

WORSHIPING TOGETHER THE MESSIANIC WAY

The place of Jews and Gentiles in Messianic Congregations

By Dr. Galen Peterson
©2016 American Remnant Mission

Messianic congregations, more than any other place of worship, have the opportunity to blend together Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua (Jesus). In so doing, a diversity of opinions exists regarding rights and responsibilities of individuals based on ethnic identity. In some Messianic congregations, Gentiles are forbidden from having the privilege of making an *aliyah* (being called up) to read Scripture from the Torah, or to wear a *tallit* (prayer shawl). In other cases, in order to become a fully functional member of the congregation, Gentiles are required to convert to Judaism in addition to having becoming saved through faith in Yeshua. The result is the creation of a two-tiered system of rights and privileges within the body.

But it is also true that for much of the history of Christianity, believing Jews have been cast in a similar light by the church. For example, during the Inquisition, Jews who had become Christians faced torture and death if they retained any culturally Jewish practice. In our modern day, this opposition has not disappeared, but has just become less violent, as many churches still ban any practice that has a Jewish character, and they call Jewish believers to leave such things behind if they are to find acceptance in their place of worship.

In light of this background, it seems wise to have a solid understanding of our identity as believers and how that has a bearing on what we do in worship. That kind of discernment requires having answers from Scripture on some key questions:

Who is a Jew?

According to rabbinic Judaism the traditional definition of a Jew is: “A person born of a Jewish mother or has been converted to Judaism and who does not profess another religion.” This is a rabbinical tradition that was based on the reasoning that you can only prove the identity of the mother, not the father. Today that principle persists, in spite of becoming irrelevant due to the availability of paternity testing.

This position became official in Judaism during the Crusades. As Crusaders made their way to and from the Holy Land, they saw fit to indulge themselves at the expense of the women in Jewish villages. By raping the women, thousands of children were born with Jewish mothers and supposed Christian fathers who abandoned them in search of adventure. Since *Halakah* (Jewish Law) prohibited illegitimate children such as this from marrying other Jews, the rabbinic leaders declared that these children were rightly Jews by birth and thus eligible for all rights and privileges within the Jewish community. Thus the practice of Jewish heritage being associated with the identity of the mother became standardized, even though it lacked a biblical mandate.

Today there is one additional factor that plays a role in Jewish identity. It is the common trait throughout greater Jewish society—namely, rejection of belief in Yeshua. Most rabbis teach

that a person born of a Jewish mother but now believes in Scientology or follows the teachings of Buddha is still a Jew. You may be an atheist and not believe in God at all and still be considered Jewish. The only unpardonable sin in our day, they teach, is to believe in Yeshua as Messiah.

So the answer to the question, “Who is a Jew?” from the modern perspective is this: “You are definitely a Jew if your mother is a Jew and you don’t believe in Jesus.” All other variations are allowed. That’s what the rabbis say. But is that what God has said in His Written Word?

There is no mention in the Bible of motherhood vs. fatherhood as the determining factor of Jewishness. It simply wasn’t an issue at that time. The Torah is filled, however, with many warnings against intermarriage. The descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were instructed to marry only within their own tribes of Jews. So in the overwhelming majority of cases, a Jew had both a Jewish father and a Jewish mother. Thus we can affirm with certainty that there was a physical or genetic aspect to Jewish identity.

But that’s not all. There was a spiritual aspect as well. One passage that brings this out dramatically is in 1 Kings 12. It describes the time when Israel was divided into two kingdoms, one in the north that would continue to go by the name of Israel and another in the south called Judah.

Until this time, kings only came from the tribe of Judah, and it was further narrowed down to the line of Jesse and then through David. In this story, Rehoboam is about to become King of Israel. He was the son of Solomon and the grandson of David. But representatives from the ten northern tribes told Rehoboam that they would only support him becoming king over all twelve tribes if he reduced taxation, described as a “heavy yoke” (1 Ki 12:4).

Rehoboam consulted with his elders, who advised him to grant their petition and lower taxes. But he did not take their advice and instead listened to the opinions of some young men whom he had grown up with and continued to be part of his life. They urged him to make life even harder on the people—the “yoke” would become even heavier (v. 11). Rehoboam then passed on that determination to the ten northern tribes.

Their response is not surprising. The ten northern tribes rejected the house of David as being the kingly line and immediately seceded from the kingdom that had been built by David and Solomon (v. 16). As a result, Rehoboam could only rule over the tribe of Judah that was now the kingdom of Judah in the south (although the tribe of Benjamin would later align with them).

We also know that some individual members of the ten northern tribes did not go along with this rebellion and aligned themselves with Judah and Benjamin. So that meant that all twelve tribes were present to some extent in the new kingdom of Judah (2 Chr. 10:17; 11:14-16; 15:9; 31:6). And together they would continue worshiping Adonai at the temple in Jerusalem under the direction of the Levites.

At the same time, Jeroboam from the tribe of Ephraim was made king over the new kingdom of Israel in the north. He led them to adopt an alternate way of worship because he didn’t want the people of Israel worshiping Adonai in Jerusalem, and thus giving any kind of allegiance to their rival, Judah. Jeroboam built up Shechem (modern Nablus) and had golden calves made for worship in the areas of Bethel and Dan. In other words, the northern kingdom of Israel rejected Adonai as being the true God and rejected His sovereignty that was manifested through the house of David alone. Instead they became worshippers of false gods. For two centuries the divided kingdoms existed concurrently until 722 B.C. when the northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians and they vanished from history.

But just ten years before that calamity happened a new word was introduced in Scripture. 2 Kings 16:6 has the first reference in the entire Bible to יהודים (*Yehudim*) – Jews. From that

time forward, the people of the Kingdom of Judah (which included members from all of the tribes of Israel) were called Jews. (e.g. Ezra 4:23, Esth 3:13). That means the term *Yehudim* or Jews refers to people who could be from any of the original tribes of Israel, but they were limited to those descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were part of the kingdom that acknowledged Adonai as being the true God of the universe, who worshipped Him in Jerusalem, and who accepted the lineage of David as being the only legitimate line for the rulers of the nation. *Yehudim* or Jews never referred to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who worshipped false gods and disappeared from history. From this pivotal account in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament), this portrait is apparent:

- A Jew is a person who has a physical lineage through any of the twelve tribes all the way back to Abraham. . .
- And recognizes the sovereignty of the house of David. . .
- And believes in Adonai alone as God.

So there is both a physical and a spiritual aspect to Jewish identity according to the Bible. And since God is a God of truth and does not change (Mal. 3:6), it makes sense that these principles would be consistent over time.

But as we consider both the full context of Scripture and our modern world, it is clear that many Jews have considered the physical aspect to be sufficient. In the Second Temple period it was commonly believed that being born Jewish was all that was necessary for citizenship in the kingdom of God. So a place in the World to Come was based solely on a physical heritage. That is why when Nicodemus came to Yeshua in John 3 that Yeshua affirmed that physical birth was not sufficient. A person had to be born spiritually as well. For that reason Yeshua declared to Nicodemus: “You must be born again” (John 3:7).

Later Paul addressed the Jews in Rome who were substituting religious adherence to the Law for a spiritual relationship with God:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (Rom 2:28-29)

Again later in this same book of Romans, Paul says: “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (Rom 9:6). There are only a couple of options for interpreting this phrase. Some have said that it means, “there is another Israel that is the *true* Israel. The church is Israel, not the physical nation of Israel.” But the problem with that interpretation is that it ignores the immediate context of Romans 9. For when you read the preceding verses, Paul is referring to:

“my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever” (Rom 9:4-5).

Contextually speaking, this means that within the physical nation of Israel is the Israel that God has always desired—Jewish people who love Him and live by faith. Paul calls these Jews the “remnant”—a faithful few out of the entire nation (Rom 11:5). This reality has not changed, for the remnant of Jewish believers today are those who recognize Yeshua as Messiah and Lord. And belief in Him is in keeping with the biblical principle of acknowledging God’s sovereignty through the house of David because Yeshua is a descendent of the tribe of Judah and the house of David and thus the rightful heir to the throne of Israel.

In all due respect to the rabbis down through the centuries, people who were born Jewish and believe in Yeshua as Messiah have fulfilled their divinely given calling. Messianic Jews are Jews in every respect because they meet the specific criteria set forth in God's Word:

- A Messianic Jew has a physical lineage through any of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- A Messianic Jew recognizes the sovereignty of the house of David.
- A Messianic Jew believes in Adonai alone as God.

Who is a Jew? There are many opinions on that subject. Ultimately the only answer that really matters is the one that God has given us in the Holy Scriptures. And He makes it clear that Messianic Jews are truly Jewish in His eyes.

Who is a Gentile?

The Hebrew word for Gentile – גוי (*goy*) literally means “nation.” In a general sense, it refers to all people who are not born Jewish. But during the later biblical period, the word took on the additional meaning of people who do not believe in the God of Israel and were thus excluded from the promises and blessings of God. By the time of Yeshua, the term *goyim* (plural) was used in a scornful manner, such as putting them in the same category as the dreaded “tax-collector” (Matt. 18:17).

However, in keeping with God's emphasis on the inner person and His love for humanity, Gentiles have always been welcome in the Kingdom of God. In Scripture, righteous Gentiles are identified differently. They are called: גֵּרִים (*gerim*) translated as “sojourners, aliens or strangers,” or יְרֵאֵי יְהוָה (*yirei-Adonai*) meaning “God-fearers.” For an accurate understanding of the place of Gentiles in the family of God, it is essential to know the rights and responsibilities of believing non-Jews in biblical times:

- The word *ger* is derived from a Hebrew root meaning “to turn aside from the road and to abide.” It has the sense of a traveler on a physical journey, stopping to stay at an inn. In keeping with this word picture, *gerim* were people who reached the end of their spiritual journey and from that point onward they dwelled in the house of the Lord.
- God required equal application of the Law to ethnic Jews and *gerim*:
And if an alien sojourns with you, or one who may be among you throughout your generations, and he wishes to make an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to Adonai, just as you do, so he shall do. As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before Adonai. There is to be one law and one ordinance for you and the alien who sojourns with you (Num 15:14-16; cf Ex 12:49).
- *Gerim* were granted the same societal protections such as the courts and cities of refuge (Deut 1:16; 24:17; Josh 20:9), and they served in the army (2 Sam 1:13).
- *Gerim* were given the privilege of taking part in sacred assemblies (Josh 8:33) and having a Sabbath day of rest (Ex 23:12).
- *Gerim* were entitled to celebrate the feasts like Passover (Ex 12:48). They were included in the national atonement on *Yom Kippur* (Lev 16:29) and celebrated *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut 16:13,14).

- Since God parceled out the land of Israel to the twelve tribes and those plots remained in the possession of the descendants of the tribes, *gerim* were not permitted to own land (Num 26:55). It should be noted, however, that the tribe of Levi also had no land rights, yet they held a prominent place in the nation. In both cases, the food needs of both groups were accommodated—the Levites received offerings, while the *gerim* could glean the fields (Deut 24:19-21) or serve as artisans and other occupations (1 Chron 22:2).
- God permitted *gerim* to bring offerings for sacrifice to the Temple (Isa 56:7).
- God further declared that “My house (the temple) will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples”—for native born Jews and for *gerim* alike (Isa 56:7; cf. 1 Ki 8:41-43).

So the portrait of the person who had not been born Jewish but became a believer in the God of Israel and lived according to God's principles is rather clear. Aside from the ownership of land, there were no practical distinctions between the native born Israelite and the *ger*.

At one point during the reign of Solomon, 153,000 *gerim* lived in the land of Israel (2 Chr 2:17). But just like the believing remnant of Jews among national Israel, the believing *gerim* were a remnant among the Gentiles. As a whole, Gentiles needed a real breakthrough spiritually. The Apostle Paul describes their situation this way:

Remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:12).

That is a real problem. But there is also a real solution: “But now in Messiah Yeshua you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah” (Eph 2:13). Gentiles are no different from Jews in terms of our greatest spiritual need. All people, regardless of heritage, need to be reconciled to God through faith in Yeshua. And when Gentiles believe in Yeshua—the Messiah of Israel, they become grafted into Israel (Rom 11:17-24), and in so doing, they become like the *gerim* of Old Testament times—fully a part of God’s kingdom.

So now, if you were not born Jewish, but believe in the Jewish Messiah Yeshua, all that separation described above in the book of Ephesians is undone. You are now united with Messiah Yeshua, not separated from Him. You are not excluded but included in the commonwealth of Israel. You are an heir, not a stranger to the covenants of promise. You have a great hope and you can live daily in fellowship with God in this world.

But there is more. Paul goes on to say:

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (Eph 2:14-16).

We cannot know with absolute certainty, but when Paul cites “the barrier of the dividing wall,” There are a couple of options regarding this reference. He may have been referring to the wall that separated unrighteous Gentiles from the inner courts of the Temple in Jerusalem. Josephus writes about the presence of stone slabs at various places along that barrier with Greek inscriptions warning Gentiles about crossing it (*Wars of the Jews* 5:5:2). And today, if you go to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem you can see one of those warning signs that was preserved when the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. and was unearthed in 1871. In large Greek letters, it reads:

No foreigner shall enter within the forecourt and railing around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.

The reason for that prohibition was due to Gentiles being considered unrighteous and not able to draw near to God's Holy Temple. So that may have been the subject of Paul's reference to a dividing wall that once blocked unrighteous Gentiles from approaching God's *Shekhinah* or divine presence, but now righteous Gentiles can draw near to Him through faith in Yeshua (cf. Heb 10:19).

Others believe that Paul was referring to the rabbinic "wall" or "fence" around the Torah that excluded Gentiles. What is certain, however, is that at the time of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a state of enmity or hostility existed between Jews and Gentiles related to the Law that kept them separated. It is the power of the cross that breaks this division because the enmity has been eliminated. So the ultimate result of our reconciliation to God through faith in Yeshua is the formation of an entirely new identity for redeemed humanity, expressed by the phrase, "one new man" and "fellow citizens" (Eph 2:15,19).

All this to say that there should be no second-class citizens in a Messianic congregation. Regardless of our ethnic background, we are all able to worship together in the same manner, and to serve and to lead, Jew and Gentile alike.

If you are Jewish and you believe in Yeshua, a Messianic congregation is a place where you can grow in your cultural heritage. If you don't believe in Yeshua yet, a Messianic congregation is where you can get answers to your questions that other people may not be equipped to do so. If you are a Gentile, a Messianic congregation is where you can partake in the blessings of the Messianic way of worship and where you can discover the cultural foundations of your faith that are ignored or forbidden elsewhere. It is also a great place to express your love for Israel and the Jewish people.

A further word of wisdom is worth noting. It is common for Gentiles with a heart for Jewish people to consider themselves to be spiritual Jews. But a spiritual Jew is not a term or concept found anywhere in the Bible because you cannot change your DNA. Ethnically you are still what you always have been. The term "spiritual Jew" sounds nice and might justify what you want in your heart. It just doesn't have the Bible to back it up.

But if you call yourself a Messianic Gentile, or simply a Messianic believer, that is biblically consistent and indicates your appreciation for the Messianic way of worship and your love for the Jewish people. In all things, we want to be true to the principles we have been given in God's Word.

This then, is an important way of answering the question—"Who are we? Regardless of our physical distinctions, we are united together as one body, one olive tree, one new man, and fellow citizens of the kingdom of God.

It might be said that we have been given a glimpse of heaven. For it is there that we will be united as one with other believers across the generations. As John writes:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands (Rev 7:9).

We have an eternal future awaiting us that is marked by people of many distinctions being united as one. It seems reasonable, then, to uphold that kind of worship and daily life now.