

# **THE PRIESTLY CALLING OF MESSIANIC JUDAISM**

## **A Biblical Case for Retaining a New Covenant**

### **Messianic Jewish Distinctive**

**by Michael Rudolph**

#### **The Foundational Priestly Covenant**

We read in Genesis that God made a Covenant with Abraham, promising to bless him and his descendants (through Isaac and Jacob) with fruitfulness, with land and with the benefits of being overseen and cared for by God. This is what He said:

*Genesis 17:4-8; 22:18: "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." ... "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."*

While most covenants require the covenanting parties' mutual agreement, it is significant that, in regard to this covenant, God dictated its terms without asking for or requiring Abraham's consent, and seemingly without requiring any response on the part of Abraham's descendants other than physical circumcision. Consequently, God provided no means by which the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob could breach or otherwise abrogate the Covenant as a people. God did, however, provide that individuals would be cut off from the Covenant if they remained uncircumcized in their flesh.

#### **The Second Priestly Covenant**

From the beginning, it was God's desire and purpose that his people Israel would be a "*kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Exodus 19:6) -- priests to each other and to the Gentiles, that the heathen might observe the people of God and choose to come to God by joining Israel. It was for the purpose of drawing the Gentiles -- not excluding them -- that God caused Israel to be set apart and to be distinguished through the Law that was given through Moses. For example, God gave Israel a weekly Sabbath of rest, unique annual feasts, restrictive food laws, special garments (fringes with cords of blue), a moral and civil code, and a sacrificial system for atonement of sin conducted by priests from one of its own tribes. Further, all of these distinguishing features were possessed and exhibited by those who also possessed the distinguishing mark of circumcision.

As part of this first priestly covenant, God established a Tabernacle for sacrifice, within which were several open areas and chambers separated by partitions. Available modern sources indicate that only Israelites could pass through the outer partition into the inner court of the Tabernacle, from which position the burnt-sacrifices could be observed. This is analogous to, and consistent with, what we know of the structure and function of the "Second Temple," where

a wall or gate known as the "*soreg*" separated the Temple Mount (Court of the Gentiles) from the interior areas where the sacrifices were conducted and which were prohibited to Gentiles.

Despite the lack of access by Gentiles, one can derive (both from Scripture and Rabbinical sources) that Gentiles were permitted to bring sacrifices to the Tabernacle and later to the Temple. For example, in referring to animals having certain deformities, Scripture says of Gentiles who might attempt to offer them:

*Leviticus 22:25: "Nor from a foreigner's hand shall you offer any of these as the bread of your God, because their corruption is in them, and defects are in them. They shall not be accepted on your behalf."*

The implication is that foreigners may offer animals for sacrifice if they are unblemished. Also, we read in *Hullin* 13b of the *Talmud*:

"Perhaps this is the meaning [of the *Baraita*]: As regards Israelites, you may accept sacrifices from the righteous but not from the wicked, but as regards gentiles you may not accept sacrifices from them at all? -- You cannot entertain such a view, for it has been taught: [It would have sufficed had Scripture stated], 'a man', why does it state, 'a man, a man'? To include gentiles, that they may bring either votive or freewill-offerings like an Israelite."

There is only one logical way to reconcile the prohibition against Gentiles entering the sanctuary and yet being able to offer sacrifices; that way is through the priestly intercession of an Israelite.

The common sacrifices took place daily, with Israelites offering sacrifices for themselves, for each other, and for Gentiles. They were assisted in their intercession by the Levitical priests who, in turn, were assisted in physical ministry by their fellow Levites. Once each year, however, the entire Levitical priesthood and all of Israel turned their attention to a special intercession. The High Priest began his spiritual and physical preparation on the third day of *Tishri*, and on the 10th of *Tishri*, on *Yom Kippur*, he donned special garments, selected a goat for blood sacrifice, another to carry sins into the wilderness, and entered the "Holy of Holys" for his once-a-year intercession to seek atonement for the sins of the nation of Israel.

### **The Third Priestly Covenant**

It came to pass that Israel fell into significant sin, breached its Covenant given through Moses, and utterly failed in its priestly responsibilities. Even so, as long as even one Israelite remained who was circumcised, Israel as a nation was not capable of breaching the "First Priestly Covenant" – the Abrahamic Covenant – and therefore God gave Israel a replacement for the Covenant that they violated:

*"But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: '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 when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them," says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days,' says the Lord, 'I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.' In that He says, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.'"* (Hebrews 8:6-13).

In understanding this new priestly covenant, one must be clear on four points. First, this "new" covenant is established on the foundation of a new sacrificial system – a system which appropriates Yeshua's death and resurrection as a one-for-all-time sacrifice, sufficient to atone for all sins – past, present and future. Second, this "new" covenant has replaced the Levitical priesthood with a new "Yeshua" priesthood, wherein both Jewish and Gentile believers together serve as priests under Yeshua the new High Priest. Third, the nature of this "new" covenant is to "not" abolish the law, but rather to divinely establish it in our minds and on our hearts. God's complaint with Israel under the "old" covenant was that the people were "lawless"; the "new" covenant must therefore correct this, and re-establish Israel as a people of law based upon their knowledge of and relationship with God. Fourth, the "new" covenant has been given to Israel – not to the church, not to the Gentiles, not to Rabbinic Judaism which has rejected Yeshua, but to the Messianic Jews, God's remnant people Israel, who love God, embrace Yeshua, and bear the foundational covenant mark of circumcision.

### **Some Question a Continuing Role for Israel**

There are some who contend that, in the New Covenant, there is no longer a unique Jewish calling or role reserved for physical Israel, Messianic or not. Those who hold this view tend to consider anything (custom, prayer, lifestyle, apparel, etc.) which makes it possible to distinguish a Messianic Jew from a Gentile believer to be tantamount to re-erecting the middle wall of partition alluded to in Ephesians 2:14. The remaining sections of this paper will respond to this view with clear biblical proof of the continued calling and unique priestly role of Jewish believers in Yeshua.

### **Salvation Is of the Jews**

Under the Mosaic Covenant, Israel served the Gentiles in two basic ways – (1) by being a physical people whom Gentiles could join if they wanted as complete a relationship with God as possible, and (2) by bringing the sacrifices of Gentiles before the Lord, thereby providing a means for Gentile atonement.

Since *"the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable"* (Romans 12:29), it should be no surprise to find Israel continuing these functions, with modification, under the New Covenant. Although it is still possible for a Gentile to become a proselyte to Israel in the old way, the New Covenant opened to Gentiles a way to connect to Israel and receive all of its benefits without joining the Nation physically. The process for this is described in Romans 11, where the Gentiles, described

as branches of a wild olive tree, are able to graft into a cultivated olive tree and become partakers of the root. If the olive tree is representative of circumcised Israel, then the root must be the Foundational Covenant of Abraham. This is likely because of the reference in verse 17 to natural branches (circumcised Israelites) which were broken off because of unbelief, but having the potential to be re-grafted in (verse 23) if they return to faith (in Messiah). Also, verse 22, speaking of Israel, refers to the olive tree as "their own olive tree".

Clearly then, the wild branch being grafted into the good olive tree, contrary to nature (verse 24), is the principal way that Gentiles come to God in the New Covenant. Scripture is plain as to one's need to personally receive Yeshua as Lord in order to have eternal life (e.g. John 3:16), but the mechanism through which this is accomplished is not by a direct connection of each individual to God, but rather a process of grafting into the nation of Israel which alone is the recipient of the Abrahamic Covenant.

In John 4:22 we read the words of Yeshua: "*for salvation is of the Jews.*" Certainly this is so both because Yeshua who brought salvation was Himself a Jew, but also because without circumcised Israel, without the good olive tree, there is no possibility of New Covenant salvation for the Gentile. Consider this. If either every Israelite in the world refused circumcision and was subsequently cut off from his people, or else every Israelite denied the Messiah and died in that condition, there would be no Israel, no olive tree, no broken-off natural branches to come alive, and consequently no salvation for the Gentiles. Gentile salvation depends upon Gentile connection with Israel as much under the New Covenant as it did under the Old Covenant. Salvation is, indeed, "of the Jews".

### **Trustees of the Scriptures and Covenants**

The apostle Paul had no difficulty appreciating the special calling of Israel to be trustee of the covenants and of the written Word of God:

*"What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God."* (Romans 3:1-2).

*"For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen."* (Romans 9:3-5).

As has been shown previously, being the intended recipient and trustee of all of the covenants with God – the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, and the New Covenant, all priestly covenants, gives Israelites a very responsible role in priestly ministry in that their existence and visible identity is crucial to God's blessings finding their way to the Gentiles and to the outermost parts of the earth.

### **A Beacon to Lead the Gentiles to God**

A decidedly priestly role for Messianic Jews, and one which requires that they be clearly visible

and distinguishable, is the role of reflecting Messiah's light so that the Gentiles can find Messiah by heading toward the light of Messianic Israel. The prophet Isaiah revealed this beacon-of-light ministry of Israel while Israel was still in darkness:

*"Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the Lord will arise over you, and his glory will be seen upon you. The gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." (Isaiah 60:1-3).*

Lest one now think that Israel's responsibility to the Gentiles was only under the Old Covenant, let us consider carefully the words of Zechariah:

*"Thus says the Lord of hosts: `In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man saying, `Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zechariah 8:23).*

### **A Loyal Witness In a Satanic War**

The Scriptures which follow, clearly identify Messianic Israel as a witness people, sealed by God, and called in the last days to stand firm in obedience to God even while the evil one launches a war against them.

*"Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, saying, `Do not harm the earth, the sea or the trees till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.' And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four Thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed." (Revelation 7:2-4).*

*"Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle that she might fly into the wilderness to her place where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the Commandments of God and have the testimony of Yeshua the Messiah." (Revelation 12:13-17).*

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