

PROSELYTES TO ISRAEL IN A MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATION

by Michael Rudolph

Introduction

Ruth, the Moabitess, became a member of Israel through her offer of covenant: "Your God will be my God, and your people will be my people (Ruth 1:15-17). Israel's acceptance of Ruth's offer was manifest through Boaz taking her as his wife (Ruth 4:13), and that day Israel added to its number a new proselyte, destined to be in the direct line of the descendants of King David and Messiah Yeshua (Ruth 4:13-22; Mt 1:1-6). Throughout history, countless Gentiles have become proselytes to Israel (Is 56:1-8; Ezr 6:21), as did Ruth, through the exchange of covenant promises with God and Israel (Acts 6:5, 13:43).¹ The question often raised among New Covenant believers is, however, whether changing one's identity from non-Jew to Jewish proselyte is either possible or proper now that salvation through Yeshua has come to both Jewish and non-Jewish believers alike (Jn 3:16; Ep 3:6; Acts 11:18).

In his letters to the Romans and the Ephesians, Paul establishes the spiritual equality of Jews and non-Jews in Messiah (Ro 10:12-13; Ep 3:6). Nevertheless, Paul says of Israel:

"What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way. First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God."
(Ro 3:1-2)

"Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Messiah, who is God all over, forever praised!" (Ro 9:3-5)

From these and other scriptures (Ex 19:1-6; De 14:1-2; Is 61:6), we see that being a Jew is a desirable identity, for Israel has been called to serve God as a holy and a priestly nation (Ex 19:6; Ro 15:7-13; Ro 49:6, 60:3, 61:6).

Through Yeshua's death, life came to both Jew and non-Jew alike (Jn 3:16; Ep 3:6). Yeshua and the disciples at first ministered exclusively to Jews (Mt 15:22-24; Acts 3:26), but after his death, the disciples were released to carry the news of Yeshua's salvation to the gentiles as well (Ro 1:16, 11:13; Acts 9:15, 10:1-35). Those gentiles who accepted Yeshua became grafted-in partakers of God's covenant with Abraham (Ro 9:22-26, 11:13-22; Ep 2:11-13), but the wild olive shoot referred to in Romans 11 did not become the root. In other words, the gentiles who received the Messiah of Israel were not automatically Jews, and were therefore determined to be

¹ L. H. Feldman, "The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers", pp. 58-69, Biblical Archaeology, Sept./Oct. 1986.

exempt from following most of the Jewish law (Acts 15:1-21). In the same way that many Jewish and non-Jewish believers of the first century lived together in communities that were distinctively Jewish in worship and lifestyle, so also today, Messianic Jewish congregations have drawn significant numbers of gentile believers desiring to worship and fellowship with their Jewish brethren. Many of these individuals have taken on Messianic Jewish identities, adopted Messianic Jewish practices and lifestyles, and some have even offered their sons and daughters in marriage to the sons and daughters of Jewish believers.

From time to time, gentile believers, such as those heretofore described, have perceived that God was calling them to make permanent their relationship with Israel by requesting recognition as proselytes to Israel. Responses from their respective congregations have ranged from supportive to prohibitive, with most Messianic Jewish congregations unsure as to how they ought to respond. This paper explores various considerations and criteria important in the recognition of proselytes by Messianic Jewish congregations, and concludes that such recognition is consistent with Scripture when responding to the authentic call of God.

Defining "Jew" Genetically

Genetic definitions of "who is a Jew" abound and, as one might expect, proponents of such definitions tend to resist the practice of proselytization. The following list illustrates the main inconsistencies which result from defining a "Jew" in purely genetic terms:

(1) If one's mother is Jewish, he is considered to be Jewish by Orthodox rabbinical *halacha* despite belief in Messiah Yeshua.^{2, 3, 4}

(2) The weight of Scripture teaches that Jewish identity is transmitted through the father (Ge 17:15-19, 27:26-29; Ex 3:5-6; He 11:8-9).⁵

(3) The above Notwithstanding, no follower of Yeshua is considered to be Jewish under Israel's Law of Return.^{6, 7, 8}

² Hulling 5a (refers to Israelite apostates); Avodah Zarah 26a,b; Gittin 45b (*meshummadim* listed separately from non-Jews)

³ L. H. Schiffman, Who Was A Jew?, pp. 9-17, 41-49, KTAV, 1985.

⁴ "Apostacy", Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 3, p. 209, Keter, 1972

⁵ D. Juster, Jewish Roots, pp. 191-192, DAVAR, 1986

⁶ Law of Return, 5710-1950 (Israel), as amended 1954

⁷ Application of Rufeisen v. The Minister of the Interior (1963), 54-55, High Court Case (Israel) 72/62, PD 16:2428-55

(4) Akiba ben Yosef, probably a proselyte and one of Judaism's most highly esteemed Rabbis, declared Bar Kochba messiah, an error which cost the lives of many Jews during Bar Kochba's military campaign against Rome.⁹ Despite this, Akiba's identify as a Jew has never been challenged.

(5) No known Jewish authority has ever challenged history's most notorious false messiahs, Bar Kochba and Sabbatai Zevi (who converted to Islam) as having forfeited their identities as Jews.

(6) No living person can, with certainty, trace his genetic lineage to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and therefore no one can be absolutely certain he is a Jew by any genetic definition.

(7) The Apostle Paul defined limits to genetic definitions of Judaism when he said "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Ro 9:6), and "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Ro 2:28-29).

An Analogy

The foregoing is not to say that Jewish identity has no Genetic basis, for God said to Abraham:

"As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come" (Ge 17:9).

Since being an Israelite is not unlike being a citizen of a political state, the following analogy is presented as an aid to understanding the relationship between genetic and covenant membership:

A baby born within the borders of any country usually receives automatic citizenship in that country. Although the youngster has had no voice in the location of his birth, he comes into a covenant whereby he receives certain citizenship benefits and owes certain obligations of loyalty. The evidence (sign) of this covenant is the baby's birth certificate, without which he cannot prove his citizenship. His acceptance of the covenant is assumed, as is his obligation of continued loyalty to the country. The child is not required to ratify or affirm the covenant when he comes of age, but he can lose his citizenship if he disaffirms it or commits certain acts of disloyalty. Similarly, persons who are not citizens by birth can become citizens through a

⁸ "Apostacy", Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 3, pp. 209-210, 214

⁹ A. J. Kolatch, Who's Who in the Talmud, pp. 68-71, Jonathan David, 1981

covenantal process known as "naturalization". Applicants for naturalization must affirmatively agree to the covenant, for as to them, commitment cannot be assumed.

In the same way, one who is born of Jewish parents is born into the Abrahamic Covenant as his natural identity, and in the same way, his covenant membership is a yoke he carries throughout his life, his covenant sign being circumcision (Ge 17:9-14). Also in the same way, a Jew can be cut off through disaffirmance or particular breach of the covenant, and one who is not born of Jewish parents can join Israel by choice.

Common Objections

There are two often-made objections to allowing gentiles to become proselytes to Israel in a Messianic Jewish congregation. They are:

(1) Referring to circumcision and other matters, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul said: "A man should remain in the situation God called him to" (I Co 7:17-24).

(2) Allowing proselytization in Messianic Jewish congregations would open the floodgates to large numbers of gentile converts, thereby diluting the Messianic Jewish witness and causing a loss of authenticity.

To the first objection, one may point out that in the context of I Corinthians 7:16-17, Paul is speaking of marriage between a man and a woman; then, beginning with verse 18, Paul establishes a general rule, employing circumcision as an illustration. Paul did not intend this to be a teaching on circumcision, nor did he consider the rule to be absolute, for he himself departed from it when he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). Thus we deduce that the principle Paul teaches is contentment to be in the center of God's will for our lives which, in most (but not all cases, reflects our condition at the time we enter the Kingdom. Finally, Paul prefaces the entire discussion with his qualifying remark: "I, not the Lord", suggesting that he considered the aforesaid rule to be of a more temporal and pragmatic nature, as compared with the other eternal principles he taught in the same epistle.

To the second objection, one may point out that at no time in history have large numbers of gentiles sought to become proselytes to the extent that it ever caused a problem of reverse assimilation or dilution. In point of fact, the specter of circumcision, having to adhere to the law, and a reluctance to abandon one's existing identity, effectively deterred a large number of righteous gentiles known as "God Fearers" (Jn 12:20; Acts 17:4) from taking the final steps in becoming proselytes; these same factors are still deterrents today.¹⁰

¹⁰ C. L. Feinberg, "Proselyte", vol. 4, pp. 908-909, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, M. C. Tenny, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976)

All of this having been said, some weight must nevertheless be given to Paul's admonition to remain in the situation in which one is called. It is also clear that God's intention that Israel be a light and a witness to the nations (Ge 18:18, 22:18; Ex 19:6; Is 2:1-5, 61:6) would certainly be undercut by the assimilation of great numbers of non-Jews, and for that reason, large-scale proselytization could not be God's design (Zech 14:16-19; Ro 15:7-13).¹¹ It is noteworthy that, in Scripture, most incidents of gentiles joining Israel in faith were the result of marriages between non-Jews and Israelites.

Proselytes Already Recognized

Finally, it must be pointed out that despite polemics, Messianic Jewish congregations already recognize proselytization in two ways. First, Messianic Jewish congregations generally accept as Jewish proselytes, those gentile believers who submit to, and are declared proselytes by, non-Messianic Rabbinical authorities -- a strange delegation of authority to those we consider apostate in their rejection of Yeshua.¹² Second, Messianic Jewish congregations, acting without uniformly agreed-to biblical standards, usually receive as Jews, those of us who have some claim to Jewish ancestry, although none of us can prove his lineage past several generations. In truth, if we did not recognize a process by which we become Jews through covenant, none of us could, with any certainty, call ourselves Jews.

Conclusion

From time to time, God calls a non-Jew in a Messianic Jewish congregation to establish a lifelong tie to Israel by becoming a proselyte. The most natural situation where this occurs is when a non-Jew marries a Jew, and the couple recognizes that their becoming "one flesh" requires an equal commitment to, and membership in, the House of Israel.¹³ As representatives

¹¹ R. K. Harrison, "Gentiles", vol. 2, p. 696, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible

¹² Entitlement to "Moses' seat" (Mt 23:1-3) can no longer belong to those who reject Messiah Yeshua because, with the destruction of the Temple and the replacement of Temple worship with Messiah's sacrifice, the foundation of the Mosaic Covenant (not the validity of the law or the Old Testament Scriptures) passed away and was replaced by a new covenant in Yeshua (He 8:6-13).

¹³ A man who elects to join Israel must be circumcised (Ge 17:9-14). A woman's circumcision is her marriage to a circumcised man (example of Ruth 4). Both of these acts are signs of an underlying a blood covenant. Although this leaves open to question whether a single woman may become a proselyte to Israel, the matter is of little consequence, for if a single woman is recognized as an Israelite through covenant declaration and she does not subsequently marry, there will be no offspring whose identity would be in doubt. Similarly, if such a woman should subsequently marry a circumcised Israelite, the identity of her offspring would be clear, as would also be the case if she subsequently married an uncircumcised man.

of Israel, congregational leaders have a solemn responsibility to consider every case where a member of the community requests recognition as a proselyte. In the case of a non-Jew proposing to marry a Jew, unity of calling is always a subject of their premarital counseling. As to others, leaders' observations over a period of time, plus proven commitment within a Messianic Jewish congregation, are sufficient safeguards to enable those in authority to discern who in their midst are truly called by God to become proselytes to Israel.

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