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Introduction

1 When 'the first exclusively Hebrew Christian Association was formed [near] here in the Jews' Chapel on September 9 1813, [and] a group of forty-one Jewish Christians met together to constitute themselves an association called "Beni Avraham"' (Schonfield, 1936: 219), ancient issues were given a new twist.

It cannot be that no one repeated the mantra 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile' (Gal. 3:28).

As brave and revolutionary as we Messianic Jews might think ourselves today, those forty-one were revolutionary in theirs. They dared by their very association together – an *exclusive* one, according to the historian Hugh Schonfield, to say 'yes, but'.

Their association said that they had something in common. Something that they wanted to *celebrate* rather than brush under the rug.

Theirs was the turning back of 1,750 years of Christian history, back to a day when the apostles envisaged the formation of communities of believers who were not *Jewish*, but *Gentile*. Now the 41 were forming a community that was not Gentile, but Jewish, and exclusively so.

In the first century, a new day was dawning. No longer was the Word of the Lord mediated through Israel alone. The Word of the Lord had come to the Gentiles, too!

So it was, that as early as two decades after the resurrection of Messiah Yeshua, but no later than two decades after the destruction of the Temple (in other words between 50 and 90 C.E.), Jewish believers in Yeshua wrote a manual for the new, emerging, church. In the midst of that process a pressing problem arose. Jews were bound to keep the *Torah*. it was an assumption, a given in its day. The church in Jerusalem had many members who were zealous for the law, and even the Apostle Paul took a vow to certify his continued observance of Jewish law himself, and to certify that he did not teach other Jews to do otherwise.

But the question was a live one: What was the relationship of Gentiles to the Law? The Apostolic council of Acts 15, Paul's record of his conflict with Peter and Paul's extended rhetorical argument in the book of Galatians provide an authoritative account regarding the early church's position. It should be a source of amazement as we look back on those days – not that Jews kept Jewish law, but that Gentile converts to the church were not required to do so.

So it would be fascinating if we could see exactly how this was put into practice? Wouldn't it be intriguing to see how first century Jewish believers and Gentile believers implemented Acts 15 and reacted to the teaching of Paul?

2 For what would be a full millennium, no such window existed. But for one scribe, 'Leon, notary and sinner' we might still be in the dark. It was he who in 1056 copied a whole book of early church writings into a codex, a book. In that book, he copied in an ancient teaching, already almost forgotten, and buried amidst other ancient writings in the book, this teaching would languish forgotten for another eight centuries. Scholars and librarians would pick up the book from time to time. None ever realised the hidden treasure it contained.

This treasure was called the *Didache* – the 'Teaching' of the Lord according to the twelve Apostles (cf. Acts 2:42). It was genuine and not a fraud. While no one knows for certain, it is safe to say that it was written in the same years that the Apostles and their company wrote the New Testament, somewhere between the years of 50 and 90 C.E.

It was a source ancient writers had referred to and quoted from numerous times. It was one of the lost books that had been important to the early church for centuries. A victim of its own success it had been copied and emulated by other authors as 'new believer's' instruction as they became members of the church. The *Doctrina Apostolorum*, Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, the Apostolic Constitutions and more cited, transcribed, paraphrased and approximated its teachings. As the church's needs changed over time, it was superseded and all but forgotten and all but vanished into the mists of time.

3 How the book transcribed by ‘Leon, notary and sinner’ got into the monastery in Istanbul (Constantinople) we don’t know. But here it was that Philotheos Bryennios, the tall and dignified Metropolitan of Nicomedia, found it in 1873 (Schaff, 1885: 8).

4 Its publication, after yet another decade, caused a sensation. The best church historians and theologians of the day raced each other to produce their translations, analyses and commentaries. Philip Schaff, Adolf Harnack, and others. They were fascinated by this opportunity to see the inner workings of the earliest church. This was a church rapidly outgrowing its original Jewish milieu and in the process of becoming a worldwide movement of the Nations to the Lord and Saviour who is ‘not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance’ (2 Peter 3:9).

And the *B’nei Avraham* didn’t know anything about it. Their first meeting preceded the discovery of the *Didache* by 60 years.

5 The *Didache* would unpack the practical implications of the Gospel, for the Gentiles. In doing so, it would reveal the implications of the Gospel for Jews, perhaps in surprising ways.

I. There Are Two Ways

So what is the message of the *Didache*? It starts with the assertion that there are two ways: A way of life and a way of death.

6 Over a thousand years before Messiah came, Moses summarized the Torah, and placing it before the children of Israel asked them to choose which way they would go (Deut 30:15). Other Hebrew scriptures such as, Josh 24:15, Jer 21:8, Ps 1 and more follow a similar theme. Thus it is no surprise that the theme of the ‘two ways’ should even turn up in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Audet, 1952).¹

The first five chapters of the *Didache* are concerned with the ‘two ways’ that confront every person. ‘There are two ways; one of life and one of death, and great is the difference between the two ways’ the reader is told (*Did* 1:1). The reader of the New Testament will immediately recognize the source of the next words. They are the words similar to those of our Lord Yeshua himself. ‘The way of life then is this. First love God who made you, second your neighbour as yourself’ (1:2). Immediately the author is resorting to the Law – the Law of Moses and Yeshua’s restatement of it. A restatement completely in accord with Jewish doctrine that would later link loving one’s neighbour to the fact that we are made in

¹ While citing Marinus de Jonge’s position that the *Didache*’s material ‘May be Jewish and Christian in a Christian document’ Zangenberg states that ‘With regard to the material presented, it indeed seems beyond doubt that the schema employed in *Did*. 1:1-6:1 is of Jewish origin’ (Zangenberg, 2008: 54-55). Van de Sandt and Flusser agree that ‘Most scholars agree that the version of the Two Ways in the *Didache* goes back to an originally Jewish basic model’ (2002: 49)

God's likeness.² Moreover, in case we should neglect the 'two ways' connection to the Law, lists of forbidden acts are given.

Do not murder
Do not commit adultery
Do not corrupt boys
Do not engage in sexual immorality
Do not steal
Do not *practice* magic
Do not *use* potions
Do not murder an unborn child in the womb or kill a newborn.

The list goes on, but you can see it right away. This is *Torah*. This is not *Torah direct*. This is *Torah* interpreted and mediated for an audience who need not only *Torah* but a *halakah* – directions on how to live, which way they should go. This is the *Way of Life*. It is not particularly pointed at Jews, but Gentiles who are entering a new state in relationship to God and a new form of people-hood. They are not going to be 'like the Gentiles' (1:3) even though they are themselves addressed as Gentiles in the title and elsewhere in the *Didache*. They are taught using a traditionally Jewish form, enlivened by the words of the Messiah interpolated into the mix. They are not to abandon the commandments of the Lord (4:13); they are to avoid unlawful deeds (4:14); and like Israel in the wilderness, if they live this way they will be 'perfect' (1:4; 6:2).

Are the new believers under law or are they not?

The key is that this is a descriptive, not proscriptive path. Throughout the 'two ways' section of the *Didache* the author does exactly what you would expect of a Jew. He knows of no other standard of righteousness other than the Torah. He is a Jew after all. Viewing the Law as the ultimate standard of righteousness he applies it to the situation of his reader without imposing the law itself upon him. His attitude is laid bare as he says 'if you can bear the entire yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect; but if you cannot, do as much as you can.'

Search the Torah. I don't think you'll find Moses saying 'do as much as you can' or, concerning food, 'bear what you can.' Obedience to Torah is an either-or. Either one is obedient or one is not. Either a command is kept or it is broken.

So what is of ultimate importance then? The Law? No. It is the worship of the One true God, creator of heaven and earth. Thus special care must be taken not to involve oneself in anything that smacks of idolatry or participation in the worship of false gods (3:4; 6:3). Thus idolatry is to be shunned, or even anything that leads to it (3:4). Food sacrificed to false gods must especially be avoided as it is a 'service to dead gods' (6:3).

² *Ber. Rab.* 24:7.

How often the New Testament testifies to the very same concerns on the part of the Apostles, as they brought the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul says to the Ephesians (4:17), who were not manifestly Jews, 'Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the **Gentiles** do, in the futility of their minds.' The Ephesians were part of a new people-hood. They stood in a new relationship with God and with Israel. That relationship meant that they were no longer to walk in the ways of the Nations. Now *their* behaviour, not only that of Israel, reflected on the God they worshipped. Paul was of course adamant that Gentiles should not be required to live as Jews but he was just as adamant that there was a way in which they should walk that would glorify the Creator.

The Apostolic council, in Jerusalem, prohibited food offered to idols (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). So did the Apostle John (1 John 5:21; Rev. 2:14), and Paul passionately sought to dissuade the Corinthians from doing the same in a city where it was presumably hard not to (1 Cor. 8).

The writer of the *Didache*, the 'Didachist' surely saw the Law as God's ideal. For his reader though, he applied it sensitively, flexibly, and above all with a view to what the *Torah* pointed to in truth: a life lived for God.

II. There Is a People

7 For the early Christians this was a life apart. Like the Jews of the 19th century, the members of B'nei Avraham paid a price to come into the community of Messiah. For the early Christians, to become part of his Body, they were taking a major step that would generally cause embarrassment for their families – good gods-fearing pagans. Their membership in the church would, however, give them a whole new family who would care for and love them. The *B'nei Avraham* were particularly concerned with visiting their sick members. What else could be so meaningful to those who had lost their standing in their home community and might have few if any visitors at their sick bed?

For centuries, Jews had been immersing themselves in accordance with the words of the *Torah*, putting away all sorts of ceremonial uncleanness. This immersion was total. A total covering beneath the symbolically (and in some senses literally) cleansing waters. By Jewish custom, such waters had to be living (flowing), and not stagnant. For this a body of living water was and is required. This is water that flows and that replenishes itself, and for this purpose any river or ocean water could do. Thus John baptised in the Jordan (John 1:28) and when Paul went to Philippi, it was to the riverside that he went in search of a place of (Jewish) prayer.

It is likely, but not certain that Jews practiced proselyte immersion in Yeshua's day and in the days of the Apostles (Sandt and Flusser, 2002: 278). Presumably, this was because a convert would need ceremonial cleansing before partaking in Jewish worship. To this day, Jewish women traditionally refrain from directly touching a *Torah* scroll for reasons of ritual impurity although it is doubtful that anyone but the most religious who immerse on a daily basis is truly ritually pure. But there is another, deeper meaning, for 'Jewish though envisaged another kind of impurity.... the defilement that resulted from certain especially heinous sins, usually idolatry, sexual immorality of many kinds, and murder' (Bauckham, 2013: 179).

Those who came to John for immersion – what was their intent? It was not a search for ritual purity. The Dead Sea Scrolls teach us the connection between the outward cleansing demanded by their interpretation of the Law and inward purity. The inward cleansing was essential if the outer cleansing was to have any meaning. Thus 1QS3.8-9 says of the one being immersed that it is ‘by the compliance of his soul with all the laws of God his flesh is cleansed by being sprinkled with cleansing waters and being (sic) made holy with the waters of repentance’ (Martínez and Tigchelaar, 1997: 75).³ Here the inward attitude of the heart is evidenced in faithfulness to God’s requirements and repentance. In that the waters simply cleanse the flesh, the context makes it clear that the cleansing itself is just that. At the same time the cleansing waters are a portrayal of the deeper purification that has gone on within (4Q414). If Wise, Abegg and Cook have reconstructed the text correctly, 4Q512 also testifies to at least some immersions being a symbol of consecration. Their translation reads that ‘...impure people in accordance with [their] g[uilt, they shall not be purified by ritual bathing]’ (2005: 419).

Thus it is that John’s – and Yeshua’s – baptism was a baptism intended to mark a change in heart. In that it fit with at least some Jewish expectations. It was an immersion that focused on the inward, not the outward cleansing. When Yeshua commanded his disciples to immerse people from all nations there is no indication that his was an agenda of purification from ceremonial defilement. Rather, immersion was to mark their obedience as they were ‘to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Matt 28:19). This is why, after Yeshua’s command to make disciples of all nations a baptise them, it was immediately understood to apply to Jews, who regularly immersed anyway, as well as to Gentiles (Acts 2:41). This immersion said, ‘I am turning to God and obedience to the commandments of Messiah Yeshua.’

Yeshua’s immersion marked a transformative relationship to God and his commands. It is a hallmark of membership in the Body of Messiah. Then as now it is a sign of both obedience and belonging. The one who has chosen to walk in the ‘way of life’ will be baptised. B’nei Avraham or B’nei Noah (Gentiles), this has been the mark of obedience for all who follow Messiah to this day. So it was for the Didachist, and if you enjoy upsetting apple carts, you’ll enjoy the Didachist’s instructions for baptism.

Now about baptism, thus you shall baptise. All the preceding having been said, you shall baptise in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you do not have living water, baptise in other water. And if you are not able to do so in cold, then in warm water. But if you do not have either, pour out on the head three times in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit (7:1-3).

Philip Schaff obviously found it humorous. He wrote of the initial reaction that ‘Pædobaptists found in it a welcome argument for pouring or sprinkling, as a legitimate mode of baptism ; Baptists pointed triumphantly to the requirement of immersion in living water as the rule, and to the absence of any allusion to infant baptism ; while the threefold repetition of immersion and the requirement of previous fasting suited neither party’ (Schaff, 1885: 13).

³ The obverse is also true. 1QS 5.13-14 states that ‘it is impossible to be purified without first repenting of evil, inasmuch as purity adheres to all who transgress His word.’ (Wise et al., 2005: 123)

But I think I've laid the groundwork, and we can all understand what's at the heart of this. If this was an immersion for the sake of purification, then total immersion would not be negotiable. That was not the purpose here, however. The purpose reflects that of the New Testament, to show faith in Messiah Yeshua, identification with his work of salvation, obedience to his commands, and membership in his Body, the church. It was the gateway to a new people-hood.

Thank God for that. But it is interesting to see that the Didachist is careful to link baptism to his teaching on the two ways. For the Didachist, baptism without obedience and without a commitment to walk on the way of life, is meaningless. Once again, his commitment to Torah but refusal to apply it directly to the Gentile convert is foundational to his thinking. In this he stood in direct accord with both Paul and the Jerusalem council.

Embodying Jewish values, the author continues. As the new believer is now part of the community of believers, he receives instruction on how to say blessings both before and after meals. This is in accordance with Jewish custom to this day. Any significant meal is preceded both by blessings before and the blessing of the meal (*birkat hamazon*) afterwards. With exultant reference to the Lord and his gathering of the church into the kingdom the blessing after the meal follows the traditional Jewish pattern.

Once again, in the new community, boundaries are drawn. After all of the teaching, the induction into the Body of Messiah via baptism, the participation in the communal meal, what comes to the foremost? It is the prophet, and the way in which a prophet should be evaluated. The prophet must teach 'everything mentioned above' (11:1). If he should teach otherwise, 'do not listen to him' (11:2). Prophets, in other words, are those who like the Didachist hold to Torah values but do not impose the Torah on Gentiles.

III. There Is a Hope

8 The 41 Jewish believers in Yeshua who took part in the first *B'nei Avraham* meeting no doubt had their own thoughts on the relevance of the *Torah* to them and to the overwhelmingly Gentile church that they were now part of. The adage is well known. Two Jews, three opinions. First century Gentiles had to come out of their world into a world where *Torah* was held in high esteem, even if it wasn't directly applied to them. These Jewish believers, just twenty years after the French revolution, were coming into a church that had at least in part been transformed by that very *Torah*. It was a world that held promise and hope.

Had they had the *Didache* before them, they would have been able to rejoice at the words accompanying its instructions regarding communion, the Lord's supper. In a 'free' translation of the Septuagint text of Malachi 1:11 (Niederwimmer, 1998: 198) the Didachist relates the eucharist to the 'sacrifice' mentioned by the Lord. 'In every place and time bring a pure sacrifice to me, for I am a great King says the Lord, and my Name is marvelled at among the nations'.

In the meantime, the believer is challenged to be found 'perfect' at the final moment when the Lord returns(16:2). It is a message that once again returns to the Didachist's high view of the *Torah*. The

reader is warned of a day when lawlessness will increase (16:4). Echoing the words of the New Testament regarding lawlessness, for the Didachist it is a disregard for *Torah*. It will be a mark of the world-deceiver (ὁ κοσμοπλανῆς) that he will perform lawless deeds (16:4).

The *Didache* comes to an abrupt end. It seems that ‘Leon, notary and sinner’ had a very old copy, and the last piece was apparently missing. But we know we have the gist of the ending. ‘Then the world will see the Lord coming before the clouds of heaven.’

What can we say? Even so come, Lord Yeshua. Both Jews and Gentiles, regardless of their relationship to the *Torah*, have the same hope.

9 Call it a double standard, a transitional situation as the Gospel *de facto* transferred from Jewish to Gentile hands, or a theological imperative. It is arguably clear from the *Didache* that there was diversity in the early church and that Jews, even believers in Yeshua, were still assumed to be beholden to the *Torah* as a covenant obligation whereas Gentiles were not (cp. Gal. 5:3). The Didachist based his teaching on the *Torah* and there is no indication that he believed that the relationship of the Jewish believer to the *Torah* had changed ‘in Messiah’. Yet in accordance with Acts 15 and the Galatian controversy he is loathe to apply it to new, non-Jewish, believers in Yeshua.

If my observations are correct, the Didachist did assume that Jewish believers lived according to the Law and that Gentile believers were not required to. His understanding was that the Law was ideal, as Paul would say, the Law is holy (Rom. 7:12), the Law is good (Rom. 7:14); and he delighted in the Law of God (Rom. 7:22). It may be that the Didachist has rather accurately portrayed the views of the Apostles. Theirs may not have been the view that Jewish distinctives – namely a unique relationship to the Law given to Israel at Sinai – were to be done away with in the new dispensation.

The beauty is that despite what were perceived to be diverse obligations for Jew and Gentile, the *Didache* underscores the unity that prevailed in the churches that used it. Diversity is in fact a requirement for unity. Without it one merely has homogeneity, and there is nothing remarkable to note. The early church, according to the *Didache*, was both remarkably united and yet diverse. It included Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. Yet like the New Testament, there was no attempt to homogenise the distinctives, no attempt to obscure differences.

The 41 of B’nei Avraham may not have known if their association would have any lasting relevance. I wonder if any of them might have shared the view of their successor, Rabbi Lichtenstein, who published via the HCTI, now Messianic Testimony, at 189 Whitechapel Road, not far from here, in 1900. He wrote: ‘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’ (Lichtenstein, c 1900: 24).

The London Society (now CMJ) of 1813 was courageous in fostering B’nei Avraham. I believe in that day Jewish believers began to connect with the live wire of God’s ongoing call upon Israel. Thus energised, their movement did not die, not due to the onslaught of liberalism nor the horrors of the holocaust, which brought to naught a population of some 200,000 Jewish believers in Europe (Glaser, 1999: iii).

Conclusion

So what is it that the Apostles, in the eyes of the Didachist, was saying about Jews and Gentiles and the Law of God? There is a way of life, and there is a way of death. Those on the way of life are a distinct people, worshippers of Messiah Yeshua and respectful of the *Torah*. As the Apostles made absolutely clear, however, the letter of this *Torah* was not to be required of the Gentiles. This is the freedom that the church now enjoys, reflecting the wisdom of God who deliberately set Israel aside for a time so that the Gospel might go forth to the nations – not as a Gospel of law and submission to the letter, but a Gospel of grace.

10

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