

# OF COURSE TORAH IS FOR GENTILES!

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It is often taught that *Torah* is only for Jews and not for Gentiles. After all, did James not proclaim (and the Assembly agree) that Gentile believers in Messiah need only keep the Noahic Laws?

*"Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:19-20).<sup>1</sup>*

In this paper, I posit that the above was intended only as a minimum requirement, and was neither meant to limit Gentiles' adherence to *Torah*, nor infer that *Torah* was not applicable to them. I then proceed to suggest that, not only has *Torah* always been for Gentiles, but that Gentiles were its first recipients.

## Torah is God's Teaching

The word *Torah* has several definitions but, in its broadest definition, *Torah* (תּוֹרָה - Strong's number 8451) means God's teaching. According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament:<sup>2</sup>

"The word *tôrâ* means basically "teaching" whether it is the wise man instructing his son or God instructing Israel. The wise give insight into all aspects of life so that the young may know how to conduct themselves and to live a long blessed life (Prov 3:1 f.). So too God, motivated by love, reveals to man basic insight into how to live with each other and how to approach God. Through the law God shows his interest in all aspects of man's life which is to be lived under his direction and care. Law of God stands parallel to word of the Lord to signify that law is the revelation of God's will (e.g. Isa 1:10). In this capacity it becomes the nation's wisdom and understanding so that others will marvel at the quality of Israel's distinctive life style (Deut 4:6). Thus there is a very similar understanding of the role of teaching with its results in the wisdom school, in the priestly instruction, and the role of the law with its results for all the people of the covenant."

In another lexical reference, "The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon," the primary definitions of "*Torah*" presented are: "direction," "instruction," and "law."<sup>3</sup> From both of these sources, it is apparent that the meaning of "*Torah*" is broad and is not limited to the Scriptures of the Mosaic Law or even to the *Pentateuch*.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scriptures in this paper are quoted from the New King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> R. Laird Harris, editor, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, TWOT No. 910, p. 404, Moody Press (Chicago, Illinois: 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Francis Brown, editor, The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon, "*Torah*", p. 435-436, Hendrickson Publishers (Peabody, Massachusetts: 1979).

## **Torah and Commandment Are Not the Same**

“Law” and individual “laws” are related but different. “Law” refers to a body of “laws,” usually legislated statutes. In the same way, God’s law (*Torah*) is revealed through individual “laws” called commandments (*mitzvot*), statutes, judgments, or terms that are similar:

*“You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 18:5).*

“In this light law is often considered to consist of statutes, ordinances, precepts, commandments, and testimonies.”<sup>4</sup>

God’s body of Law (*Torah*) is His revealed will that we must obey, while His commandments are specific directions given to specific persons and categories of persons at specific times in the course of history. So *Torah* is what God wants, and His *mitzvot* are specific commandments that He speaks in order to get us to do His will. The consequence of this difference is that His broad body of law (*Torah*) applies to everyone, while specific commandments of His law may apply to certain persons and not to others (see appendix for a secular analogy).<sup>5</sup>

## **Torah Pre-existed Creation**

The notion that the *Torah* existed before the creation of the world is strongly suggested in *Tanakh*, was written about in ancient Jewish texts, and specifically stated in the New Covenant Scriptures. Writing for *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Warren Harvey references Ben Sira and Proverbs 8:22 ff in order to make his point:

“‘Moses received the *Torah* from Sinai’ (Avot 1:1). Yet there is an ancient tradition that the *Torah* existed in heaven not only before God revealed it to Moses, but even before the world was created (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, p. 1236 (Keter Publishing House: Jerusalem, 1971).”

Harvey (in agreement with other Jewish writers) believes that Proverbs 8:22 ff, written as a personification of wisdom, is actually the personification of a pre-existent *Torah*:

*“The LORD possessed<sup>6</sup> me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth; while as yet He had not made the earth or the fields, or the primeval dust of the world. When He prepared the heavens, I was there, when He drew a circle on the face of the deep, when He established the*

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<sup>4</sup> Harris, supra.

<sup>5</sup> Even when commandments do not apply literally, they nevertheless have application (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

<sup>6</sup> קָנָה hn'q' qanah {kaw-naw'} (Strong’s 7069) is also translated “to get, acquire, create..”

*clouds above, when He strengthened the fountains of the deep, when He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him as a master craftsman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in His inhabited world, and my delight was with the sons of men. Now therefore, listen to me, my children, for blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not disdain it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor from the LORD; but he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death” (Proverbs 8:22-36).*

Harvey’s conclusion of a pre-existent *Torah* is heavily influenced by ancient writings in both *Talmud* and *Midrash* that reference Proverbs 8:22 ff:

“Surely it was taught: Seven things were created before the world was created, and these are they: The *Torah*, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of Messiah. The *Torah*, for it is written, ‘The Lord made me [sc. The *Torah*]<sup>7</sup> as the beginning of his way” (Pes 54a).<sup>8</sup>

“Thus God consulted the *Torah* and created the world, while the *Torah* declares, ‘In the beginning God created’ (1, 1), ‘beginning’ referring to the *Torah*, as the verse, ‘The Lord made me in the beginning of His way (Prov 8:22)” (Gen. R. 1:4).<sup>9</sup>

The New Covenant Scriptures refers to God Himself as the spoken “Word” and one who embodies and speaks the “Word”:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*  
(John 1:1).<sup>10</sup>

And the verses that follow John 1:1 clearly identify Messiah Yeshua as also being the Word:<sup>11</sup>

*“He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. He was*

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<sup>7</sup> Referring to Proverbs 8:22.

<sup>8</sup> The Babylonian Talmud, I. Epstein, ed., vol. Moed 2, p. 265 (Pesachim 54a) (The Soncino Press: London, 1938).

<sup>9</sup> The Midrash Rabbah, H. Freedman and M. Simon, transl., vol. 1, p. 1 (verse 1:4) (The Soncino Press: Jerusalem, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> “Word,” in John 1:1 is the Greek word **λόγος** {logos} (Strong’s 3056), which is the spoken Word or one who embodies it.

<sup>11</sup> Also **λόγος** {logos}.

*in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:2-14).<sup>12</sup>*

When the *logos* spoke, the result was νόμος {*nomos*} (Strong’s 3551), the same Greek word used in Hebrews 8:10 to mean *Torah* when the Book of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:33 in translation. Since the *logos* was pre-existent, it is logical that the *nomos* or *Torah* (Hebrew) came into existence when the *logos* spoke it, and so *Torah* must have either pre-existed or at least come into existence during the creation.

### **Gentiles Were There First**

So *Torah* existed “in the beginning” and, some time thereafter, there were people – nations of them (גוֹי {*goy*} (Strong’s 1471), pl. *goyim* meaning Gentiles<sup>13</sup>) – but no Jews. Why? Because God had not yet “invented” them (Genesis 17:4). Yet, these Gentiles knew all about God’s *Torah*, for we read numerous accounts in Scripture of their compliance and/or lack thereof (e.g. Genesis 3:6, 4:3-4, 5:5, 6:9, etc.).

The word גוֹיִם {*goyim*} appears in Scripture for the first time in Genesis 10:5, proving that Gentiles existed prior to God’s covenant with Abraham, yet after *Torah* was spoken into existence. Additional evidence for *Torah*’s existence before there were any Israelites is found in the Genesis verse 26:5 where God, referring to *Torah*, speaks to Isaac at a time prior to God’s promise to Jacob (Genesis 28:12-15), and prior to Jacob’s encounter with the Angel of the Lord who named him “Israel” (Genesis 32:24-28):

*“because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws {תּוֹרַתִּי and my Torah}” (Genesis 26:5).*

Finally, *Torah* is mentioned seven times in Scripture prior to Israel receiving its covenant of nationhood at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:3-8). These occurrences (Genesis 26:5; Exodus 12:49, 13:9, 16:4, 16:28, 18:16, and 18:20) demonstrate that God’s *Torah* was operative among the Gentiles long before there was a Mosaic Covenant or Law.

### **The New Covenant Resolves All Doubt**

Jeremiah prophesies a New Covenant wherein God’s law will be written on men’s hearts:

*“Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My*

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<sup>12</sup> See also, John 14:6.

<sup>13</sup> The word גוֹיִם {*goyim*} appears in Scripture for the first time in Genesis 10:5, proving their existence prior to God’s covenant with Abraham, yet after *Torah* was spoken into existence.

*covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”* (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Since the word for “law” in this Scripture is תּוֹרָה {*Torah*}, Jeremiah is quoting God as saying “I will put My *Torah* in their minds, and write it on their hearts.” Granted that the New Covenant was made with the houses of Israel and Judah but, through faith-grafting (Romans 11:17, 24), *Torah* written on the heart is now also available to Gentiles (Ephesians 3:6; Galatians 3:14):

*“for when Gentiles, who do not have the law {nomos}, by nature do the things in the law {nomos}, these, although not having the law {nomos}, are a law {nomos} to themselves, who show the work of the law {nomos} written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them..”* (Romans 2:14-15).

### **Torah Is Not a Unique Jewish Distinctive**

Since we have shown that *Torah* predated Israel and the Mosaic Covenant, obedience to *Torah* cannot possibly be claimed by Judaism as a unique Jewish distinctive. That notwithstanding, particular requirements of *Torah* and the manner in which they are obeyed may indeed be identity-dependent. For example I, being male, cannot obey the commandment to “not wear anything that pertains to a man” and, if I were a woman, I could not decline to “put on a woman’s garment” (Deuteronomy 22:5). As a non-*Cohen*, I could not have obeyed commandments of *Torah* that directed priests to conduct certain burnt offerings (e.g. Leviticus 17:6), and if I were a *Cohen*, I could not have obeyed the commandment to allow my land to rest every seven years (Leviticus 25:4). In the same way, certain commandments apply only to Israelites (Jews), certain ones only to Gentiles, and many to both.

One identity-dependent factor for me is that I am living in the twenty-first century and under the New Covenant. Had I lived during the time of Moses or Joshua, I would have been required to bring animal sacrifices to the Tabernacle; as it is, there is no Tabernacle or Temple, and I am therefore prohibited from sacrificing any animal whatsoever. On the other hand, Scripture teaches that there is a need for blood atonement, so I gratefully receive Messiah Yeshua’s sacrifice for remission of sin as my own. Interpreting Mosaic commandments for New Covenant application requires wisdom from the Holy Spirit and, in a large sense, that is what Jeremiah meant when he said that the *Torah* would be placed in our minds and written on our hearts.

In the New Covenant, both Jews and Gentiles need to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit in order to know how to apply commandments that were given under the previous Covenant and many centuries ago. Some commandments can be obeyed today exactly as in the day of Moses, and some need to be adjusted to accommodate our new situation.

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