

# It is Often Said

Tim Hegg

*“Yeshua Broke the Sabbath”*

*“Torah Is a Burden”*

*“The Law Is Fulfilled”*

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*Comments and Comparisons of Traditional  
Christian Theology and Hebraic Thought*

Volume I



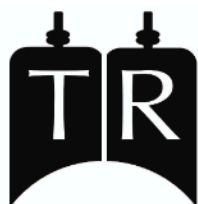
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## Foreword

Thank you for purchasing *It is Often Said, Volume I*. I hope these studies will help you as you search the Bible to discover many “wonderful things” from God’s Torah (Psalm 119:18). It may be that you are opening this booklet because you have questions about whether the Torah has been set aside or if it endures as God’s loving instructions for His children—those who have been born again into His family through faith in His Son, Yeshua.

In fact, I’ve written these short studies to offer answers to the teaching, so prevalent in our day, that the Torah or “Law of God” has been abolished and therefore is more or less irrelevant for the life of faith being lived out by believers in Yeshua. My primary purpose in these short essays is to lead you, the reader, back to the inspired word of God—the Scriptures—hoping to show that if we read the Bible in its historical context, allowing the authors of Scripture to speak in their own terms as they were “carried along by the Ruach HaKodesh” (Holy Spirit, cf. 2Pet 1:21), you will see that God never intended His Torah to be a temporary teaching but that it contains His gracious and loving instructions in righteousness for all of His people in all eras.

Very often, when those of us who have confessed Yeshua to be our Savior come to appreciate the everlasting nature of the Torah and begin to live by its precepts and incorporate its commandments into our daily lives, others may think that we

no longer believe in “salvation by grace through faith” but have adopted a “works salvation” instead.

But nothing could be farther from the truth. The more one comes to appreciate God’s Torah and seeks to obey the commandments taught in it, the more one understands and appreciates the infinite value of God’s grace freely given to us in the person of His Son, our Messiah Yeshua, Who alone could pay the penalty for our sin through His sacrificial death upon the cross. In the celebration of the Sabbath and the biblical festivals, we participate in the “story of redemption” and understand in new and fresh ways the unspeakable gift of salvation which God, through His mercy, has freely bestowed upon us through His Son, Yeshua.

So open your Bible with me as you read and study the following essays. I pray that, like King David, you will find the Torah to be “more precious than gold” and “sweeter than honey” (Psalm 19:10).

Tim Hegg

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## Preface

Two thousand years of anti-Torah teachings and theologies have lulled many of us in the body of Messiah to sleep and kept us from partaking of the rich, nourishing root of our ancient Hebraic faith. As a result of misguided teaching about the authority of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) for our lives, we find ourselves hungry and longing for direction and purpose, seeking the simplicity of a life of faith in Israel's Messiah.

There is an inherent contradiction in Christian theology that teaches an "Old Testament" morality, yet at the same time, when questioned about the validity of the Torah, claims that "Messiah abolished the oldness of the letter" so that we would be free to walk in the "newness of the Spirit." By spurning the very source and foundation for their own moral instructions, Christian theologies are left waving in the air.

Numbers 15:16 says, "There is to be one law [Hebrew, *torah*] and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you." Yet this is not what we see today. God's Torah has been divided into civil, moral, and ceremonial laws. Once the Torah is dissected in this way, it is subjected to the "pick and choose" notions of man, determining at will what believers in Messiah are to obey and what they should dismiss as merely cultural or even legalistic. This has resulted in a faith that is skewed, unbalanced, and confusing both to believers and the world that watches. Is the written Word, like the incarnate Word, the same yesterday, today, and forever? Has the eternal, inspired Word of God really changed? Are not all of God's truths unchanging

and therefore applicable for all of His people throughout all of the ages?

This booklet specifically addresses and answers some of the common anti-Torah arguments often heard in our times. It is our desire to provoke, challenge, and encourage believers to embrace the heritage and portrait of righteousness that has been kept from them for so long. By following in the footsteps of Messiah as He modeled the life of Torah, we strive to strip away centuries of tradition, superstition, and teachings of man. Confronted by the simplicity of righteousness as it is revealed in God's Torah, both written and living, we desire to return to a life of faith that honors our Father both in individuals and community, now and for the next generation as well.

Some of the main purposes of the Torah are: (1) to convict of sin and instruct in righteousness (Romans 7:7; 1 John 3:4); (2) to reveal Messiah to us individually (Luke 24:25–27; John 5:46; Romans 10:1-13; Deuteronomy 18:15) and thus to teach us to walk as He walked; (3) to reveal the righteousness of God in Messiah. When the Torah is lived out, it paints a true picture of Yeshua for those outside the community of believers to see (1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21).

By addressing these questions about the Torah and its place in the Christian's life, we hope to awaken in the hearts of the redeemed the reality of their relationship with the land, the people and the Scriptures of Israel. For thousands of years the church has taught that it replaced Israel as the chosen people of God. Paul, however, says quite the opposite. In Romans, he reminds Gentile believers that they, "being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree," and he warns against arrogance "toward the branches" (Romans 11:17, 18).

"Remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of [the] 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 2:12, 13).

We cannot continue to walk in pride, opposed to our roots. The gospel was given to Israel to share with the nations, and through Messiah those from the nations are grafted into Israel, through whom salvation and blessing are promised. It was never God’s intention for the redeemed of the nations to remain separate from Israel and her Messiah.

The purpose of this book is to seek biblical answers for questions that are often raised when the idea of Torah life is contemplated. The Torah is a tree of life to those who have faith in Yeshua (Psalm 19:7), for through Him we are dead to the condemnation of the Torah and are free to walk in a joyful life of obedience because of our love for God and our desire to do what is pleasing to Him. May the mercy, justice, righteousness, patience, and love that God reveals about Himself through the written Word of His Torah be evident in these pages (cf. Exodus 34:6–7).

Please note, as you read through this book you will find yourself coming across terminology with which you may not be familiar. We are using the original Hebrew translation for many commonly used words because the Hebrew word gives a much fuller meaning. Yeshua is Jesus’ Hebrew name. His name means “salvation.” The meaning of His name alone is good reason to use it. The word *Torah* is used when referring to the first five books of the Bible. This word means “teaching or instruction” in the Hebrew. This is a much more accurate definition of the books of Moses than the more commonly used term *law*. The word *Tanakh* is used in place of Old Testament. *Tanakh* is an acronym formed from the three sections of the Hebrew Bible—the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (Writings). Also, the term Apostolic Scriptures is used in place of New Testament as the terms “new testament” and “old testament” have a lot of negative connotations associated with them.





Not only do the Scriptures never hint at the Sabbath being abolished or changed, but on the contrary we have the clear and direct statement of Yeshua Himself that until heaven and earth pass away, nothing in the Torah will be done away with. Matthew 5





It is Often Said



## *“Yeshua Broke the Sabbath”*

The issue of the Sabbath was not an early one. Nowhere in the Apostolic Scriptures do we find any indication that anyone questioned the validity of the Sabbath. There is not one argument between Yeshua and His antagonists over the issue of whether the Sabbath is a day that God commanded to be set apart. If there were controversies over the Sabbath, they related to how the Sabbath was to be kept, and specifically with regard to the man-made laws that had been added to the Torah commandment.

### **Part of the Creative Order**

The Sabbath precedes Sinai. It is given in Genesis 2 as the day that God Himself set apart and blessed over all the other days. In fact, the issue of the manna and when it was to be gathered (Exodus 16) shows that the Sabbath was well in place before the giving of the Torah on Sinai. It became the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:14ff) subsequent to its place in creation. This is why Yeshua Himself states, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Note that He did not say the Sabbath was made for the Jews, but for “man” or “mankind.” Thus Yeshua teaches us that the Sabbath is a

matter of the creative order that governs all of mankind, not just Israel.

## **The Messiah's Teaching**

Yeshua never broke the Sabbath, though He was accused of doing so. However, Yeshua did take exception with the many man-made laws that had caused the Sabbath to be a burden, even in His time. Yeshua wanted to restore the true Torah teaching about Sabbath, that it was a day of joy and blessing, not one that only multiplied the expanding list of what one could not do.

Yeshua's custom was to be in the synagogue on Sabbath (Luke 4:16). It is common in our modern times to hear the question, "What would Yeshua do?" Here, then, is an obvious answer. If it were the custom of Yeshua to be with the gathered people of God on the Sabbath, would it not make perfect sense to do what He did? If we are His disciples, before we stop doing what He did, should we not expect a clear statement in Scripture to that effect? On what basis should we disregard the direct commandments of God and the clear example of His Son, Yeshua?

But where is there any statement in Scripture telling us that God no longer wants us to keep the Sabbath day? Where has He withdrawn the wonderful gift of Sabbath that He gave to His children? Where is the teaching of Yeshua for us, His disciples, saying that the Sabbath has been changed? There is none! Should we follow the third- and fourth-century church leaders who said that the command of God, one that carried the death penalty for its neglect (Exodus 31:14f; Numbers 15:32f) is no longer important? Would we say the same thing about any of the other commandments? Why are we so willing to dismiss the fourth commandment without any direct statement of Scripture to do so?

Moreover, why would Yeshua, in speaking of the last days, tell us, "Pray that your flight will not be... on the Sabbath?" (Matthew 24:20) Would He not have known if the Sabbath would

be done away with for the last-days church? Why should the Sabbath be a concern for anyone in the last days? Obviously, Yeshua never envisioned a time when the Sabbath would be suspended.

Not only do the Scriptures never hint at the Sabbath being abolished or changed, but on the contrary we have the clear and direct statement of Yeshua Himself that until heaven and earth pass away, nothing in the Torah will be done away with. Matthew 5:17–20 states clearly that Yeshua did not come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (make them viable, alive, real). The text goes on to admonish the disciples of Yeshua both to do the commandments and to teach others to do them if we want to be great in the kingdom of God.

### **The Apostle Paul Concurs**

Paul was not concerned about whether a person was a Jew or Gentile (circumcised or not). What he was concerned about was that everyone keep the commandments (I Corinthians 7:19). Does anyone really believe that Paul did not include the fourth commandment in what he called “the commandments?”

Moreover, on what basis would someone argue that the Sabbath has been changed to Sunday? Usually the answer to this question is that by the death and resurrection of Yeshua the Sabbath has been done away with. But if the eternal sacrifice of Yeshua is the instrument by which the Sabbath is abolished, how is it that in the millennium it is reinstated?

In Isaiah 56:3ff and 58:13ff, both of which are surely millennial passages, the Sabbath is clearly in force, not only for Israel, but for all the foreigners who attach themselves to Israel. How could Yeshua abolish the Sabbath with His eternal sacrifice, yet have it reinstated in His millennial reign? If He abolished it, there must have been something wrong with it. Why then would it be reinstated in the millennium?

Reason this way: if it was clearly in place in the time of Yeshua, and it will clearly be in place in the millennium, on

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what basis has it been suspended in the interim? If God had intended that His straightforward commandment should, in a given era, be disregarded, then surely He would have made this clear. Yet no such statement can be found in all of Scripture.

Paul also kept the Sabbath (Acts 17:2) and walked strictly according to the Torah (Acts 21:24). Some will say that in Romans 14 Paul speaks of the Sabbath as something that is nonessential and even irrelevant. But Romans 14 is not dealing with the Sabbath. (The word *Sabbath* is not found in that context). It is most likely addressing the controversy over which day to celebrate the Festival of Weeks (Leviticus 23:15–16—an argument that was well established between the Pharisees and Sadducees of His day) or even, perhaps, over which days to set aside for fasting. The fact that Paul labels the whole debate as a matter of “opinion” (Romans 14:1) should alert us to the fact that he could not be talking about something clearly stated in the Scriptures, like the Sabbath command.

Furthermore, it is unthinkable that with such a passing statement Paul could abolish a Torah commandment that was one of the central issues of his day. And all without even the slightest hint of debate or backlash! If Paul had taught that the Sabbath was no longer viable, this would have been added to the offenses his opponents listed against him. Yet Paul is never accused of such a teaching. To read Romans 14 as abolishing the Sabbath is to read it entirely out of its historical and grammatical context.

## The First Day of the Week

Some might suggest that in the Apostolic Scriptures the first day of the week is mentioned as the meeting day for the followers of Yeshua. But an investigation shows that there are only two times in the whole of the Apostolic Scriptures (Acts 20:7–12 and 1 Corinthians 16:1–3) where the first day of the week is highlighted for Yeshua’s followers, and in the second of these, there is no clear evidence that they even met together.

In the first reference, the meeting is obviously after the end of the Sabbath (when the first day of the week begins from a Hebrew standpoint), going late into the night. It was the custom of the early followers of Yeshua to gather together with the Gentiles after the Sabbath to celebrate their life in Yeshua. The Gentiles would be finished with work. Remember, their masters were not worshipers of God and thus would not have honored the Sabbath by giving their slaves the day off. It was at this kind of meeting that Eutychus, sitting in the window, fell to his death (Acts 20:9).

In the other text that mentions the first day of the week, Paul is giving an admonition to the congregations to gather money for the relief of the believers in Jerusalem. Gathering money would not have been appropriate on the Sabbath, so a different day was chosen. But this never negated the obvious fact that they continued to meet on the Sabbath and to set it apart as unto the Lord. The Apostolic Scriptures, with a unified voice, show that the Sabbath—not the first day of the week—was the day upon which the followers of Yeshua gathered together in synagogues.

In the final analysis, then, the Scriptures are replete with clear indications (through numerous examples and direct commands) regarding the keeping of the Sabbath. What Scripture lacks is any clear statement to the effect that the Sabbath has been abolished. But why would God want to abolish something that He gave to His children for joy and gladness?

## It's not in the 'New Testament'!

Some say that only what is found in the Apostolic Scriptures applies to believers today. The inevitable shift away from the synagogue, which occurred in the second- and third-century church, unwittingly created a subtle yet real break with the *Tanakh*. Since the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings were the Scriptures of the synagogue, and since the emerging Christian church wanted to define herself as different from the synagogue and as a new entity, it was only natural that an emphasis would be placed upon the Apostolic Scriptures to the detriment of the *Tanakh*. Being placed in an inferior position, the established *Tanakh* remained valuable for the Christian community only insofar as they reinforced the teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles. Still, the emerging Christian church considered the Hebrew Scriptures to be the Word of God, and they were therefore retained in the Christian Bible.

The modern Christian church, however, has moved well beyond even the third- and fourth-century church, and adopted a practical hermeneutic that accepts only the Apostolic Scriptures as authoritative in the believer's life. Anything specifically taught in the *Tanakh*, but not clearly repeated in the Apostolic Scriptures, is considered applicable for Israel only and not for the church. Some within the Christian community might admit that the Sabbath remains for Jews, but that it does so only because there is an eternal covenant with them of which the Sabbath is a sign.

Yet it is clear that the Sabbath commandment took in all who were within the community of Israel, not just the native-born Jew or the proselyte. This is clearly taught in the Torah: "But the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements" (Exodus 20:10).<sup>1</sup>

## The Sinai Covenant

Those who stood at Mount Sinai and ratified the covenant included far more than Jews, for the text clearly states that a “mixed multitude” left Egypt: “A mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock.” (Exodus 12:38) No doubt some Egyptians and others of foreign nationality had come to believe in the God of Israel and had left with Israel in the great deliverance and redemption. As they stood at Mount Sinai, they entered into the covenant. It would seem likely that the verses found in the Torah declaring one law for the native born and for the foreigner (stranger) has this mixed multitude in mind.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the Sinai covenant was made with the nation of Israel and that it has national ramifications as well as individual. This is apparent from the fact that land is allocated to Israel (as a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant), and nationalistic items such as an army, kings, and a census are spoken of and laws given pertaining to each. But that this nationalistic character of the covenant also includes non-Israelites is clear, and extends to all who attach themselves to Israel through faith in her God. This is apparently Paul’s emphasis when he describes Gentile believers as becoming part of the “commonwealth” of Israel (Ephesians 2:12–13), having been distant before, but now having been brought near. Moreover, Paul’s ingrafting picture of Romans 11, and the clear emphasis upon Abraham as the father of all who believe (Romans 4:16), moves toward the idea that the Gentile believer in Yeshua, like the God-fearer, has taken up “residence” within Israel (grafted into the same root) and therefore has the privilege of living within the divine precepts of the Torah just as the Jewish believer.

Some might argue that the lists of sins attributed to the Gentiles by someone like Paul (in Romans 1, for instance) do not include the breaking of Sabbath. To this several responses may be given. First, that the nations should abide by the Torah is the vision of the prophets for the last days. The full spread of

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the gospel did not occur until the coming of the Messiah and the sending of the Spirit, so the knowledge of the Torah was not widespread. Second, none of the lists confess to being exhaustive. Third, the fact that the Scriptures clearly teach that the Torah condemns the sinner (whether Jew or Gentile, cf. Galatians 3:10, 13) means that the sinner is judged as a law-breaker. Being condemned by one's works (cf. Revelation 20:12, 13) would require a standard for what would be accepted and what would not—this standard is God's Torah, a Torah that condemns all who are not in Yeshua. That the unbeliever is condemned by the Torah would indicate that he or she is condemned for breaking all of it, not just part of it (note James 2:10).

Such a perspective is in concert with the punishment put upon the nations for failure to keep the Festival of Tabernacles, a Sabbath to the Lord (Zechariah 14:17–19). These nations did not stand at Sinai, nor did they enter into the two-sided covenant between Israel and God. Yet they are held to the standard of the Torah. This being the case, one cannot argue that present-day Gentiles are exempt from the Torah on the basis of covenant ratification, for if such were the case, the same would apply to Gentiles in any era. That it clearly does not is evident from the prophetic texts, which consistently portray righteous Gentiles as observing the Sabbaths given to Israel (Isaiah 56:1ff; 58:13, 14; 66:23).

Some might further argue that when believers are called to obey the commandments of God, the most important question to ask is “Which commandments apply to me?” Some would answer that certain commandments, like the Sabbath, are not

applicable for the present-day church. That there are specific laws given for specific groups is obvious (male/female, king/servant, married/single), but to single out the Sabbath as given only to the Jews needs further substantiation. The other nine commandments are clearly universal in scope. An argument from silence (that Sabbath is not mentioned by the Apostles as a direct commandment) is insufficient to consider it entirely sectarian in its application. For why would God include one sectarian commandment together with nine universal commandments?

### **Flawed Hermeneutics**

This kind of hermeneutic is flawed. To say that only the Apostolic Scriptures are directly applicable to the believer presents a number of problems. The first and most obvious is that the Apostles seemed to go out of their way to show that the Scriptures (the Word of God) form the standard for the disciples of Yeshua. Yet in the time of the Apostles, the Apostolic Scriptures, as we have come to know them, did not exist as Scripture. Evangelical scholars agree that the Apostolic Scriptures did not circulate as canonical texts until late in the first century CE at the earliest; most likely, until the second century.

Though some of the Apostolic writings may have been received as divine doctrine for the early Messianic congregations, most often when the Scriptures are referred to, it is the *Tanakh* and nothing more. To say, then, that the Christian church receives as divine doctrine only what the Apostles wrote is essentially to write off the first-century congregations of “The Way” as having little relevance for us in matters pertaining to our life of faith.

Second, the hermeneutic that receives only what is stated or restated in the Apostolic Scriptures as divine doctrine cannot be sustained by the Apostolic writings themselves. In Romans 1:32, for example, Paul presumes that everyone agrees that the death penalty is prescribed for homosexuality. He presumes

this because it is “the ordinance of God”; that is, because it is so stated in the Torah. For Paul, since it is so stated in the Torah, it is received as divine direction for the believing community to which he writes.

Third, a great many ethical and moral values that we consider foundational have their basis in the *Tanakh*, not in the New. Where in the writings of the Apostles do we find laws regarding abortion, pedophilia, cruelty to animals, bearing false witness in a court of law, bestiality, and cross-dressing to name a few?

Fourth, if all that is necessary to live a fully sanctified life before the Lord is what is found from Matthew to Revelation (setting aside those portions of the Gospels that are directly spoken to a Jewish audience), is there really any essential need for the *Tanakh*? One would hardly think so, and one might go so far as to say that Marcion (whose “canon” essentially consisted of only Paul’s writings) was right to unburden us from the first two-thirds of the Bible. Would not our spiritual energies be best spent upon the “essentials” rather than upon that which, in the final analysis, is no longer needed? Of course, the modern Christian church is not suggesting that we abandon the *Tanakh*, but it seems that in a practical way such a hermeneutic moves in that direction.

### **Finally..**

If the *Tanakh* is only a relic of the past, an antique that adorns one’s shelf but has no practical use in one’s life, is it really being received as the Word of God which lives and abides forever? If it is only being used as a magnifying glass to investigate more closely the really important words of God (the “New Testament”), is it functioning as the two-edged sword the Apostles claimed it to be?

The truth of the matter is clear: the Torah is a brilliant light illuminating our souls with God’s truth and pointing us time and time again to Yeshua. It is the foundation, the *yesod*, of all of

Scripture. And only as we know it, and live it, are the Scriptures as a whole understood as they should be.

## Summary



### *“Yeshua Broke the Sabbath”*

**“The most important question to ask when reading a verse like 1 Corinthians 7:19 (“What matters is keeping the commandments of God.”) is “Which commandments am I accountable for?” The answer will be different for male and female, Jew and Gentile, married and single, etc. The same applies to all the verses in the Apostolic Scriptures that talk about ‘commandments.’”**

Some might argue that when believers are called to obey the commandments of God, the most important question to ask is “Which commandments apply to me?” Some would answer that certain commandments, like the Sabbath, are not applicable for the present-day church. That there are specific laws given for specific groups is obvious (male/female, king/servant, married/single), but to single out the Sabbath as given only to the Jews needs further substantiation. The other nine commandments are clearly universal in scope. An argument from silence (that Sabbath is not mentioned by the Apostles as a direct commandment) is insufficient to consider it entirely sectarian in its application. For why would God include one sectarian commandment together with nine universal commandments?

**“The Sabbath is a sign of the two-party covenant made between Israel and God. It therefore does not apply to Gentiles. The two parties of the covenant were God and Israel—the Gentiles were never part of this picture.”**

Those who stood at Mount Sinai and ratified the covenant included far more than Jews, for Exodus 12:38 clearly states that a “mixed multitude” left Egypt. As they stood at Mount Sinai, they entered into the covenant. It would seem likely that the verses found in the Torah declaring the same law for the “native born and for the foreigner (stranger)” had this mixed multitude in mind. (Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 9:14; 15:29)

**“To those who may have been conditioned as part of the Jewish community to keep the Sabbath, Paul’s guidelines are given in Romans 14. These texts clearly state that Sabbath observance had a place before Messiah came, but they no longer need to be a part of our observance.”**

Romans chapter 14 is not dealing with the Sabbath. (The word *Sabbath* is not found in that context.) It is most likely addressing the controversy over which day to celebrate the Festival of Weeks (an argument that was well established between the Pharisees and Sadducees of His day) or even, perhaps, over which days to set aside for fasting. The fact that Paul labels the whole debate as a matter of “opinion” (verse 1) should alert us to the fact that he could not be talking about something clearly stated in the Scriptures, like the Sabbath command.

## Study Questions



### *“Yeshua Broke the Sabbath”*

1. Why is it significant that the Sabbath is mentioned at the very beginning of the Bible (Genesis 2:2, 3)? Why might it be important to realize that the Sabbath was given before the Torah was revealed at Sinai?
2. When the Torah was given at Sinai, the Sabbath was chosen as a sign of the covenant. Why was the Sabbath a fitting sign of the Torah as a covenant? (Exodus 31:14ff; Ezekiel 20:12, 20)
3. Yeshua’s regular custom was to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). What does this mean for us as we strive to be His disciples?
4. It is clear that Yeshua did not intend to do away with the Torah (Matthew 5:17–21). What does this mean with regard to the Sabbath? In light of His words in Matthew 24:20, does it seem possible that He intended the day of rest to be changed to the first day of the week?
5. In the millennial reign of Yeshua, the Sabbath once again will be observed by all of God’s people (Isaiah 56:3ff; 58:13–14). If this is what will be in place during Yeshua’s earthly reign, what reasons could be given for why it would be changed to Sunday in our times?
6. Paul’s practice was to observe the Sabbath as a day set apart to God on the seventh day of the week, not the first day of the week (Acts 17:2; 21:24). In light of his admonition to “be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah” (1 Corinthians

11:1), how should we consider his observance of the Sabbath as a model for us?

7. From the viewpoint of Scripture, can it be maintained that the Sabbath was made only for the Jews? (Exodus 20:8–11; 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14; 31:12; Mark 2:27)
8. If the Sabbath is the sign of the covenant God made with Israel, how can it apply to non-Jewish believers? What is the relationship between Israel and the non-Jewish believers in Yeshua? (Ephesians 2:12–13; Romans 11)
9. Some in our day are saying that the *Tanakh* is no longer authoritative since the Apostolic Scriptures have been written. Is there biblical warrant for such a belief? When Paul wrote that the Scriptures were profitable for us (2 Timothy 3:16), what Scriptures did he have in mind?
10. One would expect that if God intended one of the Ten Commandments to be dismissed, He would plainly tell us so. Is there any place in the Bible that instructs us to cease observing the Sabbath? How would you understand the Apostolic passages that speak of the “first day of the week” (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2) or the “Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10)? Is there any indication in these passages that there was a regular meeting of the believers that had replaced the Sabbath?



Indeed, the layer upon layer of rabbinic additions to the Torah had made the whole matter a burden, and had even at times clouded the very purpose of the Torah. The apostles were unwilling to place this burden upon the shoulders of the Gentiles, a burden that the rabbis would have expected every proselyte to bear.





It is Often Said



## *“Torah is a Burden”*

It is often said, “Even the Apostles admitted the Torah was a burden no one could bear!” This statement characterizes a common sentiment about the Torah—one based upon an equally common interpretation of Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council.

Let us look again at Acts 15 and the decision of the Apostolic Council that convened in Jerusalem. What was the issue at hand? What brought about the need for the council in the first place? How should we interpret the apostles’ decision? What does all this tell us about the place of the Torah among the early followers of Yeshua?

### **The Core Issue at the Jerusalem Council**

The opening verses of Acts 15 present a clear picture of the core issue confronting the Jerusalem Council:

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of

The Gentiles had been saved and graced by God's presence—evidenced by the Spirit—as a matter of their faith, not because they had changed status from Gentile to Jew.



them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.<sup>3</sup>

The issue at hand was whether or not a non-Jewish person could become a covenant member with Israel and share in the blessings of the covenant. God had made the covenant of blessing with Israel and no other nation.<sup>4</sup> Most Jews in Paul's day believed that only Jews had a place in the world to come. A Gentile could secure a place in the afterlife only by becoming a Jewish proselyte (convert), made possible, according to the rabbis, through a ritual based entirely upon their rules but with no foundation in the Torah.

Therefore, when men from Judea taught that unless you are circumcised (undergo the ritual of a proselyte) according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved, they were simply applying the standard theology of their day. The council was dealing with this question: If Israel had a place in the world to come, did Gentiles, therefore, need to submit to the contemporary man-made proselytizing ritual in order to secure eternal life; that is, be saved?

Nowhere does God's Word outline a ceremony for a Gentile to become a proselyte. In fact, the Torah specifically states that the resident non-Jew was to be received as just that—a non-Jewish person who had attached himself to Israel and to her God. If God expected the believing Gentile to become a Jew through some ritual of conversion, there would be no reason for a verse such as Numbers 15:16: "There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you."<sup>5</sup>

In fact, God’s sacred Scriptures prescribe no method for becoming a proselyte, thus revealing that the rabbinic matter of proselytizing was entirely man-made.

The issue was one of status. What qualified a person to be assured of a place in the world to come—ethnic status or faith? Which was essential for salvation—identification as a Jew or as being “in Messiah”? Paul and the other apostles at the Jerusalem Council unanimously agreed that one’s ethnic status had no bearing whatsoever on one’s salvation. The crux was faith, not ethnicity.

### **Is the Torah a Burden No One Can Bear?**

The predominant interpretations of Acts 15, however, center not on the issue of how to receive Gentiles into the body of Messiah, but on whether the Torah bore any relevance to their life of faith.

The opening words of the chapter clearly define the real issue. Furthermore, the apostles’ language indicates their struggle with the dominant theology of their day. The man-made rules of the oral Torah had become so interwoven with the interpretation and application of the written Torah that in many cases the two had become indistinguishable.

In the first speech recorded in our chapter, Peter uses language that signals an important key to the interpretation of this passage. He reminds his audience that he, the first apostle sent to the Gentiles, had witnessed the outpouring of the Spirit upon them with no proselytizing process. Then he says:

“Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Yeshua, in the same way as they also are”  
Acts 15:10, 11

Here Peter makes several important assertions that are key to understanding his words. First, note that he puts at odds the “yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” with salvation through faith. The Gentiles had been saved and graced by God’s presence—evidenced by the Spirit—as a matter of their faith, not because they had changed status from Gentile to Jew. In Peter’s mind, the “yoke” that the Judean teachers desired to place upon them was contrary to salvation based upon God’s grace.

But here is a crux for the proper interpretation of the passage: Would Peter have referred to the written Torah as a yoke that “neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear”? The common answer of Christian interpreters is a resounding “Yes!” Taking the position that the Jews of his day believed their salvation was gained through obedience to the Torah, Peter’s statement is interpreted as a ringing declaration against salvation by works.

But the council was not debating whether salvation was gained by works. No one, including the “men from Judea” who were insisting that the Gentiles become proselytes, believed that anyone gained a place in the world to come by a complete keeping of Torah. Rather, the prevailing view was that a place in the world to come was the gracious gift of God to every Israelite.

Furthermore, if Peter is calling the written Torah an unbearable “yoke,” then he is pitting the Scriptures against the true gospel message. But we know Peter did not do this. His message of the gospel given at Pentecost (Shavuot, Acts 2) is based entirely upon the *Tanakh*. He shows from the Scriptures (Psalms) that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead, and that by this work of Messiah the promise of salvation to Israel, as well as to the nations (given in the Abrahamic covenant found in Genesis), would be realized. Far from pitting the Torah against the message of salvation by faith, Peter bases his gospel upon it.

However, Peter is not the only one who affirms the Torah's teaching of salvation by faith. Paul also states that by reading the Torah via the illuminating work of the Spirit, one inevitably sees Yeshua.<sup>6</sup> And according to Galatians 3:8, he considers the Abrahamic promise to be the gospel.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Apostolic gospel is grounded in the *Tanakh*, for these divinely inspired Scriptures provided the apostles' only presentation of the message of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

If Peter's descriptive phrase "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" cannot mean the written Torah, to what was he referring?

James uses similar language in his reference to the requirements given to the Gentiles:

"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials."<sup>9</sup>

Would James have characterized the Torah a burden? No. In his epistle, written before the Jerusalem Council, James refers to the Torah as "the perfect Torah,"<sup>10</sup> "the Torah of liberty,"<sup>11</sup> and the "royal Torah."<sup>12</sup> Obviously, James considered the Torah an extreme blessing. Apparently both he and Peter had something other than God's Torah in mind when they spoke of the unbearable yoke and a burden.

## **Yoke and Burden in the Sayings of Yeshua**

Undoubtedly, Yeshua's teachings remained part of the ongoing dialogue among the apostles. Like disciples of any prominent teacher, Yeshua's students surely rehearsed His teachings orally before they were written down. It seems certain the oral tradition of His teachings formed the basis for what later become the synoptic Gospels.

Yeshua refers to the man-made laws of the sages via the metaphor of a burden: "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger" (Matthew 23:4).

Various authors have indicated their belief that the four things required of the Gentiles were a “short list” of the Noachide Laws.



Additionally, He characterizes His own teachings with the familiar term *yoke*: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:29–30).

The use of the term *yoke* in the rabbinic literature is well attested. It describes one’s willingness to submit to God and His commandments, as well as to the proper interpretation of the Torah and the accepted doctrine of the sages. As far as the rabbis were concerned, one was not keeping the commandments as he should unless he kept them as prescribed by the ruling authorities—according to the accepted teachings. The “yoke of the commandments” had effectively become the yoke of the rabbis’ interpretations of the commandments and this yoke was often a burden indeed.

This is why Paul was accused of negating the Torah. It was not God’s Torah Paul was negating, but some of the man-made laws that had been added to the Scriptures. In fact, in Acts 21 we read that believing Jews were upset at Paul because the rumor had circulated that he was teaching people to forsake Moses and the customs. So sure were they that he had forsaken God’s way they were willing to attempt a mob lynching.

Yet Paul was unwilling to require Gentile believers to submit to the myriad man-made rabbinical laws in order to be received into the messianic community. His decision to move in this direction was considered by some to be worthy of death. The “yoke” of tradition had been cast across the neck of Israel for so long that it was impossible for many to envision a genuine faith in God apart from it.

Yeshua made a significant point when He asked His disciples to take upon themselves His yoke, not the yoke of His contemporaries. In contrast to the yoke that the rabbis were laying upon people's shoulders without any intention to help them lighten the load, Yeshua identifies His yoke as "easy" (*chrestos*); that is, "kind" and His burden as "light" (*elaphros*), that is, "not a burden." His yoke was "kind" in that it gave "mercy" and "love" equal significance with "righteousness" and "justice." His burden was "light" because He had unwrapped the teaching of God, the Torah, from all the man-made extras. Therefore it was able to penetrate the heart with *chesed v'emet*, loving kindness and truth. Yoked together with Him, the Torah was as sweet as honey and the joy of one's heart. Under this kind and gentle yoke, Yeshua intended even the smallest stroke of the Torah and the Prophets to be fulfilled in the lives of His followers.<sup>13</sup>

This yoke of the Torah as Yeshua taught cannot be the burden and yoke referred to by Peter and James. The yoke they described was unbearable, and even the four things required of Gentiles (which contained some measure of man-made laws) could have been a burden. The yoke they were unwilling to place upon the backs of the Gentile believers was the yoke of the many man-made rules and laws. Indeed, the layer upon layer of rabbinic additions to the Torah had made the whole matter a burden, and had even at times clouded the very purpose of the Torah. The apostles were unwilling to place this burden upon the shoulders of the Gentiles, a burden that the rabbis would have expected every proselyte to bear.

### **The Four Requirements**

There was no way around the fact that the Gentiles would need to conform to some of the man-made laws that for so long had been attached to the Torah. The apostles decreed that an essential group of traditions should be received by the Gentile believers in order to give them a genuine, working membership within the synagogue community.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28–29)

Why these four? Is there some commonality that binds them together? Were the four requirements really the Noachide Laws?

It is not uncommon for scholars to reference the Noachide Laws when discussing the edict drawn up by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.<sup>14</sup> Various authors have indicated their belief that the four things required of the Gentiles were a “short list” of the Noachide Laws.

The Babylonian Talmud lists the Noachide Laws as seven:<sup>15</sup> 1) prohibition of idolatry, 2) prohibition of blasphemy, 3) prohibition of bloodshed, 4) prohibition of sexual sins, 5) prohibition of theft, 6) prohibition of eating flesh from a live animal, and 7) requirement to establish a legal system. But to derive these seven from Genesis 1–11 requires reading between the lines.

However, it should be noted that no mention of the Noachide Laws exists in the earliest rabbinic materials. They are a later compilation suited for the time when the synagogue was no longer interested in having Gentiles as part of the community. The formulation of the Noachide Laws thus made a second way for the Gentiles—a way that gave them a place in the world to come without requiring the Jewish community to deal with them.

This renders the Noachide Laws interpretation of Acts 15 unworkable because it is opposite of the council’s conclusion. The Jerusalem Council decided that the believing Gentiles were to be received as members of the covenant in exactly the same way as Jews were received—by their faith. What is more, had the council prescribed the Noachide Laws for the Gentiles, they

would have been disobeying Torah. For the Torah itself plainly states that there is one Torah for Israel and the Gentile who dwells with her. Clearly, the Noachide Laws interpretation does not fit. We must look for another explanation.

### **The Four Requirements as Fences against Idol Worship**

One thing is clear: The apostles viewed the four requirements given to the Gentile believers as essential. But grouped as they are they comprise a specific message to the Gentiles about a specific issue. Obviously, the apostles were not suggesting to the Gentile believers that all moral and ethical guidelines were summed up in these four. No, an essential issue is described by these four requirements—an issue the apostles knew was a “make-or-break” matter. I would like to suggest that the four prohibitions find a commonality in idol worship in the pagan temples.

From a Jewish perspective, nothing characterized the Gentiles more than idolatry. And nothing was more abhorrent. If Gentiles were allowed into the congregation and community without the requirement of becoming a proselyte, how was the community to be assured that they had made a final break with idolatry? Without the many prohibitions involving touching, handling, eating, etc., how could one be certain the Gentiles, living within the pagan culture, were not participating in the idolatry in which they had been raised?

At this point the Jerusalem Council saw the need for Gentiles to submit to some of the man-made laws. The Jewish community needed to be satisfied that the Gentiles were no longer idolaters, and that they had forever turned their backs on this capital crime. In order to make such assurances, the apostles required the Gentile believers to take on the yoke and burden of man-made laws in the area of idolatry.

I suggest that the four items given to the Gentiles are a unified group identifying idol worship in pagan temples. Thus they reveal the apostles’ demand that believing Gentiles separate

The four prohibitions each attach to an aspect of the pagan temple, and require the believing Gentile to conform to the current teachings of the Jewish community with respect to all matters of idolatry.



themselves from any contact with the temples that could be construed by the Jewish community as participation in idolatry. In asking the Gentiles to divorce themselves from even the cultural aspects of the pagan temples, the apostles were requiring the Gentiles to view idolatry from the Jewish perspective, and even to conform to some of the additional laws formulated by the Sanhedrin against it. As Ben Witherington writes:

They must not give Jews in the Diaspora the opportunity to complain that Gentile Christians were still practicing idolatry and immorality by going to pagan feasts even after beginning to follow Messiah.<sup>16</sup>

Though idolatry would naturally be considered outside the scope of a believer's life, the apostles called for conformity to the additional rabbinic teachings pertaining to idolatry—the “fences” not found in Scripture but necessary in this realm for inclusion into the Jewish community.

When we speak of pagan temples and their rituals, we must remember that in great measure these were seen as cultural and social institutions and not merely as religious ones. For instance, local pagan temples often served as banks for individuals as well as the state, and were the locations for all manner of political issues.<sup>17</sup> Gentiles who had been born and raised in the idolatrous cultures of Greece and Rome had a great many aspects of family and community tied together with the local temples. Could a believing Gentile continue to participate at these temples and even join in political, family, and community

events without actually participating in idolatry? Could they eat there without giving their allegiance to the god or goddess to whom the meal was dedicated?

So many daily activities within Roman and Greek society involved the local temple that Gentile believers needed to commit themselves to extra precautions to assure their Jewish brothers that they had forsaken all aspects of idolatry. The four prohibitions listed by the council were given to do just that.

## **The Four Prohibitions as Aspects of the Pagan Temple**

### **1. Abstain from meat offered to idols**

The phrase “meat offered to idols” translates as only one word in the Greek. This word, *eidolothutos*, is used nine times in the Apostolic Scriptures,<sup>18</sup> always in the context of eating food at a pagan temple. This fact is strengthened by the phrase used in the initial listing in Acts 15:20. There, “things contaminated by idols” clearly refers to the pollution of food used in rituals of the pagan temple. The same word is used in a similar manner in 4 Maccabees 5:2. By using this word, the apostles were not prohibiting food from the common market, but specifically food at a ceremonial meal in connection with an idolatrous ceremony.

Thus Gentile believers could not eat a meal in connection with the pagan temples if the food was in any way dedicated to a god or goddess. Of course there were meals and activities in the temple precinct that had nothing to do with the idol housed inside. Apparently these were allowed.

### **2. Abstain from blood**

This does not refer to eating meat with blood—which is discussed in the next prohibition—but to ingest-

ing blood itself, something not uncommon in idol rituals. Whether or not the common person drank the blood of the sacrificial victim is not certain, but there is evidence that the priests did.<sup>19</sup> From a Jewish perspective, to participate in a ritual in which the representative priest drinks the blood of the sacrifice is to participate in the same abominable act. Of course, the Torah prohibits eating blood,<sup>20</sup> but the Apostles required the Gentiles to distance themselves from any ritual in which blood was ingested and/or improperly used. Such a thing was simply too abhorrent for the Jewish community.

### 3. Abstain from things strangled

The sacrifices in pagan temples were usually killed by cutting the throat. But sometimes they were strangled.<sup>21</sup> This inhumane killing of animals was contrary to the spirit of Torah. While the Torah prohibited eating blood, there is nothing in the written Scriptures describing exactly how an animal was to be slaughtered. In order to fully comply with the Torah commandments against ingesting blood, the sages felt the necessity to make such rulings. Meat from animals that had been strangled was therefore prohibited because of the high probability that the meat was saturated with blood.

Gentile believers were not to participate in the cruel strangulation of animals or in the rituals that included such practices. Nor were they to eat the meat of animals that were strangled. As such, meat for sale at the local pagan temple was out of bounds for the Gentile believer. The chances that the meat had been strangled were too high.

#### 4. Abstain from fornication

The word translated “fornication” is *porneia*, the root of our English word *pornography*. While some have suggested that *porneia* here describes prohibited marriages (i.e., too close to the bloodline),<sup>22</sup> the fact is that in Leviticus 18, where prohibited unions are discussed, the LXX (*Septuagint*) never uses the word *porneia*. Granted, *porneia* is used in 1 Corinthians 5:1 to describe incest, but that is hardly what the apostles are talking about here.

The word *porneia*, however, is associated with the pagan temple prostitutes.<sup>23</sup> So notorious was temple prostitution in Corinth that the coined phrase “play the Corinthian” meant to engage in sexual promiscuity.<sup>24</sup>

It can hardly be the case, however, that the apostles were speaking of sexual engagement with temple prostitutes when they prohibited “fornication.” This would be considered out of the question for all believers and therefore unnecessary to be singled out for Gentiles in particular. Rather, the prohibition is to any connection with the temple rituals that utilized temple prostitutes, including any kind of support or participation in any service that included temple prostitutes, seen or unseen.

In the end, the four prohibitions each attach to an aspect of the pagan temple, and require the believing Gentile to conform to the current teachings of the Jewish community with respect to all matters of idolatry. Complete separation from the idolatry of the pagan temple is emphasized in the final sentence of the edict: “If you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.”<sup>25</sup>

The Apostles knew that if the Gentile believers were willing to accept the strict rabbinic teachings regarding all matters of idolatry, particularly regarding the pagan temples, their acceptance within the Torah community would be much greater. Though this could be a burden and at least a part of the yoke of the oral Torah laid upon them, it was essential for their inclusion into the Torah community where they could learn the Scriptures and grow in faith. Their willingness to submit to these additional rulings gave the Jewish community the necessary confidence to receive them as those who had completely forsaken idolatry and turned to the one God of Israel.

## Summary

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was dealing with a specific issue: Was it necessary for Gentiles to become proselytes and thus take on the full weight of the man-made laws of the sages in order to be accepted within the Jewish community. The council voiced a unified “no” to this question. Using “circumcision” as a shorthand designation for “the ritual of becoming a proselyte,” the council determined that the Gentiles would not need to be circumcised (i.e., become proselytes) in order to be received into the Torah community.

There was, however, the need to assure the Jewish community that those Gentiles who had confessed Yeshua as Messiah had genuinely forsaken any form of idolatry. Since the Greek and Roman cultures were centered around idol worship with local pagan temples, it was important that the Jewish community be able to receive the Gentile believers without any suspicion of remaining idolatry.

The apostles, therefore, required the Gentiles to accept the extra-biblical, man-made laws regarding idolatry. These were:

- ✎ They should not participate in any meal that was even remotely connected to idol worship.
- ✎ They should not participate in any gathering or ceremony that involved the misuse of blood as a sacrificial element.
- ✎ They should not involve themselves in any ritual or ceremony that involved the strangulation of animals, and they should be careful not to eat meat from animals killed through strangulation (something not uncommon in the pagan sacrificial rituals).
- ✎ They should distance themselves from any contact with or support of the temple prostitutes and the fornication they represented in the pagan temple precincts.

While the written Torah surely prohibited any worship of idols, the sages had put a good number of fences in place to distance the people from contact with idolatry. These fences were extra-biblical, yet the apostles considered them essential in showing the clear break the Gentile believers had made with idolatry. Since they were man-made and not directly from Scripture, they were part of the yoke of oral Torah, the burden that the sages had laid upon the written Scriptures. While the apostles were unwilling to put the Gentiles under the full weight of the traditions—something not even the Jewish people had been able to bear—they did see the need to require the Gentiles to keep this rabbinic teaching. Only such a requirement could have fully satisfied the Jewish community that the Gentile believers had made a radical break from their former idol worship.

## Summary



### *“Torah is a Burden”*

**“If you need proof that the Torah has been done away with, just read Acts 15! Even the Apostles realized it was a heavy burden rather than a gift of God’s grace.”**

Christian interpreters of Acts 15 take the position that the Jews of that day believed their salvation was gained through obedience to the Torah. Peter’s statement is interpreted as a ringing declaration against salvation by works. But the council was not debating salvation was gained by works. No one, including the “men from Judea,” believed that anyone gained a place in the world to come by a complete keeping of Torah. Rather, the prevailing view was that a place in the world to come was the gracious gift of God to every Israelite.

**“The Apostles instructed the Gentile believers to live according to the Noachide Laws, not the Torah. The Torah is for Jews; the Noachide Laws are for the Gentiles.”**

Had the council prescribed the Noachide Laws for the Gentiles, they would have been disobeying Torah. For the Torah itself plainly states that there is one Torah for Israel and for the Gentile who dwells with her. (The Noachide Laws are of rabbinic, not biblical origin, and were formulated in the later centuries, not the first century.)

**“Even the Apostles struggled over the issue of the Torah, but Paul finally won. The Jerusalem Council agreed with him that the Torah was not applicable for the Gentile believers.”**

Peter’s message of the gospel given in Acts 2 is based entirely on the *Tanakh*, confirming the Torah’s teaching of salvation by faith. Paul states that by reading the Torah via the illuminating work of the Spirit, one inevitably sees Yeshua. James refers to the Torah as “the perfect Torah,” “the Torah of liberty,” and the “royal Torah.” They all had something other than God’s Torah in mind when they spoke of the unbearable yoke and the burden.

**“Anyone who says God requires us to live according to Torah hasn’t read Acts 15. Even the four things the Apostles required of the Gentiles were cultural, not moral.”**

Acts 15 refers to man-made laws, not the Torah itself. The Jerusalem Council saw the need for Gentiles to submit to some of those laws. The Jewish community needed to be satisfied that the Gentiles were no longer idolaters and had forever turned their backs on this capital crime. In order to make such assurances, the apostles required the Gentile believers to take on the yoke and burden of man-made laws in the area of idolatry in order to give them a genuine working relationship within the synagogue community. The Apostles knew that the Gentiles coming into the congregations would be learning the Torah more fully as they heard Moses each Sabbath (Acts 15:21).

## Study Questions



### *“Torah is a Burden”*

1. What was the primary issue being dealt with at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–2)?
2. According to the Scriptures is the Torah a burden to the child of God (Psalm 1:2; 19:7–10; 40:8; 119:77; Romans 7:12–14; James 1:25)? When Yeshua spoke of burdens and loads upon people’s shoulders, to what was He referring (Matthew 23:1–11; Mark 7:6–13)? How does this help explain the “burden” referred to in Acts 15:10, 28?
3. Why is it wrong to understand the four requirements of Acts 15 to be the Noachide Laws? What are the Noachide Laws? (See pages 37–38)
4. Why did the Jews believe it was necessary for a Gentile to “become a Jew” in order to be saved? What ritual did the first-century rabbis prescribe for a Gentile who wanted to “become a Jew”? According to Scripture, is it possible for someone to “become a Jew”? What is the only way for a sinner to have forgiveness of sins, according to the Scriptures?
5. What explanation might you give for why the Apostles required the believing Gentiles to adopt the four requirements of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)?



The challenge that lies before us is this: Can we read the Torah without placing upon the text the prejudice of nearly 2,000 years? Can we come to the Scriptures seeking to find in them the rich rewards of the life God intended for His children?





It is Often Said



## “The Law is Fulfilled”

It is often said, “Those who are telling you that the Torah is for us have failed to understand that Yeshua fulfilled the Torah. He said so Himself!” Frequently, when opportunities arise to speak to our family and friends about Torah living, we encounter this line of reasoning. “Since Yeshua plainly said that He came to ‘fulfill’ the Torah, there is no longer any reason for us to concern ourselves with it.” It is apparent by this thinking that *fulfill* means “finish” or “complete.” Thus, since Yeshua “fulfilled” the Torah, He finished it. It’s over; nothing more needs to be done in relationship to it.

To strengthen this point of view, the context following Matthew 5:17–20 is interpreted to mean that Yeshua spoke of the Torah as being deficient. By using the phrase “you have heard it said,” it is suggested that He sets aside the Torah in favor of His new teaching that He introduces by “but I say.” For example:

You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court,” But I say to you ... (Matthew 5:21–22)

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you ... (Matthew 5:27–28)

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the LORD.” But I say to you ... (Matthew 5:33–34)

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you ... (Matthew 5:38–39)

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you ... (Matthew 5:43–44)

When these are read with the preconceived idea that the Torah has been abolished, it appears as though Yeshua Himself is teaching against the Torah. But is this really what is being taught here? Was Matthew trying to explain to the Jewish community that the Messiah Yeshua had “fulfilled” the Torah in such a way that it could be set aside so that His followers could advance to a higher level of obedience than their forefathers?

### **What Does *Fulfill* Mean in Matthew 5:17?**

Some have suggested that Yeshua’s word *fulfill* was the Hebrew *qum* (*qum*), meaning “to establish” or “confirm.” This makes sense because of how the word is used in the *Tanakh*,<sup>26</sup> but also because of how it was used in the *Mishnah*.<sup>27</sup> It is evident that the verb *qum* became a rabbinic favorite to describe the “doing” of Torah commandments. This is important because Mishnaic Hebrew may reflect affinities with the Hebrew and Aramaic spoken in the first century.<sup>28</sup>

So, if Yeshua used the word *qum* when He made His famous statement about “fulfilling” the Torah and the Prophets, He clearly meant that He came not to set the Torah aside but to establish the Torah, to confirm it, to see that it was carried out or obeyed the way God intended. This, of course, fits with the words of verses 19–20, in which Yeshua instructs His disciples to “do” the commandments and teach others to do them as well.

Yeshua's point was simply that He came to put the Torah into the lives of the people of God, not to take it away.



But detractors hasten to point out that the Greek word for “fulfill” in Matthew 5:17 is *pleroo* and that in the Septuagint<sup>29</sup> it never translates the Hebrew word *qum*. In fact, *pleroo* almost always translates another Hebrew word, *malei*, which means “to be full,” “to fill up,” or “to complete.” That Yeshua may have used this Hebrew word is strengthened by the fact that the Syriac Peshitta<sup>30</sup> uses the same semitic root *malei* in Matthew 5:17.

The Hebrew word *malei* means to “fill up” in the sense of “complete.” For example, it is used in the sense of “completing” the set period of time for ritual purification (Leviticus 12:6). The conclusion that many have drawn from this is that Yeshua “filled up” the Torah in the sense that He “completed” it. In short, His “fulfilling” of the Torah is understood to mean that it is “finished” and therefore is no longer relevant for us.

Let us suppose that Yeshua did use the word *malei* as the Greek and Syriac translations suggest. Is “fulfill” in the sense of “complete” the only meaning of the Hebrew word *malei*? If indeed Yeshua used *malei* and not *qum*, what might He have meant?

The Hebrew word *malei* is used in the phrase “to fulfill the words.” The setting is that of aging David and the fight for his throne. Adonijah declared himself king behind David's back, and the prophet Nathan wanted Bathsheba to tell David what had taken place. The prophet said to her:

Go at once to King David and say to him, “Have you not, my lord, O king, sworn to your maidservant, saying, ‘Surely Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he shall sit on my throne’? Why then has

Adonijah become king?” Behold, while you are still there speaking with the king, I will come in after you and confirm (*malei*) your words.” (1 Kings 1:13–14)

The phrase translated “confirm your words” uses the Hebrew word *malei* (translated by *pleroo* in the LXX), a word that is usually translated “fill up” or “complete.” But what does it mean to “fill up your words”? In the context the meaning is certain: Nathan the prophet would “confirm” Bathsheba’s words, meaning that he strengthened them and gave them credibility. While she was explaining the situation to King David, Nathan would arrive and confirm that what she had said was true. Since he becomes the second witness, the matter is established.

In this case the word *malei* means to “confirm” or “establish” and fits very well with the context of Yeshua’s statement. His point was that He came to “confirm” the words of the Torah in the same way that Nathan confirmed Bathsheba’s words. He came as a witness to establish the Torah’s meaning and relevance. In this way He confirms the Torah rather than abolishes it.

Another instance of the word *malei* meaning “confirm” or “establish” is found in Jeremiah 44:25:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, as follows: “As for you and your wives, you have spoken with your mouths and fulfilled (*malei*) it with your hands, saying, ‘We will certainly perform our vows that we have vowed, to burn sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her.’ Go ahead and confirm (*qum*) your vows, and certainly perform your vows!”

Here the confession of the mouth is “fulfilled” (*malei*) with the hands. The point is obvious: What has been said with the mouth is put into action with the hands. This “putting into action” is described as “fulfilling” what was said. While this

verse is in the context of Israel performing idolatry, it still testifies to the fact that the Hebrew word *malei* could be used in the sense of “confirm” or “establish.” It links the idea of “fulfilling” (i.e., confirming) with “performing” (i.e., doing).

Yeshua ties these same concepts together in Matthew 5:17–20. He admonishes His disciples to be great in the kingdom of God by doing the commandments and teaching others to do them also. This must be seen as an explanation of what He meant by “fulfill” the Torah and the Prophets, in contrast to abolishing them. It hardly seems reasonable that He would have declared an end to the Torah because He had “completed” it and then proceed to admonish His disciples to do the commandments and teach others to do them. The only reasonable interpretation of the passage is that by “fulfill” Yeshua meant “to confirm” or “to establish.” His point was simply that He came to put the Torah into the lives of the people of God, not to take it away.

The conclusion we reach, then, is that regardless of which of the two Hebrew words Yeshua actually spoke, either could bear the meaning required by the context; namely, “to confirm” or “to establish.” The argument that the word *fulfill* in Matthew 5:17 must be understood as “finish” or “complete” based upon one meaning of the word *malei* is simply not valid.

### **“You have heard it said ... but I say ...”**

What about the second line of reasoning often encountered when discussing Yeshua’s words in Matthew 5:17–20? In the context immediately following His direct statement of confirming the Torah and Prophets, Yeshua goes on to make His point by contrasting what has been heard with what He is saying.

This is often understood to be a contrast between the Torah and the “better way” of Yeshua. Indeed, in each of the five contrasts Yeshua introduces a quote from the *Tanakh* with the phrase “You have heard it said,” then contrasts it with His own teaching, introduced by “but I say to you ....” It is not difficult to

understand how people have read this as meaning “This is what you find in the *Tanakh* ... but I tell you something different” and consequently come to the conclusion that Yeshua considers the Torah to be replaced by His own teaching.

Most who believe this do not necessarily think the *Tanakh* is bad. Even in the creeds developed by the ancient church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, the *Tanakh* was received as the inspired and sacred Word of God. Rather, the common position is that Yeshua took the Torah to a higher level in His teaching by taking what was only external and making it internal. By this it is meant that Yeshua required a higher level of spirituality than the Torah did. To use the Torah as a pattern of righteousness is thus seen to be “going backward” as far as spirituality is concerned.

Besides the clear emphasis we have already seen in the opening words of Yeshua in verses 17–20, there are two reasons this traditional approach is wrong. First, a careful reading of the contrasts beginning in verse 21 shows that Yeshua includes more than the written Torah when He refers to “You have heard it said ...” Second, understanding how the phrase “You have heard it said” was used by rabbis helps us understand what is meant by “You have heard ... but I say ...”

### **The Meaning of “You Have Heard it Said...”**

The opposing statements of Yeshua that follow His opening teaching on the vitality of the Torah and Prophets are each introduced with the statement “You have heard...” In two of the instances, however, “You have heard...” includes more than a quote from the *Tanakh*. The phrases “Whoever commits murders shall be liable to the court” (verse 21) and “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (verse 43) are not to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>31</sup> Nowhere does the Bible commend hating one’s enemy.

An interesting parallel to the phrase “You have heard it said” is found in a Jewish teaching on Exodus.<sup>32</sup> Here, in reference

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to the commandment “Honor your father and your mother,” the writer says, “I might understand, ‘Honor them with words only.’” The phrase, “I might understand” is actually “I hear” or “I might hear.” The teaching goes on to refute this proposition and to show that the commandment refers not only to respectful speech but also to the duty of maintaining one’s parents. Thus, the phrases, “I hear” or “You hear” in rabbinic dialog introduces one interpretation of a text, but one with which the speaker disagrees.

Daube shows that the early, rabbinical technical terms for “literal meaning” (a “wooden” or “naive” understanding) were *shemua* and *mishma* “that which is heard.”<sup>33</sup>

“He who hears” is used in the sense of “He who sticks to the superficial, literal meaning of Scripture” in the hermeneutical rule, according to which a general summary (like the notice concerning man’s creation in the first chapter of Genesis) may be followed by detailed facts (the story of man’s creation in the second chapter). The latter is merely “fleshing out” what has come before—a repetition giving more particulars. With this in mind, “He who hears” (he who takes Scripture literally; i.e., woodenly) will form the erroneous belief that the second account refers to different facts, but in reality it is merely a repetition with more particulars.<sup>34</sup>

Note in this regard another example from Rabbi Yudah HaNasi in his comments on the phrase “And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai”:

I might hear this as it is heard (i.e., I might understand this according to its literal meaning). But thou

must say: If the sun, one of the many servants of God, may remain in its place and nevertheless be effective beyond it, how much more He by whose word the world came into being.<sup>35</sup>

Here we have the same pairing of terms used by Yeshua: “heard” and “say.” This, then, gives a setting for Yeshua’s exposition. He is teaching the Torah text, not from a surface reading but from a well-informed understanding of the text in light of the whole Torah. “You have heard it said ...” introduces a commonly held interpretation, but one that Yeshua intends to correct by His own understanding of the text, introduced by “but I say to you...” He is showing that one commonly held view of the text is deficient and needs to be reconsidered in light of a fuller understanding of the Torah.

We may therefore conclude that both in the word Yeshua used for “fulfill,” as well as in His subsequent teaching on specific aspects of the Torah, He wants to point us to the genuine meaning of the Torah. It is not the Torah He calls deficient, but the manner in which it was being commonly taught by some of His contemporaries.

### **How Does This Apply to Us?**

If Yeshua was teaching people that the Torah had, to one extent or another, been misunderstood in His day, it stands to reason that the same might be true in our times. If He was further telling them that the Torah, rightly understood, would provide a light to their path as they purposed to walk with God, His words speak the same message to us today. The challenge that lies before us is this: Can we read the Torah without placing upon the text the prejudice of nearly 2,000 years? Can we come to the Scriptures seeking to find in them the rich rewards of life God intended for His children? Not only do I hope we can, I am convinced we must.

## Summary



### *“The Law is Fulfilled”*

**“Don’t believe it when you’re told the Torah is for today. Yeshua fulfilled the Torah. He said so Himself!”**

In Matthew 5:17–20 Yeshua admonishes His disciples to be great in the kingdom of God by doing the commandments and teaching others to do them also. This must be seen as an explanation of what He meant by “fulfill” the Torah and the Prophets, in contrast to abolishing them. It hardly seems reasonable that He would have declared an end to the Torah because He had “completed” it and then proceed to admonish His disciples to do the commandments and teach others to do them. The only reasonable interpretation of the passage is that by “fulfill” Yeshua meant “to confirm” or “to establish.” His point was simply that He came to put the Torah into the lives of the people of God, not to take it away.

**“The teaching of Yeshua goes to a higher level of spirituality than the Torah. If you think the Torah presents a path for righteous living, you’re going backward.”**

Yeshua is teaching the Torah from a well-informed understanding of the text in light of the whole Torah. “You have heard it said...” introduces a commonly held interpretation but one that Yeshua intends to correct by His own understanding of the text, introduced by “but I say to you...” He is showing that one commonly held view of the text is deficient and needs to be reconsidered in light of a fuller understanding of the Torah.

Thus He uplifts the Torah to its rightful standing as the way of righteousness.

**“When Yeshua said He had come to fulfill the Torah, He meant He came to finish it. He not only finished it, He also calls His followers to live by a new standard.”**

Since we now know this issue results from a misunderstanding of the word *fulfill* is it possible that Yeshua was teaching people that the Torah had, to one extent or another, been misunderstood in His day? If so, it stands to reason that the same might be true in our times. If He was further telling them that the Torah, rightly understood, would provide a light to their path as they purposed to walk with God, His words speak the same message to us today. The challenge that lies before us is this: Can we read the Torah without placing upon the text the prejudice of nearly 2,000 years? Can we come to the Scriptures seeking to find in them the rich rewards of life God intended for His children?

### Study Questions



### *“The Law is Fulfilled”*

1. What does the word *fulfill* mean in Matthew 5:17? (Compare the use of the word *confirm* in 1 Kings 1:13–14 and the phrase “fulfilled it with your hands” in Jeremiah 44:25). How do the words of Yeshua in Matthew 5:18–20 help define His meaning of *fulfill* in verse 17?

2. It is not uncommon to hear people say that the “Old Testament” dealt with externals, while the “New Testament” deals with the heart. Why is this a misreading of the Scriptures? (Consider Deuteronomy 4:29, 39; 6:5–6; 7:9; 10:16; 11:13; 2 Timothy 3:16.)
3. How was the phrase “You have heard it said ... but I say to you” used by the Jewish teachers of Yeshua’s day?”
4. The Hebrew word *hear* often means “obey.” How does Yeshua’s teaching emphasize this? (Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:47–49; 8:21; John 7:51)
5. From a biblical standpoint, what does it mean to truly “hear” the word of the Lord?
6. Yeshua said He did not come to abolish the Torah, but fulfill it. What did He mean by these words?



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Also note Exodus 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14; 31:12.
- <sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 9:14; 15:29.
- <sup>3</sup> Acts 15:1, 2.
- <sup>4</sup> m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. also Exodus 12:49 and Numbers 15:29.
- <sup>6</sup> Romans 10:4 where “end” should be understood as “goal.” Cf. 2 Corinthians 3:1–4:6.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. the parallel texts to Genesis 12:3 as well: 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 27:29; 28:14.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Romans 10:6–8 where Deuteronomy 30:12ff is quoted and where Paul considers this Torah passage to be “the word of faith which we are preaching.” In fact, for Paul Genesis 15:6—“Then he [Abraham] believed in the LORD and He reckoned it to him as righteousness”—showed beyond doubt that the message of salvation by grace through faith was the message Abraham believed (cf. Romans 4:3). Paul considers the Abrahamic promise to be the Gospel (Galatians 3:8), the same Gospel he preached.
- <sup>9</sup> Acts 15:28.
- <sup>10</sup> James 1:25.
- <sup>11</sup> James 1:25; 2:12.
- <sup>12</sup> James 2:8.
- <sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:17–20.
- <sup>14</sup> Brad H. Young, *Paul the Jewish Theologian* (Hendrickson, 1997), 38ff; Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Eerdmans, 1989), 49; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 3rd edition (SPCK, 1970), 118; Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Fortress, 1996), 169–170; Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (Yale, 1990), 194ff.
- <sup>15</sup> b. *Sanhedrin* 56a–60a; b. *Avoda Zara* 64b. The earliest reference to the so-called Noachide Laws is in the Tosefta, dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE, cf. t. *Avoda Zara* 8:4.
- <sup>16</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Eerdmans, 1998), 463.

- <sup>17</sup> J. R. C. Cousland, "Temples, Greco-Roman" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Evans and Porter, eds. (IVP, 2000), 1186.
- <sup>18</sup> Acts 15:29; 21:25; 1 Corinthians 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19; Revelation 2:14, 20.
- <sup>19</sup> R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus* (New York, 1969), 49ff.
- <sup>20</sup> Leviticus 3:17; 17:12.
- <sup>21</sup> See the magical papyri PGM XII.14–95, "Take also on the first day seven living creatures and strangle them; one cock, a partridge, a wren... Do not make a burnt offering of any of these; instead, taking them in your hand strangle them, while holding them up to your Eros, until each of the creatures is suffocated and their breath enters him. After that place the strangled creatures on the altar together with aromatic plants of every variety." Quoted from Witherington, *Acts*, 464 n.423. Interestingly, even Philo mentions that some were sacrificing animals by means of strangulation: Philo, *The Special Laws*, iv:xiii.122.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. W. K. Lowther Clarke, *New Testament Problems* (Macmillan, 1929), 59–60; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans, 1951), 300.
- <sup>23</sup> Hauch/Schultz, "*porneia*" in *TDNT*, 6:581f, though with regard to *porneia* in Acts 15 the authors come to the conclusion that it refers to prohibited marriages.
- <sup>24</sup> C. S. Keener, "Adultery, Divorce" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Evans and Porter, eds. (IVP, 2000), 12.
- <sup>25</sup> Acts 15:29.
- <sup>26</sup> The hifil of *qum* is used in the *Tanakh* of "confirming" covenants: Genesis 6:18; 9:9, 11; 17:7, 19; Exodus 6:4; Leviticus 26:9; Deuteronomy 8:18; 2 Kings 23:3; Jeremiah 34:18; Ezekiel 16:60, 62.
- <sup>27</sup> Note that *qum* can mean "to sustain" or "to maintain" the teaching of a sage, m.*Gittin* 3:4; in the Talmud *qum* is used as "fulfilling, maintaining, carrying out, or executing" the whole Torah, b.*Yoma* 28b. For a full listing cf. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud* (Jerusalem, n.d.), 1330.
- <sup>28</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisenbrauns, 1990), 10. Interestingly, the translation of the New Testament into Modern Hebrew uses *qum* to translate Yeshua's word *fulfill*, reflecting later common usage in rabbinic Hebrew.
- <sup>29</sup> The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the *Tanakh*, often called the LXX.
- <sup>30</sup> The Syriac translation of New Testament is dated by some scholars as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E.
- <sup>31</sup> The first edition of the NASB puts the phrase "and hate your enemy" in small caps to show that it is a quote from the *Tanakh*, but this is an error.
- <sup>32</sup> *Mekhilta* on Exodus 19:20.
- <sup>33</sup> Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1956), 56.

<sup>34</sup> Daube, *Op. Cit.*, 56. This is from the 32 principles of interpretation of Eliezer ben Yose HaGelili. These are listed and expounded in R. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide* (Random House, 1989), pp. 147–154. The principle alluded to here is number 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Mekhilta* on Exodus 19:20.