

ONE LAW MOVEMENTS
A Challenge to the Messianic Jewish Community
By Daniel Juster and Russ Resnik

One of the glories of life in the Messianic Jewish community is the unity of worship and service between its Jewish and Gentile members within a specifically Jewish context. In recent years, however, a trend has developed that challenges the Messianic Jewish community on this very issue. This trend involves various groups and movements that teach that all Jews and Gentiles under the new covenant are called to keep the same Torah in all regards.

In so doing, these One Law movements not only misinterpret a great body of Scripture, but they also miss the unique calling of Jews and Gentiles within the Body of Messiah, robbing both groups of the biblical richness of their identity. They lose the new covenant vision of unity in Messiah between Jews and Gentiles and replace it with a man-made rallying cry, which One Law advocate Tim Hegg has expressed as “One people, One Messiah, One Torah.”¹

Several streams teach such views, including Ephraimite groups that believe that Gentiles who have come to faith in Yeshua in some way fulfill the prophecies concerning the regathering of the Northern Tribes and their reunion with Judah. Generally, they teach that all believers are called to follow the same Torah instructions, with the exception of circumcision.

Other groups teach that Gentiles are both called to live the same Torah as Jews (except for circumcision), without teaching that they are in any way descended from the so-called “lost tribes” of Israel. These groups see all believers as grafted into the Olive tree, and therefore called to obey the same Torah as Israel. Perhaps the best-known proponents of this view are the writers of *First Fruits of Zion*, including Tim Hegg.

The Continuing Value of the Torah

Hegg and others make some good and important points about the Torah, which we should recognize before correcting what we believe is wrong.

Judaism, of course, always speaks of the Torah in the most positive terms. Torah as a whole—the 613 commandments identified in rabbinic literature—is the unique responsibility and privilege of the Jewish people, although many aspects of Torah apply to all people. It will be more relevant to this discussion to compare the “One Law” view of Torah with views in the Christian world.

The best One Law arguments on the value of the Torah resemble those within classical Reformed (Calvinist) Christian thought. Reformed theologians throughout history have put forth a clear doctrine of the Law. They see the will of God described by his Law, not only as taught in the New Testament, but also as taught in the Torah of Moses. Those who teach that we only need to love and can forget the Law of God are badly mistaken. Why? Because without the Law to tell us what love looks like, we will fall into sentimental indulgence. True love is always according to God’s Law. Therefore, the true believer, saved by grace, keeps God’s law, and the mark of the saved is obedience of the Law of God.

Starting in the late 19th century, Dispensational Theology overturned much of this view in popular Christianity in the United States and even in world missions. It taught that the Mosaic Law had no

¹ Tim Hegg, “It is often said: ‘The Torah is only for Jews.’” *Bikurei Tziyon* Issue 77, Vayikra/Leviticus, 2003, p. 15.

claim at all on the believer. Since the Christian is saved by grace, he may continue to live in sin while being assured of heaven. Such a life would not be a happy one, so believers should be exhorted to commitment and holiness. The committed disciple, however, should be instructed mostly by the epistles, not Torah and not primarily even the teaching of Yeshua, which is an application of Torah.

Many of today's Dispensationalists have abandoned this severe anti-law position, but many Christians are still influenced by it. It is reflected in popular Christian speech and is prevalent in much Christian culture. One Law teachings can be seen as a reaction to this anti-law culture, and a return to a sounder understanding of grace and law, such as is taught by Reformation theology. So why are One Law people not simply conservative Presbyterians?

Most of Reformed Theology was replacement theology, declaring that the Church has replaced Israel in the plan of God. It treated Israel, the Jewish people, like all other peoples, except that until they receive Yeshua, they may show special marks of both preservation and judgment. Reformed thought divided the law into the ceremonial and the moral-social. The latter is a guide for personal life and for the laws and practices of society. The former related only to the practices of ancient Israel and the Temple. Such theology is alive and well today.

One Law people would see the deficiency in this sort of theology. If Israel has not been replaced, but is still the covenant people of God, then the division of the Torah into an easy moral/ceremonial dyad cannot be sustained. For example, the festivals not only involved sacrifices, but also are memorials of the history of God's grace and deliverance in the life of Israel, and the fulfillment of his promises to Abraham. Because of these non-sacrificial aspects of the festivals, they must still have validity. Indeed, why isn't the entire Torah still valid where it does not depend on the presence of the Temple sacrificial system?

These issues and questions could serve as a healthy balance to some of the traditional teaching of the churches. But One Law teachers take another, crucial, step, which brings them into error. They argue that since Gentiles are grafted into the Olive Tree of Israel, both Jew and Gentile are now called to keep the same Law (except for circumcision). They would apply the Law in the same way to both groups, so that Gentiles in the Messiah are to keep the Sabbath, festivals, food laws, and much else that has not been common in Christian practice.

The Exegetical Case for One Law

Most of the case for One Law is taken from the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Exodus 12:49: "The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you." The alien (*ger* in Hebrew) is viewed as the prototype of the Gentile who comes to Messiah. Several Torah passages apply the same law to native born and alien, for example, Leviticus 24:22, or Numbers 15:16. The New Testament in contrast puts forth passages that seem to say that Gentiles are *not* called to keep the same application of Torah.

Acts 15 specifically declares that nothing should be required of the Gentiles but four laws, three of them related to blood. Galatians 5 warns Gentiles not to receive circumcision or they will be required to keep the whole Torah. *The clear implication here is that without circumcision, Gentiles are not required to keep the whole Torah.* Colossians 2 warns that no one is to judge the Colossians with regard to Sabbath, New Moons or festivals. These are a shadow; the substance is Messiah. In Galatians 4:10 Paul writes that he fears that he labored over the Galatian Gentile congregations in vain because they were now observing "special days, months, seasons and years."

One Law interpreters argue that these passages are only rebuking those who want to keep the Law from wrong motives, as a means of salvation. Thus, in Acts 15, the circumcision party taught that unless a

man was circumcised he could not be saved. One Law teachers agree that salvation is by grace, not based on observance of Torah.

Likewise, the One Law teacher says that Galatians is speaking against Torah as a requirement for entry into the Kingdom of God. After acceptance into the body of Messiah through faith, however, everyone should be disciplined to keep the whole Torah as the way of a blessed life. But *Paul never qualifies his argument this way*. He never writes anything like “for a disciplined life of blessing, you all need to keep the whole Torah.” If that had been his view, he had plenty of opportunity to make it clear. If that had been his view, the context would seem to *demand* that he express it. But he did not, either in Galatians or elsewhere.

One Law teachers respond to this by claiming that Paul is not speaking to this issue, but that the Jerusalem council did speak to it when they said, “Moses is read every Shabbat in the synagogue” (Acts 15:21). They take this to mean that, while Gentiles have easy entry requirements, simply faith in the Messiah, they will gradually adopt the Torah way of life through continual exposure to the Law of Moses in the Synagogue.

This is the gist of the argument, repeated in article after article. All the passages on the goodness of the Law (Torah, the instruction of God) throughout the Bible are used to support this point of view.

Responding to the Doctrine

“One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you” (Exodus 12:49). In context, it is clear that this “one law” does not apply to *every* stranger within Israel. Torah instructs that the native born *must* eat the Passover, but the stranger must *not* eat it, unless he is circumcised. Only through circumcision can he be incorporated into the people of Israel and their Torah. Without it, he remains an outsider and is banned from the Passover (Ex. 12:38, 43-48).

In Leviticus 24:22, both the alien and the native Israelite are under the same prohibition against murder and both are to suffer the same penalty. Numbers 15:16 instructs an alien who decides to bring a free will offering to offer it in the same way as the native born. However, there is no requirement for him to bring a free will offering. Other mandated offerings are not assigned to the alien.

One Law advocates often cite the “mixed multitude” that joined the Israelites in their departure from Egypt (Ex. 12:38). In Joshua 5, however, *all* males who are to enter the Land of Israel undergo circumcision. Before the “one law” can go into effect within the Land of Israel, all those who cross the Jordan with Joshua, both native-born and sojourners from the mixed multitude, must be circumcised. Circumcision marks the boundary between those who have the fullness of Torah given to Israel and those who have the more general connection to Torah common to all nations.

Uncircumcised aliens were allowed to live in the midst of Israel as long as they accepted the requirements of not undercutting life in the land of Israel, submitted to the governing authorities, did not spread idolatry, and did not commit crimes punishable by the civil magistrates. It is unclear how long such aliens were able to stay within Israel. The Torah does not tell us.

With the coming of the New Covenant, there is a change of relationship between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Since the New Testament teaches specifically on the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the new reality of the body of believers, we cannot simply transfer the practices of pre-Yeshua times into the New Covenant period.

By the time of Yeshua, an interpretative tradition was developing concerning the requirements for Gentiles. These later became formulated as the Noahide laws, binding on all people and rooted in the covenant with Noah. Already in the first century, Judaism made a distinction between universal requirements and requirements that were the particular responsibility of Jews.

Torah itself makes it clear that the Law has different applications for different groups. For example, purity laws and requirements for priests were different than purity laws for other Israelites. There were laws for men and laws for women, laws for widows, children, and so on. The Torah is not one homogenous whole, but is filled with diversity. Only as each group fulfilled its own destiny in Torah (men and women, for example) could there be true unity in the nation. Likewise, unity of Jew and Gentile does not require that there be one set of commandments for both, but that each group fulfill its own identity and destiny (1 Cor. 7:17-20).

Yeshua in Matthew 5:17-18 teaches obedience to the least of the commandments. He was speaking to Jews in period when the Temple was still standing and it was possible to keep the Torah to a much greater degree than now. To teach people to obey the least of the commandments, however, assumes that they keep them according to the intent of the commandment. It does not mean that Gentiles should be taught to keep all the details of law given to Israelites.

Yeshua teaches mostly on those parts of Torah considered to be universal in accordance with Jewish teaching of that period. The Gospels give little space to the primary concerns of the Pharisees concerning Torah's purity laws. From how to pray, to loving enemies, from lust in the heart to hatred in the heart, Yeshua teaches Torah that applies to all. There is no evidence that the Apostles ever taught Gentiles to keep the whole Torah, but only the Torah that was perceived as universal, just as Yeshua himself had done.

Significant passages that speak to Gentile practice in the New Covenant provide clear evidence that the One Law view is not correct.

Let us first return to Acts 15, which discusses the assertion by some believers that a man must be circumcised in order to be saved. *The conclusion of the Apostles and Elders (Acts 15:20), under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was to lay upon the Gentiles only four requirements:*

- to avoid fornication
- to avoid idolatry
- to avoid eating blood
- to avoid eating that which is strangled.

As has been noted, these are very similar to the Noahide laws. This does not mean that Gentiles are free to murder, steal, and dishonor their parents. The passage assumes a universal morality, as do Paul, Peter, and James (who were present that day), and John in their writings. As Romans 2 notes, Gentiles can perceive the law of God, even without the revelation of Moses, and are responsible for many standards that are also expressed in the Bible. For example, classic Roman moral law taught the ideals of monogamous marriage, honoring parents, honesty and much more. The essential and unique addition of New Covenant ethics is the sacrificial example of Yeshua.

Acts 15 clearly addresses issues beyond basic morality, issues that would not have been readily perceived in the Roman world. These added requirements were also necessary for Jewish-Gentile fellowship. Acts 15 emphasizes reverence for blood (which is reverence for life), a standard that goes back to Noah. Meat strangled has far too much blood in it. Roman ethicists rejected fornication, but an exception was made for cult prostitution. Idolatry was indeed the way of life in the Roman world and

was part of good citizenship. *In this command, the Gentile believer had to make a radical break with Roman culture.*

One Law teachers make a big point of James's statement that "Moses has been read every week in the Synagogue" (Acts 15:21). This is taken to imply that Gentile believers will, in the normal course of their new life, attend synagogue and adopt more and more of the whole Torah. Since Torah life is good and beautiful, why wouldn't he? On this basis, the verse is taken as an exhortation to further learning and the adoption of the whole Torah. *Thus, One Law teachers transform an ambiguous statement into a strong and unambiguous exhortation.*

They apparently overlook, however, the fact that these words spoken in the council *were not included in the apostolic letter that was circulated among the congregations.* If this were such a crucial exhortation to Gentiles, it is amazing indeed that the apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, did not think it important enough to put in their letter!

It is most telling that in all the epistles to congregations there is not a single word commanding Gentiles to adopt the whole Torah, and no direct statement of hope that they will eventually adopt a fully Torah-keeping life in the same way as the Jews. There is no word of such an exhortation or even mild encouragement throughout the whole book of Acts, which is written in part to show the relationship of Jewish-Gentile fellowship!

Even were we to say that Gentiles are free to embrace Torah, the calendar of Israel, and more, there is no word that there is any *covenant responsibility* for Gentiles to do so. Acts 21 reinforces this impression. Here James tells Paul of the rumor that he teaches Jews who embrace Yeshua to forsake Torah. This of course is not true. So, Paul demonstrates this to be a false rumor by his Temple involvement. James reminds Paul that Gentiles were freed from responsibility for the full weight of Torah. *Neither Paul nor James gives the slightest hint that they were encouraging full Torah observance among Gentiles.* Paul could have said, "Not only do I not teach Jews to forsake Moses, but I even encourage Gentiles to embrace more and more of the Torah as they come to understand and appreciate it." This is the emphasis of the One Law teachers, but there is not one word in the New Testament that explicitly encourages Gentiles to grow in keeping the whole Torah.

Galatians 5 is a watershed passage. Here Paul in the strongest terms exhorts Gentiles not to receive circumcision. Some One Law teachers want to allow a legitimate option of circumcision, so they add the proviso that it should not be done for the wrong reasons. *Yet, this is not in the text.* The New Covenant offers the fullness of God's blessing upon Gentiles without the necessity of circumcision. This was not the case in the Mosaic order.

When Paul writes, "Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law" (v.3), it is impossible to escape the implications of this verse. *If one is circumcised, he is obligated to keep the whole law; if one is not circumcised, he is not obligated to obey the whole law.* Paul's statement would make no sense if Gentiles were already obligated to keep the whole law! Again, there is no qualification here. Paul does not write, "of course, I would like you to be able to keep the whole law as I do, but this should be gradual as you understand and not by the requirement that would come from circumcision." This is exactly the kind of qualification that Paul does make for celibacy in I Cor. 7. *But he does not make it here concerning the law.*

Finally, let us look at Colossians 2. Here we are told that no one is to be allowed to judge the Colossians for practices concerning food or drink, a new moon or a Sabbath, or special feast days. These are a shadow; the substance is the Messiah. The clear and plain meaning of the text is that no one is to judge them as to whether or not they observe these days. In an Oscar-winning performance, some

One Law teachers twist this text into an exhortation to the Colossians to keep these practices so well that no one would be able to judge them!

There is no word in the New Testament that exhorts Gentiles to circumcision, feasts, purity laws, Sabbaths, fast days and more, but these practices were, and continue to be, central to Judaism.

One of the serious problems with One Law interpretation is that it seems to ignore the awesome change that has come through the death and resurrection of Yeshua. The eschatological Kingdom has come and Gentiles are invited into full spiritual participation without the pre-Yeshua requirements. The spiritual equality of Jew and Gentile in the Messiah is a monumental change. The Gentile in the New Covenant has a far better status than the uncircumcised alien and even the pre-Yeshua Jew, because he that is least in the Kingdom is greater (in privilege) than John the Immerser. He is even raised with Messiah and spiritually present with Him at the throne of God (Eph. 2:5). *There is no higher status.*

If such a Gentile is called into the Messianic Jewish community and its Torah-based way of life, on behalf of the restoration of Israel, he or she is worthy of honor. But the distinctive way of life mandated in the Torah for Israel is not presented as the ideal for all peoples.

The Danger of Usurping Israel's Irrevocable Calling

Paul writes that even Jews who are enemies of the Gospel have an “irrevocable calling” (Rom. 11:29). He describes aspects of this unique calling in Romans 9:1-3, which notes that certain communal privileges would forever belong to the Jewish heritage. We are an elect nation; the Word of God was given to us; the covenants are given to us and made through us; and even the ancestry of the Messiah is from us.

The festivals preserve both universal meanings and particularistic features specific to Jewish promise, life and calling. Thus, Passover achieves universal meaning in Yeshua and the idea of a universal Exodus. Shavuot is the season of the outpouring of the Ruach HaKodesh. Sukkot looks toward the ultimate Kingdom, in which all nations will celebrate it (Zechariah 14). The New Covenant Scriptures provide universal meanings for the festivals. Yet, they never command Gentiles to keep them in this age. In contrast, there are specific Jewish meanings in the festivals that are unique to Israel's own identity.

Without making such distinctions, One Law people often have nothing to say concerning the unique calling and destiny of the Jewish people. In addition, some even say that Israel is now defined by those who have faith in Yeshua, all of whom are called to keep the whole Torah, not those who are Jewish by birth and do not believe in Yeshua. Note the following quote as a case in point.

According to Paul, Messiah alone is adequate for believers to be reckoned with the people of God, and there is only one people of God. Like it or not, the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven has broadened the definition of Israel . . . According to Paul, the criteria defining Israel is not physical descent, nor circumcision; nor Torah observance—it is faith.²

This is the old replacement theology with a new twist. The new and true Israel is said to replace the old Israel of the flesh, but the new twist is that this new Israel is still to keep the Torah. The arguments are the same as in replacement theology but with the addition of all keeping the Torah.

² *Messiah Magazine* p. 28, Shemot, 2004.

In contrast, here are features of the unique calling of Messianic Jews.

1. Covenant responsibility for the whole Torah, although it has to be applied as fitting to the New Covenant and an age without Temple or sacrifice. Circumcision is a unique marker of this call.
2. Participation in Jewish life connected to the Jewish community. We are part of our people.
3. Rooting in our language and land, and connecting to the good aspects of the culture of Israel today. This includes those who are called to live in the Diaspora.
4. Affirming the truth that our continued existence as a unique people is an essential witness to the reality of God and his promises. It is a clearly implied command in the Bible that we are not to undercut the survival of our people. We are to not to assimilate, but are commanded to remain Jewish.
5. We are to play a prophetic role in the last days by being that Jewish contingent that witnesses to Yeshua before our people and before the nations.
6. We are to welcome Yeshua with the words “Baruch haba b’shem Adonai,” “Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.” This must precede his coming.
7. We are to affirm and be part of the heritage of our people where it is good and beautiful as part of our unique peoplehood. We are to avoid that which is wrong, but we cannot adequately express Jewish life if we ignore 2000 years of cultural development.
8. We take on a prophetic priestly role when we engage in Biblical celebrations, for they call into being the events of the last days and the redemption of the World.

One additional aspect of One Law teaching is very confusing. The teaching advocates that Gentiles keep Biblical law, such as the festivals. One would expect that they would look into the Bible to see how to celebrate those festivals. Instead, they resort to post-Biblical Jewish practices. When One Law people practice a Passover Seder, for example, they often follow the order of traditional Jewish practice: four cups of wine, salt water, hand washings, Elijah’s chair and much more.

Instead of being truly “Biblical,” the One Law teachers appropriate various aspects of these Jewish traditions. Unfortunately, there is very little in their literature that shows their followers the distinction between what is Biblical and what is from Jewish tradition.

Even more, the One Law teachers often use non-Biblical Jewish symbols. One article on Biblical law was illustrated by a photograph of a family of four, the father and son wearing *kippot* (Jewish skullcaps) and looking at a Menorah. Neither *kippot* nor the Menorah is part of Biblical Torah. Another article in the same magazine mentioned Jewish liturgical directions, not found in the Bible, as somehow applying to “us,” that is the Gentile readers of the magazine.³

This mixture of post-Biblical symbols is found throughout One Law literature. All this gives the impression that One Law teachers either do not understand the difference between Biblical and post-Biblical practices or they are trying to appropriate Jewish identity for themselves

³ Bikurei Tziyon issue 77, Vayikra 2003.

It is good for Gentile believers to understand the practice of the Jewish people and to appreciate Jewish culture. Yet, when one combines One Law interpretation with the appropriation of extra-Biblical Jewish practice, and then models this as an example for everyone, we are very close to replacement theology and practice. The refrain “One people, One Messiah, One Torah” must be balanced with the affirmation of God’s continuing election of the Jewish people alongside his election of the Messiah-believing community. Without this balance, such a refrain resembles the language Christian theology used for centuries to argue for the replacement of Israel by the church.

Paradoxically, One Law people undermine their own vision for “One People,” by basing unity on a common response to Torah. In other words, they hope to achieve unity by producing unified Torah-based behavior among all believers. Scripture, however, portrays our unity as accomplished in Messiah himself.

The letter to the Ephesians, which includes some of the strongest statements of unity within the Body of believers, never posits the idea of One Law. Instead, it calls us to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” for “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (4:4-6).

The beauty of this God-given unity is that it honors and preserves biblical distinctions between diverse groups, particularly Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles who are called to be part of the Messianic Jewish community are worthy of particular honor, not because they have finally realized that they are responsible for Torah in the same way as their Jewish brothers, but because they have voluntarily taken on a relationship to Torah out of a love for the God and people of Israel. This commitment on behalf of God’s work within Israel is an act of Messiah-like love that needs to be honored within the Messianic Jewish community.

January 28, 2005

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