

The “Great Commission”: An Inquiry

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The Great Commission—Some Background

The idea of converting the nations to worship the one, true God did not originate with Yeshua. Isaiah’s prophecy is replete with the promise of gathered peoples, of Israel being a light to the nations, and the pagan peoples worshiping Israel’s God.¹ The other prophets agree.² The prophetic call for Israel to be the light to the nations is based upon the initial promise of the Abrahamic covenant, that in Abraham’s seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. From the very outset of God’s covenant with Israel, the whole world is in view, and Israel is His servant to accomplish this task. That Israel was not completing this mission becomes the basis for the pointed rebuke of the prophets and even the theme of the prophetic book of Jonah, though played out against the prophet himself.

What, then, was Messiah’s meaning when He gave the commission before His Ascension? Was this understood by His disciples as something new, something innovative, something requiring a new strategy?

We may begin answering this question by focusing on the already-not-yet ministry of the Holy Spirit as outlined by Messiah (primarily in John 14-16). The Spirit was active among all those who believed, but there was a mission of the Spirit that had not yet been undertaken, for which reason John could say that the Holy Spirit was not yet—

But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet *given*, because Yeshua was not yet glorified. (John 7:39)

John’s meaning is that the Spirit had not yet unleashed His power to evangelize the nations. Or, to say it another way, the Apostles had not yet received the specific work of the Spirit by which power they would be enabled to evangelize the nations (a meaning obscured by the translator’s interpretive addition of the word “given” in John 7:39).³ Thus, the work commissioned by Messiah before His Ascension presupposed a special work of the Spirit for which the Apostles were instructed to wait before going out on their mission.

This special work of the Holy Spirit in energizing the great commission was graphically displayed at Shavuot in Acts 2. There, people from many “tribes and tongues” received the gospel in their own language. Shavuot, called Pentecost by the Greeks, is a celebration of the harvest, and the Lord, by sending His Spirit on this day, graphically marked out the purpose and scope of the Great Commission.

In time, God revealed to Paul an additional aspect of the commission. Whereas the common belief among 1st Century Judaisms was that God would bring the nations to worship Him, none believed (at least not as a central tenant) that He would join the nations *as Gentiles* to Israel in this worship. While the Sages anticipated the salvation of the nations in the Messianic age, they envisioned this under the rubric of conversion to Judaism. What Paul received via divine revelation was boldly significant: the vast ingathering of Gentiles into the covenant would occur, not by them becoming proselytes, but Gentiles remaining non-Jewish as fellow-heirs within Israel—full covenant members.⁴

Thus, in God’s progressive revelation of the covenant and its fulfillment, two aspects were emphasized in regard to the harvest of the nations: (1) the Holy Spirit endowed the Apostles in a special way to initiate the final harvest of the nations, and (2) the nations would turn to God not by converting to Judaism, but by receiving the

¹ Is. 11:10; 25:3; 34:1f; 42:6; 49:6; 60:3, and many others.

² Jer 3:17f; 4:2; 16:19; 33:9; Dan 7:14; Amos 9:12; Mic. 4:2ff; Zech 2:11; 8:22f; 14:16ff; Mal. 1:11,14.

³ Cp. Matt. 16:13-17; Jn. 14:26; 15:26.

⁴ Eph 3:4-7.

Spirit apart from proselytizing, and being incorporated into the family God as non-Jews, with full privileges and responsibilities of the covenant.⁵

With these two features in mind, let us turn our attention specifically to the wording of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. In doing so I am particularly interested in understanding what significance Yeshua put on discipling, baptism, and teaching as He commissioned His Apostles for this task.

Matthew 28:18-20

<p>18 καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς λέγων· ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς. 19 πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, 20 διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν· καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος.</p>	<p>18 And Yeshua came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”</p>
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Comments on the Text

18 The οὖν, *oun* (“therefore”) of v. 19 is generally assumed to fall back upon v. 18. To say it plainly, the “going” is based upon the fact that “all authority” has been given to Messiah. Whether this is to be understood as personal authority (as over demonic powers or enemies of the gospel) or as universal authority (that Yeshua had won the victory through dying and rising again, and that the salvation of the elect from the nations was therefore inevitable), the nations would be successfully discipled because of Yeshua’s position as ultimate sovereign.

The idea of authority being “given” (ἐδόθη < διδωμι, 3rd pers. aor. passive) encapsulates the submissive victory which Yeshua won through His death and resurrection. Where as other “heroes” gain their authority by subduing their enemies alone, Messiah gains authority by subduing His enemies, but also by submitting to the Father. Therefore, though the victory is won by His efforts, the authority is given to Him by the One to whom He submits. Yet in claiming this authority as His own, Messiah equates Himself with the sovereign of Daniel 5:34-35 and 7:7–14, Whose domain stretches from the heavens to the earth and Whose kingdom and dominion is eternal.⁶

19 The structure of the Greek is interesting: participle – imperative – participle – participle – verb to be. (It is possible that the participles also function as imperatives.⁷ Note, for instance, Matt 9:13—πορευθεντες δε μαθετε τι εστιν, “But go and learn what this means.”) If the participle πορευθεντες, *poreuthentes* (“go”) mimics the Hebrew הִלְכְּ, *holech* (“walk, go”) or (more probably) הִלַּךְ, *k’lu* (imperative form: “go!”), the sense would be much

⁵ This Pauline position, that Gentiles should be admitted into the congregation without conversion to Judaism, was confirmed by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). This “council decision” did not silence the issue, however. The feeling on the part of some (and perhaps many) that Gentiles should be circumcised (by which is meant “convert to Judaism” = “become proselytes”) appears to underlie much of the polemic of the Pauline epistles, and is even the focus of an entire epistle, i.e., Galatians.

⁶ Cp. Lxx Dan. 4:27, κύριος ζῆ ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἡ ἐξουσία αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ γῆ αὐτοῦ...,” “the Lord lives in heaven and His authority is upon all of His earth”

⁷ In the Lxx, the Hebrew Infinitive Absolute is often translated by the participle (see Blass-DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago, 1961, §422), and it is well recognized that on occasion the Infinitive Absolute functions as an imperative (besides its normal use to strengthen the finite verb). It is at least possible, then, that the participles in this text translate an original infinitive absolute construction.

like our common “come on!” as in the phrase “Come on! Let’s get going” This would then be a call to action—functioning as an initial imperative to prepare oneself for the task or activity ahead.⁸

Μαθητεύσατε, *mathēteusate*, means “make disciples,” but the verb itself originally meant “to be a disciple.” Blass-Debrunner note this progression:

The Hellenistic transformation of intransitive actives into causatives is represented in μαθητεύειν: it meant first ‘to be a disciple’ (Plut., Mt 27:57 v.1.), then became a deponent (Mt 13:52, 27:57 v.1.), and from this there developed a new active ‘to make a disciple’ (28:19, A 14:21).⁹

The meaning of the term itself seems self-evident. The word means to be a pupil or student (in contrast to a teacher), to learn or study.¹⁰ The Pharisees remind the disciples of Yeshua at one point that they are “disciples of Moses,”¹¹ meaning that they professed adhering to and practicing the laws given by Moses. The Pharisees themselves were said to have disciples as well.¹² “To make disciples,” therefore, in the context of Yeshua’s commission, surely means to encourage and teach people how to follow His teachings and how to teach others after they have learned.

The modern-day use of the term in evangelical circles tends to add the idea of maturity. An immature believer is said to lack “discipleship.” But this concept is foreign to our text. To be a disciple is to embrace the teachings of Yeshua without reservation, meaning one does what He commands and teaches others to do the same.¹³ The Apostles could not think of someone being a disciple who did not fully embrace the teachings of their master. Thus, a disciple is constantly in a state of growth, but he is nonetheless a disciple from the first day he commits himself to follow Yeshua.

In the Apostolic Scriptures the use of “disciple” doubtlessly draws from the general structure of the Judaisms of the 1st Century, most importantly the school of the Pharisees. While the Sadducees gave allegiance only to the written Torah, the Pharisees emphasized the oral Torah (one version of which was eventually codified in what we now call the Mishnah). This oral Torah was to be taught to all by qualified and recognized (ordained) teachers or sages, and for this purpose the *בֵּית מִדְרָשׁ* (*beit midrash*, “House of Study”) was established. The teaching aspect of the synagogue focused primarily upon the written Torah and Tanach, but the Beit Midrash (modern day Yeshivah) had as its purpose the teaching of Haggadic (story) and Halachic (legal rulings) materials. Students at the Beit Midrash were known as *תְּלָמִידִים* (*talmidim*, “learners” or “students”) regardless of age. Only someone who received ordination and appointment to a public office of teaching was referred to by a different title. Some of the authorities named in the Mishnah and Talmuds remained *talmidim*, having never sought ordination or official positions (e.g., Simeon ben Azzai and Simeon ben Zoma).¹⁴ Sages taught not only in their respective villages and schools, but often traveled to other villages and schools to share their learning. That Yeshua went about the country side teaching and instructing disciples should not be considered unique. This was common within the 1st Century Judaisms, especially Pharisaism, as far as we are able to ascertain.¹⁵

⁸ Cp. also Matt 11:4; 21:6; 22:15; 27:66. In each of these a particular action is preceded by the verb *poreuomai* in participle form.

⁹ Op. cit., §148.

¹⁰ Note *μαθητε* in Wisdom 6:9.

¹¹ Jn. 9:28.

¹² Matt 22:16.

¹³ Note in this regard Matt 5:17-20; Lk. 6:46-49.

¹⁴ See the comments of S. Safrai, “Education and the Study of the Torah” in *The Jewish People of the First Century*, vol. I-2 of *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (Van Gorcum, 1987), p. 965ff.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 964. For further information on the transmission of the “oral Torah,” see my paper, “What Version of the Mishnah Did Paul Read?”, available at www.torahresource.com.

Therefore, taken within the Jewish context in which Yeshua spoke the Great Commission to His disciples, we must understand His use of μαθητεύω (matheteuo, “make disciples”) as common and not something new or innovative. He was commanding His Apostles to be active in gaining other disciples who would accept Him as the true Messiah, and therefore follow His teachings and rulings. Understood in this light, we certainly cannot say that Messiah considered His disciples as distinct from the true worshipers of God within the Judaisms of His day. He did not commission them to begin something new! He simply sent them out to be witnesses of His Messiahship, and to increase the number who called Him “Master.”

The noun μαθητής, *mathētes* is found 229 times in the Gospels, and 28 times in the book of Acts. It is not found in any of the other books of the Apostolic Scriptures. The verb μαθητεύω, *mathēteuō* is found 3 times in Matthew¹⁶ and once in Acts.¹⁷ The obvious lack of the use of this word group in the Epistles is striking and interesting. Is it possible that as the Messianic synagogue became less and less tied to the Judaisms from which it sprang, it adopted a different terminology? Is the “workman” (ἐργάτης, *ergatēs*) of 2 Timothy 2:15 a Greek idea of “disciple?” Why, if the Great Commission fueled the expansion of Yeshua’s followers, did not the title “disciple” or the activity of “make disciples” remain in the Apostolic epistles? Certainly this question needs to be asked in any investigation of the outworking of the Great Commission by the early Messianic congregations.

Furthermore, it seems clear that “making disciples” and “baptizing” are closely linked together. Note the wording of John 4:1-3:

When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Yeshua was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Yeshua Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee.

When “making disciples” is closely linked to baptizing, it seems significant that Paul would announce he had not been sent to baptize but to preach.¹⁸ How are we to understand Paul as a model for the outworking of the Great Commission if he flatly states that Messiah did not send him to baptize? And particularly since Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles! This issue bears wider reflection and on-going study.

The word μαθητής, *mathētēs* does not enjoy a wide use in the Lxx either. In slight variation (and in some cases, in variant texts), the noun occurs in Jeremiah three times, but not in the sense of “pupil.”¹⁹ It apparently means “champion” or “chieftain” (from the sense of “well trained”[?]) and translates the Hebrew אלוף, *’aluf*, (“tribal chief”). A verbal form of the word occurs in Wisdom 6:9 in the sense of “learn” or “study”:

“To you, then who have absolute power I speak, in hope that you may learn wisdom and not go astray;”²⁰

On the mere distribution of the word group itself, it seems likely that the concept of “discipleship” became prominent during the rise of the synagogue and Beit Midrash, that is, during the late 1st Century BCE and early 1st Century CE. It is therefore not surprising that the command to make disciples is found in the Great Commission of our Lord.

Ἔθνος (*ethnos*, “people(s), etc.”) is the most general designation for a group of people.²¹ It commonly des-

¹⁶ Matt 13:52; 27:57; 28:19.

¹⁷ Acts 14:21.

¹⁸ 1 Co. 1:17.

¹⁹ Jer. 13:21; 20:11; 26[46]:9.

²⁰ Quoted from *The Revised English Bible with Apocrypha*, Oxford, 1989.

²¹ λαός (“people”) appears already in the Lxx to be used more often of Israel as distinct from ἔθνος which often designates non-Israelite nations.

ignates “non-Jewish” in both the Apostolic Scriptures and Lxx.²² The meaning, then, of Yeshua’s words is in concert with the promise made to Abraham that “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”²³ While in His own ministry He focused on the Jewish nation almost exclusively,²⁴ after the cross and resurrection He commissions His apostles to evangelize the nations. The added παντάς (*pantas*, “all”) would naturally follow in this interpretation, emphasizing the fact that the promise to Abraham that embraced all the nations was now being realized.

An obvious question that arises out of this use of ἔθνος, *ethnos* is whether Israel is envisioned within the Great Commission. While it is clear that the Apostles of Yeshua accepted as part of their mission the discipling of their fellow Jews, the core message of the Gospel was the same, whether given to Jews or non-Jews. All who come to God must do so on the same basis, i.e., faith in His Son, Yeshua Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile. But the evangelistic method and procedures undoubtedly differed depending upon the group in view. To give the gospel to pagan peoples steeped in idolatry and polytheism would have require a different starting point in the delivery of the Gospel than would have been required to inform religiously oriented Jewish people that Yeshua of Nazareth is indeed the promised Messiah. While “conversion” is an appropriate term applicable to all who come to faith in Yeshua, how such a conversion was manifest in outward social and cultural realities would have differed between observant Jews and pagan non-Jews. While in the end both pagan and Jew come to the Father only through repentance toward God and faith in Yeshua, and while both must be crucified to self and find life in Yeshua alone (and in this salvific sense there is in reality no Jew or Gentile²⁵), what each jettisons from his past is different. The pagan forsook his pagan rituals and demonic worship; the Jew forsook his self reliance (i.e., covenant status based upon ethnic status) but continued to worship within the synagogue and Temple contexts, yet with true understanding and faith. Torah life took on new meaning, but it was Torah life nonetheless. His mode of worship and his pattern of life were still governed by Torah, though after coming to faith in Yeshua he would recognize that the goal of the Torah was Yeshua Himself, giving new dimensions and motivations to his Torah observance.

We must, therefore, reckon with the distinct possibility that the Apostles adopted a “two-track” methodology in carrying out the Great Commission, though the core message of the Gospel was the same to all. Thus, the Apostles (especially Paul) seemed to understand that their mission was primarily focused on the promise to Abraham regarding the blessing to all the nations, and that the goal to which Messiah’s commission pointed was this promise.

βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα... (“Baptizing them in the name...”). The issue of baptizing is linked closely with making disciples and appears to be based most directly on the 1st century practice within Judaism of the *mikveh* (מִקְוֵה). The *mikveh* was a gathering or pool of running (“living”) water most often used for ritual or ceremonial cleansing. This was the case for those who were defiled by contact with the dead,²⁶ or any other defiling object, or through an unclean flux from the body,²⁷ and especially for a menstruate.²⁸ Vessels that had become ritually unclean or were suspect of uncleanness were likewise immersed in the waster of the *mikveh*.

More important for our consideration, however, was the use of the *mikveh* in the ceremony of conversion, when a proselyte was admitted into the people of Israel.²⁹ During the time of the second Temple, a proselyte was

²² TDNT, 2:365ff.

²³ Gen 12:3. This promise is reiterated a number of times, and in Gen 18:18 employs ἔθνοι.

²⁴ Matt 10:6; 15:24.

²⁵ Gal 3:28.

²⁶ Num 19.

²⁷ Lev. 15.

²⁸ Lev 15:19f

²⁹ See the article “proselyte” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (Macmillian, 1971), 13:1182ff.

required, according to Rabbinic ruling, to make a sacrifice, be circumcised, and undergo immersion in a *mikveh*. After the destruction of the Temple, the sacrifice was no longer required, nor the giving of money equivalent to the sacrifice.³⁰ R. Eliezer argues that one is a proselyte even if he performs only one of the two required rituals (circumcision or mikveh) but R. Joshua disagreed and the *halachic* decision went in favor of R. Joshua.³¹ Therefore, the proselyte of the 1st Century and later was required both to be circumcised and immersed in a ritual bath. Furthermore, the Sages concluded that both the circumcision and the immersion must be witnessed by a *bet din*, a court of three witnesses. An individual who claimed he had immersed himself but could not produce witnesses was not accepted as a legitimate proselyte.

The parallels to the Apostolic *halachah* are evident. Agreeing with R. Eliezer in the final analysis, the council of Acts 15 decided that the Gentile believer did not have to be circumcised, leaving baptism as the single ritual marking conversion. One cannot help but imagine that the words of Messiah in the Great Commission figured into this debate, for He specifically names baptism, but says nothing about circumcision. And one cannot help but think that this figured heavily into the Pauline theology of how Gentiles should be included within the covenant people of Israel on the basis of their faith apart from becoming proselytes.

What, then, did the ritual immersion signify for the proselyte to Judaism during the 1st Century CE? Traditionally, scholars have held that the *mikveh* performed a cleansing of one's life from the pagan uncleanness in which he had lived. Like vessels purchased from Gentile craftsmen that needed to be purified in the waters of the *mikveh*, so the proselyte himself must pass through the waters before he is accepted into the covenant community. Maimonides expresses this interpretation of proselyte baptism:

It is plain that the laws about immersion as a means of freeing oneself from uncleanness are decrees laid down by Scripture and not matters about which human understanding is capable of forming a judgment; for behold, they are included among the divine statutes. Now 'uncleanness' is not mud or filth which water can remove, but is a matter of scriptural decree and dependent on the intention of the heart. Therefore the Sages have said, 'If a man immerse himself, but without special intention, it is as though he has not immersed himself at all.'

Nevertheless we may find some indication [for the moral basis] of this: Just as one who sets his heart on becoming clean becomes clean as soon as he has immersed himself, although nothing new has befallen his body, so, too, one who sets his heart on cleansing himself from the unlikenesses that beset men's souls—namely, wrongful thoughts and false convictions—becomes clean as soon as he consents in his heart to hear those counsels and brings his soul into the waters of pure reason. Behold, Scriptures say, 'And I will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean; from all your unlikenesses and from all your idols will I cleanse you [Ezek. 36:25]'.³²

Jewish Proselyte Baptism

Not all scholars are in agreement, however, about the practice and significance of proselyte baptism in the 1st Century CE. Some are not even sure it was a prevalent practice. For example, proselyte baptism is not mentioned in either Josephus or Philo, though both speak of converts. The first unambiguous references to proselyte baptism belong to the later 1st Century, most importantly the debates recorded in the Mishnah.³³ Still, the references in the

³⁰ b.*Yevamot* 47a; m.*Gittin* 1. [*Gittin* is one of the 14 minor tractates found in some editions of the Mishnah and Talmud attached to the fourth order, *Nezikin*.]

³¹ b.*Yevamot* 46.

³² *Yad, Mikva'ot* 11:12.

³³ Epictetus, *Dissert.*, II.9.9-21, as noted in Beasley-Murray, p. 23. A passage found in the fourth Sibylline Oracle, dated about 80 CE, deals with proselyte baptism in the opinion of most scholars. The Rabbinic discussions in the Mishnah might likewise represent earlier traditions and evidence a practice in place by the end of the 1st century.

Mishnah³⁴ deal with an apparent standard practice, meaning it may reflect an early practice.

There are further debates about how a Gentile was viewed as unclean by the Jewish community of the 1st Century CE. Zeitlin argues that Gentiles were not regarded as unclean until the year 65 CE, when Jews were forbidden to associate with them, as a measure intended to promote Jewish nationalism in the face of the threat from Rome, and it was only after this declaration that the necessity for proselyte baptism arose.³⁵ Some scholars discount the year 65 as significant, claiming that the laws requiring separation from Jews were, in reality, nothing new. Furthermore, Zeitlin's argument rests upon his assumption that the Apostolic Scriptures are generally much later than traditionally held, and that the various references to proselyte baptism are therefore also late.³⁶ Others note that Rabbinic language would confirm the belief that Gentiles were unclean. Jeremias states that

...in the time of Herod the uncleanness of the Niddah (a menstrual woman) was ascribed to the Gentiles; in the first decades of our era the uncleanness of a corpse; in the last time before the destruction of the temple the uncleanness of the Zab (=a man with a seminal issue).³⁷

Josephus says that when one of the lower order of the Essenes touched a member of the highest grade, the latter washed himself "as though he had associated himself with a foreigner."³⁸

Yet the Rabbinic discussion on this point is itself not unified. In *b.Pesechim* 91a, the school of Hillel lays down a particular ruling about a proselyte on the ground that, "he (the proselyte) will not understand that the previous year he was a heathen and not susceptible to uncleanness, whereas he is now an Israelite and susceptible to uncleanness." On the basis of this data, Daube is convinced that proselyte baptism was outside the levitical sphere, i.e., was not considered to wash away the unclean status of a non-Jew.³⁹ It functioned purely as a initiation rite into the Jewish community.⁴⁰

I would like to offer a suggestion at this point (though I've not read this elsewhere nor done extensive research to discover if this idea is suggested in more recent scholarship). Is it possible that proselyte baptism was envisioned as mystically connecting the convert to the nation at the time of the exodus? Paul's comment that all were "baptized into Moses" (1Cor 10:2) may have arisen from a common understanding regarding the non-Jews who left with Israel on that historic day. They ate the Passover (which required circumcision, Ex 12:48) and then walked through the Sea which may have been understood as symbolically represented by the *mikveh*. Furthermore, the Passover seder puts much emphasis upon the fact that it was not merely the Israelites of old who passed through the Sea, but every generation of Israel was to view themselves as personally being redeemed from Egypt.⁴¹ Perhaps, then, the proselyte was acting out the crossing of the Red Sea in the *mikveh*, and identifying

³⁴ See notes 29-30 above.

³⁵ Solomon Zeitlin, "The Halaka in the Gospels and its relation to the Jewish Law at the Time of Jesus," *HUCA*, I, 1924, p. 360.

³⁶ Jn. 18:28; Acts 10:28; 11:12; and possibly Mt. 8:7.

³⁷ J. Jeremias, "Der Ursprung der Johannestaufe," *ZAW*, 1929, p. 313. Quoted from Beasley-Murray, 21, n. 2.

³⁸ *Wars*, II, viii, 10.

³⁹ See Daube's remarks in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1956), pp. 106ff.

⁴⁰ Daube (*Ibid.*) bases his argument on the fact the women, who could not undergo circumcision in the proselyte ritual, were left with nothing if baptism was not administered. Since, he argues, the vast majority of proselytes were women, baptism became the most common public ritual connected with proselytism as a whole. G.F. Moore, a recognized scholar in 1st Century Judaism, agrees with Daube (though on slightly different bases) as did Büchler, who wrote: "There is no evidence for the assumption that the immersion prescribed for the proselyte was instituted to wash off symbolically his numerous sins." A. Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century* (KTAV, 1967), p. 373.

⁴¹ This is based on the wording of Ex. 12:26, 27, which envisions the future generations asking about the Passover seder and its meaning. The parent is to tell the child, "It is a Passover sacrifice to the Lord who passed over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but spared our homes." Thus, each generation may rightly say that the Lord

with Israel as the “sojourner” did at the time of the exodus. If this thought has merit, it might find a parallel to the “ingrafting” motif used by Paul in Romans 9–11. Baptism would, under this rubric, identify the believer with the redeemed Israel of the exodus, and with Abraham, the father of all those who have righteousness by faith.

Another interesting debate in the Bavili deserves our attention. In the Hillel/Shammai debate over proselyte baptism (*b. Pesachim* 91b), the question is raised whether or not a proselyte can eat the Passover the evening on which he is baptized. Shammai ruled that the proselyte could eat the Passover the same day he had undergone baptism, but Hillel ruled he must wait seven days. Why? “He who separates himself from his uncircumcision is as one who separates himself from a grave.” That is, the proselyte is considered to be impure with the same impurity accorded to corpse defilement.⁴² However, it seems highly significant that proselytizing in the 1st century was apparently viewed as moving from death to life. Further corroboration of this is found in *b. Yevanot* 22a: “One who has become a proselyte is like a child newly born.” Thus, proselytism in the 1st Century enjoyed two symbols common with the Apostolic gospel: resurrection from the dead (*mikveh*) and new birth.

At what point the immersion ceremony in the Messianic community was understood to picture death and resurrection with Messiah is not certain. Perhaps this was emphasized at the outset, though this is not explicit by any means. Commentators debate whether or not the language of Romans 6 refers to water or Spirit baptism.⁴³ Certainly for the proselyte, immersion signified an identification with the Jewish nation and faith, for the principle significance of the *mikveh* was a change of status. In the same manner that Israel was willing to follow Moses through the sea,⁴⁴ (thus changing status from being slaves to free people), the proselyte was willing to follow Yeshua and identify with His Torah-life of faith. Thus, for the convert to be baptized “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” was to identify with the true God of Israel as represented in His Messiah, Yeshua, and to take upon himself the obligations of obedience and loyalty to Him as enabled by the Holy Spirit. Paul refused to allow people to be baptized in his name,⁴⁵ for the disciples were to be of Messiah, not Paul. It may well be for this reason that Paul refrained from baptizing very many people. His position as Apostle of Messiah may have made it unwise to baptize converts, for the simple reason that some would have inevitably put more emphasis upon being baptized by Paul than being baptized into Messiah!

John’s Baptism

Having looked briefly at proselyte baptism in the Rabbinic sources, I turn now to the question of John’s baptism.⁴⁶ It obviously was not proselyte baptism, for both Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to him.

At the outset it appears that John’s baptism had two primary foci: one eschatological and the other repentance. That John was an eschatological figure is easy to prove. The opening citation of Malchai 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3–4 in Mark’s gospel account clearly announces John as the eschatological prophet who would prepare the way for Messiah and the time when “all flesh” would “see it together,” i.e., the salvation of the Lord.

Yet John’s preaching was centered on repentance and his baptism is defined as “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν). The most natural way to interpret this phrase is “a baptism that marked repentance, that is, seeking to have one’s sins forgiven.” Clearly, John did not believe that physical lineage (i.e., Jewish status) constituted a guarantee of forgiveness by God. In this he agrees

redeemed us out of Egypt, and that we passed through the Sea to safety.

⁴² Num 19:16ff.

⁴³ Cp. also 1 Cor 12:13. Both Cranfield (*Romans*, 2 vols. in the *International Critical Commentary* [T & T Clark, 1975]) and Murray (*Romans in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Eerdmans, 1965]) recognize that Paul is speaking about the actual ritual of baptism, but emphasizing that its import is essentially union with Messiah.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor 10:2, “. . . all were baptized into Moses. . .”

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 1:13-16.

⁴⁶ Matt. 3; Mk. 1; Lk. 3.

with at least one strain of Rabbinic teaching.⁴⁷

It is not clear in the Gospels exactly how John viewed the Gentiles in his ministry. It should most probably be presumed that, like Yeshua, John concentrated his efforts on the Jewish community and ministered little, if at all, to non-Jews.

The baptism of John signaled repentance, a “turning” from sin to righteousness. It seems clear that the many people who came to John (including religious leaders) were seeking to make their lives right before God in view of the approaching Messianic Age. For John’s baptism was also given as a precursor to the “One who would come after.” Thus, it was a call to the nation of Israel to make themselves right with their God, and to prepare for the rule of Messiah in their midst. And, as Beasley-Murray has shown, the anticipation of the Messiah so evident in John’s baptism also predicts the baptism He would bring, i.e., of the Spirit, anticipating the prophetic promise of revival among Israel by the Spirit of God.⁴⁸ John’s baptism symbolized repentance and forgiveness of sins, but the baptism that Messiah would bring would actually effect this forgiveness and cleansing through the work of the Spirit.⁴⁹

The discussion may be advanced by remembering that Yeshua was not known to perform many baptisms during His earthly ministry (if any at all).⁵⁰ It seems very likely to me that the reason lies in the essential message of John the Baptist, that he baptized in water, but the One following him would baptize in the Holy Spirit. Thus, for Yeshua to baptize as John did might confuse the significance of John’s baptism as preparation for the Messianic Age. But we should also reckon with the fact that Yeshua’s ministry was primarily to the “lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). To the extent that the *mikveh* was understood within 1st Century Judaism as an initiation rite for Gentiles entering the covenant, we should not expect to find Yeshua regularly engaged in it.

But John’s baptism both retained the sense of ceremonial cleansing and anticipated proselyte baptism. For the proselyte, John’s baptism emphasized a newness, a moving from sin to righteousness, anticipating the person and work of the Messiah, Yeshua. In so far as it paralleled this “repentance,” it envisioned the persona who was baptized as beginning a new life. With regard to cleansing and repentance, John’s baptism emphasized preparation for the approaching, Messianic rule. If ceremonial cleansing were necessary for worship in the temple, how much more would one need to be clean in heart and body for the rule of Messiah.

Perhaps most puzzling in this discussion of John’s baptism, however, is the fact that Yeshua Himself is baptized by John. While this short paper cannot deal with the issue of Yeshua’s *mikveh* in the Jordan river, it seems important to ask how it informs the meaning of baptism as a whole, and especially how it relates to the command to baptize disciples.

The Gospels differ in their retelling of the event, particularly in the wording of the declaration of the Father upon Yeshua as He came up out of the water. Matthew puts it in the third person: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Mark and Luke adopt second person: “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well pleased.”⁵¹ Matthew and Mark clearly have John baptizing Yeshua, but Luke does not mention John’s part, noting

⁴⁷ Beasley-Murray’s remarks (Op. cit., p. 33, n. 1) accepts uncritically the notion that 1st Century Judaism embraced a belief that no circumcised person would be punished by God. The two most often quoted citations to substantiate this teaching are Mid. Rab. *Exodus*, 19, “The circumcision do not go down to Gehinnom” and b.*Shabbat* 128a, “All Israelites are sons of kings (=patriarchs).” Both of these, when read in context, show that a Jew who acted corruptly, even if circumcised, would feel the anger and justice of God, and could even descend to Gehinnom. And m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1 (the Gemara is b.*Sanhedrin* 100a) teaches clearly that an Israelite could forfeit his place in the world to come by forsaking the covenant through disobedience.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:24-28; Joel 2:28; Zechariah 12:10.

⁴⁹ See Beasley-Murray’s remarks, pp. 38-9.

⁵⁰ Jn. 3:22, 26; 4:2.

⁵¹ The Hebrew concept of *bat qol*, as the divine voice, would favor the 3rd person, since the divine voice must be heard by objective parties, and more than one person. See the comments of Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Fortress, 1973), pp. 205-6.

Yeshua's baptism after remarking that John was put in prison by Herod.⁵² The gospel of John never mentions the baptism of Yeshua.

What significance are we to derive from these data? Clearly, it must have been an issue not easily resolved why the lesser (John) should baptize the greater (Yeshua), especially when John's baptism was defined as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John's protest as recorded in Matthew ("But John tried to prevent Him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me'?"⁵³) surely echos the sentiments of many when considering with this event. What then was the purpose from the standpoint of Yeshua?

His response is the answer: "But Yeshua answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"⁵⁴ From the vantage point of those who looked on, Yeshua must be known as fully righteous—He must be recognized as ceremonially clean. His resurrection would substantiate His deity. For now it was necessary for Him to conform to the established criteria of holiness as the incarnate Messiah.

We should not balk at the idea that Yeshua became ceremonially unclean during His earthly ministry. Granted, in the time immediately preceding His crucifixion as the spotless Lamb of God, there was need to show His ceremonial purity (and thus the woman with an issue of blood is cleansed rather than defiling Yeshua when she touches His garment). Practically speaking, it would have been impossible entirely to avoid corpse impurity as one lived within 1st Century Jewish society. It seems clear, then, that Yeshua, walking as He did among fallen humanity, must have contracted ritual impurity. If He was to bear the sins of His people upon the cross, it does not present a problem to see Him likewise bearing their impurity in His life. "To fulfill all righteousness" only shows that He lived a careful Torah life, the very thing we expect of the righteous Messiah.

If this interpretation is correct, we must presume that John's baptism was a kind of personal, religious cleansing—perhaps a most careful manifestation of one's longing for purity and holiness, of a confession of inward cleansing as well as outward conformity to the Torah's standards. For John rebukes the leaders who come to him, calling upon them first to bring forth works that manifested true inward repentance. If this is so, we may rightly say that John's baptism, while centering specifically upon the issue of ritual cleansing in anticipation of the Messianic era also brings into focus the need for forgiveness of sins in this cleansing, and thus fits the pattern for the ingathering of Gentile converts as the sign that the Messianic age had arrived.

The Baptism of the Great Commission

It is possible now to see the evolution of baptism, beginning with proselyte baptism, progressing to John's baptism and culminating in the baptism prescribed by Yeshua. John's baptism prepared the Jew for the rule of Messiah, a rule marked by His crucifixion and resurrection. If the proselyte baptism marked the beginning of life as a follower of God, then Messiah's question to the disciples is decisive for determining the import of baptism as He commanded in the Great Commission:

But Yeshua said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" And they said to Him, "We are able." And Yeshua said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized."⁵⁵

To be identified with Yeshua, even to the extent of dying for His teachings, was in every way to identify with His death. The forensic reality of union with Messiah in His death and resurrection (which Paul later develops and teaches) was impossible apart from the foundational confession that one was actually willing to physically die for

⁵² Mt. 3:13-17; Mk. 1:9-11; Lk. 3:18-22.

⁵³ Mt. 3:14.

⁵⁴ Mt. 3:15.

⁵⁵ Mark 10:38, 39.

Him. To become a disciple of this Yeshua meant that one was willing to follow Him, even to the point of death. It seems to me highly probable that the disciples collated this saying of their Lord with His final instructions to disciple the nations.

And, it seems equally sure that Paul's union-with-Messiah theology was based upon this saying of Yeshua, for to be baptized with the baptism of Yeshua was also to participate in His resurrection. Thus, baptism took on the full scope of the confession of Yeshua as Messiah as the Gospel spread: it was symbolic of conversion, of life from death, of resurrection from the grave, of new birth, of repentance and forgiveness of sins, and of union with Messiah in His baptism, including the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This highly symbolic act thus took on supreme importance in the emerging Messianic community. But when it was eventually divorced from biblical theology and its Hebraic roots, it offered a ritual which could be (and was) greatly misused.

One final word on the significance of baptism as a conversion ritual: it envisions a community. If the parallels to Jewish baptisms are true as I have suggested, then it is clear that baptism marks the entrance into the congregation of God—into the covenant people. Baptism, therefore, assumes a believing community into which the baptized person enters and within which he or she enjoys the benefits and responsibilities of that community. Thus, baptism presumes the community and cannot rightly exist without it. It may be for this reason more than any other that the Great Commission must be viewed as primarily our Lord's methodology for fulfilling His promise that He would build His Congregation.⁵⁶

εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (...in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.) The three-name formula in this precise form is found only here, though the implicit truth of the unity of the Godhead is found throughout the Gospels.⁵⁷ What is meant by being baptized in the name of...? If the Greek εἰς τὸ ὄνομα, "into the name," is dependent upon the Hebrew (לְשֵׁם, *l'shem*) or Aramaic (לְשֵׁם, *leshom*), then it would seem that the primary meaning is "with respect to," as is seen in Matthew 10:41,

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.

To receive a prophet "in the name of a prophet" is to welcome him *because he is a prophet*. Matthew 18:20 may be another example:

For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.

"Gathered in my name" means to gather *in the interests of the cause of Yeshua*.

The Hebraic idea of "in the name of" is also illustrated by a number of examples. Heathen slaves on their entry into a Jewish house were compelled to receive a baptism שְׁפָחוּת לְשֵׁם, *l'shem shiphchut* "in the name of slavery," i.e., to become slaves. Similarly, on their being set free they were to be immersed שְׁחָרְרוּ לְשֵׁם, *l'shem shichrur* "in the name of freedom." In another instance, an Israelite can circumcise a Samaritan, but not visa versa. This is because a Samaritan would circumcise "in the name of the God of Mt. Gerizim, i.e., "with the obligation of venerating the God of the Samaritans" (i.e., God as the Samaritan theology envisioned Him.)⁵⁸

Thus, it seems clear that the convert who is baptized in the triune Name confesses a relationship of worship and service to this God. In this way, baptism is the best symbol of one's commitment to being a true disciple of Yeshua the Messiah, who Himself confessed the work of the Father and the Spirit.

20 διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν ("teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..."). The Great Commission envisions more than conversion of the nations. In a typically Hebrew way, it

⁵⁶ Matthew 16:18.

⁵⁷ Cf. Lk. 10:21; 11:13; Jn. 14:26; 15:26.

⁵⁸ These quotes taken from Beasley-Murray, p. 91, citing Strack-Billerbeck.

stresses the need to know the Torah of God. It is, in my opinion, singularly significant that the Hebrew concept is “teaching them to observe” as over against the Hellenistic way of thinking, which might be represented in “teaching them to know.” Clearly Messiah’s conception of “teaching” is that it produces “observing.” Teaching that does not result in doing is therefore not the teaching commanded here. Obedience to God’s instructions is the sure fruit of proper teaching.

The Greek τηρεῖν, *terein* (“to observe, keep”) is the counterpart of the Hebrew לִשְׁמֹר, *lishmor* (“to keep, guard, obey”). שָׁמַר, *shamar* (“to keep, guard, obey”) is the verb most often used in connection with “keeping the commandments,” and surely lies behind the current text. In using this verb throughout the Torah, the reader is reminded that “keeping the Torah” is to be understood as “guarding a treasure.”

The disciples are to teach new disciples to keep all that Yeshua had commanded them. The term “command” is ἐνετείλαμην (aor. ind.) from ἐντελλόμαι (“to command, order, give orders”) and is fairly common in the Gospels (12x). It is used twice in Acts (1:2; 13:47) and twice in Hebrews (9:20 Lxx; 11:22).

What exactly did Yeshua command His disciples? What comprises His teaching which they were to pass on to other disciples?

Clearly, Yeshua did not represent His teaching as different from or contrary to the Torah and the Prophets, though apparently He was accused of this by His opponents. In Matt 5:17-20, Messiah makes it amply clear that His teaching was in full harmony with the Torah and that His disciples were those who exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, i.e., who not only lived obedient lives but whose hearts were also right with God. The same emphasis is found in His summation of the Torah: to love God wholly (Deut 6:4f) and one’s neighbor as one’s self (Leviticus 19:18).⁵⁹ Clearly, this must be the foundational for the message the Apostles were commissioned to teach in the process of making disciples of Yeshua. They were to preach the gospel as given to Abraham. Certainly, since Yeshua directs them to teach “what I have commanded,” the message would necessarily be Messiah-centered, as was the gospel proclaimed to Abraham.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the emphasis upon “all I have commanded” means that the disciples were not free to leave out any part of Yeshua’s teaching. As such, the message delivered by the prophets of old would reach the families of the world and the blessing promised to Abraham would be realized through the witness of Messiah’s disciples.

This has a direct bearing on the Apostolic mission in Acts. Yeshua had His disciples begin in Jerusalem and work outward to the far reaches of the world (Acts 1:8). The pattern of Acts follows the commission of Yeshua exactly: it begins in Jerusalem and ends in the journeys of Paul to the nations. We may then collate three core texts which give us both the *method* and the *message* of the Apostolic mission: Matt 28:18–20 commissions the disciples to make disciples of all the nations; Matt 5:17–20 specifies the content of their teaching in this discipleship enterprise, and Acts 1:8 prescribes missional plan geographically.

καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας (“and lo, I am with you always...”). The mystical presence of Messiah through His Spirit becomes the practical outworking of His authority, the starting point of the Great Commission. The imperative ἰδοὺ, *idou* (“look, behold”) answers to the Hebrew הִנֵּה, *hinei*, and is used to arrest the attention of the listeners. The disciples were to remain cognizant of the ever-abiding presence of the Messiah as they went about their mission. The One who has already identified Himself as all-powerful will continue to reside “in their midst,” the same concept (i.e., the abiding presence of the Almighty) upon by which the prophets regularly comfort Israel.⁶¹

ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος (“until the end of the age”) closely parallels the Hebrew וְעַד הָעוֹלָם, *'olam va'ed*, “forever,” so that, most likely, there should not be a great distinction made between “end of the age” and “forever.” The vast majority of the times αἰῶνος is found in the Lxx, it translates some form of עַלְמָא, *'alam*. The

⁵⁹ Matt 22:37f.

⁶⁰ Cp. Jn 8:56; Gal 3:8.

⁶¹ Cp. Is 43:1-7; Zeph. 3:14ff.

emphasis is upon the abiding presence of Messiah in the building of His Congregation,⁶² a presence that will never cease until the job is finished.

This fact of the abiding presence of Messiah is emphasized as well by the emphatic pronoun ἐγώ, *ego*, “I” in couplet with the verb to be, εἰμι, *eimi*, “I am.” In this way Messiah assures the disciples that it is He and no one else who will accompany them on their mission. The same Lord they had come to know and trust would, in fact, empower them for their work and service. This abiding presence is also clearly emphasized in πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας, *pasas tas hemeras*, (translated “always”) which literally is “all the days,” meaning that His presence would abide from then until the work was completed, without any lapses—He promises to be the ever-present Lord, empowering the work of His kingdom.

Conclusion

First, it seems clear that Yeshua’s command to the Apostles in the Great Commission did not come to them as something innovative or new. On the contrary, what He enjoined upon them was very understandable in the context of 1st Century Judaism. This would include making disciples, baptizing them as a ritual indicating their entrance into the covenant, and teaching them what privileges and responsibilities their covenant status enjoined.

Secondly, the Great Commission must be taken as prophetic, in that the gathering of the nations (non-Jewish peoples) did not comprise a major part of Yeshua’s own earthly ministry. This prophetic aspect of the Great Commission must be coupled with Yeshua’s promise of the Spirit, by Whose power the worldwide evangelism would be realized.

Thirdly, the essential elements of the Great Commission are best understood as reflecting the beliefs of the 1st Century Judaism, i.e., as having their foundations in the Judaism of that era. The disciples understood that the commission given to them to make disciples of the nations was to initiate the final “harvest”⁶³ which would bring to fruition the promise made to Abraham, that in his Seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The reigning authority of the ascended Messiah would be evidenced by the ingathering of the nations to be His disciples, accepting Him as their Savior and living in accordance with His teachings as revealing the will of the Father. Thus, the symbol of baptism would fittingly portray the new life into which the converts were re-born, and would also identify them as followers of the true God whose Messiah is Yeshua. Such a conversion would usher them into the family of God, uniting them to God’s people as the strangers of old who came out of Egypt with Israel, forming “a mixed multitude.”⁶⁴ Their passing through the waters of baptism symbolized their redemption in the death of Messiah and their inclusion into the covenant people of God.

Finally, the message the disciples were to take was not their own, but that of their Messiah. His message to them, while elucidating the Torah and the Prophets, did not differ from the eternal message of the Gospel proclaimed to Abraham. Therefore, it would be through their witness and work that all the nations would be blessed in Messiah, the seed of Abraham. That which Messiah commanded them while they walked with Him upon this earth formed the foundation upon which they made decisions for the young, growing Messianic community. The outworking of the Great Commission is therefore graphically seen in the history of the early Messianic community as found in Acts.

⁶² Matt 16:18.

⁶³ Cf. Matt 9:38; Lk 10:2.

⁶⁴ Ex. 12:38.