

The Messiah, his Disciples, and the Law of Moses

Philip Duncan Peters (uncanpeters12@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,

“And [I come] confirming that which was before me, the Torah, and to make lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you. And I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. So reverence God and obey me.”¹

In a few words this verse summarises 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 Testament.² In this paper, we will seek to gain a better understanding of this relationship and some of its nuances.

The Torah

¹ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (Ed.). *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (p. 128). HarperOne. Kindle Edition, 2015.

² 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].

Duncan: Messiah and the Law of Moses

The identity of the ancient Israelites as a nation was based on the Torah, which they believed came through the Prophet Moses. The Torah contained God's covenant with the Israelites,³ and the covenant included a whole system of laws. These laws were the covenant requirements of God on the people.

Torah means instruction or teaching.⁴ 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 the other nations.⁵ They were to be separate, distinct, "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.⁶

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",⁷ and this promise is reiterated to Isaac and to Jacob.⁸

In the short to medium term, this 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.⁹

We turn now to the New Testament, and to Jesus and 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.

³ It also contains large sections of narrative. In fact, the first one and a half out of five books in the Torah contain a story, beginning with the creation of the universe and reaching the account of God making a covenant with the Israelites, and there are also narrative sections in the remaining three and a half books of the Torah.

⁴ Harris R. Laird; Archer, Gleason L; Waltke, Bruce K. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (p.403-404).

⁵ See Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (p.52-57).

⁶ Leviticus 20:26, Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011. See also, Exodus 22:31, Leviticus 11:41, 45: 19:2; 20:7, Deuteronomy 7:6: 14:2

⁷ Genesis 22:18. See also Genesis 12:3; 18:18.

⁸ Genesis 26:4; 28:14.

⁹ Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

Scene 1: Messiah Jesus and the Torah

Jesus Christ was born an Israelite and was brought up observing the Torah.¹⁰ According to the Gospel¹¹ narratives, we find him at once in conflict with aspects of the religious tradition, and yet also making repeated appeal to the Torah.

Out of many passages that speak of Jesus' relationship to the Torah,¹² 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 honours 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.”¹³

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, “Honour 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

¹⁰ Eg. Luke 2:21-24, 41-52.

¹¹ The English word “Gospel” translates the Greek, εὐαγγέλιον *euangelion*, meaning good news. The word *Injil* in Arabic is derived from *euangelion*. There is sometimes confusion in Muslim-Christian dialogue because Muslims conceive of one book, the Injil, whereas Christians commonly talk of “four Gospels”. Strictly speaking, Christians also believe there is one Gospel, which includes four accounts of the life of Jesus Christ.

¹² 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.

¹³ Isaiah 29:13.

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 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.’¹⁴

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

In the first scene in v1-13, 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” (v3, 5) which the Pharisees regarded as an oral Torah, but which Jesus regarded as merely human traditions, for which the Pharisees had let go of the commands of God (v8). Jesus here is upholding and defending the Torah as the word of God, and severely criticises the Pharisees for nullifying the word of God by their human traditions (v8, 13).

Then Jesus tells the crowd, ‘There’s nothing that goes into a person from the outside that can defile. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them’ (v15).

Later, he 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

¹⁴ Unless stated otherwise, translations from the Bible are my own.

into the stomach, and then it passes out of the body' (v18-19). And then there is an editorial comment, 'In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean' (v19).

This seems rather strange: Jesus has been critical of the Pharisees for nullifying the word of God, and now he appears to be doing the same in relation to the food laws in the Torah.¹⁵ Of course, this is not explicit in Jesus' words, but it is apparently how he is interpreted by Mark, the writer of this Book, who inserts the comment, 'In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.'¹⁶

Orthodox Jewish scholar, Professor Daniel Boyarin has an alternative interpretation of both Jesus and Mark. He recognises that the standard Christian interpretation of Mark 7:19 is that Jesus declared all foods kosher. But 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...¹⁷

The Torah lists certain foods that are forbidden.¹⁸ These are the kosher rules or dietary laws. An entirely different set of rules deal with purity and impurity.¹⁹ 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 the eater's life and certainly did not render the body of the eater impure. The pharisaic tradition seems to have

¹⁵ France R.T. *The Gospel of Mark*, (p.278).

¹⁶ It is important to recognise that in most strands of Christian theology, Mark is viewed as writing under the inspiration of God.

¹⁷ Boyarin, Daniel. *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (Location 1543). See also Freidenreich, David M. *Food and Table Fellowship*, in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (p. 650).

¹⁸ See Leviticus 11:1-47; 20:25-26, Deuteronomy 14:1-21.

¹⁹ See Leviticus 12-15.

extended that prohibition against eating defiled kosher food and also rendered the eater him- or herself impure through this eating. The Pharisees sought to convince other Jews to adhere to their new standards of strictness²⁰

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.²¹

“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.”²²

Boyarin's thesis should be taken seriously and has a lot to commend it. It fits well in the context of Mark 7, particularly the earlier part where Jesus criticises 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,²³ by which time the issue of clean and unclean food was well known throughout the early Christian communities.²⁴ The 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, Jesus 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.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid, Location 1557-1566.

²¹ Ibid, Location 1571.

²² Ibid, Location 1637.

²³ Although some scholars date it earlier, in the 50s or even 40s of the First Century. See Carson, D. A./ Moo, Douglas, J. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (p.179-182).

²⁴ See Romans 14:1-23, written by Paul c. 57 CE.

²⁵ Klawans, Jonathan, *The Law in The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (p. 820). Also, France, Op. cit. (p.278).

Rather, Mark 7:19 is an inference that Mark draws out from Jesus' words in v15, "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," – words and a principle that Mark was applying to a later situation and controversy.

This leads us to the next passage and event which involves some of Jesus' earliest disciples.

Scene 2: What God makes clean

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

Up to this point around the mid to late 30s, the Messiah Jesus movement is 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.²⁶

Jesus had commissioned his disciples to take his message to all nations, and to make disciples of those nations.²⁷ Indeed, there were passages in the Prophets, the ancient Scriptures of the Jews, that spoke of the nations turning to God, and of the Messiah's rule extending to the ends of the earth.²⁸ But 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.²⁹

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

²⁶ Acts 8:4-25.

²⁷ Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:47-48, Acts 1:8.

²⁸ For example, Psalm 2:8; 22:27-28; 67:1-7, Isaiah 2:1; 42:6; 45:22; 49:6, Zechariah 2:11.

²⁹ Genesis 17:10-14, Exodus 12:48.

of the Israelites, and accept the Torah and the Books of the Prophets as his word. However, they stopped short of becoming Jews. Circumcision was abhorrent to Greco-Romans, and 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 CE authors Josephus (Josephus, Ag. Ap. 2.14) and Philo (QG III, 48ff.)³⁰

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.³¹

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.”³²

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.³³

⁹ The next day, as they were travelling and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof about midday to pray. ¹⁰ He became very hungry and wanted something to eat. While they were preparing food, Peter went into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven open and something like a huge sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners. ¹² In it was every kind of four-footed animal, and also reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice said to him, ‘Get up, Peter, kill and eat!’

¹⁴ ‘Certainly not, Lord!’ Peter replied. ‘I’ve never eaten anything that’s defiled or unclean.’

¹⁵ The voice came to him a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not consider defiled.’

³⁰ Hoffman, Lawrence, *Circumcision in The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (p.826).

See also Hodges, Frederick M. *The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme*, in THE BULLETIN OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE, <http://www.cirp.org/library/history/hodges2/> accessed 29th July 2020.

³¹ See Witherington, *ibid*, p. 341-344.

³² Acts 10:2.

³³ Acts 10:3-8.

¹⁶ This all happened three times, and then suddenly the whole thing was taken back up into heaven.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was also called Peter was staying there as a guest.

¹⁹ Peter was still giving careful thought to the vision when the Spirit said to him, 'Listen! Three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Go with them and don't pass judgement on them, because I have sent them.'³⁴

Peter and some other Jewish believers in Messiah Jesus go to Caesarea with the men and enter the house of Cornelius, where a large group of his family and friends are gathered. Peter says to them,

'You yourselves know that it's 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. ²⁹ So when you sent for me, I came and I didn't raise any objections.'³⁵

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

'I now grasp the truth, that God does not show favouritism. ³⁵ He welcomes the person who fears him and does what is right, whatever race they are from.'³⁶

Peter then goes on to speak about Jesus the Messiah, and how sins can be forgiven through him.³⁷

Next we read:

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came down on all who were listening to his message. ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ 'Who can stop these people receiving ritual washing with water?'³⁸ They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.'³⁹

³⁴ Acts 10:9-20.

³⁵ Acts 10:28-29.

³⁶ Acts 10:34-35.

³⁷ Acts 10:34-43.

³⁸ Or *baptism*.

³⁹ Acts 10:44-47.

This refers to the experience of the earliest Jewish disciples at the Jewish feast of Pentecost, 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, which were understood by the diaspora Jews who were present in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost.⁴⁰

Peter and his Jewish companions witness something parallel and equivalent to their own experience now happening to these non-Jews. They understand these events as Divine revelation. God is demonstrating that a new era had commenced, in which God accepts people from every nation who turn to him – and he accepts them *as they are*, not by them first becoming 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 way.⁴¹

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.' (v15)

There were, in fact, all kinds of animals in the large sheet, presumably including some kosher animals, which Peter could have slaughtered and eaten. But to Peter's mind (and to those of other First Century Jews) the clean or kosher animals were contaminated by contact with the unclean animals in the huge sheet.⁴²

However, the main point of the vision is not about food – it is about people. That is the lesson Peter takes from it.

⁴⁰ Acts 2:1-4.

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² Witherington (Op. cit. p.350) remarks,

'more attention needs to be paid to the exact response of Peter – he refers to both the common (κοινον) and the unclean (ακαθαρτον). The former probably refers to something that could be defiled by association with something unclean, the latter to something inherently unclean.'

‘You yourselves know that it’s 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.’²⁹ So when you sent for me, I came and I didn’t raise any objections...

‘I now grasp the truth, that God does not show favouritism.’³⁵ 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.⁴³ In Deuteronomy 14, food rules are catalogued in v.3-21. Just before, in v.2, it says,

You are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the people on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.⁴⁴

And at the end in v.21 it says,

But you are a people holy to the Lord your God.⁴⁵

By the First Century CE, many Jews were actually stricter than the Torah on contact with non-Jewish nations: Jews were not to mix with non-Jews.⁴⁶ Immediately following this narrative in Acts, we read of Peter being criticised by some of the circumcised believers,

‘You entered the home of uncircumcised men and ate with them.’⁴⁷

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 when giving hospitality to a revered Jewish guest such as Peter, that he would have provided him with kosher food. The nub of the criticism is having social contact with non-Jews. This, 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.

⁴³ Wright, Christopher, *Deuteronomy*, (p.181-182), Wenham, Gordon, *Leviticus*, (p170-171).

⁴⁴ Holy Bible: New International Version, British Text eBook Edition, 2011.

⁴⁵ Ibid. See also Leviticus 11:43-45.

⁴⁶ 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.”

⁴⁷ Acts 11:3.

Scene 3: The Jerusalem Council – Should non-Jewish disciples observe the Torah?

Next we jump forward another decade or so to 49 CE. Much has happened in the intervening decade. In Antioch in Syria, a thriving “Christian”⁴⁸ A community 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, Saul/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 is today 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 visit and claim 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 book of Galatians to counter this teaching, but the matter comes to a head at what is called the Council of Jerusalem in 49 CE.

The issue is; how can a person be saved? We need to understand what they meant by “saved”.⁴⁹

They meant first of all, the widespread Jewish view that salvation will take place at the day of resurrection and judgement, when God’s kingdom or reign will come in completeness and all opposition to that reign will be utterly defeated. God’s people will be raised to eternal life⁵⁰ and the whole of creation will be restored, renewed and healed. To be saved is to take part in the resurrection to eternal life.⁵¹

In addition, aspects of salvation reach into the present age; to be saved means to have one’s sins forgiven;⁵² sometimes it involves physical healing.⁵³ Acts 15 provides an account of the Council of Jerusalem.

¹ 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.’

⁴⁸ In Acts 11:26 we read, “The disciples were first called ‘Christians’ in Antioch.” This was probably in the late 30s of the First Century CE. The term “Christian” is used only three times in the entire New Testament, and in each case, it is what outsiders call the disciples.

⁴⁹ 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).

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² See for example, Luke 1:77

⁵³ See for example, Luke 8:48, Acts 4:10.

² 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...

After they arrived in Jerusalem,

⁵ ... 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.'

⁶ The apostles and elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ 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.

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

⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed his approval of them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, but he made their hearts clean through faith. ¹⁰ 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?⁵⁴ ¹¹ No! It's through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we believe in order to be saved, just as they do too.'

In other words, salvation is a free gift, received by faith, not something one achieves for oneself by observing Torah.

Later in the proceedings, James, a prominent leader⁵⁵ in the Jerusalem community speaks. He refers back to Peter's experience and claims it agrees with their prophets of old. He quotes the 8th Century BCE Prophet Amos:⁵⁶

¹⁶ After this I will return
and rebuild the destroyed dwelling of David.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
And I will restore it
¹⁷ so that the rest of the human race may seek the Lord,
even all the nations who belong to me,

⁵⁴ Marshall comments that, "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).

⁵⁵ This James is commonly identified as being a brother of Jesus Christ, see 1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19.

⁵⁶ Amos 9:11-12 Septuagint.

says the Lord who does these things...

¹⁹ 'Therefore, I give my judgement,' James continued, 'that we should not make it more difficult for people from the nations who are turning to God. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ For the Torah that came through Moses has been proclaimed in every city from ancient times, since it is read aloud in the synagogues every Sabbath.'

The council agrees, and they write and send the letter, in the terms James proposes.

James understands the events Peter describes in the case of 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: that not only Jews but also non-Jews could become part of God's covenant people.

James also sees this as a fulfilment of the Books of the Prophets. There are a number of similar passages he could have quoted, but he selects Amos 9:11-12 in the Greek version⁵⁷ that speaks of the rest of the human race seeking the Lord and of all the nations who belong to him⁵⁸.

This means that many of the regulations of the covenant made with the Israelites through Moses were always meant to be temporary. They were for the period when the covenant people were largely from one race – the Israelites. God was now demonstrating through various signs that God's saving purpose was for people from every nation – and from every nation *as they are* – not as people who have become Jews through conversion and circumcision. In addition to the signs, 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 restrictions 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 in the Greco-Roman

⁵⁷ 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).

⁵⁸ Literally, 'all the nations upon whom my name is called'.

world.⁵⁹ Although sexual immorality in general is forbidden in the rest of the New Testament, that mentioned here particularly relates to temple prostitution.⁶⁰ Witherington provides examples from the culture of strangling animals and drinking blood as part of temple rituals.⁶¹ The issue is one of *venue* (idol temples) rather than *menu* (food). So the requirements here are the basic ethical requirements of monotheism. In turning to God (v19) these non-Jews are turning away from idols.

Scene 4: A Torah-observing community of Messiah Jesus followers.

Our fourth and final scene takes place almost a decade later, in 57 CE. In the years since the Jerusalem Council, Paul and various companions have 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. Paul organises a collection from the believing communities he has helped establish for the believers in Jerusalem and Judea. He and his companions have made the long journey to Jerusalem. We take up the reading in Acts 21:17-26.

¹⁷ When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters welcomed us warmly. ¹⁸ The next day, Paul went with us to see James. All the elders were present too. ¹⁹ Paul greeted them and began to give a detailed report of what God had done among the nations through his service.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² What should we do? They’ll certainly hear that you have come. ²³ So do what we tell you. There are four men here with us who have taken a vow. ²⁴ Take these men with you and go through

⁵⁹ Witherington, Ben, Op. cit. p.461-464. See also Thompson, Alan, J. *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus* (p.184-187).

⁶⁰ 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 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).

⁶¹ Op. cit. p.464.

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.²⁵ 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 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. At best this is a gross and inaccurate caricature. The reality is far more complex and nuanced, as is Paul’s relationship with his Jewish heritage.⁶² Paul regarded his own and his colleagues’ teaching about Messiah Jesus as the true fulfilment of the Israelites’ history and of God’s revelation.⁶³ Here we see 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 accepted in the fellowship.
- But Paul never told Jewish believers in Messiah Jesus to abandon their Jewish heritage.⁶⁴
- Paul himself was willing to go through a purification ritual that was, and that appeared to be, very much a part of the fabric of the old covenant, to demonstrate his adherence to the Torah.⁶⁵

⁶² Witherington comments that, to the very end of Acts, “Paul will be arguing to various audiences that he is a loyal Jew and his mission to the Gentiles was not an anti-Jewish one: he opposed neither his people nor their keeping of the Law.” Op. cit. p.644.

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).

⁶³ Later in Acts, Paul says, “I believe everything that is in agreement with the Torah and the Books of the Prophets” (24:14) ... “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 nations” (26:22-23).

⁶⁴ In Acts 16:3, Paul actually has Timothy, whose mother was Jewish, circumcised in order to avoid offence to Jews in the region.

⁶⁵ 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

How do we piece all this together? What did God require of Messiah-followers, both Jewish and non-Jewish?

The old covenant contained a detailed package regulating what was required to be part of God's people, beginning with circumcision for males, followed by a life following detailed rules and rituals laid down in the Torah. Indeed, these rules and rituals, particularly circumcision, Sabbath observance, and kosher food laws defined what it meant to be an Israelite. People could and did become members of God's people by becoming Jews, by observing all the laws in the Torah.

However, in the new covenant era brought in by the death, resurrection and ascension into heaven of the Messiah Jesus, and the sending of the Holy Spirit on his disciples, all this began to change. All the earliest disciples were devout Jews, so only something of profound significance would lead them to change their view on what was necessary to become part of the people of God. This is what they believed had happened in the signs that we have looked at, as recorded in Acts 10. But through these signs, and through re-reading the Books of the Prophets, 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.

But if there was now a new covenant, in which people could become God's people without becoming Jews and observing the entire Law of Moses, where did that leave Jews who followed Jesus as Messiah?

It seems that 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, honouring 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 are communities of Messiah followers all around the Mediterranean, the majority of whom are non-Jews. On the other hand, in Jerusalem there is a community of "many thousands of Jews (who) have believed, and they are all passionately devoted to the Torah." Their faith is in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and king, *and* they are zealous for the Torah. What unites these two groups is their belief in and allegiance to Jesus as Messiah, Lord and Saviour, but otherwise they are very diverse.

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

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).

Duncan: Messiah and the Law of Moses

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

Jerusalem would be devastated in 70 CE by the Romans. Over the ensuing decades and centuries there was an increasing polarisation between Christians and Jews, that eventually forced people to choose one path or the other. The one thing both sides agreed 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 are accepted, was turned on its head by later Christianity, to become Jews are not accepted (unless they renounced their Jewishness). As a result, there was a sad loss of rich diversity within Christianity.⁶⁶

Based on the glimpse we get of Messiah Jesus followers in Jerusalem around 57 CE, this later polarisation should be seen as a tragedy and a departure from the teaching and practice of Jesus and his earliest disciples.

Conclusion

We began with a quotation from the Qur'an, Āl-'Imrān 3:50, which succinctly describes Jesus and his disciples' relationship to the Torah. On the one hand, the Messiah Jesus says,

And [I come] confirming that which was before me, the Torah...

We see this in both Jesus and his early disciples. They revere the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures as the word of God, which they frequently appeal to as the ultimate authority. Jesus claimed to be the one who came not to abolish but to fulfil the Torah and the Prophets.⁶⁷

On the other hand, in Āl-'Imrān 3:50, Jesus continues,

... and to make lawful unto you part of that which was forbidden unto you.

⁶⁶ 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 & Siquist, Scott W. *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume 1*, (p.129-136).

⁶⁷ Matthew 5:17.

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 bring in a new era and a new covenant, which included people from all nations as the people of God, without them having to adhere to 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.

Bibliography

- Apocrypha*, New Revised Standard Version, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1989.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ*. The New Press. 2012 Kindle Edition.
- Carson, D. A./ Moo, Douglas, J. *An Introduction to the New Testament*, IVP Apollos, Nottingham, UK, 2005.
- France R.T. *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark*, Paternoster, Carlisle, UK, 2002.
- Freidenreich, David M. *Food and Table Fellowship*, in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition, 2017.
- Green, Joel B. “*Salvation to the end of the earth’ (Acts 13:47): God as saviour in the Acts of the Apostles*, in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, eds. Marshall, Howard I. and Peterson David, Eerdmans, Grand rapids, Michigan, 1998.
- Harris R. Laird; Archer, Gleason L; Waltke, Bruce K. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1980.
- Hodges, Frederick M. *The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme*, in *THE BULLETIN OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE*, Volume 75: Pages 375–405, Fall 2001 <http://www.cirp.org/library/history/hodges2/>
- Hoffman, Lawrence, *Circumcision in The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford University Press. 2017 Kindle Edition.
- Holy Bible*: New International Version, British Text eBook Edition, 2011.
- Irvin, Dale T & Sunquist, Scott W. *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume 1*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 2001.

Duncan: Messiah and the Law of Moses

- Lumbard, Joseph E. B. *The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions*, in Nasr, Seyyed Hossein; Dagli, Caner K.; Dakake, Maria Massi; Lumbard, Joseph E.B.; Rustom, Mohammed [2015-11-17]. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* [Kindle Locations 79106-79108]. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.
- Klawans, Jonathan, *The Law in The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Oxford University Press. 2017 Kindle Edition.
- Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts*, IVP, Leicester, 1980.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (Ed.). *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. HarperOne. 2015 Kindle Edition.
- Peterson, David, G. *The Acts of the Apostles (The Pillar New Testament Commentary)*, Apollos, Nottingham, 2009.
- Saeed, Abdullah, *How Muslims view the Scriptures of the People of the Book: Towards a Reassessment?* Chapter 10 in 'Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World: Conflict, Dialogue, and Transformation'. Palgrave Macmillan. 2011 Kindle Edition.
- Thompson, Alan, J. *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus*, IVP Apollos, Nottingham, UK, 2011.
- Wenham, Gordon, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Leviticus*, (p170-171), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979.
- Williams, David J. *New International Biblical Commentary: Acts*, Hendrickson, Massachusetts, 1990.
- Witherington, Ben III. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1998.
- Wright, Christopher, *New International Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*, Hendrickson, Massachusetts, 1996.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (p.52-57), IVP, Leicester, 2004.
- Wright, Tom, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, London, 2007 (Kindle edition).
- Wright, Tom, *Paul: A Biography*, SPCK, London, 2018.