon himself.<sup>98</sup> And the Talmud asserts that the proselyte has the status of a newborn.<sup>99</sup> The later Midrash asserts that the proselyte will be blessed in the world to come in accordance with his good deed and that his descendants who marry priests will serve in the Temple.<sup>100</sup>

Yet it is clear that there remained a “pecking order” regardless of the theoretical equality of native-born and proselyte:

A priest takes precedence over a Levite, a Levite over an Israelite, an Israelite over a mamzer [one with illegitimate birth], a mamzer over a Netin [descendent of the Gibeonites], a Netin over a proselyte, a proselyte over a freed slave. Under what circumstances? When all of them are equivalent. But if the mamzer was a disciple of a sage and a high priest was an am haares [rural, unlearned people], the mamzer who is a disciple of a sage takes precedence over a high priest who is an am haares.<sup>101</sup>

Here, as in other places in the Mishnah, the proselyte (גר [or its feminine equivalent] is the designation most often used) is put just above the freed slave or a woman (who had inferior legal standing).<sup>102</sup> In the same vein, a *mamzer* may not marry a born Israelite but may marry a proselyte.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, a priest is not permitted to marry a proselyte.<sup>104</sup> The Tosefta creates four classes:

There are four congregations: the congregation of priests, the congregation of Levites, the congregation of Israelites, and the congregation of proselytes. And the rest are permitted to intermarry with one another.<sup>105</sup>

The Dead Sea sect excludes the Ammonites, Moabites, *mazerim*, aliens, and proselytes from the end-times Temple because “his holiness is there.”<sup>106</sup>

That the proselyte did not, in practical measures, share equality with the native-born Jew, is evident from the following Mishnah dealing with matters of the *b'erachot* (blessings and liturgical prayers):

These [people] bring [firstfruits] but do not recite: a proselyte brings but does not recite,

<sup>95</sup>b.*Keritot* 9a. For the dating of this and related citations, see Schiffman, *Ibid.*, 32ff. He concludes that though some of the rabbinic citations might indicate a debate in the 1st Century CE over exactly what was required of a proselyte in his conversion ritual, the evidence points to a unified agreement on their requirements, but debates among the rabbis were over the exact point at which a proselyte was considered a full-fledged Jew.

<sup>96</sup>b.*Yevamot* 47a-b.

<sup>97</sup>m.*Bava Metzia* 4.10.

<sup>98</sup>*Tanchuma* Lech Leka 6.

<sup>99</sup>b.*Yevamot* 22a.

<sup>100</sup>Mid. Rab. *Numbers* 8.9.

<sup>101</sup>m.*Horayot* 3.8.

<sup>102</sup>Cf. m.*Eduyot* 5.6; m.*Bava Kama* 4.7; m.*Keritot* 2.1

because he is not able to say, “[I have come into the land] which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us,” (Dt. 26:3). But if his mother was an Israelite, he brings and recites. And when he [the proselyte] prays in private, he says, “God of the fathers [instead of “God of our fathers]. And when he prays in the synagogue, he says, “God of your fathers.” [But] if his mother was an Israelite, he says, “God of our fathers.”<sup>107</sup>

Here, interestingly, the proselyte in question may be the son of an Israelite woman (native born Jew) but acquired his current status through the ritual of a proselyte. Why? The answer may be that in the opinion of the earlier Sages, lineage was determined by the father, not the mother, and that in later rabbinic Judaism a shift occurred by which maternal lineage became the standard.<sup>108</sup> One might speculate that such a shift was considered necessary in light of the 2nd and 3rd Century need to make clear ethnic distinctions as a result of the division of Synagogue and Church .

Rabbi Eliezer<sup>109</sup> notes that proselytes often return to their pagan ways, something Josephus confirms.<sup>110</sup> It may be that the added *minim* benediction was directed to just such possibilities.<sup>111</sup> Rabbi Chiyya is quoted as saying:

Do not have any faith in a proselyte until twenty-four generations have passed because the inherent evil is still within him.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, the proselyte (at least in practical *halalchah*) was not treated as equal in spite of the fact that the words of some of the Sages said they should be. The reason for such an inequality can only be explained as the result of sociological tensions: with the strong pull to become Hellenized, the boundaries of Jewish identity needed to be strengthened in order for the Jewish community to remain viable. The obvious way to strengthen such identity boundaries was to make covenant membership an ethnic issue. One must consider how such a position played into the various factors resulting in the split between the emerging Christian Church and the Synagogue.

### 3.4 God-fearers

The existence of the term “God-fearers” is best represented in Acts. Here we find the phrase φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν, *phoboumenos ton theon*, “a fearer of God,” four times.<sup>113</sup> One time the substantive participle ὁ φεβούμενος, “a fearer” is found.<sup>114</sup> In addition, σεβούμενος τὸν θεόν, *seboumenos ton theon*, “one who reverences God” appears,<sup>115</sup> as well

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<sup>103</sup>b. *Yevamot* 79b; b. *Kiddushin* 67a.

<sup>104</sup>m. *Yevamot* 6.5; m. *Kiddushin* 4.7; m. *Bikkurim* 1.5.

<sup>105</sup>t. *Kiddushin* 5.1, from Neusner’s translation.

<sup>106</sup>4Q174, 3:4, where בני נכר is distinguished from גר.

<sup>107</sup>m. *Bikkurim* 1.4. Interestingly, Rambam disagrees with this Mishnaic ruling. See the comments of Blackwell, *Mishnaot* 6 vols (Judaica Press, 1983), 1.469.

<sup>108</sup>Cf. m. *Kiddushin* 3.12ff and the remarks of Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish? (Acts 16:1-3),” *JBL* 105/2 (1986), 251-268. Schiffman, on the basis of the Tosefta (t. *Kiddushin* 4.16), argues that the offspring of a non-Jewish male and a Jewish woman is a full-fledged Jew, cf. *Who Was a Jew?*, 10ff, but his argument requires taking the Mishnah passage as a later interpolation, and receiving the Tosefta as representing the earlier opinion. He also must explain away references in Josephus (cf. *Ant.* 14.15.2).

<sup>109</sup>It should be noted that he was under the ban of excommunication because he apparently had been influenced by the followers of Yeshua, cf. b. *Avoda Zera* 16a-17b.

as the substantive participle *σεβούμενος*, “a reverencer.”<sup>116</sup> It is clear that in some of these instances, the phrase describes non-Jews who were a regular part of the synagogue community. Cornelius is the most famous of these in the book of Acts.

There has been considerable debate as to whether these labels identify a technically recognized class of non-Jews who were regular participants in the life and worship of the Jewish community, or if they simply are used to describe those (Jew or non-Jew) who were sympathizers with the Judaisms of the day, but unwilling to take the full steps to becoming a proselyte.<sup>117</sup> The majority of scholars have accepted the view that the “God-fearers” comprised some intermediate position between Gentile and recognized Jew (whether by lineage or conversion), and that they probably enjoyed some *de facto* status within the Jewish community. Some, however, are not convinced, and the debate continues.

Admittedly, the data are not as conclusive for the majority view as one might expect. This is partly the case because the rabbinic literature is careful not to assign a legal status to these “sympathizers,” even if, in practice, they played a regular (and perhaps substantial) role in the 1st Century synagogue. Levine, for instance, considers several inscriptions from the 1st and 2nd Centuries CE as evidence not only for the presence of God-fearers, but also for their legally recognized status within the synagogal community. Note, for example, the following inscription:

I release in the *proseuche*, Elpias the son of my slave, bred in my house; he shall remain undisturbed and unassailed by any of my heirs, except for [his duty] to visit the *proseuche* regularly; the community [*synagoge*] of the Jews and the God-fearers will be [together with me] guardian [of the enfranchised].<sup>118</sup>

Levine goes on to comment:

If this interpretation is correct, it would indicate that God-fearers held a legally recognized position in the synagogue alongside the regular Jewish community, a presence even more institutionalized than later on, in third-century Aphrodisias. Such a situation has far-reaching implications regarding these God-fearers’ numbers as well as their social and political standing.<sup>119</sup>

Indeed, the inscriptions of late antiquity give what appears to be conclusive evidence for an increasing number of non-Jews (including prominent members of the society) who openly participated in and supported the Jewish synagogue.<sup>120</sup>

Philo mentions the God-fearers in a text where he reasons that since the Israelites did not practice circumcision in Egypt, the passage in Exodus 22:20, 23 which requires treating the *proselutos* with fairness, must be talking about uncircumcised Gentiles. As

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<sup>110</sup> *Against Apion* 2.123.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. b. *Megillah* 17b and the comments of Louis Feldman, *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World*, 339.

<sup>112</sup> Mid. Rab. *Ruth Zuta* on 1.12, quoted from Feldman, *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Acts 10:2,22; 13:16,26; cf. Rev. 14:7.

<sup>114</sup> Acts 10:35.

<sup>115</sup> Acts 16:14; 18:7.

<sup>116</sup> Acts 13:43, 50; 17:4, 17.

such, he reasons that they must be God-fearers.<sup>121</sup> Likewise, Josephus makes mention of this class of worshippers. In *Antiquities* he uses the same Greek phrase found in Acts:

Ant. 14.110 And let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the habitable earth, and those that worshipped God (σεβουμένων τὸν θεόν), nay, even those of Asia and Europe, sent their contributions to it, and this from very ancient times.

The apocryphal work *Testament of Joseph* also uses this same Greek phrase in the context of Potiphar's wife seeking instruction in Torah from Joseph.<sup>122</sup>

In spite of widespread use of terms to apparently designate an "in-between" class of Gentiles, the rabbinic literature is virtually silent about the so-called "God-fearers." The reason seems obvious: the Sages did not want to give any legitimation to a class of people who were not willing to make a full commitment. To allow Gentiles (for so a God-fearer would have been legally ranked) the privilege of full covenant participation would not only negate the desire to become a full-fledged proselyte, but it would also blur the Jewish identity. The covenant belongs to Israel, and only Jews and those who "become Jews" are allowed to function within the covenant boundaries.

Yet while the term "God-fearer" does not find its way into the rabbinic literature, there is the possibility that an alternative label was at least used to identify those who were sympathetic to the Jewish religion. We note several times that *יִרְאָה שָׁמַיִם*, "fearer of Heaven" is used in a way that could denote a class of non-Jewish sympathizers. The fact that the language of "fearing heaven" is found in the biblical text<sup>123</sup> made it a ready label for an "in-between" group of Gentiles who were viewed as "on their way" to becoming proselytes. We should note, however, that to "fear Heaven" is a common phrase in the rabbinic literature for anyone who was deemed pious.<sup>124</sup>

Yet that the phrase "one who fears Heaven" may indicate a sympathizer or God-fearer seems clear. King Lemuel's father is said to be a Heaven-fearer,<sup>125</sup> as is a Roman senator who gave his life to delay implementation of an imperial decree that would have banned Jews from the Roman Empire.<sup>126</sup> There is little doubt that by the 3rd Century CE, the term "fearer of Heaven" became a technical term among the rabbis for what others called "God-fearers." In the Yerushalami, R. Eleazar (3rd Century) is quoted as saying that only the Gentiles who had nothing to do with the Jews during their bitter past will not be permitted to convert to Judaism in the time of the Messiah, but that those "Heaven-fearers" who shared in the tribulation of Israel would be accepted as full proselytes, with the Emperor Antoninus at their head.<sup>127</sup> Likewise, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishamel* lists four categories of true worshippers of God:

One shall say: I am the Lord's (Is 44:5), that is: "All of me is the Lord's and there is no

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<sup>117</sup>For a thorough description of the debate, and the sources for the debate, see Louis Feldman, *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 342-82.

<sup>118</sup>Quoted from L. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (Yale, 2000), p. 115.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

<sup>120</sup>Note Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, p. 273.

<sup>121</sup>As noted by Feldman, *Jew & Gentile*, p. 348.

<sup>122</sup>*Testament of Joseph*, 4.4.

<sup>123</sup>Daniel 4:23; Matthew 3:2; cf. 1Maccabees 3:18.

admixture of sin in me.” “And another shall call himself by the name of Jacob (Ibid.), these are the righteous proselytes. “And another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord” (Ibid.), these are the repentant sinners. “And surname himself by the name of Israel” (Ibid.), these are the God-fearing ones (יראי שמים).<sup>128</sup>

As noted above, in rabbinic Judaism the designation גֵּר תוֹשָׁב, *ger toshav*, (“resident alien”) was clearly differentiated from the proselyte (who had Jewish status), and it may be that this term was taken up by the rabbis to mean the “God-fearer.” The *ger toshav* was clearly treated as a Gentile though he was presumed to have accepted the Noachide laws and was therefore allowed to remain within the synagogue community.

We may speculate that the influx of Gentiles into the diaspora communities presented increasing challenges for the Jewish community. This may explain the fact that the 2nd Century Rabbi Meir taught that the pagan who studies Torah ranks higher than an ignorant high priest, while the 3rd Century Sage, Rabbi Yochanan said that a Gentile who engages in the study of Torah is subject to the death penalty.<sup>129</sup> It would appear that the privilege of Torah study was reserved for the Jew and proselyte as the boundaries of Jewish identity continued to be eroded.

What should we make of the class of “God-fearers?” First, it seems apparent that the God-fearer, while occupying a kind of “in-between” state between pagan and proselyte (at least in the view of the leaders of the Jewish community), were nevertheless treated as Gentiles in terms of legal *halachah*. While they may have been appreciated for their involvement and support, they were still Gentiles. It also seems most likely that the growing animosity toward Gentiles which one senses in the evolving rabbinic literature of the 3rd and 4th Centuries, can only indicate that there were no firm *halachic* rulings by the pre-destruction Sages according God-fearers’ legal status within the community. So while they were tolerated and even appreciated early on and spoken of in veiled terms, as the tensions grew between Jew and non-Jew following the second Jewish Revolt, the so-called “God-fearer” was relegated to the Noachide Laws as a way to further define the boundaries between the Jew and proselyte and the Gentile community.

Some have suggested that the God-fearer provides a fitting paradigm for the Gentile within Messianic Judaism.<sup>130</sup> But this hardly fits the biblical pattern. The God-fearer of the 1st Century clearly held an inferior status in the synagogue community, a status which only eroded as pressures increased upon the Jewish community. To postulate that the God-fearer presents some kind of model for the Gentile within Messianic Judaism is, once again, to give into the non-biblical notion that ethnic status offers various God-given categories within the body of Messiah. Nothing could be further from the clear message of the Tanach, affirmed by the Apostles. What the gospel calls for is a visible people of God whose identity is first and foremost in their attachment to the Almighty through His Messiah, Yeshua. Such an attachment is based upon faithfulness to God as the inevitable outworking of faith in Yeshua. And such a life of faithfulness is not only expected of all covenant members, it is the privilege of all. The life of faithfulness is a life lived in the light of Torah. God-fearers were the natural result of building walls on the basis of ethnicity. For what position was left for Gentiles who (for various reasons) could not become proselytes? These were the very walls Yeshua

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<sup>124</sup>Note b.*Berchot* 8a; 56b; b.*Shabbat* 61a; b.*Sukkah* 49b; b.*Nidah* 33b; Mid. Rab. *Gen* 53.9; Mid. Rab. *Num* 10.4; Mid. Rab. *Qoh* 12.12.

<sup>125</sup>b.*Sanhedrin* 70b.

<sup>126</sup>Mid. Rab. *Deut.* 2.24. Note also Mid. Rab. *Gen* 28.6; Mid. Rab. *Canticles* 1.25.

abolished in order to bring the Gentile near, not in a class separate to himself, but as a fellow heir and fellow participant in the covenant.

### 3.5 Summary: The Rabbinic Ritual of Proselytism

The rabbinic literature uniformly recognizes that the ritual of proselytism is the only avenue for a Gentile to become a covenant member. While the presence of God-fearers is surely documented, in the rabbinic literature there is no legal status given to those who were “in-between,” that is, Gentiles who worshiped in the synagogue and attended Temple functions (in the court of the Gentiles) but who had not undergone the official ceremony. For the Sages, a person was either a Jew or a Gentile—there was no middle ground.

The proselyte ceremony is not ancient, but a later innovation. As Schiffman notes:

Y. Kaufman is probably correct in assuming that there could not have been an institution for religious conversion at this time. According to him, conversion was originally accomplished by attachment to the land and collective fate of the people of Israel. The early Second Commonwealth, however, was a period of transition. The old process, followed for example by Ruth, had gone out of use, yet the later methods of conversion, based upon a conception of Judaism as a religion rather than Israel as a national entity, had not yet developed.<sup>131</sup>

This is borne out by the shift in meaning of the word *ger*. Whereas originally the word was purely sociological, in the rabbinic literature it has become a technical term in a religious sense. The *ger* is someone who has submitted to the ceremony of the proselyte. But in order to reckon with the biblical text which often uses *ger* in a way clearly not applicable to the proselyte, the rabbis develop specific, technical terminology to differentiate between a mere “foreigner” (גֵּר תוֹשֵׁב) and a genuine proselyte (גֵּר צְדִיק). And with the developing *halachah* comes expanded categories and rulings, all with the goal of maintaining and guarding the core, Jewish identity.

For rabbinic *halachah*, four things were required in the ritual for proselytism: (1) circumcision (for males), (2) *mikvah*, (3) sacrifice, and (4) acceptance of the Torah (both written and oral). After the destruction of the Temple, payment of money was substituted for sacrifice. Of course, like all *halachot*, these measures were debated. But the *halachah* which won acceptance required these four elements.

While the rabbinic literature evidences an appreciation for the proselyte, it is also clear that the proselyte threatened the identity boundaries. As such, there was a basic mistrust of the proselyte and even a diminishing of his place within the community. Once again, this tendency to give the proselyte a lesser place of privilege within the community can be seen as an attempt to maintain and strengthen the Jewish identity in the face of growing assimilation and exile into the diaspora.

The presence of God-fearers in the early centuries of the Common Era only proves that the Synagogue had created walls to separate between the Jew and non-Jew. While the God-fearer was accepted and even appreciated, he was technically a Gentile, and could not participate on the same level as a Jewish member. Though the God-fearer was praised by some, his lower position within the synagogue community could never be tolerated by the gospel message of Yeshua. In Yeshua, the victory of the eschaton was to be lived out, a victory that brought Jew and Gentile together as equal children in the family of God. Anything less than this was unacceptable in light of the high price paid

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<sup>127</sup>See Feldman, *Jew & Gentile*, p. 354.

to accomplish the building of Yeshua's *kehilah*.

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<sup>128</sup>Lauderbach, *Mekilta* 3 vols (JPS, 1935), p. 141.

<sup>129</sup>Cf. b.*Sanhedrin* 59a.

<sup>130</sup>Patricia Fischer, "Modern-Day Godfearers: A Biblical Role Model for Gentile Participation in Messianic Congregations," Unpublished monograph, n.d.

<sup>131</sup>Schiffman, *Who was a Jew?*, 15.



## Section 4

# The Covenant People

### 4.1 Israel: A Mixed Multitude

The name “Israel” is first encountered as the new name given to Jacob at the renewal of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 32:28). Its meaning is not certain, though traditionally it has been understood to mean “he contends with God.”<sup>132</sup> The name Israel is first used in a national sense in Exodus 4:22, when God declares that “Israel is My firstborn.” Most often, however, the common designation of the twelve tribes of Israel is “children of Israel” (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *b’nei Israel*).<sup>133</sup> This phrase, using the word “son” (בֵּן, *bein*) in its sense of “child” or “descendant,” refers to both male and female who make up the nation of Israel.<sup>134</sup> But foreigners were also part of the designation “children of Israel.” The exodus narrative is clear that a “mixed multitude went up” from Egypt (Exodus 12:38), a designation that envisions both native born and foreigner together. Yet the text never uses the label “mixed-multitude” to designate the people whom God had redeemed from Egypt. Always “the children of Israel” or “Israel” are the object of God’s redemption from Egypt’s slavery:

And on that same day the LORD brought the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts. (Exodus 12:51).

Quite clearly the people redeemed from Egypt, called “children of Israel,” were comprised of both native born and foreigners. As far as the exodus narrative is concerned, Israel, whom God redeemed from Egypt, was comprised of both native born and *gerim*, “sojourners” or those whose clan identity was outside that of the tribes of Jacob.

What is more, it is this same mixed multitude that stands at the foot of Mt. Sinai and accepts the covenant of the Torah. According to Exodus 19, the people redeemed from Egypt by God’s power are those who arrived at Sinai. And when the covenant terms are announced to the people, the text states: “All the people answered together and said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do!’” (Exodus 19:8). The native born together with the foreigner constituted the covenant people who received the Torah at Sinai.

### 4.2 Diminished Jewish Identity

The rabbis, of course, were quite aware of the theological tension this brings. If foreigners are accorded covenant status, the identity of the Jewish nation as uniquely God’s covenant people is diminished. As such, it became the common line of interpretation to understand the word “sojourner” (גֵּר, *ger*) to mean “proselyte”

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<sup>132</sup>שָׂרָה, “to contend,” “fight” and אֵל, “God,” thus the common understanding is “he who contends with God.” Others have suggested “God fights,” “God rules,” and “God heals,” cf. *Koehler-Baumgartner*, “ישראל.”

<sup>133</sup>Used 637 times in the Tanach, the expression, which began as a designation of the physical sons of Jacob, soon became the title for the whole nation.

<sup>134</sup>This is obvious by the fact that Exodus 13:2 speaks of the “wombs” among the “sons of Israel.” Furthermore, the “sons of Israel” all passed through the Red Sea on dry ground (Exodus 14:22) and all ate the manna (Exodus 16:35). In Exodus 35:29, the “sons of Israel” are specifically defined as “every man and woman” who brought offerings for the building of the Tabernacle.

whenever covenant membership is envisioned.<sup>135</sup> Since in the eyes of the authorities the proselyte ritual changed the status of the non-Jew to that of a Jew, the idea that the covenant belonged uniquely to the offspring of Jacob could be maintained. Moreover, a clear distinction could be established between Israel and the nations. Anyone of non-Jewish descent who wanted to join the covenant-people could do so, but only through a ritual which accorded them the status of being “Jewish.”

Interestingly, the UMJC recognizes that their position will ultimately require just such a ritual of conversion (becoming a proselyte and receiving a Jewish ethnic status). For those with Jewish lineage whose families have assimilated and who want to return, as well as for those who have no Jewish lineage and desire to become part of the covenant people, there must be a way to obtain the status of being “Jewish” in order to participate in all of the covenant privileges:

This raises the question of conversion to Judaism. Scripture clearly provides a model for those outside of the Jewish people to become part of the people, and sets a precedent for a ritual of conversion through circumcision. Whether or not we develop such a ritual within our own circles, we must recognize its validity in the larger Jewish world. If we seek to be part of the Jewish people, we must accept the broad norms of conversion prevalent within the Jewish community. Thus, like all forms of Judaism, we see a convert, whether from a Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox context, as a Jew, and their offspring normally as Jews.<sup>136</sup>

The notion that the Scripture “sets a precedent for a ritual of conversion” by which a non-Jew becomes a Jew is pure nonsense. Where would such a *ritual* be found in the Scriptures? And where is there any indication that obedience to the Torah (which would include accepting the sign of the covenant in one’s flesh) is a doorway for one’s change of ethnic status? While the Sages constructed a ritual which effected, in their estimation, an ethnic change of status for the foreigner, there is nothing in the biblical text to warrant such a thing. The “ritual of conversion” was a rabbinic idea, not a biblical one.

Indeed, from the first giving of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12), the inclusion of the nations within the covenant is envisioned, not as those who “become Jews,” but as “foreigners” who are brought near and made covenant members. While the promise is realized first among the physical offspring of Abraham, the goal is that all the nations would be blessed in him, not through some ritual that supposedly changes one’s ethnicity, but through faith in the same Messiah in whom Abraham believed, a faith that would change the heart to do God’s will.

In fact, the rabbinic view of proselytism finds no parallel in the written Torah. The idea of foreigners becoming part of the covenant people through acceptance of Israel’s God and His Torah (including circumcision) is ancient.<sup>137</sup> But the rabbinic ritual which included circumcision, mikvah, and sacrifice was the product of Judaisms in the Graeco-Roman times, not the Judaisms of the Second Temple period and earlier.

Thus, the rabbinic ritual finds no basis in the Tanach. In the biblical narratives, whenever a “stranger” or “foreigner” lives as part of the covenant people of Israel, he does so as one who has believed in Israel’s God and is therefore willing to obey His

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<sup>135</sup>Note that in the Stone Chumash as well as in the Stone Tanach, the word *ger* is most often translated “proselyte.” Of course, this cannot be done consistently, since Israel as a whole is considered as *gerim* by God (Leviticus 25:23).

<sup>136</sup>Rus Resnik, “Messianic Jewish Self-Definition: Addendum,” p. 2.

<sup>137</sup>Note the remarks above regarding the evolution of the term *proselutos* in the Lxx, Philo, Josephus, and the Jewish inscriptions.

commandments. A foreigner who dwells with Israel but is not willing to obey the commandments, forfeits the right of participation in the covenant<sup>138</sup> and may be expelled or even put to death if his transgression is a capital offense.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, it is clear that the *ger* (“sojourner”) does not entirely receive the status of a full citizen (גֵּרֵּה), for he has no right of land ownership. Like the Levite, the *ger* is listed with the orphan and the widow because he, like them, is at an economic disadvantage, being without land ownership.<sup>140</sup> Thus, the distinction is maintained between native born and the foreigner, but this distinction diminishes neither the responsibilities nor the privileges of the covenant as defined by the Torah. That Ezekiel prophesies a change in this condition (Ezekiel 47:22-23), the “foreigner” (גֵּרֵּה) being given the right of land ownership, is a vision of the final eschatological victory in which the nations are blessed as full citizens in the Land as God promised.

### 4.3 The Covenants Envisioned the Ingathered Gentiles

There are numerous examples of those who were foreigners taking up covenant membership in Israel, but in no case is there any indication that they lost their status as a “foreigner.”<sup>141</sup> The very fact that the biblical text continues to instruct the nation of Israel to treat the foreigner with respect and justice proves that the *ger* retained the status of foreigner even while *functioning as a full covenant member*.<sup>142</sup>

But that the *ger* is considered a covenant member, receiving both the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant, is clear from the activities in which he engages, and the covenant consequences assigned to him. He participates in the yearly festivals<sup>143</sup> and is required to observe the statutes of the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:12). The *ger* brings sacrifices to the Lord (Lev 17:8; 22:18; Num 9:14; 15:14), is not allowed to eat blood (Lev 17:11-13), becomes unclean when eating meat from animals dead or torn (Lev 17:15), participates in the ritual of the ashes of the red heifer (Num 19:10), receives the death penalty for idolatry or cursing God (Lev 20:2; 24:16), participates in corporate forgiveness (Num 15:26), and may be cut off from the community for defiance against God (Num 19:10).

Thus, the covenant that God made with Israel always envisioned the ingathering of the Gentiles into that covenant. Consider the Abrahamic covenant. Did not God promise as part of the covenant blessings that the nations would be blessed? What is more, the subsequent Sinai covenant, embodied in the Torah, is not something separate from or unconnected with the Abrahamic covenant. In fact, in the unfolding revelation of the covenant narratives, the Sinai covenant is clearly given as the means by which

<sup>138</sup>Exodus 12:43ff.

<sup>139</sup>Leviticus 18:26-29; 20:2; 24:16.

<sup>140</sup>Deuteronomy 14:29; 16:14; 26:11-12.

<sup>141</sup>Granted, the rabbinic writings in some cases give the “proselyte” a status equal to or even greater than the native born, but the Tanach does not speak in such terms. The constant repeated refrain, “there shall be one Torah for the native born and the alien” witnesses to the equality of covenant members, not some hierarchical arrangement.

<sup>142</sup>Exodus 12:19,48; 20:10; 22:21; 23:9,12; Leviticus 16:29; 17:8,10; 18:26; 19:10,34; 20:2; 22:18; 23:22; 24:16,22; Numbers 9:14; 15:14-16,26,29-30; 19:10; 35:15; Deuteronomy 1:16; 5:14; 10:19; 14:29; 16:11,14; 24:14,17,19-21; 26:11-13; 27:19; 31:12; Joshua 8:33,35; Isaiah 14:1; Jeremiah 7:6; 22:3; Ezekiel 14:7; 22:7,29; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5.

<sup>143</sup>Weekly Sabbath, Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14; Pesach, Exodus 12:48, 49; Numbers 9:14; Feast of Unleavened Bread, Exodus 12:19; Shavuot, Deuteronomy 16:10, 11, cf. Deuteronomy 26:10, 11; Yom Kippur, Leviticus 16:29; Sukkot, Deuteronomy 16:13, 14, but cf. Leviticus 23:42.

Israel would obtain the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. We see this by the fact that the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, given as unconditional (unilateral),<sup>144</sup> are repeated in the Mosaic covenant as contingent upon obedience (bilateral).

<b>Abrahamic Covenant</b>	<b>Mosaic Covenant</b>
Special Relationship: Genesis 17:7	Treasured people: Exodus 19:5
Gift of the Land: Genesis 15:18-19	Gift of the Land: Exodus 23:20-33
Increase in number: Genesis 17:6	Increase in number: Leviticus 26:9
Confirm covenant to next generation: Genesis 17:7	Confirm covenant to next generation: Leviticus 26:9
Be your God/you shall be My people: Genesis 17:7	Be your God/you shall be My people: Leviticus 26:12
General blessing: Genesis 12:2; 26:24	General blessing: Deuteronomy 11:26f
Nations blessed: Genesis 12:3; 28:14, et al	Nations come to the light of the Torah: Isaiah 2:3; 51:4

The two covenants, then, are not separate and distinct, but are woven together in the flow of redemptive history. The covenant given to Abraham, which promised blessing, land, an enduring covenant relationship between the offspring of Abraham and God, and covenant blessing for all the nations, is reaffirmed in the Mosaic covenant and the giving of the Torah. It is not as though God has gone back on His word, at first promising unconditional blessing to Abraham, and then changing His covenant to be conditional at Sinai. Far from it! God, in choosing Abraham and his offspring, had set Himself to form a people who would be characterized by His own holiness. The covenant of Abraham came not only with blessing, but with provision to attain that blessing through obedience.<sup>145</sup>

Gen 18:17-19 The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? "For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

Thus, the Mosaic covenant, the Torah, is given to bring about that holiness which

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<sup>144</sup>There are, of course, stipulations connected with the Abrahamic covenant, i.e., circumcision. But the failure to circumcise affects the individual, not the whole nation. The structure of the Abrahamic covenant clearly follows that of the Royal Grant Treaty which is unilateral, not bilateral as the Suzerain-Vassal treaty is. There is little doubt that, though there may be matters of reciprocity in the Abrahamic covenant (as is the case in all covenants), the major thrust of the narrative structure in which the Abrahamic covenant is given is that it is a unilateral covenant dependent upon God's faithfulness, not Abraham's.

<sup>145</sup>Cf. Genesis 18:19, where, in the reiteration of the covenant blessings, the Divine purpose is given: "For I have chosen him [Abraham], so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

would, in turn, procure the promised covenant blessings. To the extent that the Abrahamic covenant both envisioned and incorporated the nations, so the Mosaic covenant, the Torah, is given to all covenant members as the divine revelation of God's holiness, written upon the heart of every covenant member in order to bring about God's blessings in their lives and in the life of the covenant nation.

In this way, the two covenants function as two sides of the same coin. Like "justification" and "sanctification" as described in the Scriptures, both of which are necessary for the salvation of the sinner, so the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant are bound together in God's salvific plan. The Abrahamic covenant is presented as unilateral (God initiating and promising) just as justification is God's sole work. Likewise, the Mosaic covenant is presented as bilateral (God and Israel working together) just as sanctification is presented in the Bible as the cooperation between the redeemed soul and the Almighty. In this very same manner, Paul presents the gospel as enveloped within the Abrahamic promise, connected to the Mosaic covenant as the *pedagogue* to lead to the Promised One (Galatians 3).

No one would deny that the Gentiles are envisioned in the Abrahamic covenant ("in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed"). But if the Abrahamic covenant includes the Gentiles, then so does the Mosaic covenant, for the Mosaic covenant is given as the means of fulfilling the covenant promises made to Abraham. The two covenants are bound together – they cannot be separated. To say that the Gentiles are blessed in the Abrahamic covenant but have no part in the Mosaic covenant would be like saying a person could be justified without becoming sanctified. Such a scenario finds no place in the biblical record.

#### ***4.4 Foreigners Who Attach Themselves to Israel***

From the earliest times, the glory of the Torah given to Israel attracted foreign peoples to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is in accordance with what God promised:

"See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? "Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

This motif of the foreigner coming to worship the God of Israel is incorporated into Solomon's dedicatory prayer:

"Also concerning the foreigner [גֵרִי] who is not of Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your name's sake [למען שמך] (for they will hear of Your great name and Your mighty hand, and of Your outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, to fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name. (1Kings 8:41-43)

Other terminology is found in the Tanach which indicates the attachment of non-Israelites to the covenant nation. Ruth is said to have sought refuge by coming under

the “wings” of the Almighty (Ruth 2:12), a motif which the Psalmist also uses of finding companionship with God in His “tent” (Psalms 61:4). Ruth’s famous confession includes both a connection to the people and the God of Israel: “. . . your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (Ruth 1:16). The Torah commandment prohibiting the Ammonites or Moabites from entering the assembly of Israel must be reckoned in light of the fact that Ruth was a Moabitess. The only conclusion possible is that Ruth lost the penalty attributed to a Moabite (even though she is consistently remembered as such) when, through her own confession, she joined the people of Israel. Yet any “ritual of conversion” is entirely lacking in the biblical narrative.

A common expression in the Torah is “the alien (*ger*) who has drawn near (*קרַב*)” or who is “in your midst (*בְּקִרְבִּי*).<sup>146</sup> The fact that the Lxx regularly uses the verb *πρόσκειμαι* (“to be closely attached to”<sup>147</sup>) with *προσελύτος*, *proselutos*, to translate *גַּר* in the context of “in your gates” (or other locative descriptor) highlights this concept of “attachment” or “drawing near.” This language of “drawing near” most likely underlies the words of Paul in Ephesians 2, in which the Gentile is said to have been “far off” but who has been “brought near” through faith in Yeshua:

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Messiah Yeshua you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

For Paul, the negative condition of the Gentiles, that they were “separate from the covenants of (the) promise,” is overcome by being “brought near through the blood of Messiah.” To “draw near” (*קרַב*) has the sacrifices in mind, since the terminology of “drawing near” is often connected with the sacrificial cult. Indeed, “to offer” a sacrifice is often denoted by the sense “bring near,”<sup>148</sup> and especially “to bring near to the Lord.”<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, in the language of the priests, “to draw near to God” means to offer sacrifices and thus to be in communion with God.

1Sam. 14:36 Then Saul said, “Let us go down after the Philistines by night and take spoil among them until the morning light, and let us not leave a man of them.” And they said, “Do whatever seems good to you.” So the priest said, “Let us draw near to God here.”  
[בְּקִרְבֵּי הָאֱלֹהִים]

As the priests represent the people before the altar, in their “drawing near to God,” they brought the covenant people into communion with God. Thus, “drawing near to God” has clear covenant ramifications.

This is the same terminology used in rabbinic literature for making a proselyte. Commenting on Genesis 12:5, the midrash states:

AND THE SOULS THAT THEY HAD MADE! It refers, however, to the proselytes [which they had made]. Then let it say, ‘ That they had converted ‘; why THAT THEY HAD MADE? That is to teach you that he who brings a Gentile near [to God] is as though he

<sup>146</sup>Ex. 12:48; Deut. 16:11; 26:11; 28:43; 29:11; Josh. 8:35.

<sup>147</sup>So BDAG, “*πρόσκειμαι*.”

<sup>148</sup>E.g., Lev. 1:2-3,5,10,13-14.

<sup>149</sup>E.g., Lev. 2:11-12; 3:1,7,12; 6:13; 7:11; 9:2.

created him. Now let it say, That he had made; why THAT THEY HAD MADE? Said R. Hunia: Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women.<sup>150</sup>

Moreover, for Paul, this covenant relationship that the Gentiles now possess is nothing less than being included in the “commonwealth of Israel” from which they were formerly far off. Paul’s emphasis upon the fact that the “circumcision” (those who based their covenant status upon being Jewish) call the Gentiles the “uncircumcision” (meaning, “not Jewish”), shows that in his day the prevailing view of the Jewish community was that “drawing near” was possible only for Jews. This left only one alternative for Gentiles as far as the Rabbis were concerned: they would have to become a Jew (proselyte) in order to enter the covenant. But Paul’s theology could not sustain such a position, because the Scriptures speak differently.

What is more, in the following context (Ephesians 3), Paul makes it clear that the Gentiles do not form a separate entity, nor do they participate in a covenant different than the Jews, but

the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel. . . . (Eph 3:6).<sup>151</sup>

And this is not some ethereal, theological “body” in which people actually exist but never see each other nor have anything tangible in common. The “gospel,” as far as Paul was concerned, is grounded in the Abrahamic promise that all of the nations would be blessed through his seed (Galatians 3:8). This blessing accords with the eschatological promise that the nations would be instructed in the Torah, not in their separate locations, but as they came up to Zion, and fulfilled the Isaianic prophecy that the Temple would be called the “house of prayer for all the nations.”<sup>152</sup>

When Paul confronted Peter (Galatians 2:11-12), it was over issues of “table fellowship,” that is, the *halachah* about who could eat with whom, and particularly the issue of Jews and non-Jews eating together. For Paul, Peter’s position was wrong and something which could not stand in the face of the gospel. For Peter had, at one point, eaten with the believing Gentiles, but when in the presence of the Jewish brethren who were following a *halachah* which prohibited eating with non-Jews, he withdrew. Why would this be so significant in Paul’s mind? Because he recognized that table fellowship was a central covenant issue. Far from thinking that the Jews could have one table and the Gentiles another, Paul saw in the words of the Tanach a single table at which all of God’s chosen people sit and fellowship. Their eating together at a common table was evidence of their mutual covenant membership. And the words of Yeshua, after marveling at the faith of the Gentile Centurion, had reiterated the same prophetic promise:

Matt. 8:11 “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven;

Indeed, the vision of the prophets is that the nations would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Sukkot which consummates the festival cycle (Zechariah 14:16f).

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<sup>150</sup>Mid. Rab. Genesis 39.14.

<sup>151</sup>The compound words are all constructed with συν, συγκληρονόμος, σύσσωμος, συμμετόχος. These emphasize vital union and sharing of things held in common.

<sup>152</sup>Is. 56:7.

They would worship the God of Israel, sitting together in the sukkah. This is not merely a perfunctory duty, for the nations have come to seek Israel's covenant God:

Zech 8:20-23 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'It will yet be that peoples will come, even the inhabitants of many cities. 'The inhabitants of one will go to another, saying, "Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts; I will also go." 'So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD.' "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'""

The point is that the Gentile should "go with" the Jew to learn and to worship, not find their own, separate worship and identity.

Isaiah also speaks of the foreigner who attaches himself to the Lord:

Isaiah 56:6-8 "Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the Sabbath And holds fast My covenant; Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." The Lord GOD, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, "Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered."

In like manner, Isaiah speaks of foreigners who attach themselves to Jacob:

Isaiah 14:1 When the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and again choose Israel, and settle them in their own land, then strangers will join them and attach (תִּלְוּ) themselves to the house of Jacob.

In these prophets, the picture is not "equal but separate," as though there are two groups that have equal covenant status but find clear and separate identities. Rather it is Jew and Gentile together in one place, worshipping in one way, "equal and together," communing in a unified covenant identity. Not two peoples, but one; not two Torah, but one; not two sets of *halalchot*, but one. And thus, the covenant expressions of the Torah, ascribing the same Torah to both native born and foreigner,<sup>153</sup> are fully realized in the eschaton. For Paul, the beginnings of this "one people, one covenant, one Torah" was evident in his day. The "promise made to the fathers" was being realized in the salvation of the Gentiles.<sup>154</sup> The future had invaded the present.

#### 4.5 Adoption

The metaphor of adoption is used in Scriptures to picture the method by which God brings His chosen one's into covenant relationship with Himself.

Adoption was not uncommon in the ancient Semitic world.

Adoption differs from fosterage in that the latter is a temporary arrangement which is not legally binding. The foster child receives support but not the status of son or daughter.<sup>155</sup>

<sup>153</sup>Ex. 12:19; Lev. 16:29; 17:15; 18:26; 24:16; Num. 9:14; 15:16,29-30.

<sup>154</sup>Acts 13:32ff.

<sup>155</sup>Knobloch, "Adoption" in *The Anchor Bible* 6 vols. (Doubleday, 1999), 1.76.



Adoption in the Ancient Near East was primarily for the purpose of giving legal status. Thus, adoption could result in giving someone the status of “son” or “daughter,” but also “brother” or even “father.” From Nuzi we discover that a husband could adopt his wife, giving her the status of “sister” or “sister-in-law” which would secure the transfer of family inheritance to her in the event of his death.<sup>156</sup> Likewise, in a Babylonian text, slaves are adopted in order to give them their freedom.<sup>157</sup> It was not uncommon for a Suzerain to adopt his Vassal king in order to give him royal, family status.<sup>158</sup> This is the meaning of Psalm 2:

Psalm 2: 7 You are my son, today I have begotten you.

The choosing of Abraham is for the purpose of covenant, that is, to give him legal status in God’s world.<sup>159</sup> That the giving of land is an integral part of the covenant (Genesis 15) shows that God has chosen Abraham to give him legal ownership of territory which, though occupied by other peoples, is His rightful possession to give to His chosen, covenant fellow. “Choosing” is connected to the act of adoption.

God also chooses the offspring of Jacob:

Deut. 7:6 “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you [יְהוָה בָּחַר] to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

The normal language used for adoption in the Akkadian was “to take for son/daughtership.”<sup>160</sup> The use of “take” (Hebrew לקח) in the sense of acquire legal status is also found in the normal language of the Tanach for marriage: a man “takes” a wife.<sup>161</sup> We should not be surprised, then, when God is said to “take” Israel to be His people:

Ex. 6:7 “Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

This is likewise adoption language.

Yet even this should not come as a surprise. The metaphor of adoption has already

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<sup>156</sup>Ibid. Note also the same legal adoption of a wife in the Elephantine Aramaic Marriage Contract (AP 15), Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “A Re-Study of an Elephantine Aramaic Marriage Contract (AP 15),” *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William F. Albright*, Hans Goedicke, ed., (John Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 140.

<sup>157</sup>J. J. Rabinowitz, “Semitic Elements in the Egyptian Adoption Papyrus Published by Gardiner,” *JNES* 17(1958), 145-46. Some have suggested that adoption of slaves in order to give them freedom figures into the exodus narrative, J. Swetnam, “*Διαθηκη* in the Septuagint Account of Sinai: A Suggestion,” *Biblica* 47(1966), 442.

<sup>158</sup>See the comments of Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90.2(1970), 191 where Hittite treaty texts include the statement by the Suzerain to the Vassal: “I will make you my son.”

<sup>159</sup>Gen 18:19 uses the Hebrew word ידע, “to know” in the sense of “covenant relationship:” “For I have chosen him . . .” is literally, “for I have known him . . .” Cf. Amos 3:2, “you only have I known (chosen) among all the families of the earth.”

<sup>160</sup>Knobloch, “Adoption,” Ibid.

<sup>161</sup>E.g., Gen. 4:19; 11:29; 25:1; Ex. 2:1; 6:20,23.

been encountered in Jacob's adoption of Joseph's sons:

Gen 48:5-6 "Now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. "But your offspring that have been born after them shall be yours; they shall be called by the names of their brothers in their inheritance.

What is more, the fact that Jacob had Ephraim and Manasseh are between Jacob's knees may also signal the formal act of adoption.

Gen 48:12 Then Joseph took them from his knees, and bowed with his face to the ground.

That Ephraim and Manasseh are specifically placed between (or on?) the knees of Jacob is most likely symbolic of adoption, since the children born by a concubine were the legal possession of the wife, for the concubine was said to bear the children "on the knees" of the wife (meaning the children were considered as legal heirs of the husband and his wife). Note Genesis 30:3:

Gen. 30:3 She said, "Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children."

The key to this phrase lies in the symbolic gesture, widely attested in Near Eastern sources, especially Hittite, as well as in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. The place or reception of a child on or by the knees of another signifies legitimation, whether in acknowledgment of physical parenthood or by adoption.<sup>162</sup>

Thus, Jacob adopts the sons of Joseph. From that point on, they were legally his brothers, and co-heirs in the inheritance of his father, Jacob. In like manner, God adopted Israel as His first born son—Israel, and none other.

The exodus as an act of adoption is portrayed by Ezekiel.

Ezek. 16:1-5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations and say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to Jerusalem, "Your origin and your birth are from the land of the Canaanite, your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. "As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water for cleansing; you were not rubbed with salt or even wrapped in cloths. "No eye looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.

Israel's origin is construed as from foreign parents, Canaanite and Amorite, the most pagan of nations in Israel's history. Likewise, the ceremony of the first fruits after entering the Land included the mandatory phrase, "My father was a wandering Aramean,"<sup>163</sup> reminding of the fact that Jacob had sojourned in Aramaea and from which region he had also acquired wives and children.

Thus Israel is viewed as the adopted child of God. Indeed, the Land belongs to Him, and He simply bequeaths it to Israel, though, like the *ger*, she has possession of the Land only because it ultimately belongs to God:

Lev. 25:23 'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for

<sup>162</sup>Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (JPS, 1989), p. 207.

<sup>163</sup>Deut 26:5.

you are but aliens and sojourners with Me (כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי).

Israel, therefore, could never be confident in herself—in her own ancestry. She was forever dependent upon God Who had adopted her from her paganism and made her His child forever. Her right to the Land was only maintained in her relationship with her Father through adoption.

This idea of the adoption of Israel must be what underlies Paul's use of the term "adoption of sons." He lists adoption as one of the privileges of Israel:

Rom. 9:4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Torah and the temple service and the promises . . .

Paul includes himself in this adoption when he writes:

Gal. 4:5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

The English "adoption as sons" translates ἡ υἰοθεσία, *he whuihothesia*. "a legal, technical term for the adoption of children."<sup>164</sup> This Greek word is not found in the Lxx, and thus must be used by Paul to develop the theme of adoption in terms familiar to his readers.

Here is emphasized the corporate election of Israel as God's first-born son (Ex 4:22f; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1). God as "Father" is revealed to Israel in the context of his "sonship." However, Israel's sonship is a matter of God's grace, and not the mere outworking of the natural course of events, for Israel is "adopted," that is, chosen by God to be His son. Thus, for Paul, even though the nation is currently in a state of unbelief, Israel is still the adopted (and thus rightful) son of God (note the present tense, "to whom belongs," not "belonged").<sup>165</sup>

But for Paul, God's adoption process is not restricted to the physical offspring of Jacob. All of God's chosen ones, whether descended from Jacob or brought near from the nations, are God's adopted son.

Rom. 8:15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!"

Rom. 8:23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

Eph. 1:5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Yeshua Messiah to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

Thus, for Paul, the "adoption of (as) sons" appears in two spheres in our present time, but will ultimately be in only one. On one level, Israel as the physical descendants of Jacob have rejected Yeshua on a national scale. Yet she retains the "adoption as sons" because the promise of the covenant has been made to her. Her adoption is secure only because God intends, in the kindness of His grace and faithfulness to His word, to bring her as a corporate entity to faith in the Messiah. On a second level, the remnant, consisting of both Jew and non-Jew, is the present manifestation of God's adoptive

<sup>164</sup>BDAG, "ἡ υἰοθεσία."

<sup>165</sup>Tim Hegg, *Notes on Romans*, (to be published), p. 337.

grace, for the remnant behaves as His true son, embracing the Messiah through Whom the adoption has been secured.

It should be carefully noted that Paul's metaphor of adoption, based squarely on the adoption motif of the Tanach, is at diametric odds with the prevailing rabbinic view of his day, and the subsequent view of rabbinic Judaism. For rather than finding identity in the elective, choosing, adoptive actions of the Almighty, rabbinic Judaism (and unfortunately the Messianic Judaism as portrayed by current statements of the UMJC) secured its identity to a physical lineage of Jewishness. For Paul, there was no cause for putting confidence in the flesh, that is, in physical lineage.<sup>166</sup> For while he certainly could have boasted in his pedigree,<sup>167</sup> he rather boasted in the work of God on His behalf. For he had come to realize that his position in the covenant was never based upon his ethnicity, but only upon God's gracious election, presented as adoption.

This speaks directly to the issue at hand. To think that physical lineage (Jewishness) could render one son with greater privileges than another is to fly in the face of God's grace, and to diminish both the gospel and the price required to secure its blessings. The reason Jewish lineage is important is because God has promised to manifest His omnipotent sovereignty through the people descended from Jacob. But in maintaining this promise to Jacob, one need not exclude the non-descendent, for God has also promised to bring the nations within the scope of that same covenant. God has adopted them both! It is only when the Jew and non-Jew live and worship together as equally adopted brothers in the congregation of Yeshua that God's faithfulness and power are manifest as they should be.

#### ***4.6 Summary: The Covenant People***

Throughout the Tanach the covenant people of God are Israel and those who join themselves to God and thus to her. The historical covenants made with Abraham and with Israel at Sinai are viewed as the unified work of God for His covenant people. While the Abrahamic covenant establishes the promises of God to Israel, the Sinai covenant reveals the righteous life required of God's people.

There is no indication whatsoever that covenant membership is based solely or even primarily upon ethnicity. The foreigner who joins himself to God and thus to Israel has the same covenant privileges and responsibilities as the faithful Israelite. When Israel was constituted as God's chosen people in the exodus from Egypt, she was comprised of a mixed multitude which is regularly referred to as the "children of Israel."

This in no way diminishes the fact that ethnic Israel stands as God's chosen people (Amos 3:2), nor does it undermine the truth that even unbelieving Israel retains covenant promises and blessings to which God will be faithful.<sup>168</sup> Nonetheless, lineage does not guarantee covenant membership, for any who turn against God will be "cut off." Not everyone descended from Jacob necessarily constitutes Israel (Romans 9:6).

But the emphasis of the Torah and the Prophets is that Israel, as God's chosen people, will, by divine fiat, eventually come as a nation (not merely as a remnant) and will worship God as the nation God designed her to be.<sup>169</sup> The remnant throughout the

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<sup>166</sup>Phil. 3:3.

<sup>167</sup>2Cor 11:18.

<sup>168</sup>Lev 26:40ff; Ezek 36:20ff; Romans 11:28ff, etc.

<sup>169</sup>This is the fulfillment of the New Covenant, Jeremiah 31:31-34.

generations, made up of Jew and non-Jew, will join her in the eschatological celebration of God's victory.

This victory of God is not seen in the salvation of Israel alone, but in the blessing which she brings upon all the nations through her Messiah, Yeshua. This picture, of the nations joining Israel, was understood by the Apostles of Yeshua to be dawning in the advent of Yeshua's incarnation and His subsequent death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. It was through the Messiah of Israel and the witness of His Apostles that the victory of God would be won, and the nations blessed.

Therefore, covenant membership was never purely a physical reality, nor even primarily related to one's ethnicity. Those who were native born could be "cut off from their people," and in such a case, would not longer be constituted as covenant members. On the other hand, those of foreign extraction, if drawn by the God of Israel, could through their faith "draw near" to God as their father, and become a *bone fide* covenant member with Israel, and a recipient of all the privileges as well as the responsibilities of that covenant. Faith is therefore the issue, and God will show Himself both faithful and sovereign by bringing the physical seed of Jacob to covenant obedience before Him. This covenant obedience is based upon the forgiveness of sins (Jeremiah 31:31-34), and is therefore by faith in the God of Israel and in His Messiah, Yeshua, for it is only through His atonement that forgiveness is possible. Ultimately, anyone, regardless of ethnicity, who denies Yeshua as Messiah, will be cut off from the covenant of God's promises. Thus, as Paul says, all the promises of God are confirmed and made actual in Messiah (2Corinthians 1:20).

The motif of adoption, which runs throughout the Scriptures, emphasizes this very fact. Israel is God's firstborn son by adoption. Thus the nation does not stand on its own pedigree, but on the elective decree and sovereign grace of the King. The Land is not hers—it belongs to God, and is only hers as He allots it to her via her adoption. In like manner, the non-Jew whom He chooses is adopted into the covenant people and has Abraham as his father. As such, the non-Jew is a full-fledged covenant member with all the privileges and responsibilities attended therewith. It is with this in mind that Paul references the "adoption of sons" as one of the prime possessions of Israel. All who find themselves within the embrace of the covenant, whether Jew or non-Jew, owe their privileged position to God's adoptive love.

## Section 5

# Specific Torah Instruction Regarding the Foreigner (*ger*)

The Torah is quite clear on the equality of the *ger* within Israel. While one must carefully interpret *ger* according to its immediate context, it is clear that when the word describes a foreigner who has integrated into the Israelite society and is a participant in her worship, the same laws apply him as apply to the native born. As we have seen, it is anachronistic to read the rabbinic “*ger* = proselyte” back into the Torah texts. There is no indication whatsoever that a “ritual of conversion” existed in the time of Moses, and thus where the context indicates, the word *ger* simply means a foreign resident in Israel who had accepted the rule and worship of Israel’s God.

Examples of the equality between the *ger* and the native born abound in the Torah. The following are examples:

### 5.1 The Commands Regarding Sabbath

The “*ger who is in your gates*” (Targum has בְּקִרְוֶיךָ, “in your town”) is to honor the Sabbath in the same way as the native born. He is to cease from his common labors (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14). That the commandment is given to the *ger* should be noted in light of Exodus 31:12-17 where the Sabbath is detailed as the sign of the covenant, given to בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *benei Yisrael*, “the children of Israel.” Though the *ger* and other foreigners are not mentioned in this text, the fact that the commandment as originally given clearly includes them, would necessitate the conclusion that they are also included in the general designation “children of Israel.” Furthermore, since the Sabbath is the sign of the covenant, and since the *ger* is specifically commanded to keep the Sabbath, it follows that he is being treated as a covenant member.<sup>170</sup>

### 5.2 The Commandments Regarding the Festivals

The *ger* is able to observe Passover and Chag HaMatzot (Festival of Unleavened Bread) as one whose ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.

The *ger* is not allowed to eat leaven during Chag HaMatzot, and like the native born, to do so incurs “being cut off from the congregation” (Exodus 12:19). Such a penalty presumes the *ger* is a full fledged member of the congregation.

Likewise, the *ger* who celebrates Pesach must be circumcised himself and all the males of his household must be circumcised as well (Exodus 12:48). The language of this verse is important. Only after the *ger* and males belonging to him (most likely meaning the males of his family) are marked as covenant members, is he able to “draw near” (יִקְרַב) “to do it” (לַעֲשׂוֹהוּ), which must mean “present his pesach lamb as the prescribed sacrifice” (קרֵב being sacrificial language). Thus, the *ger* described here is one who has joined himself to the congregation of Israel on a generational level, for he has not only accepted the commandments of the Torah (witnessed by his own circumcision) but he has been faithful to circumcise his own children. The text then goes to state: וְהָיָה כְּאֶזְרָח, *v'hayah k'ezrach* “and he will be as a native born,” further amplified by “there

<sup>170</sup>The rabbinic comments make it clear that the גֵּר תוֹשֵׁב and the גֵּר צְדִיק are to be kept separate. For instance, the comments of Rambam on the current text: the commandment applies only to the גֵּר צְדִיק and not to the גֵּר תוֹשֵׁב because the גֵּר תוֹשֵׁב is one who has taken upon himself the Noachide laws (קבל עליו שבע מצוות) which do not include the Sabbath) while the גֵּר צְדִיק (והגר הוא גֵּר צְדִיק ששב וחזר לתורתנו שצוה אותו) has taken upon himself the entire Torah, cf. Exodus 20:10 in *Mikraot Gedalot*.

shall be one Torah for the native born and for the *ger* who sojourns in your midst.”

Note carefully that there is no change of ethnic status. The *ger* is still a *ger*, and the native born, a native born. But the *ger* stands in the congregation with the same privileges (participation in the Feast) and responsibilities of the native born (he is not allowed to eat leaven nor is leaven to remain in his house).

This earlier legislation in Exodus agrees with the subsequent statement of Numbers:

Num. 9:14 ‘If an alien sojourns among you and observes the Passover to the LORD, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its ordinance, so he shall do; you shall have one statute, both for the alien and for the native of the land.’”

The *ger* is to observe Shavuot:

Deut 16:10-11 “Then you shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the LORD your God blesses you; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst, in the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name.

The *ger* is to observe Yom Kippur:

Lev. 16:29 “This shall be a permanent statute for you: in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall humble your souls and not do any work, whether the native, or the alien who sojourns among you (הָאֲכֵרֵחַ וְהַגֵּר וְהַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם).

The *ger* is to observe Sukkot:

Deut. 16:13-14 “You shall celebrate the Feast of Booths seven days after you have gathered in from your threshing floor and your wine vat; and you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your towns (בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ, literally “in your gates”).

The addition of the Levite in the final listing of the passage indicates that those who were not land owners (and thus would not be gathering in their own harvest of grain) were still part of the celebration and expected to participate fully.

Leviticus 23:42 emphasizes that the requirement to dwell in booths is given to the native born:

Lev 23:42-43 ‘You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.’”

Though the *ger* is not mentioned here, this text surely does not *exclude* the *ger*. However, the addition of Deuteronomy 16:13-14 clarifies the Leviticus text by specifically including the *ger* in the Sukkot festival (see comments below). And the prophetic vision of the nations celebrating Sukkot (Zechariah 14:16ff) confirms this.

### 5.3 The Ger and Sacrifices

The *ger* was expected to participate in the prescribed sacrifices, and to do so by observing all to the commandments given regarding sacrifices:

Lev. 17:8 “Then you shall say to them, ‘Any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, 9 and does not bring it to the doorway of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man also shall be cut off from his people.

Lev. 22:17-18 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and to his sons and to all the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘Any man of the house of Israel or of the aliens in Israel who presents his offering, whether it is any of their votive or any of their freewill offerings, which they present to the LORD for a burnt offering . . . (v. 31) “So you shall keep My commandments, and do them; I am the LORD.

Num. 15:14-16 ‘If an alien sojourns with you, or one who may be among you throughout your generations, and he wishes to make an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the LORD, just as you do so he shall do. ‘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.’”

Since it is explicitly stated that the *ger* is to participate in the sacrificial ceremonies, observing the same ordinances given in the Torah, it is obvious that the *ger* would also need to observe the laws of purity as well as all the laws the sacrifices required (purifications, guilt offerings, first-fruits offerings, etc.).

What is more, the sacrificial service was the high-point of Israelite worship. Far from being a peripheral issue, the bringing of sacrifices was the very essence of “drawing near” in the worship of Israel’s God. That the *ger* is confirmed in this privilege shows that his status in Israel was equal in terms of worship and service in regard to the *sanctum* of the sacrifices.

While this is the viewpoint of the Torah, we know that by the 1st Century CE, the Herodian expansions of the Temple and its courts had divided sections for the Priests, Levites/Israelites, women, and Gentiles, corresponding to the hierarchy expressed generally in the rabbinic literature as noted above. Actually, the exclusion of the Gentiles to the courts of the Temple was in place much earlier. Josephus quotes a proclamation by Antiochus III to this effect.<sup>171</sup> Likewise, Herod could have employed Gentile workers for his Temple building projects, but instead he had priests trained as masons to carry out the work.<sup>172</sup> In Herod’s Temple, a chest-high balustrade (4.5 feet<sup>173</sup>) separated the court of the Gentiles from those of the Jews, with gates that contained warnings of capital punishment for those who transgressed its boundaries. Such a separation was not found in Solomon’s Temple nor in Zerubbabel’s. Its inclusion in the 1st Century Temple therefore corresponds with the shift in rabbinic theology to covenant membership based upon ethnicity.

The *ger* who had attached himself to Israel but had not undergone the ritual of the proselyte was therefore no longer allowed to bring his sacrifice directly to the priest. Nor was the female Israelite. In place of the clear instructions of Numbers 15:14-16, the rabbinic legislation required that

All lay on hands, except for the deaf-mute, the idiot, and the minor, the blind person, and the gentile, and the slave, and the agent, and the woman.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> *Ant.* 12.145ff.

<sup>172</sup> *Ant.* 15.390.

<sup>173</sup> Josephus, *War* 5.193.



Apparently, the privilege of bringing the sacrifice directly to the priest is no longer given to the *ger* who is a non-proselyte. How did Israelites bring their sacrifices if they were not allowed in the court of the Priests? Sanders presumes that he reached over the low parapet the separated the Priests' Court from the Israelites' Court, held back the head of the animal while the priest slit the throat.<sup>175</sup> For women and Gentiles, however, the sacrificial animals must have been taken by Levites and carried into the Priests' Court for slaughter. The "wall" separating the *ger* and the woman from the altar had been firmly erected in the 1st Century Temple.

#### 5.4 *The Ger and Other Ordinances of the Torah*

The *ger* was prohibited from eating blood:

Lev. 17:12-13 "Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, 'No person among you may eat blood, nor may any alien who sojourns among you eat blood.' "So when any man from the sons of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, in hunting catches a beast or a bird which may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

The *ger* was prohibited from eating meat from an animal that had died or been torn, and doing so would render one unclean.<sup>176</sup>

Lev. 17:15 "When any person eats an animal which dies or is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or an alien, he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he will become clean.

Participating in the worship of Molech is prohibited to the *ger*:

Lev. 20:2 "You shall also say to the sons of Israel: ' Any man from the sons of Israel or from the aliens sojourning in Israel who gives any of his offspring to Molech, shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones.

Blasphemy draws the death penalty for the *ger*:

Lev. 24:16 'Moreover, the one who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall certainly stone him. The alien as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

Num. 15:29-30 'You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. 'But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from among his people.

For the *ger*, murder, personal assault, and damages of property drew the attended penalties:

Lev. 24:17-22 'If a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death. 'The one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life. 'If a man injures

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<sup>174</sup>m.Menachot 9.8.

<sup>175</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, p. 107.

<sup>176</sup>On the parallel text in Deuteronomy 14:23 which appears to contradict the Leviticus text, see the explanation above, pp. 9-10.

his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. 'Thus the one who kills an animal shall make it good, but the one who kills a man shall be put to death. 'There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the LORD your God.'"

The *ger* could be appointed to gather the ashes of the red heifer:

Num. 19:10 'The one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening; and it shall be a perpetual statute to the sons of Israel and to the alien who sojourns among them.

The *ger* had equal access to the cities of refuge:

Num. 35:15 'These six cities shall be for refuge for the sons of Israel, and for the alien and for the sojourner among them; that anyone who kills a person unintentionally may flee there.

Josh. 20:9 These were the appointed cities for all the sons of Israel and for the stranger who sojourns among them, that whoever kills any person unintentionally may flee there, and not die by the hand of the avenger of blood until he stands before the congregation.

The *ger* was expected to keep all of the commandments. At the reading of the Torah on Sukkot, the whole congregation, including the *ger*, was exhorted to keep "all the words of this Torah."

Deut. 31:12 "Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this Torah.

In the renewal of the covenant, as Israel was entering the Land under the leadership of Joshua, the *ger* is included in the company as the blessings and curses are rehearsed, indicating that they were included in the covenant ceremony:

Josh 8: 33-35 All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had given command at first to bless the people of Israel. Then afterward he read all the words of the Torah, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the Torah. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them.

### **5.5 Summary: Specific Torah Instruction Regarding the Foreigner (*ger*)**

The inclusion of the *ger* in every aspect of the covenant is clearly laid out in the Torah. Far from being excluded from any part of the Torah, the *ger* is expected to receive and obey all of the ordinances, including the Sabbath, Festivals, laws of purities, civil justice, and Tabernacle/Temple worship, including sacrifices. In each case, the Torah that governed the life of the native born also governs the life of the *ger*. That the rabbinic legislation made different rules can only be construed as a setting aside of clear, Torah commandments.

## Section 6

# Apostolic Examples & Instructions: Jews & Gentiles

### 6.1 *The Book of Acts*

The beginning of the sect called The Way is chronicled in the book of Acts. Obviously there had been many Gentiles who had joined the people of Israel throughout her history, beginning with the exodus from Egypt. But the coming of Yeshua, the promised Messiah, had initiated the era promised by the prophets in which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In fact, the book of Acts is the history of how the injunction given to the disciples of Yeshua was actually carried out.

Acts 1:7-8 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

The Shavuot which immediately followed the ascension of Yeshua brought the promised outpouring of the Ruach HaKodesh, not as the initiation of His work in general (for He had been fully active in the life of the nation of Israel as well as in the individual believers), but in empowering the disciples to do the work Yeshua had commissioned them to do—to be His witnesses.

The early chapters fulfil the commission to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Thousands were added to the followers of Yeshua, and Jews from all over the region were coming to faith in Him. The Shavuot experience of all those Jews and proselytes who had come from the regions of the diaspora was the inaugural event in which the work of spreading the gospel of Yeshua was realized: each heard in their own language, indicating that the harvest had begun, just as Yeshua had promised.

But that the Jewish people should be drawn to the truth of Yeshua as Messiah was not a major shock to anyone. After all, the nation of Israel had, since ancient times, carried with her the revelation of the Torah and the Prophets, and the promise that God would be faithful to her, drawing her back from her wayward faithlessness. The Gentiles, however, were a different issue. How would the promise made to the fathers, that all of the nations would be blessed in the seed of Abraham—how would this be fulfilled? The answer came in a kind of "second Shavuot" at the house of Cornelius.

#### 6.11 *Peter's Vision and the Inclusion of the Gentiles*

The calling of Peter to go to the house of Cornelius sets the stage for the fulfillment of the final element of Yeshua's promise: the witness would go to the Gentiles through the empowered lives of the Apostles, and the Gentiles would be gathered into the blessing of Abraham, fulfilling the ancient, covenant promise.

The story is well known. Developed against the background of 1st Century Judaism in which Gentiles were considered unclean (at least in one respect or another), Peter is commissioned to go to the Gentiles gathered in Cornelius' house. Though Cornelius is characterized as righteous, a God-fearer, and one whose prayers God accepted (Acts 10:1-2), Peter is hesitant to go to his house—this was clearly against the prevailing *halachah* that frowned on Jewish participation in Gentile's homes. "Dwelling places of

Gentiles [גוֹיִם] are unclean” (m.*Oholot* 18:7). Peter is therefore left with a dilemma: follow the words of Yeshua, to be a witness to the nations, or maintain his allegiance to the prevailing *halachah* which rendered the homes of Gentiles off-limits.

The dilemma is solved by a vision given to Peter by God. The suspended sheet, with both clean and unclean animals, is presented to him, and the command given to “kill and eat.”

### 6.12 *Intepreting the Vision*

The meaning of the vision is well-known and certain: Peter tells us this explicitly.

Acts 10:28-29 And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. “That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.”

In relating the events to the other Apostles, Peter notes:

Acts 11:11-12 “And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. “The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house.

We may presume that by the words “the Spirit told me,” Peter was referring to the vision. So the meaning of the vision is clear: the Gentiles were not to be considered unclean, and Peter was not to hesitate to go the house of Cornelius, despite the prevailing *halachah* which forbade him to do so.

The dilemma, of course, is how the vision of the sheet could be so interpreted. What was it about the vision itself that would have made the message regarding Gentiles so clear in Peter’s mind? The traditional notion that the vision was teaching the abolition of the Torah does not adhere, for the obvious reason that the Torah never taught that the Gentiles were unclean. More to the point, the teachings of Yeshua and His apostles rather support the value and holiness of the Torah, and flatly deny that it was or could be abolished.<sup>177</sup>

I would like to suggest two approaches to this text. Though neither is without its difficulties, these may help shed some additional light on how Peter could have so quickly come to the conclusion he did, that the vision taught the acceptance of the Gentiles.

### 6.13 *The Command to “Kill and Eat” is in the Context of Sacrifices*

The Greek phrase “kill and eat” is: θύσον καὶ φάγε, *thuson kai fage*. The imperative θύσον is from the root θύω (*thuo*) which has as its primary meaning “to sacrifice.”<sup>178</sup> While it can mean generally “to kill” (cf. John 10:10), the preponderance of uses in the Apostolic Scriptures denotes “slaughtering for a sacrifice.”<sup>179</sup> It is therefore possible we should understand this to be a command to “kill for a sacrifice” (as a fellowship offering) and “eat the allotted portions.” This, of course, puts a whole new perspective on the vision,

<sup>177</sup>Matthew 5:17ff; Romans 7:7ff.

<sup>178</sup>BAG, 367.

and on Peter's response. First, the command to "kill and eat" could not have been understood to slaughter an unclean animal and eat, since only clean animals are acceptable for sacrifices. There were apparently both clean and unclean animals in the suspended sheet:

Acts 10:12 and there were in it four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air.

That the text simply says "four-footed animals" would most likely include animals designated as clean (such as sheep). So Peter must have understood the command to take one of the clean animals, slaughter it for a sacrifice, offer it, and eat the allotted portions. The question, of course, is why Peter refused to obey the direct command of the Lord. He knew it was a divine command, for in his response he says, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean."

Several things should be noted in Peter's response. First, he includes two terms: "I have never eaten anything unholy," (κοινός, *koinos*, "common") and unclean," (ἀκαθάρτος, *akathartos*, "ritually unclean"). If the command related to preparing a sacrifice, Peter understood the divine command to take from the clean animals. We should therefore understand that the word "common" (translated "unholy") to refer to *sacrificial meat has been rendered unfit for eating*. This same Greek word (*koinos*) is used for unclean meat in the Lxx.

1Mac. 1:62 But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food (μη φαγῆιν κοινά).

On what basis would Peter consider that the sacrificial flesh from otherwise clean animals had become "common," that is, unfit for sacrifice and participation in the sacrifice by eating the allotted portions? A Leviticus text dealing with sacrificial meat may give the answer:

Lev. 7:19-21 'Also the flesh that touches anything unclean shall not be eaten; it shall be burned with fire. As for other flesh, anyone who is clean may eat such flesh. 20 'But the person who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the LORD, in his uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from his people. 'When anyone touches anything unclean, whether human uncleanness, or an unclean animal, or any unclean detestable thing, and eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings which belong to the LORD, that person shall be cut off from his people.'"

Here, not only the meat of a sacrificial animal is rendered unclean by coming into contact with that which is ritually unclean, but the person who touches an unclean animal<sup>180</sup> while in the process of offering a sacrifice renders him unable to eat of the sacrifice. The penalty is severe: "that person shall be cut off from his people."

This picture may help explain Peter's dilemma: how could he slaughter the

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<sup>179</sup>Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7; Acts 14:13,18; 1Corinthians 5:7; 10:20. The places where the word denotes killing for a festive occasion are Matthew 22:4 (parable of the wedding feast), Luke 15:23,27,30 (parable of the Prodigal Son). Only John 10:10 is used in the general sense of "kill."

<sup>180</sup>This most likely means the corpse of an unclean animal, even though the text does not specifically state so here. Everywhere else in the Torah, a person is rendered ritually unclean, not by touching a live, unclean animal, but by touching the corpse of a clean or unclean animal, cf. Lev 5:2 and see the profitable comments of Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* 3 vols. (in the *Anchor Bible Commentary*, Doubleday, 1991), 1.425f.

sacrificial animal in an unclean place (in the presence of unclean animals) and then eat it according to God's command? The meat would be rendered unclean by contact with the unclean animals.

The solution to Peter's dilemma are the words of God: "What God has cleansed, do not consider unholy." The Greek is: ἃ ὁ θεὸς ἐκαθάρισεν, σὺ μὴ κοῖνου, literally, "what God has made ceremonially clean, do not *consider* common." The fact that the word "common" is used (where we might expect "unclean" [ἀκάθαρτος, *akathartos*]) would indicate that God had not rendered unclean animals clean, but that the meat of the sacrificial animal would not become "common" even though the surroundings contained the possibility of making it unfit. In other words, Peter could "kill and eat" even in what appeared to be unclean surroundings because God would not allow the sacrifice to become ritually unclean.

The strengths of this interpretive scheme are that the possible meaning of "kill" as preparing a sacrifice (something the Greek word implies) are taken into consideration. Likewise, the Torah stipulations regarding clean and unclean within the context of preparing a sacrifice are also given due consideration. The weaknesses, however, are that Peter was in Joppa, not Jerusalem, and thus the command to make a sacrifice would have been out of place (though in visions, geographical realities might be set aside). Moreover, there is nothing explicit in the vision to indicate a sacrificial *sitz im leben* and so to import this into the text on the strength of one term may be to ask more than the text itself can bear. Likewise, it is a bit of a stretch to make the phrase "what God has cleansed, do not consider unholy" mean, "God will guard the sacrificial meat from becoming unclean."

#### 6.14 *The Command to "Kill and Eat" is Parallel to Ezekiel 4*

A second possible interpretation rests upon a parallel text in Ezekiel 4. Here, as a visual aid to the prophetic message of woe against Israel, the prophet is instructed to make bread, to cook it, and eat. The problem is that the bread is to be cooked over a fire whose fuel is human dung, and therefore unclean.

Ezek 4: 12-15 "You shall eat it as a barley cake, having baked it in their sight over human dung." Then the LORD said, "Thus will the sons of Israel eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will banish them." But I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I have never been defiled; for from my youth until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has any unclean meat ever entered my mouth." [וְלֹא-בָקָה בְּפִי בֶשֶׂר פְּגוּלָה] Then He said to me, "See, I will give you cow's dung in place of human dung over which you will prepare your bread."

Here, clean food prepared over unclean fire renders it unclean. It was common to cook bread by laying it directly upon the coals of a fire, and thus its contact with the human dung would render it unclean. This may derived from the Torah commandment regarding latrines:

Deut. 23:12-14 "You shall also have a place outside the camp and go out there, and you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. "Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you or He will turn away from you.

Human excrement is therefore renders anyone who touches it "unholy."

In the Ezekiel text under consideration, the term “unclean meat” is *בֶּשָׂר פִּגּוּל*, *b’sar pigul* in the Hebrew. This is interesting because *פִּגּוּל* is not the normal word for “unclean” (we would expect *טָמֵא*, *tamei’*). *Pigul* is found only in three other places (Lev. 7:18; 19:7; Is. 65:4). In the Leviticus texts, *pigul* describes sacrificial meat that is left over beyond the limited number of days, and thus becomes unclean. Like the bread of Ezekiel, itself clean but becomes unclean when roasted over unclean fire (coming in contact with human excrement), so the meat of the sacrifices in Leviticus 7 and 19 is at first clean, but becomes unclean if left beyond the prescribed number of days.

The parallels to Peter’s vision are striking. Both are presented with something unclean and told to eat. Both give claim to a life untarnished by avoiding anything unclean, and thus both protest the direct command of God because they believe the command “to eat” is contrary to established Torah commandments. The difference, however, is also important. In Ezekiel, God responds to the prophet’s protest by changing His initial command, allowing the prophet to use normal cow dung (often used for fires) in the place of human excrement. Since the Torah forbade human excrement to exist inside the camp (city), its presence was unclean. In the prophetic “visual aid,” of course, it would have highlighted the fact that the city was under siege and thus the people could not go outside of its boundaries to deposit sewage as the Torah demands. In Peter’s vision, however, there is no accommodation to satisfy his protest. Instead, Peter is corrected by the Divine voice. This is because there is no Torah commandment teaching that Gentiles are unclean. What he considered unclean was, in fact, not unclean at all. Thus, the command in Peter’s vision is given to correct Peter’s understanding.

The rabbinic literature speaks to the issue of a *bat kol*, or a heavenly voice. Could a heavenly voice be the basis for Torah *halachah*? An interesting Talmudic citation deals with this very issue:

It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument , but they did not accept them. Said he to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!’ Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place — others affirm, four hundred cubits. ‘No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,’ they retorted. Again he said to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!’ Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards — ‘No proof can be brought from a stream of water,’ they rejoined. Again he urged: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,’ whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: ‘When scholars are engaged in a halachic dispute, what have ye to interfere?’ Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honour of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them: ‘If the halachah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!’ Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: ‘Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halachah agrees with him!’ But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: ‘It is not in heaven.’ What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, After the majority must one incline.

In light of this, we may better understand Peter’s protest. The heavenly voice was suspect because it was instructing him to act contrary to established *halachah*. Peter was therefore righteous in hesitating. But the lesson was in the question of why he might hesitate to go to the house of a Gentile. The command to “kill and eat” was a test for Peter—would he adhere to the revealed stipulations of the Torah? Even in the face of a divine vision, Peter held firmly to the Torah as he understood it. He passed the test with flying colors! But the ultimate point of the vision was *whether Peter would apply the same standard of reasoning to the question of his involvement with Gentiles*. Where in the Written

Torah did it prohibit him from entering the house of a Gentile? Where in the Written Torah could he find solid grounds for denying the request of Cornelius? Peter realized there were none. God had not created the Gentile “unclean.” That was a rabbinic fabrication. Peter had reasoned correctly, corroborated by the Written Torah, that eating something unclean was wrong. Would he likewise reason, on the basis of Written Torah, that it was proper to fellowship with Gentiles? That was the test which the vision presented.

Thus, Peter understood the purpose of the vision through the test of authority it required of him. God’s Torah stood above that of the Sages. When it came to the Gentiles, Peter was to follow God’s Written Torah, not the Oral Torah of the rabbis. And as note above, Peter got the message! He was not to hesitate to go to the house of Cornelius. He was free to eat with these covenant members without thinking that he would be participating in ritual impurity. The rabbinic wall that had separated Jew and Gentile had been abolished.

The strengths of this approach are that it takes into consideration the close verbal parallels with Ezekiel 4. Moreover, it highlights the obvious fact that Peter was dealing with both Written and Oral Torah in his *halachic* decisions. And this approach helps bridge the apparent gap between the vision itself, and the interpretation given to it by Peter, that he should not hesitate to fellowship with Gentiles. Its weakness is that the vision was given to test Peter, something the text itself does not directly indicate.

### 6.15 *The Giving of the Ruach to the Gentiles*

But the event that clinched the matter for Peter was the giving of the Ruach. What astounded Peter was that the Gentiles received the Spirit just as the Jews believers had. The same Spirit, in the same way, and upon Gentiles!

Acts 10:44-47 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”<sup>181</sup>

The designation “Holy Spirit” emphasizes His work of sanctifying, or “making holy.” The very presence of God—purity in its highest degree—had descended upon the Gentiles! Surely the Holy One would not dwell with those who were unclean. His presence, then, upon the Gentiles, proved beyond doubt what the vision had foretold: God had cleansed the Gentiles through faith in Yeshua, and they were therefore to be brought into the covenant of Israel as full participants, and no longer considered as those who would render the *chavrut* (fellowship of covenant members) unclean. The *mikvah* that they immediately entered into thus marked their change of covenant status: those who were far off had been brought near. Indeed, there was a ritual that marked covenant entrance: the *mikvah*. But this ritual, while marking a change in *covenant status*, did not purport to change *ethnic status*. The Gentile believer was a full-fledged covenant member as a Gentile, not as a Jew.

What is missing, of course, is any mention of circumcision. Peter recognized beyond doubt that God had brought these Gentiles into the covenant, yet He had done so without the ceremony of the proselyte. If they were to be circumcised later, this would

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<sup>181</sup>Cf. Acts 11:15ff where Peter reiterates the events.



be a matter of obedience. But it was not a means of entering the covenant. That had been accomplished entirely by their faith in the risen Messiah. Like Abraham,<sup>182</sup> they were reckoned as righteous while still uncircumcised, that is, while non-Jews.

Thus, the remainder of Acts outlines the manner in which the Apostles witnessed to the Gentiles<sup>183</sup> and how they were brought into the covenant people even as the prophets had foretold. In not one instance is the ritual of the proselyte referenced. The Gentiles came in as Gentiles, not as those who had gained Jewish status through the rabbinic ritual. And notice how the book of Acts ends:

Acts 28:28 “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.”

Acts 28:30-31 And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Yeshua Messiah with all openness, unhindered.<sup>184</sup>

The command with which Yeshua had commissioned His Apostles, that they should be His witnesses beginning in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, had been carried out. The ingathering of the nations had begun.

## 6.2 *Epistle to the Romans*

The Pauline epistles fill in this picture in detail, even giving specific *halachah* as to how this new inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant people of God should be handled, and how the body of Messiah should function in the era of the Abrahamic promise. And without exception, the Apostolic *halachah* instructs that believers, Jew and Gentile, to form a single, dynamic body in which each offer gifts for the completion of the whole. In no place is there found the picture of separate identities within an ethereal or spiritual unity. Paul's letters are addressed to actual congregations made up of Jew and Gentile who were to find their identity, not in their ethnicity, but in their singular faith in God through His Messiah, Yeshua.

Paul begins his epistle to the Romans by identifying the heart of his mission to the Gentiles: “. . . to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake” (Rom 1:5). The “obedience of the Gentiles” is also mentioned as a kind of *inclusio* at the end of the epistle (15:18): “For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Messiah has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed.” The fact that Paul emphasizes “obedience” as a prime objective in his mission to the Gentiles cannot be removed from the obvious fact that Paul considered the Torah as the standard for obedience. He identifies the unbeliever as one who does not submit to the Torah, indeed, as one who is unable to submit (Rom 8:7). The opposite is therefore true for the believer. What is more, Paul's characteristic of anyone who is declared righteous before God is obedience to Torah: “for *it is* not the hearers of the Torah *who* are just before God, but the doers of the Torah will be justified” (Rom 2:13).

Moreover, Paul's well known metaphor of the olive tree, in which believing Jews remain and believing Gentiles are ingrafted, is based upon the election of both. His

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<sup>182</sup>Cf. Romans 4:9-12.

<sup>183</sup>Note Acts 14:27; 15:3,12,14; 21:19; 26:20; 28:28.

<sup>184</sup>Acts 28:29 is not found in a majority of the early manuscripts and is most likely to be counted as a later addition.

message is that God has chosen both Jew and Gentile to comprise His covenant people (Rom 9:23ff). Once again, in this metaphor of the olive tree, Paul is not presenting a philosophical or purely theological picture of God's people, but a dynamic, physical reality in which Jew and Gentile strive together in the "obedience of the faith." For in this picture, both believing Jew and Gentile are enriched by the nourishment of the root. The covenant promises belong equally to all who are in the body of Messiah.

Thus Paul ends the body of the epistle with a chorus of quotes from the Tanach:

Rom. 15:9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME." (Psalm 18:49)

10 Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." (Deut 32:43)

11 And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." (Ps 117:1)

12 Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." (Is 11:10)

For Paul, the Gentile believer participates *within* Israel ("with His people"), not as a separate entity.

### 6.3 *First Epistle to the Corinthians*

In terms of essential identity, Paul is not concerned with ethnicity. In 1 Corinthians he writes:

1Cor. 7:17-20 Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches. Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.

Paul is not denying circumcision to the Gentile believer. What he prohibits is the ritual of a proselyte. His conclusion (v. 20) confirms this: one should not attempt to change his ethnicity. Jews are to remain Jews, and non-Jews remain as non-Jews. Thus Paul's instructions "he is not to be circumcised" must mean, "he is not to undergo the rabbinic ritual of a proselyte with the hopes of gaining a Jewish status."<sup>185</sup> Nor is a Jew to attempt to obscure his Jewish ethnicity. Both are needed for the body of Messiah to be whole.

But note carefully what he says: "circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing." Surely Paul does not seek to diminish the commands of God, nor the value of Jewish identity. Neither does he diminish the blessing of God in fulfilling His promise to bless the nations in Abraham's seed! But what he does intend to emphasize is that *one's essential identity is not wrapped up in one's ethnicity*. Rather, "what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God." Here is the essential identity: faith in the Messiah Yeshua, which results in the obedience of the faith, that is, obeying God's commandments.

How much clearer could Paul be? Could we possibly read Paul as saying that some

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<sup>185</sup>That Paul is speaking of "status" here is confirmed by the following context (vv. 21ff) which speak to slaves remaining as slaves (not revolting against their owners) and freemen remaining free (not becoming slaves out of some self-manufactured piety).

of the commandments were not for the Gentile believers while all of the commandments were for the Jew? I hardly think so! For Paul, the commandments did not form a criteria for distinguishing Jew from Gentile. On the contrary, Jew and Gentile find their common, covenant identity in the keeping of the commandments, because this is the life of everyone who has genuine, saving faith.

#### 6.4 *Epistle to the Galatians*

The idea that a Gentile needed to gain the status of “Jewish” in order to receive full covenant membership is the issue that prompted the epistle to the Galatians. The “good news” brought by those who were attempting to influence the Galatian assemblies was that there was a way for Gentiles to “be fully in.” This, for the influencers, was the ritual of proselytism. But for Paul, the very idea that there could be something in addition to the pure faith in Messiah by which a Gentile could gain a different covenant status—such an idea was not only bad theology, it was anathema (Gal 1:8-9). Paul finds no room for such an idea. Some, of course, would deny that prescribing the full Torah to Jews, and only parts of the Torah to Gentiles, could be construed as different “levels” within the covenant. But that is precisely what it is. For if the Torah is holy, spiritual and good, and if the commandments of God are His blessings upon His children, then to deny any of the commandments to any covenant member is to deny them the blessings of the covenant. Given the scenario that only Jews have the privilege and responsibilities of all the *mitzvot*, what Gentile believer in his right mind would not want to become a Jew (as if anyone could actually change their lineage)? But to think that ethnicity is the means by which one gains the highest level of covenant privileges is to introduce into God’s salvific plan something that He never intended. And in so doing, one renders the gospel itself as deficient. That is why Paul labels such a theology with the severe term “anathema,” “forever cursed.”

Rather, in terms of covenant membership,

there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua. (Galatians 3:8)

#### 6.5 *Epistle to the Ephesians*

This same theme is found in Ephesians. The wall that had been constructed by the “ordinances” of men,<sup>186</sup> in which Gentile and Jew were separated, has been broken down by the death of Yeshua (Eph 2:14f). The Gentiles, who once were far off, have now been brought close to the God of Israel, and to the covenants of (the) promise (2:11ff).<sup>187</sup> Thus God’s covenant people Israel, joined by the elect from all the nations, constitute the people of God without distinction, and without separate identities. The “one new man” (Eph 2:15) does not come about by the lose of Jewish ethnicity, nor the obscuring of Gentile ethnicity, but by both being identified first and foremost as those who have been chosen and redeemed by God for His purposes.

However, the Gentile does not bring in his pagan culture, but leaves it behind to embrace the culture of Torah. In worshipping Israel’s God, he does so by the means He

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<sup>186</sup>See my paper “The Dividing Wall in Ephesians 2,” available at [www.torahresource.com](http://www.torahresource.com), where I show that the Greek word *δῶγμα*, “ordinance,” is used exclusively in the Apostolic Scriptures for man-made laws.

<sup>187</sup>Note previous remarks on this Eph 2 text, pp. 37-8.

prescribes. He “attaches himself to Israel.” This biblical culture involves a new calendar, new holy writings (in the language of the new culture, i.e., Hebrew<sup>188</sup>), new rules governing family and communal relationships, a new view of food and clothes, and even a new perspective on civil and social institutions. And as a Gentile from the nations who is “grafted in,” there is one Torah for him and for the native born. The two both find their identity in their covenant relationship to the One God of Israel.

## 6.6 *Epistle to the Philippians*

In Philippians Paul gives his own personal testimony regarding identity. He speaks of the “false circumcision” (3:2), by which he must identify those who were teaching that ethnic status (gained via the ritual of the proselyte=circumcision) was an essential part of their covenant membership. Yet Paul identifies the believers in Yeshua as the “true circumcision:”

Phil 3:3 for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Messiah Yeshua and put no confidence in the flesh,

Surely Paul includes the Gentiles in the congregation at Philippi when he says “we are the true circumcision.” The words “glory in Messiah Yeshua” (καυχώμενοι ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) must therefore mark the essential character of the true covenant member as far as Paul is concerned. And the words “and put no confidence in the flesh” clearly is a reference to those who were relying on ethnic status (whether Jew or proselyte) as at least some basis for their covenant membership.

Paul, of course, could taut his own ethnic connections:

Phil 3:4-6 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Torah, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Torah, found blameless.

Yet, though Paul openly gloried in the privilege of his Jewish heritage,<sup>189</sup> when it came to his own personal, essential identity, he considered his ethnicity of no real value:

Phil. 3:7-8 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord . . . .”

Apparently Paul, confident in his Jewish heritage and identity, found no need to bolster his ethnic status at the expense of the non-Jews.

## 6.7 *Epistle to the Colossians*

In his Epistle to the Colossians Paul reiterates the same theme: all who are, by faith, in the Messiah, are equal covenant members. In a time when ethnic status had for so long been a necessity for full covenant membership, his words are astounding:

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<sup>188</sup>When Paul wrote Ephesians, the Apostolic Scriptures were not yet gathered as a completed canon. The only Scriptures he received and taught were those of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>189</sup>Cf. Romans 3:1-2.

Col 3:9-11 Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him— a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Messiah is all, and in all.

What is missing in this epistle, as in all the rest of the Pauline literature, is any fear that Jewish identity might be lost. One might immediately point out that Paul was writing in a time when Jewish identity reigned supreme, and the threat of assimilation was minimal, but that after the destruction and the defeat of the second Jewish revolt, the situation changed. From a predominately Jewish community, The Way had evolved into a community dominated by Gentiles which would emerge into the Christian Church. Here, the argument goes, Jewish identity was clearly threatened, and new measures therefore needed to be enacted.

But this scenario is only partially true. It is true, of course, that the Jewish presence within the sect called The Way was a majority at its beginning, though we should not fall into the trap of thinking that there were no Gentiles until after the Cornelius event. And it is true that the Gentile minority grew quickly into a majority by the turn of the century. But we should not overlook the fact that there were heavy pressures upon the Jewish population to hellenize during the 1st Century, and the rabbinic literature gives witness to the fact that the Sages were well aware of this threat, and did all within their power to overcome it. Indeed, the increasingly stringent measures enacted to separate Jew and Gentile in matters of table-fellowship and communal functions presents just such an attempt at strengthening the boundaries of Jewish identity.

Rather than reading Paul's words against a backdrop of a community culture that felt secure in its ethnic identity, we should note the stark contrast between Paul's perspective and that of the prevailing Pharisaic views. While their general mindset was that Gentiles (and apparently in some cases even proselytes) could not be trusted, Paul enumerates the most despised ethnic classes as equal covenant members with Jews. The "Scythian" (Σκύθης) was "frequently viewed as the epitome of unrefinement or savagery."<sup>190</sup> And "slaves" (δούλος) of Roman masters not only were accorded no legal status within the society, but were unable to observe many of the commandments, most notably Sabbath. Yet Paul puts both classes as equal with native born Jews for the obvious reason that citizenship of this world had given way to citizenship within the kingdom of God.<sup>191</sup> This was not an innovation for Paul. Yeshua had given the same teaching in parables like the Good Samaritan, and the dialogs with the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Roman Centurion.

## 6.8 *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*

The matter of the Torah was not ethnically based in Paul's mind. The Torah was the living and abiding word of God, the embodiment of the Father's instructions in righteousness. Writing to a community that was dominated by Gentiles (cf. 2:14f), Paul writes:

1Thess 4:2 For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord

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<sup>190</sup>BDAG, "σκύθης."

<sup>191</sup>Cf. Phil 3:20.

Yeshua.

Paul considers the commandments emphasized and taught by Yeshua Himself (commandments that were the same commandments given by the Father, cf. John 15:10) to form the very life of sanctification for the Thessalonian believers. Here, as always, there is no hint whatsoever that the commandments are categorized or differentiated according to ethnic status. There are no category of commandments that offer a unique Jewish identity.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup>Russ Resnik writes: Torah remains a living and relevant document for all believers, Jewish and Gentile, but *many of its specifics are intended for Israel alone*. Messianic Jews are to draw upon the rich tradition of Torah, not necessarily because this tradition is mandated for all believers, but because we are Jews" ("Messianic Judaism Self -Definition: Addendum," p. 3, emphasis mine). Likewise he speaks of Israel's "unique relationship to the Torah," (Ibid., p. 4) by which he means a relationship to the Torah which marks Jewish identity.

## Section 7

# Conclusion: The Torah is Equally the Possession of All Covenant Members

In this brief survey we have noted the Biblical words used to denote non-Jewish members of the covenant God made with the patriarchs, culminating in the covenant with Israel. Our investigation showed that the term *ger* ("sojourner") continued to be used throughout the Tanach as a designation for someone outside the ethnic range of Jacob's descendants, and someone who therefore did not have natural clan identity within Israel. Nonetheless, in those contexts in which the word and associated terms identify the "sojourner" as having attached himself to Israel, and who therefore participated in the worship of Israel's God, the *ger* is accorded full covenant membership, and the instructions to Israel were that the same Torah applied to the *ger* as to the native born. The name "Israel" became an identifier of God's chosen people, made up of the physical descendants of Jacob and those of other nations who joined themselves to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and thus were received as members within the people called "Israel."

Moreover, there is no indication whatsoever that any formal ritual of conversion was in place in the time of Moses, nor in the era of the prophets. Even in the post-exilic life of the nation as witnessed by the historical narratives and prophetic literature, no ritual of conversion is mentioned or implied. The "sojourner" was accepted as a covenant member strictly upon his willingness to confess the One true God, proven by his willingness to conform his life to the single Torah of Israel. In so doing, the *ger* received all of the privileges given to the common Israelite, as well as all of the covenant responsibilities enjoined upon the covenant people. In short, he became a *bone fide* part of Israel. This did not change his ethnicity—he remained as one chosen from the nations. Yet he was identified as an Israelite.

Historical studies showed, however, that rabbinic conventions did put into place a ritual of conversion at a time when ethnic status was more and more considered essential for covenant membership. This ritual is not documented until late in the Second Temple era, and only under the influence of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman period. Since covenant status had been redefined as essentially a benefit of ethnic identity, the ritual of conversion was construed as changing the ethnic identity of the *ger* from "foreigner" to "native born," so much so that a Gentile who submitted to the ritual was identified as a Jew. The prevailing view of Pharisaic Judaism during the 1st Century was that covenant membership required a Jewish ethnicity.

What naturally followed in the decades subsequent to the destruction of the Temple was the teaching that the Torah, which was the core vehicle for establishing covenant identity within rabbinic Judaism, was applicable only to covenant members, and thus only to Jews. This necessitated the formulation of standards for Gentiles who desired to be righteous but who, for one reason or another, were not willing to undergo the ritual of conversion. While during the 1st Century (and perhaps slightly earlier) the non-Jew who identified with Israel but was unwilling to submit to the ritual of conversion was tolerated as a "God-fearer," in the decades subsequent to the destruction of the Temple, a new formulation of the so-called Noachide Laws provided a way for Gentiles to be seen as righteous without becoming members of Israel's covenant. The fact that the earlier class of "God-fearers" finds no legal status whatsoever in the rabbinic literature can only be explained by the fact that the Yavneh legislation found no room for non-

Jews as covenant members.

Thus, by the 3rd and 4th Centuries CE, and especially in the Talmudic era, the Torah (both written and oral) was increasingly denied to the Gentiles and reserved as the unique covenant marker for Jews and proselytes. Apparently this was felt necessary by the Jewish Sages in order to maintain a clear distinction between the Jew (whether native born or proselyte) and the Gentile, especially in light of the emerging Christian Church which had, in its earliest years, formulated a “replacement theology” in which she claimed for herself the exclusive right of covenant membership, and the label “Israel.”

This perspective, that the Torah was the exclusive right of Jews, was not only a identity marker for the post-destruction Synagogue. For in her attempts at self-identification, the emerging Christian Church defined herself by her stance against Torah. Since Torah had become deeply entrenched as an ethnic marker for the Jews, and since the emerging Christian Church was identifying herself by her distinction from the Synagogue, it became the standard theology of the early Church fathers that the Torah had been abolished (thus denying its ability to define covenant membership). In this way, the emerging Christian Church defined itself by developing anti-Torah *halachah* such as the replacement of Sabbath by Sunday, a disregard for the food laws, exchanging baptism for circumcision, developing new Festivals, and developing Christian rituals (such as the eucharist) to replace “Jewish” ceremonies (such as the Pesach seder). As far as identity markers, these measures “worked” for both parties: a clear division had occurred. Jews belonged to the Synagogue and Torah, Christians belonged to the Church and Christianity. From that point on, the labels “Jewish” and “Christian” defined mutually exclusive religious and social groups.

Unfortunately, for these distinction to have been put into place required that both parties redefine their Scriptures. The Synagogue anachronistically interpreted (in crucial texts) the *ger* of the Tanach as a “proselyte,” and the Church interpreted the message of Yeshua and the Apostles as anti-Torah. In general, this remains the current perspective. Yet, as this brief survey has shown, there is no ritual of conversion found anywhere in the Tanach, nor is there any indication that the biblical authors, whether of the Tanach or Apostolic Scriptures, every thought that one could change his ethnic status through a religious ritual. Rather, *the biblical writers uniformly teach that covenant membership is gained through acceptance of God and His Messiah, resulting in submission to His Torah, and not on the basis of ethnic status.*

This is proven, on the one hand, through a study of the Tanach texts that deal with the foreigner in Israel. The repeated message of the Tanach is that the *ger* who has joined himself to God and Israel, is a covenant member equal to the native born. On the other hand, the Apostolic Scriptures affirm this same reality. The Jew and the Gentile are covenant members with equal standing and equal responsibility. Nowhere in the writings of the Apostles is there any indication of separate callings or ministries for Jews and Gentiles within the body of Messiah.

Moreover, the Apostles have nothing to say about *how* Jews and Gentiles should maintain and manifest their distinct identities (though they recognized such a distinction). It simply was a non-issue in their writings, even though they continue to maintain both the enduring existence of Israel as a nation, and the fulfillment of the covenant promises to her and to the Gentiles who would join her through faith in the Messiah. The Apostles are not concerned so much with individual, ethnic identity as they are with the believer’s identity in Messiah. For them, the body of Messiah is the expression of the eschatological people of God unified under the leadership of the risen Messiah Yeshua, made up of Jew and Gentile.



Surely unbelieving Israel remains God's chosen people and He has promised to save her in the end. Moreover, it is this promise of God to save Israel that forges the covenant connection between the current believing remnant, made up of both Jew and Gentile, and the nation of Israel who currently has rejected Yeshua. For when "all Israel will be saved," she will then find her identity, both individually and corporately, in God's Messiah, Yeshua, even as the remnant, acting as the first fruits of the final harvest, now finds her identity in Him. The remnant's love and hope for the larger nation of Israel is built upon the obvious fact that she is merely the first fruits of the final harvest. Like a caravan traveling to Jerusalem for a Festival, the remnant continues to grow as more and more join her on the journey to the celebration. No one is completely satisfied until they reach Jerusalem where the Festival will take place, even though joining the caravan has given assurance that the destination will be reached. And all hopes are cast upon the final destination even though the journey itself is full of joy and singing.

In like manner the remnant moves to the goal of the full salvation of Israel as God has promised. Our identity is with her of whom we are a part, regardless of individual ethnicity, because only with her will the celebration of the Festival be complete. And the Festival celebrates Yeshua!

What does this mean for us today? First, it seems clear that the current move of Messianic Judaism to define itself along ethnic lines is an almost uncanny repeat of the 2nd Century split between the Synagogue and Church. Messianic Jews, wanting to secure their Jewish identity, are attempting to strengthen their relationship with the traditional Synagogue by accepting her identity boundaries.<sup>193</sup> To use the former metaphor, Messianic Judaism has decided to form its own caravan, inviting travelers to join her based upon their ethnic status. Yet in doing so she risks sending the message that only those with Jewish ethnicity are welcomed at the final celebration. Yet both the Tanach and the Apostolic Scriptures are clear that the body of Messiah is one, and that this one body is traveling together toward the goal of the final celebration.

Secondly, to suggest that the local congregation is better when divided along ethnic lines (Jews in Messianic Judaism, Gentiles in the Christian Church) is to affirm that a singular ethnicity has the necessary ability to accomplish the God-given task of the assembly. But God has always formed His people out of multiple ethnicities, in order to show that the success comes from His power, not from man's. If the body only succeeds where every joint functions as it was intended, and if clearly God is bringing in people from every nation, kindred and tongue, then on what grounds may anyone say that a community formed along ethnic lines is able to function as it should? Should not each community be, in some measure, a reflection of the whole? Surely this was Paul's idea in Ephesians 4. What is more, if the body of Messiah, composed of Jew and Gentile, is moving to that eschatological victory and together "anticipate the shalom of the world to come,"<sup>194</sup> then it is only logical and prudent that this "shalom" be demonstrated now, for in Yeshua, the eschaton has broken into world history. To divide the caravan may

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<sup>193</sup>Note the following paragraph from Russ Resnik, "Messianic Jewish Identity: Addendum," p. 2: "This raises the question of conversion to Judaism. Scripture clearly provides a model for those outside of the Jewish people to become part of the people, and sets a precedent for a ritual of conversion through circumcision. Whether or not we develop such a ritual within our own circles, we must recognize its validity in the larger Jewish world. If we seek to be part of the Jewish people, we must accept the broad norms of conversion prevalent within the Jewish community. Thus, like all forms of Judaism, we see a convert, whether from a Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox context, as a Jew, and their offspring normally as Jews."

<sup>194</sup>Russ Resnik, "Messianic Jewish Identity: Addendum," p. 1.

appear to make life easier, but it may also weaken the caravan to the point that it is unable to make the journey. For everyone who joins the caravan is needed to help the rest complete the journey.

Thirdly, to suggest that local communities of the body of Messiah should be formed along ethnic lines is to deny the very heart of the redemptive work which Yeshua Himself has accomplished. The wall that had separated the Jew and Gentile is not some kind of ethereal, philosophical wall, but a genuine reality in the communities of Paul's day. The glorious picture of all the nations being blessed in the Seed of Abraham envisioned the ingathering of the nations into Israel, to worship her God with her, not apart from her. The eschatological vision is that "My House shall be called the house of prayer for all the nations." Israel was chosen as God's servant to go and invite the nations to the Festival. When the nations come, they join the celebration of the Master and His family. They are welcomed at His table, because they have become members of His covenant. Thus God's faithfulness to the covenant is not actually seen until the nations are blessed by the Seed of Abraham. Jew and Gentile working, living, and worshipping together form a clear and obvious expression of God's covenant blessing. And the current expression of our worship and life together as the body of Messiah is to foreshadow this final victory and celebration. We celebrate along the journey in anticipation of arriving at the Festival. And the journey to the Festival is an integral part of the celebration itself.

Finally, the dilemma faced by this definition of Messianic Judaism is clearly the "Gentile problem." While the Messianics recognize that the believing Gentile must be received as a covenant member, they also realize that they cannot expect to have a viable and living relationship with the unbelieving Jewish community and openly accept their Gentile brothers as equals into their congregations as well. This forces them to accept the unbiblical "ritual of conversion" in order to "change" Gentiles into Jews. And since Messianic Judaism presently does not have its own "ritual of conversion," the proposal is to accept the conversion rituals of the current branches of Judaism.

The logic in this is astounding! For if a Gentile believer desired to be fully accepted in this form of Messianic Judaism, he could go to the non-believing Synagogue, convert, and then return to the Messianic congregation with paper in hand and be accepted as a Jew. This gives him the right to a "unique relationship to the Torah" which he did not have before. "Where," I would ask, "is the Scriptural basis for that?"

On the contrary, it is this very thinking that formed the necessity in Paul's mind for the Epistle to the Galatians. The idea that Gentiles could gain a greater connectivity to the covenant through a man-made ritual of conversion (which Paul refers to in shorthand form as "circumcision" or "the works of the Torah"), is, in Paul's estimation, "another message of good news" which is, in fact, not good news at all. The reason it is not good news (though it might sound like it to a Gentile who wants to be received into the "inner circle") is that it offers a status which God does not recognize, for it promotes the idea that there is an "inner circle." The reality is that in God's family, there is no "inner circle," but all are brothers and sisters on an equal plane because all are sinners who have been saved by God's grace through the sacrifice of the Messiah.<sup>195</sup> A "ritual of conversion" adds something to the gospel, because it purports to add something to the availability of God's grace and blessings. If the Torah is the blessing which David describes in Psalm 19, then anyone who loves God should want all of it. To deny any part of the Torah to any covenant member is to deny God's blessing. This is no mere trifle for the Apostle Paul. He labels it "anathema." For all of God's blessings are

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<sup>195</sup>Cf. Romans 3:22-25.

confirmed in Yeshua. And all who are in Yeshua have access to all of the blessings of God through Him. “. . . and in Him you have been made complete” (Colossians 2:10).

There is a challenge before us. As more and more Torah Communities form, the dilemma of identity will continue to grow. It is my sincere hope and prayer that we will all, Jew and Gentile alike, find our clear and satisfying identity first and foremost in Yeshua. Then, as Jew and Gentile together, we will be able to express to a watching world the victory that has already been won in Messiah, and will be fully realized when He returns. We are on our way to the Festival, and the journey, though sometimes wearisome, is full of joy, singing, and anticipation. Let us not grow weary, for soon we will join the throngs in Jerusalem, and celebrate the King.