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MINISTRIES

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The 7 Laws of Noah

In Messianic, Hebrew Roots, and Jewish circles, you might hear about something called the Noahide Laws or the 7 Laws of Noah. There are various teachings and opinions concerning this topic, and we’re often asked our perspective and whether or not this concept of the Noahide Laws is relevant to believers today. But before we unpack that question, here’s a quick summary of the Noahide Laws.

According to mainstream Jewish tradition, many of the instructions contained in the Torah, such as the Sabbath day, festival celebrations, and certain dietary laws, are given only to the Jewish people. But there are seven universal laws that God gave to all of mankind. These universal commandments, according to Jewish tradition, are known as “The Noahide Laws” or the seven laws of Noah. These laws are referenced in the Jewish Talmud:

“Our Rabbis taught: seven precepts were the sons of Noah commanded: social laws; to refrain from blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, robbery, and eating flesh cut from a living animal.”

- *b. Sanhedrin 56a*

In mainstream Jewish tradition, the non-Jews who observe these seven laws are known as “Noahides.” The Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period defines “Noahides” as such:

“Non-Jews who observe the seven laws that apply to the descendants of Noah (namely, all peoples). According to rabbinic authorities, these include the following prohibitions: idolatry, adultery and incest, bloodshed, blasphemy, robbery, social injustice, and eating the flesh of a limb cut from a living animal)

- *“Noahides,” in Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period, p. 456*

In the middle ages, influential Jewish teacher, Rambam, taught that Noahides would inherit eternal life on the basis of their belief in the God of Israel and their observance of these seven laws:

Anyone who accepts upon himself and carefully observes the Seven Commandments is of the

Righteous of the Nations of the World and has a portion in the World to Come. This is as long as he accepts and performs them because (he truly believes that) it was the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Who commanded them in the Torah, and that it was through Moses our Teacher we were informed that the Sons of Noah had already been commanded to observe them.

-Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 8:11

In summary, today's rabbinic Judaism teaches that Noahides—that is, non-Jews who observe the seven traditional laws of Noah—will have a place in the world to come.

Obviously, this doctrine is not compatible with the teaching of Scripture as it concerns salvation.

Whether Jew or Gentile, the Scriptures teach that we inherit eternal life by grace through faith in Israel's Messiah, Yeshua, not by our observance of any commandments:

Ephesians 2:8

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

While we agree that genuine saving faith leads to faithful obedience to God's commandments, rabbinic Judaism's emphasis on the observance of certain commandments, as being key to earning a place in the world to come, is certainly problematic.

This shouldn't come as a surprise since mainstream Judaism rejects Yeshua the Messiah, and the Scriptures teach that Yeshua is the only way to the Father, so obviously we are going to differ with mainstream Judaism in our views concerning salvation.

But are there other aspects of the Noahide Laws that perhaps are grounded in Scripture—not with regard to salvation but maybe with regard to faith expression?

For instance, is there any validity to the idea that only the seven Noahide laws apply to Gentiles while the Torah's instructions concerning the Sabbath, festivals, and dietary laws apply only to Jews?

You might be surprised to learn that this idea is actually quite popular among certain segments of Messianic Judaism, and that is because they've been largely influenced by mainstream Jewish tradition.

But our primary concern as believers shouldn't be what Jewish or Christian tradition teaches, but what the Scriptures say.

So is there any indication *in the Scriptures* that Gentiles are only to keep the traditional seven laws of Noah? No. In fact, the Scriptures teach just the opposite. It's always been God's heart that the nations would draw near to Him and come into full relationship with Him through His commandments. We see this all throughout the Torah.

Exodus 20:8-10

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord (YHWH) your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.”

Right here in the midst of the Ten Commandments we can clearly see that the Sabbath isn't given only to Israel. The sojourner, who is not a native-born Israelite, is also commanded to keep the Sabbath.

We see the same thing with the other biblical festivals.

Passover:

Numbers 9:14

“And if **a stranger** sojourns among you and would keep the Passover to the Lord, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its rule, so shall he do. **You shall have one statute, both for the sojourner and for the native**”

Unleavened Bread:

Exodus 12:19

“For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, **whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land**”

Yom Kippur:

Leviticus 16:29

“And it shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, **either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you**”

Sukkot:

Deuteronomy 16:14

“You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, **the sojourner**, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns”

We even see this with sacrifices and offerings made at the Tabernacle or Temple:

Numbers 15:15-16

“For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you, a statute forever throughout your generations. You and the sojourner shall be alike before the Lord. One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.”

We can go on and on. It's clear throughout the Torah that God's commandments are not given to the native-born Israel exclusively, but are intended for everyone who follows the God of Israel.

However, some object to the plain reading of these verses and insist that the “stranger” or the “sojourner” in these passages refers to a proselyte—that is, a Gentile who has formally converted to Judaism.

“Stranger,” “sojourner,” “alien,” etc., come from the Hebrew word *ger*. It is argued that since the Septuagint translates the Hebrew word *ger* into Greek *proselutos* [**prah-suh-loo-toes**], which came to

mean, “proselyte,” that we ought to understand *ger* in these passages to mean a Gentile who has formally converted to Judaism. And indeed, it is argued that this understanding has apostolic authority since the Septuagint influenced the apostles’ interpretation of *ger* since the apostles often quoted from the Septuagint.

First Fruits of Zion is representative of this position. Here is what they’ve written concerning one of the passages we’ve read earlier:

The Greek Septuagint gives us an insight into how the apostolic community would have understood and interpreted the passage. Under the influence of the LXX (the Septuagint), they would have interpreted Numbers 15:15-16 to read as follows: “As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for Jews and for the proselyte, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as a Jew is, so shall the proselyte be before the LORD. There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for Jews and for the proselyte who sojourns with you” (Numbers 15:15-16, paraphrased) [...] Therefore, the Apostolic-Era reading of the Numbers 15 passage does not help clarify the question of a Gentile believer’s relationship to Torah. **It would apply to a Gentile who had become legally Jewish through conversion.**

-Boaz Michael and D. Thomas Lancaster, “One Law and the Messianic Gentile” (Messiah Journal 101) p. 53

In short, some people believe that you are only to keep these commandments in the Torah if you’re born Jewish or have become Jewish through rabbinic ritual conversion. However, there are several problems with this perspective.

First, while the Septuagint was certainly popular among first century Jews, including the apostles, there’s no reason to assume that the apostles would have automatically favored the Septuagint over the Hebrew text with regard to how a text should be interpreted.

Second, there’s no reason to assume that the apostles would have always agreed with the Septuagint. It’s the same with our various English translations today. We might often use a particular English translation, like KJV, NIV, or ESV, but that doesn’t mean that we always agree with how that particular translation has rendered the text in certain places.

Third, there’s no reason to assume that the Greek word *proselutos* should necessarily be interpreted as a Gentile who has formally converted to Judaism. Indeed, there are several instances in the Septuagint where this word is used of ethnic Israel:

Exodus 23:9 LXX

“You shall not oppress a sojourner [*proselutos*]. You know the heart of a sojourner [*proselutos*], for you were sojourners [*proselutoi*] in the land of Egypt.”

Leviticus 19:34 LXX

“The foreigner [*proselutos*] who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers [*proselutoi*] in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD (YHWH) your God.”

Leviticus 25:23 LXX

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers [*proselutoi*] and sojourners with me.”

Since the Greek word *proselutos* is used of ethnic Israel in these verses, it obviously does not always mean “proselyte”—that is, a Gentile convert to Judaism. Therefore, we cannot assume that whenever the apostles read *proselutos* in the Septuagint that they interpreted it as a Gentile convert to Judaism.

But wait! There’s more!

Isaiah 56:6-7

“Also **the sons of the foreigner** who join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants—everyone **who keeps from defiling the Sabbath**, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called **a house of prayer for all nations**.

What’s interesting about this passage is that the Hebrew word for “sons of the foreigner” is *b’nei haneichar*. In the Septuagint, this is rendered *allogenes*, which literally means “another race.” The passage indicates that God desires these foreigners to keep the Sabbath and bring offerings to the Temple, which are commandments that the later rabbis believed to be only for the ethnic Jews and proselytes. And yet, the translators of the Septuagint did not use the Greek word *proselutos* here.

So even if we accepted the faulty premise that *proselutos* necessarily means “Gentile convert to Judaism,” it still wouldn’t logically follow that only ethnic Jews and proselytes are to keep certain commandments since, in the Greek Septuagint, Isaiah 56 applies these commandments to the non-proselytes.

As we can see, God’s heartbeat is for not only Jews but also Gentiles to draw near and keep the Sabbath. Isaiah 56 even says that God desires the Jerusalem Temple to be a place for “all nations” to come worship. Therefore, insisting that the Sabbath belongs only to the Jewish people is to exclude those whom God Himself wants to bless with His day of rest.

So the *TANAKH*—the Old Testament—is pretty clear that there is one God-given standard for both Jews and Gentiles. No concept of so-called “Noahide laws” is evident anywhere in the text. Rather, verse after verse appears to affirm the opposite. But did something change in the New Testament?

Some have suggested that the apostolic verdict in Acts 15:20 parallels some of the seven Noahide laws and perhaps reflects an earlier version of them.

Acts 15:19-20

“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”

Based on this passage, it is presumed that an early version of the Noahide laws existed in first century Judaism and that the apostles actually affirmed the idea that Gentiles need only to follow these laws.

If you’re interested, we take an in-depth look at Acts 15 in our teaching, [Acts 15: Obedience or Legalism?](#)

Right now, let’s consider if it is reasonable to assume that the Noahide laws existed in the first century.

This doesn't seem likely when you learn that such a doctrine didn't even exist until the 4th century AD and probably much later. In his peer-reviewed Academic paper on the subject, Messianic theologian Tim Hegg writes:

“The earliest clear reference to the Noachide Laws is found in the Tosefta. The Tosefta embodies the additional comments and commentary to the Mishnah, traditionally thought to be gathered together by the 4th Century CE. However, there is no clear historical evidence that a body of rabbinic halachah, later known as the “Tosefta,” existed as a recognized, authoritative standard in the 4th Century CE, and it is very likely that such a collection of halachic formulations and discussions was not a “published” reality until much later.”

-Tim Hegg, *“Do the Seven go to Heaven?”* p. 3

In his paper, Hegg goes on further to prove through the rabbinic literature that the Noahide laws didn't even function as a set of commands given to Gentiles for righteousness. This idea didn't come about until centuries later.

Hegg writes:

“Nowhere in the early rabbinic literature is there contained the teaching that Gentiles who live in accordance with the Noachide Laws (however they may be formulated) are reckoned as righteous, given a legal status within the community of Israel, and therefore have a place in the world to come. Such an extrapolation is found only in the later rabbinic teachings (as that of Rambam). To the extent that the Sages developed the Noachide Laws, they did so in order to develop halachah for social interaction between Jews and Gentiles...”

-Tim Hegg, *“Do the Seven go to Heaven”* p. 16

Thus, since the modern concept of Noahides in mainstream Judaism didn't come into the scene until many centuries after first century, it's impossible for such a concept to have had influence in the first century debates about Gentile Torah observance.

Hegg writes:

Interpreting the edict of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 on the basis of the much later Noachide laws is both anachronistic and a misunderstanding of the function of the Noachide laws in the post-destruction, emerging rabbinic Judaisms. For not only did the formulation of the Noachide Laws await the post-destruction era, but even when they were formulated within the rabbinic theology of the much later centuries, they did not function as a separate body of laws given to Gentiles as a means of attaining a righteous status, nor even as an actual code of ethics for Gentiles. It is wrong, then, to conclude that the Jerusalem council gave the gentile believers a minimal list of commandments, exempting them from the full expression of God's will in the Torah.

-Tim Hegg, *“Do the Seven go to Heaven”* p. 20

As we can see, Acts 15 gives us no basis for adopting the modern Jewish concept of Noahide laws in our faith expression. In fact, the New Testament in other places completely affirms God's desire in Isaiah 56—that the foreigners would draw near to God and fully obey His commandments, including the Sabbath, festivals, and dietary instructions.

In Matthew 5:17-20, Yeshua affirms even the least of God's commandments in the Torah. And in Matthew 28:19-20, He commands His disciples to teach "all nations" everything He commanded, which would include even the least of God's commandments in the Torah.

In conclusion, those who suggest that the modern concept of the Noahide Laws should have relevance to us as believers are basing their views on modern rabbinic tradition that was invented many centuries after the New Testament. The Scriptures teach against the modern concept of the Noahide Laws in that God desires all people, Jew and Gentile, to fully obey Him. Our final authority ought to be the Scriptures, not Christian or Jewish tradition.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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