

A Two Covenant Theology

By Claude P. Scheiner, Jr.

According to the writers of the Babylonian Talmud, the Torah was only for Israel and the Laws of Noah were given to the Gentiles. They believed that all Israel had a place in the world to come by their heritage alone, but that Gentiles needed to observe a smaller subset of related laws in order to obtain righteousness. These guidelines became known as the “Noachide Laws.” Nothing even close to the “Noachide Laws” exists in the earlier Mishnah, and is certainly not a product of the Tanakh. However, this teaching has allowed the heresy of two paths to G-d to be taught, so that evangelism to Jewish people becomes unnecessary. Christians are “off the hook” and Jewish people aren’t bothered by insistent Christian missionaries.

Does Acts 15 refer to the “Noachide Laws?”

Many Bible commentators read Acts 15 through the lens of this rabbinic invention. However, the prevailing and dominant rabbinic theology (the schools of Shammai and Hillel) during the time of Acts 15 was that only Israel had a place in the world to come and therefore, the only hope for Gentiles was to “become Jews” through ritual conversion, another rabbinic invention without Scriptural support (and one that many rabbis, from Mishnaic days to present, prefer to discourage).

A more serious challenge for this interpretative scheme is to ask the question “Would the apostles have accepted and endorsed a position that lists a separate, limited sub-set of Torah commands whereby Gentiles could obtain righteousness?” The Apostles rejected any such notion that “anyone”, Jew or Gentile, could obtain righteous standing before G-d by any amount of Torah observance. This was legalism and was forthrightly rejected by the Apostles, as especially articulated by Sha’ul.

The Jerusalem Council specifically stated, regarding the Gentiles who were coming to faith, that “G-d, who knows the heart, bore them witness by giving the Ruach HaKodesh to them, just as he did to us; that is, He made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their heart by trust. So why are you putting G-d to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the talmidim which neither our fathers nor we have had the strength to bear? No, it is through the love and kindness of the Lord Yeshua that we trust and are delivered – and it’s the same with them.” Acts 15:8-11. In fact, the four laws given in Acts 15 were a minimal set of guidelines to help the new Gentile believers join in fellowship with the Torah observant Jewish believers (all believers of that day).

The consistent message of the Tanach and the Apostolic Writings is the same:

“The same Torah and standard of judgment will apply to both you and the foreigner living with you.” (B’midbar 15:16). “For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of G-d, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Messiah Yeshua.” (Romans 3:22b-24).