

Messianic Jewish Theology

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The word "Torah" has several meanings. It can as is well known represent the first five books of the Bible. Or in a more general way represent the whole of the Hebrew Scripture, including the prophets and the writings. For Rabbinic Jews it means all that the Rabbis ever taught. But Torah can also stand for the covenant that God made with the people of Israel after the Exodus. The terms of this covenant are recorded in the Pentateuch. Archaeologists have learned that in ancient times empires expanded by making covenants with the neighboring countries that they conquered. The conquering king would say to the conquered people - You are deserving of death because you are my enemies and opposed my rule over you. But I am by grace extending to you the opportunity to live by making a covenant with you. This covenant has a set of laws which if you obey them and if you are faithful to the covenant you will live. If you break the laws you will be punished. If you break the covenant you will lose your right to live. The covenant of Sinai is essentially such a covenant a covenant of Grace. God is the King and Emperor. He extends a covenant to the people of Israel by which they can live. He says "Why should you die O Israel, choose life." The covenant of Sinai is a covenant of grace. The term "Grace" appears many times in the Pentateuch (though it is not translated that way in English Bibles). One of my favorite expressions is where God declares Himself to be "The guardian of the Covenant and the Grace."

The Hebrew word HESED means "grace" as anyone looking in a Hebrew English dictionary can discover. However I think that the most important evidence to this fact is the Hebrew Translations of the New Testament which consistently translated the Greek word for 'grace' with this Hebrew word. The English translations of the Old Testament followed a translation tradition first set by the Septuagint which consistently translated the Hebrew word for 'grace' with 'mercy'. So the Greek translation of the Old Testament always had 'mercy' and never 'grace' in its theological sense. I don't know Latin so I can only guess that this was also true for the Latin Vulgate. It is still true for all the English translations right up to the most modern such as the NIV and the NASB. However as I said the Hebrew Translations of the New Testament show that this Old Testament word means Grace.

Grace in the Old Testament may be puzzling to you since in John it says "The Torah came by Moses but Grace and Truth came by Yeshua the Messiah." Most people read this as a sequence of events, but since we learn that Grace was very much present in the Old Testament we come to learn that the two are simultaneous, that is Moses delivered the Torah to the people of Israel as a servant of the Lord, but that Yeshua the Messiah in His preincarnate state was the one who brought Grace and Truth to those of Israel who believed. In Galatians 3:15 ff Paul explains that even with covenants between human beings once the covenant has been ratified no one can come with another covenant and change it or cancel it. He applies this rule to the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the Siniatic covenant. But it also applies to the relationship between the Covenant of Sinai and the New Covenant. The New Covenant does not cancel the Old covenant but rather enables its members to keep the Torah as it says in Jeremiah "and I will

write my Torah on the tables of their hearts.” (See in Jer. 31 where it talks about the New Covenant.) The early Church fathers paid no attention to this passage in Galatians and assumed that the New Covenant by virtue of it being new set aside and rendered the Old Covenant void. And all of Christianity followed suit. It did not register with them that Yeshua declared in the Gospels “I have not come to abolish the Torah, but rather to fulfill the Torah.”

In the Leviticus and also in Deuteronomy there are passages delineating the curses that fall on the Children of Israel for not keeping the covenant. These can be thought of as punishment clauses of the covenant. Nobody can deny that these punishment clauses are still in effect. The people of Israel have been exiled from their land, expelled from one country to another over and over again, they have experienced pogroms and even the Holocaust in the nineteenth century. But these punishment clauses also include a prediction of the return of the Children of Israel to the land of Israel. The return of the Jews to the Land of Israel is a fact now evident for more than fifty years. The continued fulfillment of the punishment clauses of the Torah even to the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel show that the Covenant of Sinai, the Torah, is still in effect and still in force. This effectiveness shows that it has not been set aside or rendered void.

We must be careful about how we apply these facts. First of all in Acts 15 the Apostles decreed that the Gentiles are not obligated to be circumcised and to keep the Torah, the Siniatic Covenant. The book of Galatians reiterates this principle in further detail. The Gentiles are not obligated to the old covenant, to keeping Shabbat, or the holidays, or dietary laws. The Apostles set down four specific laws that are binding on the Gentile believers in the Messiah - to abstain from idolatry, from adultery, from food strangled, and from food containing blood. Other than that the Teaching of the Apostles (called by Christians “The New Testament”) sets down standards of moral behavior which reiterate all of the ten commandments except for the Shabbat. The Apostle Paul warned against the effort to find justification by “works of the Law.”

Now what about Jews? They are members of the Siniatic Covenant and therefore the Torah applies to us. But in which way? In the way that the Rabbis have laid down over the centuries since the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, by prayers, repentance, and deeds of righteousness set aside the evil decree? No. No. First of all we believe and have experienced that the death of Yeshua the Messiah provides atonement and forgiveness of sins. Secondly all have experienced that none of us can do enough to suffice God’s righteous and holy standards of justice. We quickly discover that we are not sufficient to keep all of the commandments all of the time and prayers repentance and good deeds are not sufficient to atone for violations of the Torah. But now it is by the New Covenant that Messianic Jews can live according to the Torah. In Galatians 2:15ff Paul says to his fellow Jewish believers in Yeshua in vs. 19 “For through the Torah I have died to the Torah that I might live to God.” In other words Paul says that for us Jews that observance of the Torah is the means by which we put to death the works of the flesh and render ourselves virtually dead in the eyes of the Torah. Being dead to the Torah means that the curses and the punishments of the Torah do not come to us, for we have been crucified with the Messiah. It is important to notice that the words of Galatians 2:15 to 21 are addressed to Jewish believers in Yeshua. The words of the epistle from Galatians 3:1 and following apply to Gentiles. It starts out with “You foolish Galatians...” but in contrast the section starting in 2:15 says “We are Jews by nature” and therefore is addressed to Jews.

So for us Jewish believers in Yeshua it is right and proper that we should observe Shabbat and the Jewish holidays as outlined in Leviticus 23. It is noticeable in the book of Acts that Paul observed for himself

the Jewish holidays. It is proper that we should have our sons circumcised on the eighth day. Notice that Paul arranged for Timothy to be circumcised because Timothy's mother was a Jewess, but at the same time Paul would not stand for Titus to be circumcised because he was in every way a gentile. It is proper and right that we should abstain from eating pork and shrimp and catfish and oysters and especially food containing blood. It is proper that we should identify with our people even if the vast majority of them are not believers in Yeshua. The Land of Israel is our land. The promises of God to Israel are ours by faith.