

Gentiles and Torah

David Rudolph, PhD
Director of Messianic Jewish Studies
The King's University

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Torah” (Ps 119:18). Is this a prayer that Gentiles (non-Jews) can pray? Or can only Jewish people speak these words? Gentiles can pray this prayer because the Torah is relevant to Gentiles. Many sections of the Torah are not directly applicable to Gentiles (just as there are many sections of the Torah that are not directly applicable to men), but there are hundreds of other commandments that are directly applicable. There are at least twenty purposes of the Torah. They include:

- To serve as the foundational revelation of God
- To remind us of God's love, grace and power exhibited in acts of creation and redemption
- To teach us how to love God and our neighbor
- To teach us how to worship God
- To establish the oneness and sovereignty of God
- To teach us to be holy as God is holy
- To point out sin so that we might repent to God
- To train us to exercise faith in God
- To train us to be obedient to God
- To reveal the heart and priorities of God
- To reveal the wisdom and knowledge of God
- To train us to meditate on the Word of God
- To establish the order of God's creation
- To uphold God's standards of justice and compassion in society
- To draw the nations to God
- To foster unity among God's people
- To give our children a heritage from the Lord
- To point us to Yeshua the Messiah, in whom the story of Israel finds fulfillment through his death, resurrection and return
- To prepare God's people to fulfill their diverse callings
- To preserve Israel as a distinct nation by God's design

The Torah serves all of these purposes and most of them are directly applicable to Gentiles. A Gentile's love for Torah commandments should include above all a commitment to Torah ethics. These are centered on the Shema—love for God and love for neighbor.

While affirming the above, *Gentiles do not have a covenantal responsibility to keep those aspects of Torah that were given by God to serve as boundary markers of identity for the Jewish people. This relates to the last point on the list of purposes of the Torah—to preserve Israel as a distinct nation by God's design.* Consider that if all Gentiles lived as Jews, the Jewish people would cease to exist as “a certain people who keep themselves separate; their customs are different from those of all other people” (Esther 3:8). Certainly it is not God's will for the Jewish people to cease to exist!

Stated another way, the God of Israel is a God who loves diversity and we see this diversity reflected in the order of creation. Consider the different kinds of plants and trees, birds and animals, and their many colors. Humanity is divided into male and female, Israel and the nations. The biblical model from beginning to end is that the kingdom of God is a table fellowship of Jews (in all their diversity) and Gentiles (in all their diversity) whose relationship with one another is supposed to be characterized by interdependence and mutual blessing.

While the Scriptures do not provide a list of *mitzvot* (commandments) that are applicable to Gentiles, it is the historic view of the wider Jewish community, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC), the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA) and the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS), that God does not expect Gentiles to be circumcised, keep the Sabbath on the seventh day, celebrate Israel's festivals, observe all the food laws or wear *tsitsit* (tassels), among other distinctively Jewish commandments. This has been the majority view within Judaism for centuries. Moreover, this approach is consistent with the Jerusalem Council decision in Acts 15 (cf. 21:25) and Paul's "rule in all the congregations" (1 Cor 7:17-24).

But what about Gentiles who sense they are called by God to worship in Jewish ways? Gentiles who are called by God to be members of Messianic Jewish congregations are called to embrace the culture and lifestyle of these synagogues, not as Messianic Jews but as Gentile followers of the Messiah. They are Gentiles (non-Jews) who practice Messianic Judaism, i.e., Messianic Gentiles. "Calling" is the operative term here since *most Gentiles are not called to join Messianic synagogues and live out Jewish lifestyle*. The corollary to this is that Gentile Christian churches are not violating God's will if they do not keep the Sabbath on the seventh day, observe the Jewish festivals, etc. While the Gentile wing of the Church should appreciate its Jewish origins, its Jewish Scriptures, its Jew-Gentile ecclesial identity and its Jewish Messiah, it is not deficient if it does not follow distinctly Jewish customs.

Consider that *there is a difference between calling and commandment*. Gentiles should view universal Torah ethics as commandments. It is a commandment to honor father and mother. It is a commandment to be humble. Universal commandments like these should be observed in faith and with hearts of love.

In contrast to universal commandments, more characteristically Jewish customs are a matter of individual calling and not commandment for Gentile followers of Yeshua. *The Messianic Gentile's sense of "oughtness" in living out these more ethnic aspects of Jewish life derives from the person's sense of divine calling to be part of a Messianic Jewish community, and not from a covenantal responsibility to keep these particular commandments*, which is unique to the Jewish people.

If a Messianic Gentile senses that God spoke to him personally and told him to live out an area of Jewish life that is a boundary marker of Jewish identity (for example, keeping kosher or celebrating Rosh Hashanah), then *he should view it as something God told him to do and not something that God expects all Gentiles in the world to do* (cf. Rom 14:5-6). Also, he should walk this out with sensitivity to Jewish community norms, the norms of the Messianic Jewish congregation he is called to be a part of, and in step with the leading of the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit).