

What's in a Name? Thoughts on "One Law"

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In the fractured Messianic Movement, there are still some of us who confess the supremacy of the Scriptures as the final authority for faith and *halachah*. Though we are sometimes viewed as having a naïve approach to Scripture, reading and studying it outside of its literary context, just the opposite is the case. We receive the Scriptures as the divinely inspired word of God that, by His all-controlling providence, was written by men who were borne along by the Ruach HaKodesh (2Pet 1:20–21). As such, we recognize both the divine and the human element that combined to produce the Bible. Therefore, we work hard to understand the language of any given biblical text in its linguistic milieu, meaning we take seriously the grammatical, syntactical, and literary structure through which the author communicated his meaning. This, of course, requires that we work hard to understand the historical context in which the text was written. But we begin with the premise that within the Bible itself God has given us His self-revelation and thus His will for our lives as we seek to sanctify His Name upon the earth.

Currently we find ourselves embroiled in the age old controversy over what constitutes righteous living for those who confess Yeshua to be the promised Messiah—whether God has one standard of righteousness or if He has various standards for different groups of people. As I noted, this debate is nothing new. It started in Gan Eden when the evil one posed the question: “Has God said?”, and it has continued ever since. Some years ago, when the UMJC was formulating its “Definition of Messianic Judaism,” they began to label our teaching as “One Law.” The label was apparently taken from the Torah itself, where God states that there is to be “one law for the native born and for the foreigner” (e.g., Num 15:16, 29). Their position was that some of God’s laws were for everyone, but others were not. They felt that some of God’s laws were given specifically to Jewish people and not to Gentiles because these laws helped maintain a distinct Jewish identity. The conclusion was that Gentiles should not take these laws upon themselves lest they blur the Jewish/Gentile distinction.

When the “One Law” label was first used to identify our position, I was not opposed to it. “One Law” seemed to be a handy description of our understanding of what God revealed in the Torah itself, what Yeshua taught, and what His Apostles instilled in the communities of Yeshua-followers which they founded. But the more I have contemplated this label, given to us by those who are quite certain we are wrong, the more I think it is deficient. I would therefore like to encourage us all to abandon the label “One Law” and rather adopt the label “One Torah.” I have a number of reasons for wanting to make this change.

First, it has become increasingly evident that those who oppose our “One Torah” perspective have given more and more authority to what is commonly known as the “Oral Torah,” that is, the traditions of Rabbinic Judaism. Our use of the label “One Torah,” therefore, will also make it clear that while we appreciate the value of rabbinic literature as offering historical backgrounds out of which the Apostolic Scriptures (in particular) were written, we do not accord the writings of the rabbis as having authority to bind the conscience nor do we give the rabbis the authority to reinterpret the Scriptures. For instance, when Num 15:16, 29 state that “there is one Torah for the native born and the foreigner,” we take the

word “foreigner” (*ger*) in its grammatical, historical sense to mean a person from the nations who has been drawn to faith in Israel’s God. We do not agree with the rabbinic anachronistic reinterpretation that “foreigner” (*ger*) in these texts is to be understood as a “convert” to Judaism. We stand on the infallible record of God’s “One Torah” and refuse to accept the “Oral Torah” as dictating how we are to read the inspired Scriptures.

Second, using the label “One Torah” will reinforce the well-known fact that the Hebrew word Torah means “teaching,” not “law.” Surely the Torah contains laws, commandments, statutes, ordinances, and so forth, but even these should be understood as communicating God’s teaching about what is righteous and what is unrighteous in His eyes. This speaks to the issue of “commandment” or “law” as mandated. Surely God’s commandments are His requirements or mandates for His people. He did not give us “suggestions.” He revealed Himself to us with the commandment “Be holy, for I am holy.” But if our hearts have been won over by His love; if we have been changed so that we “concur with the Torah of God in our inner man” (Rom 7:22); if we have come to see God’s Torah as “more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold,” then we have come to realize that God’s Torah—His teaching—is wisdom itself and we long to know it and to live it. We agree with the Psalmist when he wrote: “Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourn” (Ps 119:54). God’s Torah is not a heavy burden because His yoke fits well and His burden is light (Matt 11:30). So if we abandon the label “One Law” and rather adopt the name “One Torah,” we will be reinforcing that we revere God’s Torah as His teaching about righteousness, gifted to us by His grace ultimately and finally revealed in Yeshua.

I recognize that labels are difficult to change. “One Law” has been a defining term for some years now, and doubtlessly will continue to be used. That’s okay. But I have decided to use “One Torah” to describe my position on this issue, and I encourage you to do the same. In so doing, we will be using a label that better defines our position—a label we have adopted rather than one placed upon us by those who hold the opposite view.