

THE MESSIAH, HIS DISCIPLES, AND THE LAW OF MOSES

Philip Duncan Peters (duncanpeters12@icloud.com)

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the Messiah Jesus, his disciples and the Law of Moses to which the Qur'an, the Torah [Hebrew Bible] and the New Testament all refer. After initial references to the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible, the author discusses four separate scenes in the New Testament, which highlight the relationship between Jesus and the Torah. The author discusses the contrast between the attitude of the Pharisees and that of Jesus to the Law but explains that, by criticizing the contemporary interpretation of food laws, Jesus was not abolishing the totality of the Law but simply abrogating its dietary regulations. The author concludes that the food laws mentioned in the Torah were of a temporary nature and that the death, resurrection and ascension of Messiah Jesus introduced a new era and a new covenant, which would accept people from all nations as belonging to the people of God without them having to adhere to all the stipulations of the older covenant.

Keywords: Torah, food laws, covenant, Israelite, Pharisees, Messiah, non-Jews

INTRODUCTION

In the Qur'an surah *Āl- 'Imrān* 3:50, the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary says:

I have come confirming that which was before me, the Torah, and to make lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you. Moreover, I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. So reverence God and obey me (Nasr, 2015).

In a few words, this verse summarizes succinctly a somewhat complex relationship between the Messiah Jesus, his disciples and the Law of Moses as it is described in

the Injil or New Testament¹⁶. In this paper, we will seek to gain a better understanding of this relationship and some of its nuances.

The identity of the ancient Israelites as a nation was based on the Torah, which they believed had come to them through the Prophet Moses. The Torah contained God's covenant with the Israelites, the covenant included a whole system of laws. These laws were the covenant requirements of God on the people. Torah means instruction or teaching (Harris R. Laird; Archer). When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries BCE, *Torah* was rendered *nomos* (law) and, in English translations of the Bible, *Torah* in Hebrew and *nomos* in Greek are usually translated as 'law'. Adherence to the Torah was intended to set the ancient Israelites as a nation apart from other nations (Wright, 2004). They were to be separate, distinct, and "holy":

You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own (Leviticus: 20:26. Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011).

However, according to the Torah, God's ultimate purpose in choosing Abraham's family was to bring blessing to all peoples. Abraham is told: "Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (Genesis 22:18, 12:3, 18:18), and this promise is reiterated to Isaac and to Jacob (Genesis 26:4; 28:14). In the short to medium term, the purpose of bringing blessing to the nations was closely connected to the God-given laws and the ethical quality of Israelite life. God chose the Israelites to be a light to the nations, attracting them by the quality of their communal life lived under God-given laws (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

We turn now to the New Testament and to Jesus, his disciples and their relationship to the Torah. There is only space for a brief survey but I believe we will get a good overview if we look at four scenes involving Jesus and his earliest disciples, roughly ten years apart from each other, beginning in the late 20s of the First Century CE.

SCENE 1: MESSIAH JESUS AND THE TORAH

¹⁶ I understand the "Injil" to be synonymous with the "New Testament". For Muslim views in support of this, see Saeed, Abdullah, *How Muslims view the Scriptures of the People of the Book: Towards a Reassessment?* [Kindle Location 4066-4540], and, Lumbard, Joseph E.B. *The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions* [Kindle Locations 79106-79108].

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From the many passages that speak of Jesus' relationship to the Torah (For example, Matthew 5:17-48; 12:1-7; 19:1-12, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 5:13-14; 10:25-37; 11:37-49; 18:18-30), I have selected one particularly significant passage; Mark 7:1-23.

¹ The Pharisees and some of the teachers of Torah who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. ² They noticed that some of his disciples were eating food with defiled or unwashed hands. ³ The Pharisees and all the Judeans do not eat unless they wash their hands, shaping their hands like cups, holding fast to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ And when they come from the market, they do not eat without first taking a ritual wash. And there are many other traditions that they have received and hold fast to, such as ritually washing cups, jugs and brass containers. ⁵ The Pharisees and the teachers of Torah asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples follow the tradition of the elders instead of eating food with defiled hands?'

⁶ Jesus replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites – as it is written:

“This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me.

⁷ Their worship of me is pointless; their teachings are merely human rules.”¹⁷

⁸ 'You neglect God's command and hold on to human tradition.'

⁹ Then he said to them, 'You have a clever way of setting aside the command of God in order to keep your tradition. ¹⁰ For the Torah that came through Moses says, “Honor your father and your mother”, and, “Anyone who curses their father or mother must be put to death.” ¹¹ But you say that if a person tells their father or mother, “Whatever help you might have received from me is qurbān (that is an offering to God) ¹² – then you no longer allow them to do anything for their father or mother. ¹³ In this way you treat the word of God as if it had no authority by your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this.'

¹⁴ Once more, Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen to me, everybody, and understand. ¹⁵ There's nothing that goes into a person from the outside that can defile them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.'

¹⁷ Isaiah 29:13

¹⁷ When he left the crowd and went into the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ ‘Do you also fail to understand?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you see that nothing that goes into a person from the outside can defile them? ¹⁹ For it doesn’t go into the heart but into the stomach, and then it passes out of the body.’ (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean).

²⁰ Then he said, ‘It’s what comes out of a person that defiles them. ²¹ For it’s from inside, out of a person’s heart, that evil intentions come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malicious deeds, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’¹⁸

This passage appears to illustrate both sides of the description of the Messiah’s relation to the Torah in Qur’an 3:50. Jesus confirms it, and he makes lawful what was previously forbidden.

In the first scene in the above passage (Mark 7.1-23), there is controversy between the Pharisees and Jesus over the ritual washing of hands and over duties to parents. The difference of opinion relates to the “tradition of the elders” (v.3, 5), which the Pharisees regarded as the oral Torah but which Jesus regarded as merely human traditions for which the Pharisees had let go of the commands of God (v.8). Jesus upholds and defends the Torah as the word of God and severely criticizes the Pharisees for nullifying the word of God by their human traditions (v.8, 13). Then Jesus tells the crowd, ‘There is nothing that goes into a person from the outside that can defile. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them’ (v.15). Later, Jesus explains the parable to his disciples, ‘Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into the stomach, and then it passes out of the body’ (v.18-19). Then there is an editorial comment, ‘In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean’ (v.19).

Jesus has been critical of the Pharisees for nullifying the word of God but now he appears to be doing the same thing in relation to the food laws in the Torah (France). Of course, this is not explicit in Jesus’ words but it is implied in the way that Mark, the writer of this Gospel, inserts the comment, ‘In saying this, Jesus declared all

¹⁸ Unless stated otherwise, translations from the Bible are my own.

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foods clean¹⁹. Orthodox Jewish scholar, Professor Daniel Boyarin has an alternative interpretation of both Jesus and Mark. He recognizes that the standard Christian interpretation of Mark 7:19 is that Jesus declared all foods kosher. However, he claims that this confuses two systems in the Torah.

While in English, they are sometimes confused, the system of purity and impurity laws and the system of dietary laws are two different systems within the Torah's rules for eating, and Mark and Jesus knew the difference (Boyarin, 2012).

The Torah lists certain foods that are forbidden (Deuteronomy 14:1-21; Leviticus 11:1-47; 20:25-26). These are the kosher rules or dietary laws. An entirely different set of rules deal with purity and impurity (Leviticus 12-15). Impurity was contracted by touching a dead human, menstrual blood, semen and various skin diseases. Boyarin writes:

The touch of such "impure" persons renders certain perfectly kosher foods forbidden to be eaten by Priests or by Israelites who are entering the Temple. During Second Temple times, there is much evidence that many Jews sought to avoid such impurity and to purify themselves as quickly as they could according to the rules from the Torah even if they were not planning to go to the Temple. The Pharisees extended these practices, even legislating that eating kosher food that has been in contact with impurities renders one impure.

"..." A Jew did not eat non-kosher food but rules around defiled kosher food depended on various circumstances of a person's life and certainly did not

render the body of the eater impure. The Pharisaic tradition seems to have extended that prohibition against eating defiled kosher food and rendered the eater him- or herself impure through this eating. The Pharisees sought to convince other Jews to adhere to their new standards of strictness (Boyarin 1557-1566).

In conclusion, Boyarin says:

So really what the Gospel describes is a Jesus who rejects the pharisaic extension of these purity laws beyond their original specific biblical foundations. He is not rejecting the Torah's rules and practices but upholding them (Boyarin 1571).

¹⁹ It is important to recognise that in most strands of Christian theology, Mark is viewed as writing under the inspiration of God.

What I hope to have shown till now in this section is that when Mark wrote the words καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα “purifying all foods,” there is little reason to believe that it meant “thus he permitted all foods,” but rather, “thus he purified all foods,” meaning that he rejected the extra-stringent laws of defiled foods to which the Pharisees were so devoted—not the kosher rules (Boyarin 1637).

Boyarin’s thesis fits in the context of Mark 7, particularly the earlier part where Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for nullifying the word of God in the Torah. However, I do not think it fits so well in the wider context of the New Testament and the historical situation in which Mark was writing. Mark is usually dated around the 60s of the First Century CE (Carson and Moo), by which time the issue of clean and unclean food was well known throughout the early Christian communities.²⁰The editorial comment in Mark 7:19, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean”, would almost certainly be read as Jesus declaring all foods kosher so it seems likely that this is what Mark intended. If we go back to the occasion of Jesus’ words we can see that he is not directly speaking about kosher foods and declaring all foods clean. As Jonathan Klawans says:

Had Jesus abrogated food laws, it is difficult to explain why dietary issues remained controversial among his early followers... Nor is Jesus ever depicted as violating the dietary commandments (Klawans).

Rather, Mark 7:19 is an inference that Mark draws out from Jesus’ words in v.15, “There is nothing that goes into a person from the outside that can defile them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them,” – a principle that Mark applied to a later situation and controversy. This leads us to the next passage that involves some of Jesus’ earliest disciples.

SCENE 2: WHAT GOD MAKES CLEAN

We now move forward about a decade from the late 20s of the First Century to the mid to late 30s. The Book of Acts in the New Testament begins with an account of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and his ascension to heaven (usually dated 30 CE). The Book of Acts then provides a narrative of the following thirty years involving many of the earliest disciples of Jesus.

²⁰ See Romans 14:1-23, written by Paul c. 57 CE.

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Around the mid to late 30s, the Messiah Jesus movement was entirely made up of Jews along with a recent addition of Samaritans who, from a Jewish perspective, were foreign but at least their males were circumcised (Acts 8:4-25). Jesus had commissioned his disciples to take his message to all nations and to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:47-48, Acts 1:8). Indeed, there are passages in the Prophets, the ancient Scriptures of the Jews, that speak of the nations turning to God and of the Messiah's rule extending to the ends of the earth (Psalm 2:8; 22:27-28; 67:1-7, Isaiah 2:1; 42:6; 45:22; 49:6, Zechariah 2:11). However, it seems that Jesus' first disciples assumed that the nations turning to God and his Messiah would involve them becoming Jews. That was a well-known and widely acknowledged pattern: non-Jews who came to worship the God of the Israelites and who wanted to become part of his covenant people would become Jews or proselytes. For males, this involved being circumcised (Exodus 12:48; Genesis 17:10-14).

However, according to the Book of Acts, God had a different plan. This brings us to the narrative of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10-11. Peter was one of the twelve disciples or apostles chosen by Jesus Christ. Cornelius was a Roman centurion in the Italian Regiment of the Imperial Roman army stationed at Caesarea Maritima on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. Cornelius was not Jewish, but he had become what was known as a "God-fearer". These were people, usually from polytheistic backgrounds, who had come to reject the gods and worship the one God of the Israelites and accept the Torah and the Books of the Prophets. However, they stopped short of becoming Jews. Circumcision was abhorrent to Greco-Romans. Particularly for people of some standing such as a centurion, circumcision in the Greco-Roman world was considered a kind of social suicide. Hoffman speaks of "the Hellenistic disgust with circumcision (as an affront to the proper male body and a sign also, it was believed, of lasciviousness), a critique known to first-century authors such as Josephus (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.14) and Philo (QG III, 48ff.)" (Hodges; Hoffman).

The result of this antipathy to circumcision was that considerable numbers of Greco-Romans in this period adhered to Jewish faith and customs, including synagogue attendance, but stopped short of being circumcised (Witherington). Cornelius is described as someone who was "devout and feared God, as did his family. He gave generously to the poor and was always praying to God" (Acts 10:2). One day while he was praying, Cornelius had a vision of an angel who told him to send for Simon

Peter who was then about thirty miles down the coast at Joppa. Cornelius immediately obeyed and sent men to Joppa (Acts 10:3-8).

The next day, as they were traveling and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof about midday to pray. He became very hungry and wanted something to eat. While they were preparing food, Peter went into a trance. He saw heaven open and something like a huge sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. In it was every kind of four-footed animal, and also reptiles and birds. Then a voice said to him, 'Get up, Peter, kill and eat!' 'Certainly not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I've never eaten anything that's defiled or unclean.' The voice came to him a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not consider defiled.' This all happened three times and then suddenly the whole thing was taken back up into heaven. Peter was utterly at a loss as to what the vision could be about. At that moment, the men Cornelius had sent appeared. They had asked and found out where Simon's house was and were standing at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there as a guest. Peter was still giving careful thought to the vision when the Spirit said to him, 'Listen! Three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Go with them and do not pass judgment on them, because I have sent them (Acts 10:9-20).

Peter and some other Jews who believed in Messiah Jesus went to Caesarea with the men and entered the house of Cornelius where a large group of his family and friends were gathered. Peter said to them:

You yourselves know that it is not permitted for a Jewish man to mix with or visit a foreigner. But God has shown me that I should not call any person defiled or unclean. Therefore, when you sent for me, I came and I did not raise any objections (Acts 10:28-29).

Cornelius recounts the angel's visit to him. Then Peter begins his message:

I now grasp the truth, that God does not show favoritism. He welcomes the person who fears him and does what is right, whatever race they are from (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter then goes on to speak about Jesus the Messiah, and how sins can be forgiven through him (Acts 10:34-43). Next, we read:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came down on all who were listening to his message. All the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the non-Jewish nations. For they heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Then Peter said, 'Who can stop these people

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receiving ritual washing with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have (Acts 10:44-47).

Peter is here referring to the experience of the earliest Jewish disciples on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, which occurred ten days after Jesus was taken up to heaven. Acts records that they were filled with the Holy Spirit as evidenced by a number of dramatic signs including miraculously speaking in other languages they had never learned. These languages were understood by the diaspora Jews who were present in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

Peter and his Jewish companions witness something like their own experience now happening to these non-Jews. They understand these events as divine revelation. God is demonstrating that a new era has commenced in which God accepts people from every nation who turn to him – and he accepts them, *as they are*, not demanding that they first become Jews by being circumcised. God demonstrates this by a series of clear signs:

1. Cornelius' vision.
2. Peter's vision.
3. The Holy Spirit speaking to Peter (v19-20).
4. The Holy Spirit coming down on Cornelius and his household in an observable way²¹.

Here again, as a subsidiary issue at least, we face the issue of the Torah and the food laws. In the vision, the Lord's voice counters Peter's objection, "What God has made clean, you must not consider defiled." (v. 15) In fact, there were all kinds of animals in the large sheet, presumably including some kosher animals, which Peter could have slaughtered and eaten. However, to Peter's mind (and to other first century Jews) the clean or kosher animals were contaminated by contact with the unclean animals in the huge sheet (Witherington). However, the main point of the vision is not about food – it is about people. That is the lesson Peter takes from it.

²¹ In Peter's thinking the Holy Spirit was closely connected with the exalted Messiah. Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, explained what had just happened to the disciples in these terms: "Jesus has been exalted to God's right hand, and he has received the promised Holy Spirit from the heavenly Father, and has now poured out what you are seeing and hearing." (Acts 2:33)

In other words, Messiah Jesus is the one who from heaven "pours out" the Holy Spirit on his disciples. Presumably he regards Jesus as the one who is now pouring out the Spirit on these non-Jews.

You yourselves know that it's not permitted for a Jewish man to mix with or visit a foreigner. However, God has shown me that I should not call any person defiled or unclean. So, when you sent for me, I came and I did not raise any objections. "...” I now grasp the truth, that God does not show favoritism. He welcomes the person who fears him and does what is right, whatever race they are from.

The food laws in the Torah were, it seems, a symbol or sign of the holiness or separateness of the ancient Israelites from other nations (Wright, Christopher, Deuteronomy, p.181-182, Wenham, Gordon, Leviticus, p170-171). In Deuteronomy 14, food rules are catalogued in v. 3-21. But v. 2 says:

You are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.

And at the end in v.21 it says:

But you are a people holy to the Lord your God (Leviticus 11:43-45).

By the first century CE, many Jews were actually stricter than the Torah about contact with non-Jewish nations. Jews were not to mix with non-Jews²². Immediately following this narrative in Acts, we read of Peter being criticized by some of the circumcised believers as follows:

You entered the home of uncircumcised men and ate with them (Acts 11:3). Actually, when we remember Cornelius' background as a "God-fearer", it is highly likely that he kept the Torah food laws himself. It is even more likely that he would have shown hospitality to a revered Jewish guest such as Peter by providing him with kosher food. The point of the criticism is having social contact with non-Jews. This attitude to non-Jews, according to the book of Acts, is what God directs these early Jewish disciples of Jesus to change. God welcomes non-Jews who fear him and do what is right, so Jesus' Jewish disciples should welcome them too.

SCENE 3: THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL – SHOULD NON-JEWISH DISCIPLES OBSERVE THE TORAH?

We will now move forward another decade or so to 49 CE. Much has happened in the intervening decade. In Antioch in Syria, a thriving "Christian" community (Acts

²² Jubilees 22:16 (c. 150 BC) directs Jews to, "Keep yourself separate from the nations, and do not eat with them; and do not imitate their rituals, nor associate with them." (Quoted in Witherington, op. cit. page 353). Similarly, in relation to Samaritans, John 4:9 in the New Testament says that, "Jews do not use cups and dishes that Samaritans use."

11:26) has emerged that is made up of both Jews and non-Jews. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they select two of their number, namely, Paul and Barnabas, to go and preach the message about Jesus Christ further afield. Paul and Barnabas go to Cyprus and then Galatia in what today is southern central Turkey, preaching the message and establishing communities of believers before heading back to Antioch. However, conflict arises in both Antioch and Galatia when some Jewish believers demand that all the non-Jewish believers in Messiah Jesus must be circumcised and observe the Torah in order to be saved. Paul writes the New Testament letter to the Galatians to counter this teaching, but the matter comes to a head at what is called the Council of Jerusalem in 49 CE.

The main issue concerns the meaning of being “saved”²³. The most common Jewish view was that salvation would take effect on the day of resurrection and judgment when God’s kingdom or reign would be complete and all opposition to it would be utterly defeated. On that day, God’s people would be raised to eternal life ²⁴ and the whole of creation would be restored, renewed and healed ²⁵. In addition, however, elements of salvation can be found in the present age. To be saved means to have one’s sins forgiven (Luke 1:77) and sometimes it involves physical healing (Luke 8:48). Acts 15 provides an account of the Council of Jerusalem.

Some people came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the Torah which came through Moses, you can’t be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into serious conflict and dispute with them. So, the disciples in Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas and some others from their community to go up to Jerusalem to meet the apostles and elders about this matter. In Jerusalem, some believers from the party of the Pharisees got up and said: ‘The non-Jewish believers must be circumcised and instructed to keep the Torah which came through Moses.’

²³ See Wright, Tom, *Surprised by Hope*, (Location 3208-3325), Green, Joel B. “*Salvation to the end of the earth*’ (Acts 13:47): *God as saviour in the Acts of the Apostles* (p.89-95).

²⁴ See for example Luke 18:18-30, where to “be saved”, “to inherit” or “receive... eternal life” (v18, 30) and “to enter the kingdom of God” (v24, 25), are different ways of speaking about the same reality.

²⁵ This is comparable with the Qur’anic depiction of the garden or al-jannat. The image of a return to the garden is used in Revelation 22:1-5, but usually in the New Testament, other terminology is used.

The apostles and the elders met together to consider these matters. After a long debate, Peter got up and said to them, ‘Brothers, you yourselves know that in the early days, God chose... that through me the (non-Jewish) nations should hear the message of good news and believe. (Acts 15.5-7)

Peter is speaking here of his visit to the household of Cornelius. Peter continued:

God, who knows the heart, showed his approval of them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, but he made their hearts clean through faith. So why are you now trying to test God by putting a yoke on the necks of these disciples which neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?²⁶ No! It’s through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we believe in order to be saved, just as they do too (Acts 15:8-11).

In other words, salvation is a free gift, received by faith, not something one achieves for oneself by observing the Torah. Later in the proceedings, James, a prominent leader ²⁷ in the Jerusalem community, referring to Peter’s experience, claimed that it was consistent with what the Prophet Amos had said in the eighth Century BCE (Amos 9:11-12).

After this, I will return and rebuild the destroyed dwelling of David.
Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it:
So that the rest of the human race may seek the Lord,
Even all the nations who belong to me,
Says the Lord who does these things.

‘Therefore, I give my judgment,’ James continued, ‘that we should not make it more difficult for people from the nations who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them, telling them to keep away from anything polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the Torah that came through Moses has been proclaimed in

²⁶ Marshall comments : “The point here is not the burdensomeness or oppressiveness of the law, but rather the inability of the Jews to gain salvation through it”. Acts, (p.250).

²⁷ This James is commonly identified as being a brother of Jesus Christ, see 1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19.

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every city from ancient times, since it is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath. (Acts 15.19-20)

The council agreed and they wrote and sent the letter in the way that James had suggested.

James understood the events Peter had described about Cornelius to be clear signs of divine revelation. The observable coming of the Holy Spirit on these non-Jews demonstrated that God was doing something new. God was indicating that not only Jews but also non-Jews could become part of God's covenant people. James also saw this as a fulfilment of the Books of the Prophets. There are a number of similar passages he could have quoted but he selected Amos 9:11-12 in the Greek version²⁸ which speaks of the rest of the human race seeking the Lord. This means that many of the regulations concerning the covenant made with the Israelites through Moses were meant to be temporary. They were meant to be effective for the period when the covenant people consisted mostly of the Israelites. God was now demonstrating through various signs that God's saving purpose was directed to people from every nation – and from every nation *as they are* – not as people who have become Jews through conversion and circumcision. When the Books of the Prophets were re-examined in the light of these signs, it became clear to James that God had planned this from the beginning.

The four regulations proposed by James in place of observing the entire Torah have generated much discussion among scholars. The best explanation is that these four restrictions - keeping away from anything polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood – were all associated, in Jewish thinking at least, with what went on in pagan temples, and there is evidence that all of these activities sometimes happened in temples of the Greco-Roman world ("Witherington, Ben, Op. cit. p.461-464. Thompson, Alan, J. The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus p.184-187,"). Although sexual immorality in general is forbidden in the rest of the New Testament, the specific reference here relates to temple prostitution²⁹. Witherington provides examples from the custom of strangling

²⁸ The Council may have been conducted in Greek, as most Palestinian Jews would have been familiar with Greek and some of the visitors from Antioch may not have known Aramaic, see Williams, David J. *Acts*, (p.265).

²⁹ 2 Maccabees, a Jewish book which gives an account of the oppression of the Jews by the Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the Jewish uprising in the early second century BCE, gives the following description of the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem: For the

animals and drinking their blood, which was practiced as part of temple rituals (*Op. cit.*). The issue is one of venue (idol temples) rather than menu (food). Therefore, the requirements here are the basic ethical requirements of monotheism. In turning to God (v. 19), these non-Jews were turning away from idols.

SCENE 4: A TORAH-OBSERVING COMMUNITY OF MESSIAH JESUS FOLLOWERS

Our fourth and final scene took place almost a decade later, in 57 CE. In the years since the Jerusalem Council, Paul and various companions had been proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in what is today Turkey, Macedonia and Greece and establishing new communities of believers there. Palestine had been badly affected by famine and was suffering economic hardship. So, Paul organized a collection to be taken from these believing communities for the believers in Jerusalem and Judea and he and his companions made the long journey to Jerusalem. We take up the reading in Acts 21:17-26:

When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters welcomed us warmly. The next day, Paul went with us to see James. All the elders were present too. Paul greeted them and began to give a detailed report of what God had done among the nations through his service. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul, ‘Brother, you can see how many thousands of Jews have believed, and they are all passionately devoted to the Torah. They’ve all been told about you, that you teach all the Jews living among the nations to become apostates, abandoning the law that came through Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or follow our customs. What should we do? They will certainly hear that you have come. So, do what we tell you. There are four men here with us who have taken a vow. Take these men with you, go through the purification ritual with them, and pay their expenses, so that they can get their heads shaved. Then everybody will know that what they were told about you is not true and instead that you yourself follow the Torah. As for the people from the non-Jewish nations who have believed, we have written to them telling them of our decision that they must keep themselves from anything

temple was filled with debauchery and revelling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws. (6:4-5, Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version.

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sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

The next day, Paul does as advised. Paul is often considered (positively or negatively) as the person who led a breakaway from Judaism and invented what we now know as Christianity. But this is a gross and inaccurate caricature. The reality is far more complex and nuanced, as is Paul's relationship with his Jewish heritage.³⁰

Paul regarded his own teaching and that of his colleagues about Messiah Jesus as the true fulfillment of Israelite history and of God's revelation.³¹ I will now point some of that complexity:

- Paul and the Jerusalem Council did not require non-Jewish believers in the Messiah Jesus to become Jews in order to be saved or to be accepted as members of the Christian community.
- Paul never told Jewish believers in Messiah Jesus to abandon their Jewish heritage³².
- Paul himself was willing to take part in a purification ritual that was part of the fabric of the old covenant as evidence of his adherence to the Torah.

How do we bring all this together? What exactly did God require of Messiah-followers, both Jewish and non-Jewish? The old covenant contained detailed instructions about becoming part of God's people, beginning with circumcision for males and followed by the observance of detailed rules and rituals that had been laid down in the Torah. Indeed, these rules and rituals, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance and kosher food laws defined what it meant to be an Israelite. People

³⁰ Tom Wright says, "Paul would have continued, as a Jesus-follower, with various Jewish devotional practices designed to direct the mind and heart toward worship, humility, and service. (Paul: A Biography, p.351).

It is interesting that Paul, in some sense, still self-identified as a Pharisee, "I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees. Acts 23:6, emphasis mine.

³¹ Paul. I believe everything that is in agreement with the Torah and the Books of the Prophets" 24:14.

Paul. I'm saying nothing except what the Prophets, including Moses, said would happen – that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and that he would proclaim light to his own people and to the nation's 26:22-23.

In Acts 16:3, Paul actually has Timothy, whose mother was Jewish, circumcised in order to avoid offence to Jews in the region.

³² In Acts 16:3, Paul actually has Timothy, whose mother was Jewish, circumcised in order to avoid offence to Jews in the region.

could become members of God's people by becoming Jews and by observing all the laws in the Torah.

However, in the era of the new covenant brought in by the death, resurrection and ascension of the Messiah Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit to his disciples, all this began to change. Since all the earliest disciples were devout Jews, only something of profound significance would lead them to change their views about what was necessary to become part of the people of God. This is what they believed had happened through the signs that we discussed based on the narrative found in Acts 10. Interpreting these signs in the light of the sayings of the Prophets, ³³ "they concluded that God was leading them to a renewed version of the Israelites, one in which non-Jews were included, not by becoming Jews, but by faith in Messiah Jesus."

The old covenant model with its Torah observance was relativized but not rejected. It became an optional covenant so that Jewish believers in Messiah Jesus could go on living according to their heritage by honoring the traditions of their ancestors. In this fourth scene, we get a glimpse of the Messiah-following community around 57 CE. On the one hand, Paul gives a "detailed report of what God had done among the nations through his service." There were now communities of Messiah followers all around the Mediterranean, the majority of whom were non-Jews. On the other hand, in Jerusalem there was a community consisting of many thousands of Jews who believed in Jesus and were still passionately devoted to the Torah. Their faith was in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and king but they were also zealous for the Torah. What united these two groups was their belief and allegiance to Jesus as Messiah, Lord and Saviour. However, they were also very diverse.

Jews were encouraged to keep on observing the Torah with two caveats:

1. They were not to rely on their Torah-observance for salvation because they were saved by the grace of God, as indeed, the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures also taught.
2. They were not to insist on Torah-observance for non-Jews as a condition of fellowship and community.

³³ The four men (v24) would have been completing a temporary Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1-21). Paul had not had time to make this vow, it requiring a month. His purification was that taken by Jews after returning from non-Jewish territory, after the pattern of purification in Numbers 19:11-13. See Peterson, David, G. *The Acts of the Apostles* (p.587).

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After the Romans devastated Jerusalem in 70 CE, the increasing polarization between Christians and Jews eventually forced people to choose one path or the other. The one thing both sides could agree on was that a person could not be both an observant Jew and a Christian. The irony was that the principle of inclusion - that non-Jews could be accepted as Christians was reversed later in Christianity to say that Jews could not be accepted unless they renounced their Jewishness. This later development resulted in a sad loss of diversity within Christianity itself and could be seen as a departure from the teaching and practice of Jesus and his earliest disciples.³⁴

CONCLUSION

We began with a quotation from the Qur'an, Āl-Imrān 3:50, which succinctly describes the relationship of Jesus and his disciples to the Torah. On the one hand, the Messiah Jesus says, "And [I come] confirming that which was before me, the Torah..." Jesus revered the Torah and the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures as the Word of God, which they frequently appealed to as the ultimate authority. In fact, Jesus said that he had come not to abolish but to fulfill the Torah and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17).

On the other hand, in Āl-Imrān 3:50, Jesus says: "And to make lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you." These words could be understood as saying that the covenant contained in the Torah was a temporary one. The death, resurrection and ascension of Messiah Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit began a new era and a new covenant, which could include people from every nation as belonging to the people of God without them having to observe all the regulations of the older covenant. However, old covenant regulations remained optional for Jews, as part of their cultural heritage, but not as a basis of salvation. ■

³⁴ Boyarin writes,

At least from a juridical standpoint, then, Judaism and Christianity became completely separate religions in the fourth century. Before that, no one (except God, of course) had the authority to tell folks that they were or were not Jewish or Christian, and many had chosen to be both.

Op. cit. (Location 359). See also Irvin, Dale T & Sunquist, Scott W. *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume 1*, (p.129-136).

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