

A Biblical Basis for Jewish Identity

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Jewish Identity Symposium

Orlando, Florida

January 23 2012

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Introduction

In 1894, a 32-year-old Hungarian Rabbi began what would prove to be a remarkable mission to the Jewish people in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. By other Jews, he was considered a “משומד” (convert, or literally: destroyed one). Nevertheless, Cohn’s vision was far from the obliteration of his Jewish identity or that of Jewish believers in Yeshua (JBY).¹

By 1937 Hitler was entrenched in power. The “Jewish problem” was a frequent topic of discussion. In his book *Le Mystère d’Israël*. French philosopher Maritain proposed a “decisive solution”. This was “the emancipation of Jewry and the increasing recognition

¹ Harold Sevenser, *A Rabbi’s Vision* (Charlotte, N.C.: Chosen People Ministries, 1994), 30, states “Leopold Cohn’s vision was that Jews would come to believe in Yeshua, yet still maintain their Jewishness.”

of their rights [as] a means toward their complete assimilation and silent disappearance as a distinct people. What does Scripture have to say of this?

Hebrew-Catholic Schoeman asks: “Do the Jews continue to have a role to play in salvation history following Christ”?² He then evaluates several rationales for Jewish identity in the Church, finally suggesting that Jews may be “yeast” for the Church, keeping it leavened, with unbelieving Jews the stock from which fresh yeast is continually. Thus yeast is continually assimilated into the Church, as it should be.³

Other JBY have strenuously objected to the seductive forces of assimilation. Writing at the end of the 19th century, Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein appealed:

And will Israel cease to be a nation when at last he recognises in Christ his Redeemer and Messiah-King? Shall we then be absorbed in Christendom, and will there be an end to our God-consecrated people? By no means;⁴

At the same time, in Kishinev, Rabbi Rabinowitz wrote a statement of faith with one eye on the Hebrew version of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*⁵ affirming (article 4):

There is but one God, who shall justify the circumcised Jews by faith and the uncircumcised Gentiles through faith; and there is no difference between Jew

² Roy H. Schoeman, *Salvation if from the Jews: The role of Judaism in Salvation History from Abraham to the Second Coming* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 67.

³ *Ibid*, 70-71.

⁴ Isaac Lichtenstein, *An Appeal to the Jewish People* (London: Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, c. 1895), 21.

⁵ Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement; The Herzl of Jewish Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1995), 97-98.

and Greek, between bond and free, between male and female; for they are all one in Christ Jesus.⁶

He then continued (article 6) “And as we are the descendants of those whom the Lord brought out of the land of Egypt... we are bound to keep the Sabbath, the feast of unleavened bread, and the feast of weeks.”⁷

Not many years later, American Mark Levy tirelessly campaigned for the right of Jewish believers to practice their Jewish customs. Writing for the Hebrew Christian Alliance, he railed against the prevailing tide:

When he wrote “In Christ Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male or female,” he [Paul] was referring to the spiritual tie and no more intended to unjew the Jew than he did to unsex the Gentile. He mentions “All the Churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16.4) and proclaims himself a “Hebrew of the Hebrews.” ...⁸

According to Levy, Paul was did not intend to erase Jewish identity, but to affirm that all believers in Messiah Yeshua are alike in their relationship to God.

The frequent reference to Galatians 3:28 as an argument for Jewish identity makes it worth closer examination. In Galatians 3:28a the Apostle Paul says:⁹

⁶ Ibid, 103. Kjær-Hansen quotes the translation of J. Adler, *The First-ripe Fig* (London: 1885).

⁷ Ibid, 104.

⁸ Mark Levy, “Jewish Ordinances in the Light of Hebrew Christianity,” *The Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly*, Vol. 1:3&4 (1917), 138-143.

⁹ Given the striking similarity, it is also unlikely that there is a direct relationship between the two lists. It is most likely that Paul wrote in reaction to sentiments that were current in his day, also the basis of the Jewish man’s daily prayers that are not attested to until much later.

“there is neither Jew nor Greek, (οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληνας)
 “there is neither slave nor free, (οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος)
 “there is neither male nor female”; (οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ)

The morning blessings of the Siddur bless God:

“who has not made me a Gentile, (בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא עָשִׂינִי גוֹי)
 “who has not made me a slave, (בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא עָשִׂינִי עֶבֶד)
 “who has not made me a woman”. (בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא עָשִׂינִי אִשָּׁה)

What did Paul mean by using such language, and does it provide JBY a Biblical basis for Jewish identity?¹⁰ In answer, we will first examine Galatians 3:28 in the context of the epistle’s purpose. We will then examine the text itself more carefully.

One Gospel – Galatians 1:1-12

Since Betz began publishing on Galatians, much attention has been given to the rhetorical argument and structure of the epistle.¹¹ With this in mind, enough can be seen from the Apostle’s greeting. Paul opens his letter to the Galatians with both a forceful assertion of his apostleship and a forthright defense of the Gospel “preached by me” (1:11), which he received “through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12). This Gospel he defends is in his very first lines, which contain two balanced clauses highlighting the basis of his appeal to the troubled congregation:

¹⁰ Similar phraseology was used by Philo in *De Specialibus Legibus* 1.211 “and if thou givest thanks for man, do not do so only for the whole genus but for its species and most essential parts, for men and women, for Greeks and barbarians”. F. H. Colson, trans. *Philo* (London: Heinemann, 1937), vol. 7 of 10, 221.

¹¹ Mark D. Nanos, ed. *The Galatians Debate* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), xi, referencing Hans Dieter Betz “The Literary Composition and Function of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians”, *The Galatians Debate*, Mark Nanos, ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 3. The article was first published in 1975.

1:1 Yeshua Messiah and God the Father who raised him from the dead
(Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ θεοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν)

1:3-4 God our Father and the Lord Yeshua Messiah who gave himself on
account of our sins (θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ δόντος
ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν)

There are only two differences in the structure of the second parallel phrases regarding Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ and θεοῦ πατρὸς. The first is the pronoun ἡμῶν (our). The second is the interposition of “κυρίου” (Lord) in the genitive in order to form the three-term title “Lord Yeshua Messiah”. All Pauline epistles except 2 Timothy use this title in their greeting, but in Galatians Paul does not use this tripartite term again until the very end of the epistle (6:18). From the outset Paul clarifies the authority and basis of the Gospel that he will subsequently defend. This is a Gospel that has previously been agreed upon. It is “our” Gospel. Yeshua is our “Lord”.

The two phrases make two points. In the first phrase, God the Father is referred to as the *Agent of the resurrection*. In the second, the Lord Yeshua Messiah is referred to as the *One who has given himself* “ὑπὲρ” (on account of) our sins. Paul’s statement here are paralleled in 1 Cor 15:3-4, likewise centered on Yeshua’s death and resurrection. Together, the two speak of a) the source of the believer’s life; and b) the basis of the believer’s standing before God. Both concepts are important to Paul’s argument; vital to the “εἷς” (one) of Galatians 3:28 until he concludes the letter by reasserting his

apostleship and referring to the Gospel: “the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah”

(6:18).¹² It is Paul’s application of this Gospel to the Galatians that interests us now.

One Father – Galatians 3:26, 28b

Paul was vitally concerned to protect his mission to the Gentiles from the “threat of marginalization and subjugation of his Gentile mission and the community members.”¹³

Having established the basis of his authority, including the endorsement he received from the other Apostles in Jerusalem (2:9, cp. Acts 15:22), Paul recounts an event that occurred in Antioch during his time there. This event, a confrontation with Peter over his disingenuous refusal to eat with Gentiles, raised the issues of justification, faith, and the basis of the believer’s standing before God. His primary concern in writing was the perversion of the Gospel by those who taught that Gentiles ought to live as Jews (2:14). The question was not if Jews should keep their Jewish identity but whether Gentiles should be permitted to keep theirs.

Galatians 3:26-28b are a pericope that culminate his argument for the essential unity of all believers. Interestingly, as Betz writes: “Form-critical analysis shows that the structure is complex. Parallels in other literature suggest that we have before us a form

¹² J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 63.

¹³ Atsuhiro Asan, *Community-Identity Construction in Galatians: Exegetical, Social-Anthropological and Socio-Historical Studies*, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 200. Rhetorical analysis such as this are useful for answering the question as to Paul’s primary concern. Was it the Gospel or the subjugation of his mission?

of a saying, made up of a number of components.”¹⁴ These verses bring Paul’s argument throughout his letter to a head. The core of this, Paul’s conclusion, is bracketed by two related phrases.

3:26 Πάντες γὰρ υἱοὶ θεοῦ ἐστε (For you are all sons of God)

3:28b πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἷς ἐστε (For you are all one)

This is a point that Paul has been attempting to drive home since he first mentioned his conflict with Peter. As he said previously, “you know” (γινώσκετε) “those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (3:7). However, 3:26-28 marks a specific argument that will add weight to his conclusion. His argument is that the Galatians – whether or not they are Jews – are all sons of God and therefore one in Messiah Yeshua.

Stressing that all are sons of God, Paul asserts that all believers have been “baptized into Messiah” (3:27). While Jews may undergo many different *tevilas* (immersions), both Jewish and Gentile believers undergo one specific *tevila* ordained by Yeshua. This is a literal, not a figurative event.¹⁵ This act has implications. In Eph 4:3-5 Paul appeals to

¹⁴ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 181. Betz argues as do many other commentators that this saying must have had a “place and function in early Christian baptismal liturgy”. Little is adduced to prove this other than the provision of parallel formulae related to Baptism in the Pauline corpus and the above form-critical analyses, leaving it open to question whether the Christianity of a later time is being read back into the Galatian context.

¹⁵ Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), 202. The *Didache*, specifically written by Jews for Gentiles, gives specific instructions regarding the mechanics of immersion (*Did.* 7:1-3). Only once (1 Cor 10:2) does Paul refer to immersion as anything other than a literal act.

tevila as evidence of the unity of believers.¹⁶ We find a further parallel in 1 Cor 12:13, again with the theme of unity in the Spirit. For Paul *tevila* is a central argument, a common experience for all believers. Instruction about *tevila* under Paul's ministry has become so formulaic and accepted that he can now appeal to the peculiar symbolism of being "immersed into Messiah".

Diversity and Unity – Galatians 3:28a

Inside the brackets of 3:26 and 28b (all sons of God – all one), Galatians 3:28a is central to a wider structure which is itself nested in the sequence of Paul's argument for the Gospel throughout Galatians. This gives an interpretive framework for three assertions regarding three mutually exclusive categories that he now makes.

The first of these three is that for those who have been immersed into Messiah and have therefore "put on" Messiah, "there is neither Jew nor Greek" (οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληγ).¹⁷ Paul's argument is soteriological, proceeding from his very greeting in 1:1-4. Yeshua's resurrection and atoning sacrifice provide one unique means of entry into the family of God, meaning both are equally sons of God. There are both "Jews by

¹⁶ "...keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Ephesians 4:3-6.

¹⁷ Cp. Col 3.10-11 "the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all."

nature” and “sinners of the Gentiles” (2:15) in the Messianic community. Both have believed in Messiah and are alike justified by faith (2:16).

Paul does not deny Jew-Gentile distinctions. He points to what unifies believers instead. In light of his conflict with Peter, his argument transcends issues of ritual purity. It is not based on the relationship of either Jew or Gentile to the *torah*. It is that one’s unity in Messiah surpasses all such distinctives and the *torah’s* requirements (as interpreted in the Apostle’s days, see Acts 10:28) for Jew-Gentile separation. As Dunn states “‘Neither Jew nor Greek’ means a oneness of Jew and Gentile in faith without the law’s interposing between them to mark them off as distinct from each other.”¹⁸ The implications of ‘one’ (εἷς) for this clause is therefore very specific. It addresses the means by which both Jews and Greeks have become one in Messiah and must therefore abide by a higher unifying principle.

This unifying principle is superior to but does not supersede ongoing Gentile identity. In a later letter (1 Cor 7:17-18) Paul declared “And so I ordain in all the churches... Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.”¹⁹ This passage is notable because it was possible to surgically reverse circumcision. The

¹⁸ James Dunn, *A Commentary on The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A&C Black, 1993), 205.

¹⁹ Rudolph rightly asks “Should a teaching that Paul considered important enough to be a universal rule be almost universally neglected by contemporary Christians?” David Rudolph, “Paul’s ‘Rule in All the Churches’” (1 Cor 7.17-24) and Torah-Defined Ecclesiological Variegation”, American Academy of Religion Conference, November 3, 2008, (Boston: Boston College University, 2008), 1.

passage refers obliquely to a surgical practice mentioned in 1 Maccabees, performed in order to facilitate assimilation with the Greeks.²⁰ If this is what Paul had in mind, he is opposing not only reverse circumcision, but *kol vachomer* assimilation in general. Paul did not expect Gentiles to jump through hoops in order to become acceptable company for Jews.

Paul's second assertion goes further. From addressing the core of his argument in his letter, he turns to related distinctions in social status. In Messiah "there is neither slave nor free" (οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος). Slavery was not merely a matter of status. Aristotle famously viewed slaves to be "by nature"²¹ inferior of soul. Both Jews and Gentiles tended to this prejudice. It has been judged that "The reputation of slaves was no better among the Jews than in the rest of the world."²²

This too could divide the Messianic community. Gal 2:12, recording Peter's withdrawal from eating with Gentiles upon the arrival of other Jews from James is comparable with 1 Cor 11:21 where it is presumably slaves who, after working long hours, arrive at the community's meals without food while the more affluent might

²⁰ 1 Maccabees 1.13-15, NRSV: "and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil." This interpretation is followed by Margaret Thrall, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1965), 55; Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 122,

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, V.

²² George Moore, *Judaism In the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1960), Vol. II. 137.

even be drunk. This gulf was as impassable between as that between Jew and Gentile. Nevertheless, here too Paul expected that being “in Messiah” obliterated these differences. Paul did not deny that these differences exist. On the contrary, he advised δούλοι (slaves) to obey their masters (Eph 6:5; Col 3:22).

Paul’s third assertion, “there is neither male nor female” (οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ) is the most easily understood today. It is also the most impassable of the three mutually exclusive categories he invokes. Here the twofold signification of these pairs can be seen clearly: recognition of distinctions, but their collapse for those who are “in Messiah”.

In some ways Paul’s “neither male nor female” is the most impassable dyad of the three. There is a twist, too. While the previous dyads are joined by οὐδὲ (nor), here we read male καὶ (and) female. Boyarin, influenced by feminist theory, compares this to 1 Cor 12:12-13.²³ He refers to the “famous ‘myth of the primal androgyne’”²⁴ (see Genesis 1:27 “male *and* female he created *them*”) but contends that androgyny is not what Paul is enjoining. “In Galatians Paul’s major concern is to defend his doctrine of justification by faith as a means of including the Gentiles in the Israel of God, and he violently rejects anything that threatens that notion and that inclusion.”²⁵

²³ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994), 183.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 184.

²⁵ *Ibid*

Indeed, Paul (controversially) held to distinctions between men and women even within the Messianic community, in terms of domestic order and community functions. “The head of a woman is her husband” he wrote in 1 Cor 11:3. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men” he told Timothy in 1 Tim 2:12. Maybe he was a man of his times. According to Josephus “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man”!²⁶ The point is that despite this all, Paul saw both as one in Messiah.

United Diversity

Paul has made his point. These “...distinctions, marking racial, social and gender differentiation, which were thought to indicate or imply relative worth or value or privileged status before God, they no longer have that significance.”²⁷ Lightfoot puts it poetically. “In Christ ye are all sons, all free. Every barrier is swept away. No special claims, no special disabilities exist in Him, none *can* exist.... One heart beats in all: one mind guides all: one life is lived by all. Ye are all *one man*, for ye are members of Christ.”²⁸ Differences do, indeed must exist. All however are one “in Messiah” and

²⁶ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. H. Thackeray (London: Heinemann, 1926), 2:24.

²⁷ James Dunn, *A Commentary on The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A&C Black, 1993), 207. Dunn puts this in the wider framework of Pauline theology, stating “Paul... regularly spoke of many believers as ‘one’, ...In which case the character of the ‘oneness’ becomes clearer: not as a leveling and abolishing of all racial, social or gender differences, but as an integration of just such differences into a common participation ‘in Christ’, wherein they enhance (rather than detract from) the unity of the body, and enrich the mutual interdependence and service of its members.” 207-208.

²⁸ J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 150. The same point is made by Luther, Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Volume 26, Lectures on Galatians*. Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963), “For if a woman wanted to be a man, if a son wanted to be a father, if a pupil wanted to be a teacher, if a servant wanted to be a master, if a subject wanted to be a

children of God, and this unity must be displayed in the Messianic community. The “law” must give way to this higher principle.²⁹

Paul has radically reshaped the Messianic community’s social world. He has affirmed the value of Gentile identity in Messiah. Between the bracketing statements of 3:26 and 3:28b he has asserted the underlying unity and diversity of all parts of the community. He is making an “effort to construct community-identity”,³⁰ but that community is not intended to be monolithic or homogeneous. Rather, the different members of that community are to be treated as equals.

The implication is clear. Jews *are* different from Gentiles, just as slaves from free and women from men. How, Paul does not say. These differences should not divide, but neither should they be downplayed. The ultimate identity of all believers proceeds from Yeshua’s resurrection and atoning sacrifice.

Heschel writes about last century’s “quest” for the historical Jesus. It was disappointing for some, because “Christians had a different agenda...For them the

magistrate – there would be a disturbance and confusion of all social stations and of everything. In Christ, on the other, hand, where there is no Law, there is no distinction among persons at all.” 357. See also Fee: “in Christ the old *significance* of these distinctions – and the *values based on them* – no longer maintain.” and later, re. “all of you are one” says “just as in 1 Corinthians, when he says the “body is one,” his point is its unity, not its uniformity.” Gordon D. Fee, *Galatians: Pentecostal Commentary* (Blandford Forum, Dorset: Deo, 2007), 143.

²⁹ Another application of this might be to take Paul’s command to “great one another with a holy kiss” as even permitting Jews to kiss Gentiles, men to kiss possibly impure women, all in contravention of Jewish purity laws.

³⁰ Atsuhiro Asan, *Community-Identity Construction in Galatians: Exegetical, Social-Anthropological and Socio-Historical Studies*, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 205.

more Jewish Jesus was shown to be, the less original and unique he was.”³¹ In fact, Yeshua’s uniqueness is not in whether his sayings have parallels in tannaitic literature, but in *who he is*. The same is true for His Jewish followers. Their identity is in *whose they are*. As sons of God and children of Abraham, all who are in that position, be they Jew or Gentile, are “one”. That “one” does not imply “alike”. Thus Jewish identity is given a firm biblical basis in what might at first appear to be a most unlikely place.

Conclusion

For two millennia, assimilation and loss of Jewish identity has been the experience of JBY, yet Galatians 3:26-28 asserts that Paul intended Gentile believers to maintain their Gentile identity. A grave injustice has clearly been done. One has to imagine how Paul would have reacted if for two millennia Gentiles had not found it feasible to maintain their own identities within a Jewish church. Schoeman’s “yeast” hypothesis does not hold true. If called upon to defend Jewish believers from the charge of division in keeping their Jewish way of life within the wider body of Messiah, Paul might well have chosen words similar to those of British Rabbi Louis Jacobs zt”l:

The Jew who prefers the Jewish way of life above all others can as little be accused of fostering an egocentric form of particularism as those who, with good cause, wax eloquent over the British or the American way of life.³²

³¹ James Carrol, *Constantine’s Sword* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p. 71 quotes Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 11.

³² Louis Jacobs, *We have Reason to Believe* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1957), p. 132.

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