

## One Torah or Two?

by Rob Vanhoff

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The Scripture is clear in defining the term and principle of תורה אחת, *torah achat*, or “One Torah.”<sup>1</sup> It is a rock-solid biblical concept with which the Torah teaches us to think. On the other hand, Scripture does not define or teach us categories like “Christianity,” “Messianic Judaism,” “Oral Torah,” “conversion,” “Jewish or non-Jewish identity/culture.” Since such catch-words are not biblical, different groups are able to define them however they wish. This can then lead to a war of labels and definitions, one group wanting to pigeon-hole another into this or that “box.” Paul rightly warned us, **Beware, lest you bite and devour one another!**

It occurred to me that some who see themselves as representing an “official” expression of **Messianic Judaism** take issue with the biblical “One Torah” label because they actually believe there are **Two Torahs**. That is, they believe in the authority of the Written Torah and in the authority of an “Oral Torah.” Some, I’m sure, will claim that it is really the “whole Torah,” made up of written and oral components. So my question in this short piece is to ask: You who reject “One Torah,” is that because you believe in “Two”? I would suggest that anyone who believes that the Talmud is authoritative for Jewish believers in Yeshua can be appropriately described as an adherent to a “Two Torah” doctrine. They have expanded their canon to include extrabiblical works and authority: Talmud and the Rabbis.

In an article on “Oral Law,” the world-renowned giant in the study of rabbinic literature Jacob Neusner writes,

*Judaism as we know it, that is, the distinctive Judaism of the doctrine of the two Torahs... was born in the encounter with triumphant Christianity, just as, in its formative century, Christianity had come into being in the encounter with an established Judaism of Temple, land, and self-governing state.*<sup>2</sup>

The only thing I would want to adjust in Neusner’s statement – apart from my normal rant about the misuse of abstract nouns like “Judaism” and “Christianity” – is the presumption of a self-governing state in 1st century Judea. We know this was simply not the case. Long occupation under foreign rule resulted in a mixed-bag of agendas for the leadership in Israel. Power, position, and politics among the Jewish elite were intimately related and subject to the presence of Rome in the Land. *Instead of a monolithic “Judaism,” we find fragmentation and sectarianism.* And with respect to government, Herod’s legacy in particular is anything but a “Golden Age” of Jewish self-rule. In other words, it was a real mess. Yeshua stated the judgement: **Not one stone will be left upon another.** Is that offensive?

But let me get back on track... Earlier in this same short article, Neusner points out that there is no evidence for this doctrine of two Torahs before 70 C.E. Rather, he writes,

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1. 1. See Ex. 12:49; Num 15:15-6, 29.

2. Jacob Neusner, “Oral Law,” in Arthur A. Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (1987), pp. 673-677.

*For a formulation of the claim that extrabiblical traditions – a commonplace among a whole range of Jewish groups – constituted the oral Torah revealed to Moses at Sinai, we have to wait until the appearance of the Talmuds, four centuries later.*<sup>3</sup>

It is anachronistic to project this post-Christian, talmudic doctrine into the first century. Neusner put it another way: “The myth of the two Torahs appears only rarely until we reach the two Talmuds, the one of the land of Israel, dating from 400 C.E., the other of Babylonia, dating from 600 C.E., and in the associated documents in the talmudic sector of the rabbinic canon.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, as far as Neusner is concerned, the doctrine of “Two Torahs” is a response to the undeniable growth of “Christianity.” I would put it this way: the “Oral Torah” ideology advertised by the 4-6th century C.E. rabbis is in part a reaction to the powerful impact that the Gospel had on the Jewish and Gentile worlds in the first few centuries of the common era. That is also to say, 1st century Pharisees did *not* believe in a dual Torah delivered to Moses at Sinai. Not for a moment. That story (or “myth” as Neusner has put it) isn’t really articulated until the Talmuds. Neusner argues that part of the talmudic project (as with that of the midrashim known as *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah*) was to defend the new doctrine of an “oral” Torah delivered to Moses and thus legitimate the authority of the rabbis over against other Jewish groups and... even against...

“Christians”! I suppose every era has its experts promoting Bible interpretations for the sake of establishing and maintaining institutions.

**TorahResource** seeks to promote Bible interpretations and offer instruction anchored in the historical/grammatical context of the fixed, inspired canon. We believe that Yeshua holds all authority in heaven and on earth, His Torah is for His ekklesia, and that there is no salvation apart from Him.

### One Law or Two?

You *might* be “**Two-Torah**” if you...

- believe that there are 613 commandments for Jews and 7 for the Gentiles.
- believe that “the Halakhah” is the Word of God. [This is a standard Orthodox position]
- subordinate Yeshua to rabbinic tradition. [Look for statements like “Yeshua learned the greatest commandment from Hillel,” or “In the world to come pigs will be kosher.”]
- believe that without the rabbinic “Oral Torah” one cannot properly interpret Scripture.
- use the Talmud to reconstruct the historical background for the early Church.
- believe that the religious Jews do not need Yeshua, because they are already keeping Torah.
- believe that inheritance in the world to come is not based upon faith in Messiah Yeshua and participation in His resurrection life.
- attribute special “spiritual power” to the individual Hebrew letters and their numerical values (*gematria*).

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3. *Ibid*, 676.

4. *Ibid*, 674.

– think that **One-Torah** people are essentially envious, antisemitic, *cryptosupersessionist* (yes, that’s a label now), or just off their rocker.

If you find yourself in agreement with any of these **Two-Law** statements I would encourage you to reevaluate how seriously you take Yeshua’s words, and whether you are ready to take a stand in defense of Two Torah doctrine.