

Introduction to the Mystery of the Gospel

These notes are from the book titled *The Mystery of the Gospel* by D. Thomas Lancaster. They are the notes I used for an adult Sunday School class at Briargate Church in Colorado Springs.

THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL

Based on the book of the same name by D. Thomas Lancaster

What is this mystery of the gospel? What is the offense of the cross? It is none other than the Gentile inclusion.

It was for the “offense of the Gospel” (that is, the offensive idea of Gentile inclusion) that Paul had been arrested, tried before the Sanhedrin, marched to Caesarea and subsequently shipped to Rome. Thus when Paul writes that he is an ambassador in chains for the mystery of the Gospel, we are given an important clue to that mystery. Paul was not in chains for preaching Messiah; he was in chains for preaching Gentile inclusion through Messiah. The mystery of the Gospel, for which Paul was in chains, was the Gentile inclusion. Tim Hegg notes that Paul’s concept of the Gentile inclusion equaling the Gospel must be what is particularly meant by his peculiar use of the phrase “my gospel” in Romans 2:16, 16:25 and 2 Tim 2:8. This also helps explain the term “enemies of the gospel” in Romans. It is not that people of Israel are enemies of the essence of the gospel (i.e., the means of salvation through God’s Messiah). Their aversion to the gospel was a reaction against the inclusion of the Gentiles – which is part and parcel of the gospel message, especially in the teaching of Paul (“my gospel”). Thus, they are not called “enemies of the gospel” but “enemies of the gospel on your account.” It isn’t the gospel, per se, that they are against, but the inclusion of the Gentiles.

A bone of contention with the Jews is that the synagogue was being packed out, standing room only, with Gentiles. Not converts to Judaism, but real Gentiles. Look at Acts 13:45 (ESV)

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.

They were jealous that the message of the Gospel was compromising the particularity of their theology. To the Jewish community of Galatia, the offense of the cross was the inclusion of the Gentiles.

It was the mystery of the Gentile inclusion that was the offense to the Jews. Ephes. 3:1-2 (ESV)

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— [2] assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,

The mystery made known to Paul by revelation was that the Gospel was for Gentiles also. The revelation by which the mystery was made known to him took place in the Temple, many years before, when the Master appeared to Paul in a vision and said to him, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." (Acts 22:21) Because of that mystery made known to him by revelation, Paul tells us, he is a prisoner for the sake of the Gentiles. Because of that revelation, he was in chains in Rome. He further states, Ephes. 3:4-6 (ESV)

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, [5] which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. [6] This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

What is Paul's big mystery of Messiah? It is that the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel. The Gentiles are together with the Jews as members of one body. The Gentiles share, together with the Jews, the promise in Messiah. That's the big mystery. The Gentile inclusion is the mystery of Messiah.

Ephes. 3:7-9 (ESV)

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. [8] To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace

was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, [9] and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,

In Genesis 12, God says to Abram:

I will make you into a great nation

And I will bless you.

I will make your name great,

And you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

Through a single man, all the families of the peoples on earth will be blessed. God doesn't say how He intends to accomplish this. He simply assures Abram that, somehow, Abram will be the agent through which all peoples on earth will be blessed.

The sages take it for granted that Torah is the inspired word of God. That much goes without saying. Furthermore, they teach that every word of Torah is sacred. Even the smallest jot and tittle have meaning. Even the spaces between the letters are important. The choice of a specific word over another word that might have been used is regarded as significant and intentional. Minute details of phrasing and syntax are fraught with meanings. The rabbis' exacting study of such subtle nuances gave rise to the body of interpretation we call midrash. Midrash means, "something searched out." A midrash is an interpretation that has been searched out.

Rabbi Berekiah points out that God did not say to Abram, "I will give you a great nation," nor did He say, "I will establish you as a great nation." Rather, it is written, "I will make you a great nation." Rabbi Berekiah suspects that God must have had a reason for using the verb "make" rather than any of the other possible verbs He could

have used. God must have intended to communicate something to us by the deliberate choice of that word. Rabbi Berekiah suggests that God's choice of words was meant to convey that Abram would become a great nation only after he was remade by God. Rabbi Berekiah taught that it is after I have created you as a new creation you will be fruitful and multiply.

In Rabbi Berekiah's opinion, it was the spiritual rebirth of Abram as a "new creation" that was critical to the fulfillment of the promise. That is why God chose to use the particular verb "I will make you."

In the faith of Abraham, Paul finds a model for the faith of the Gentile believers. By virtue of that same faith which recreated Abram into Abraham, a father of many nations, the Gentiles are also recreated as "new creations." Galatians 6:15 (ESV)

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

Just as Abram, by faith, became Abraham, a new spiritual creation, so too Gentiles by faith become new creations in Messiah. In fact, the Gentiles who are thus recreated by God are made into sons of Abraham. "So then, [Abraham] is the father of all who believe," Paul writes in Romans 4:11.

By way of this "new creation" through faith, Gentiles are recreated as sons of Abraham. This transaction fulfills the "new creation" name of Abraham, "Father of many nations." Through faith in the God of Abraham, Gentiles from many nations are remade into sons of Abraham. Through the proliferation of these Gentile believers, Abraham has become a great nation, fulfilling the words of the oracle.

Abraham's baptism. Regarding the clause, "And you will be a blessing," the midrash says, "You will be an immersion pool

(berekah): Just as a pool purifies the unclean in the same way you bring near to Me those who are far away.”

In the same way the immersion ritual brings near to God those who were formerly far away (by auspices of conversion), so too Abraham’s role is to bring near to God the Gentiles who were formerly far away. By performing this role of bringing the Gentiles near to God, Abraham will be a blessing to the Gentiles. As the pagans embrace the faith of Abraham, they are symbolically immersed into him, as if he was an immersion pool suitable for the conversion ritual.

This midrashic re-reading where Abraham is likened to an immersion pool would have suited the Apostle Paul. He uses the same symbolism when he speaks of Messiah. Paul’s Gentile converts were “immersed into Messiah Yeshua.” (Rom 6:3)

But how can Abram be compared to an immersion pool? In the midrashic commentary on Abraham’s life, Abraham is always busy making proselytes from the nations. His goal in life is to spread the knowledge of God and to bring all men to a faith in the One God. Consider a literal translation of Gen 12:4-5:

So Abram went, as the Lord had spoke to him’ and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he went forth from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot the son of his brother and all their possessions they possessed and the souls which they had made in Haran, and they went out to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan.

“The souls which they had made...?” Normally, we would smooth out the Hebrew by translating the word “souls” as “people” and the word “made” as “acquired.” The sages read the passage literally and object that Abram and Sarai were not able to make souls. What then does the Torah mean by telling us they made souls in Haran? The

literal reading says, “the souls which they had made in Haran.” Rabbi Leazar said, “it refers rather to the proselytes they had made. The verse, as it is written is to teach you that he who brings a Gentile near to God and converts him is as though had had created him.”

An example given by Rabbi Eleazar is that Ruth was a Moabite. Naamah was an Ammonite. Regarding Moabites and Ammonites the Torah specifically says, “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, even down to the tenth generation.” (Deut 23:3) How then could Ruth and Naamah be mothers of the Kings of Israel? Obviously, they were no longer to be considered Moabite and Ammonite. They had been grafted into Abraham.

Paul uses the “grafting” parable (Romans 11), but the concept that “all peoples on earth will be grafted into you” is not his invention. Rather, it is an intentional misreading of the Hebrew. To Paul, the phrase, “All nations will be blessed through you” is the Gospel. In his estimation, those very words are the Good News of Messiah. It is the mystery of the Gospel.

Genesis 22:17-18 (ESV)

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, [18] and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Notice how the promise has expanded in this passage. The original covenant blessings of Genesis 12 have been combined with the seed promises of the rest of the Abrahamic narrative. Most significant is that the key text from Genesis 12, “all peoples will be blessed through you,” has now been specified to say, “in your seed all nations on earth will be blessed.”

The midrash on Genesis 12 understands the promise of “all peoples being blessed” to mean that through Abraham all peoples would come to faith in God. In Genesis 22, this promise has been transferred to Abraham’s seed, Isaac. Through Isaac, all nations on earth will be blessed. Through Isaac, all nations will come to faith in God.

This idea is repeated in Genesis 26:4, where God passes blessing to Isaac saying, “in your seed all nations on earth will be blessed.” From Isaac the promise is passed to his seed Jacob to whom God says again in Gen 28:14, “All families on earth will be blessed in you and in your seed.”

Galatians 3:16 (ESV)

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

According to Paul, the promised Seed of Abraham is not a multitude of nations, nor is it a vast sea of people. Rather it is a singular individual by whom vast seas of people are blessed, and multitudes are recreated as seeds of Abraham.

For Paul, the promise of the seed finds its ultimate fulfillment in Messiah, a singular seed of Abraham.

According to Paul, if we belong to Messiah (who is the Seed of Abraham) then we are Abraham’s seed and the recipients of the promise to be blessed in that seed. The scriptural criteria for determining if one is indeed of the “Seed of Abraham” is not genetic, it is spiritual. If you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed, and an heir according to the promise.

The result of the engrafting of the Gentiles is that they have become a full part of the olive tree of Israel. They are no longer Gentiles in the strict sense. In Messiah, there is neither Jew nor Greek. Instead, both the natural descendents of Abraham and the spiritual descendents comprise the common entity of Israel. The point is simple. If you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. The only criterion is belonging to Messiah.

We can continue this thought with the house of Joseph. The Torah tells a story about Joseph taking a wife in Egypt. It tells us that during Joseph's time of estrangement from his family, he took an Egyptian bride. Her name was Asenath. She was the daughter of a pagan priest. Joseph's Egyptian wife is something of an embarrassment to the sages. Isaac and Rebecca had two sons. They grieved over Esau because he took wives from among the local girls. Jacob's wives, on the other hand, were Hebrew Shemites like his mother and grandmother. But this Asenath was the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and hence a Hamite. Joseph's marriage to her appears to be a breach of ethnic fealty.

The embarrassment over Asenath comes from the implication that two of the Israelite tribes now have Egyptian blood in their veins. In response to this uncomfortable moment in the Torah, the sages supply a midrashic explanation for Joseph's marriage to Asenath. The midrash would have us believe that Asenath, unbeknownst to Joseph, is actually his niece, the daughter of his sister Dinah. Through miraculous circumstances, Asenath was adopted by Potiphara and raised as an Egyptian. Therefore, Asenath, the bride of Joseph was actually not an Egyptian at all. She was really an Israelite in disguise. The happy result of this retelling of the story is that Ephriam and Manasseh (and hence the tribes that bear their names) are then full blooded sons of Jacob.

The midrash we are speaking of says, “When Shechem son of Hamor violated Dinah, she conceived and bore Asenath. Jacob’s sons wished to kill the child. What did Jacob do? He inscribed the Divine Name on a gold foil, hung it about her neck, and sent her away. The angel Michael descended and brought her down to Egypt into the house of Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife, being barren, raised Asenath as a daughter.”

The midrashic revision of the story is primarily concerned with the purity of bloodlines. We can imagine the sage who created this explanation for Asenath. He is a respected teacher in his community, perhaps with his own school of disciples. As the Torah authority of the local school and synagogue, he feels responsible for safeguarding the community. What’s more, he is not particularly fond of proselytes.

The Sage understands that his telling of the story of Asenath will shape the identity of the Jewish community for better or for worse.

He considers it a moment more and answers with a question, “What of the other eleven brothers? From where did they obtain their wives?” His disciples have no answer. This question had not previously occurred to them. From where indeed? Aside from Judah, the Torah doesn’t say.

“I will tell you from where,” the sage says. “The wives of all the Tribes were born along with them, from the same womb even. Each of Jacob’s sons was born as a fraternal twin with his wife. Thus, God provided good Israelite wives for each of our fathers. Except for Joseph.”

By imagining sibling-spouses for the sons of Jacob and by reinventing Asenath as a granddaughter of Jacob, our sage has avoided the unpleasant implications of mixed bloodlines. In addition, he has

protected his ethnocentric worldview, which places Gentiles outside of the People of God. Never mind that Dinah's own daughter, daughter of a Canaanite rape, could hardly have been of pure bloodlines herself. It is enough that the reproach of Joseph has been removed.

Asenath must be Israelite, because the alternative is unthinkable. It cannot be proven and it need not be proven, because it is a matter of identity. It is a story, not a history.

However, his fanciful retelling is contrary to the literal reading of the Torah. In the Torah account Asenath is Egyptian. She is the blood-daughter of an Egyptian, and Joseph marries her because he has no hope of ever being reunited with his family. His marriage to her results in two sons. Joseph names the eldest Manasseh (Forgetful) because he has forgotten his father's family. He names the second son Ephraim (Doubly-Fruitful) because God has made him twice fruitful with two sons.

The midrash wants to adjust the plain meaning of the text in order to avoid the unpleasant implications that two of the tribes of Israel have an Egyptian mother. By trying to control the story, the midrash hopes to control Jewish identity.

But there is another and perhaps older answer to the question his disciples posed. There is another interpretation of the Asenath character. This interpretation comes from the pen of a Greek-speaking Jewish author living sometime in the first century of the Common Era. We don't know his name or where he came from, but we can infer some things about him from his writing. He wrote in Greek. He had an interest in things Egyptian and seemed to have firsthand knowledge of Egyptian geography. He may have been an Egyptian Jew living in Alexandria.

In his community, he had probably seen scores of Gentiles turn from their pagan worship system and attach themselves to the God of Abraham. The great port city of Alexandria afforded him plenty of occasions to rub shoulders with all manner of men. He met people from all nations who had joined themselves to Israel as proselytes and converts. They were Greek speakers for the most part, but they possessed a deep passion for the God of the Hebrews. They were God-fearers, converts and Christians. They crowded themselves into the Great Synagogue; they pressed themselves in among Israel. From the Egyptian writer's perspective, the presence of those Gentiles enriched the family of God.

In his book, *Joseph and Asenath*, his interpretation of the Asenath character is considerably friendlier toward Gentiles than that of the midrash cited above. The story is written in Greek, but it is Jewish to the core. It is a suggestively erotic love story between Joseph and his Egyptian bride. In the story, Asenath is portrayed as a breathtakingly beautiful, virgin daughter of an Egyptian priest. Despite her great beauty, she is completely devoted to idolatry and worships all the gods of Egypt. Yet, when she lays eyes on Joseph, she is smitten with him. She is so smitten that she says, "I did not know that Joseph is a son of God." She tries to woo him, but he is not interested. He rebukes her for her idolatry, and she is filled with shame. Having fallen utterly in love with Joseph, she destroys all of her idols, repents for seven days in sackcloth and ashes, and calls upon the God of Joseph. During her seven days of repentance, a heavenly man appears to her. He is described as a "man in every respect similar to Joseph...except that his face was like lightning and his eyes like sunshine and the hairs of his head like a flame of fire of a burning torch, and hands and feet like iron shining forth from a fire..." The heavenly Joseph-Man is similar to the Son of Man descriptions in the books of Daniel and Enoch. The Joseph-Man speaks to Asenath saying,

Take courage, for behold your name was written in the book of the living in heaven I the beginning of the book, as the very first of all, your name was written by my finger and it will not be erased forever. Behold, from today, you will be renewed and formed anew and made alive again and you will eat the blessed bread of life, and drink a blessed cup of immortality, and anoint yourself with blessed ointment of incorruptibility. And your name shall no longer be called Asenath, but your name shall be City of Refuge, because in you many nations will take refuge with the Lord God, the Most High, and under your wings many peoples will be sheltered and behind your walls will be guarded those who attach themselves to the Most high God in the name of repentance.

Asenath's encounter with the divine Joseph-Man is followed by her conversion into a worshipper of the Lord God, Most High. She confesses her sins and washes herself from the ashes of her repentance. She dresses herself in a wedding garment and waits for her beloved to return. The Pharaoh of Egypt informs her, "The Lord, the God of Joseph, has chosen you as a bride for Joseph, because he is the firstborn son of God. And you shall be called a daughter of the most High." At last, Joseph and Asenath are married, after which Asenath says to Joseph, "Your father Israel is like a father to me."

Joseph and Asenath is an important work because it presents a first century typology of both the Joseph character and the Asenath character. In the mind of the writer of *Joseph and Asenath*, Joseph represents a Messiah character. He is even called "the firstborn son of God." The Divine Joseph-Man gives Asenath to eat from the "blessed bread of life" and to drink from the "blessed cup of immortality." These are clear allusions to the rites of the Pesach communion. It is through the agency of this Messianic Joseph character (who is represented as both divine and earthly) that Asenath is converted from paganism to the worship of the one true God.

Unlike the midrashic explanation of Asenath, our unknown author reveals in Asenath's Gentile roots and pagan origin. It is precisely her Gentile and pagan nature that intrigues him. In her, he sees a model for all future converts to Judaism. She is a "City of Refuge" for all nations and peoples who attach themselves to the Most High God.

In creating this charming story, our unknown Jewish author lends us an important, alternative interpretation to the Asenath character and the Gentile question. His readership was probably composed of Gentile converts to Judaism (or the sect of Judaism called "the Way"). Asenath is offered to them as a sort of "patron saint." She is the Torah matriarch for Gentiles seeking legitimacy in Israel.

In this respect, Asenath's character is a proto-Ruth. Like Ruth, Asenath is a Gentile daughter of a people forbidden to intermarry with Israel. Like Ruth, Asenath makes a dramatic declaration of conversion. Like Ruth, Asenath is ultimately brought into Israel through marriage to a Redeemer-Messiah character. Through her attachment to Joseph, she becomes the bride of a Son of God and a daughter of the Most High.

His Messianic treatment of Joseph creates a typology into which Jesus fits very well. As a bride of Jesus, we are His Asenath. And like Asenath, we are brought into the family of Israel through our husband. Asenath is a City of Refuge in Israel for those of us who have attached ourselves to the Most High God, the God of Israel.

Now let's focus on who Joseph is. Remember that at the first encounters of Joseph by his brothers, they have no idea who he is. Joseph is dressed like an Egyptian. He has Egyptian hair and Egyptian makeup. He speaks the Egyptian language, and until he reveals himself to his brothers, used a translator. To the eleven

brothers, Joseph is a Gentile prince. They have no idea that this is their own brother, the one sent to them by their father so long ago, the one they rejected, stripped, and put into the earth, and gave over to the Gentiles.

Although the Apostolic writers never directly invoke Joseph as a typological prophecy of Messiah, the symbolism is unavoidable and remarkably clear. The line of connection between Joseph and Jesus was certainly not lost on the Christian readers of *Joseph and Asenath*. In that work, Joseph is the firstborn Son of God, manifested in both a human and a divinely glorified state, offering his bride to eat from the blessed bread of life and to drink from the blessed cup of immortality.

So while we read the story of Joseph, we must remind ourselves that there is another story at work here, the story behind the story, a deeper meaning, a Messianic midrash. It runs parallel to the Joseph story like a second line of narrative. It is the deep mystery of Genesis. It is the story of our Master and His reconciliation with his brothers.

Jesus, like Joseph, was sent to His brothers, the people of Israel. Like Joseph, He was sent by His father. Like Joseph, His brothers did not receive Him. Instead, He was rejected, stripped, killed, and put into the earth and ultimately given over to the Gentiles.

Like Joseph, Jesus was variously received among the Gentiles, but eventually rose to an unparalleled position of prominence in the Gentile world. Like Joseph, He became the agent for the salvation of all nations. And like Joseph, He was all but forgotten by His own true brothers.

Just as Joseph was “disguised” – made unrecognizable by his Egyptian clothing and hairstyle, so too has the Messiah been made

unrecognizable – disguised by Gentile culture. We have represented Him in our artwork with Gentile hair, makeup and clothes. We have made His mouth speak in Greek and in the language of every nation, but we have forgotten that He spoke Hebrew first. We have removed Him from His Hebraic and Torah context, and made Him unrecognizable to His own brothers. Historically, the harder we have tried to convince Jews otherwise, we have only strengthened their conviction that this Jesus is not a Jew, and He is certainly not their Messiah.

The Christian inclination is to exclaim in frustration, “Look, He’s really Joseph, your bother! Look, can’t you see it? Here, read this! I’ve written a book on it!” Our efforts are of little avail. From the brothers’ perspective, we are speaking Egyptian. We are pointing to an Egyptian.

When Joseph finally chooses to reveal his identity, it is in his own timing and his own venue. He clears the room of Gentiles. There is nothing for any of the Egyptian court to contribute or to add to the moment. It is only theirs to hurry and get out of the way. So too with us from the nations. When the Master chooses to reveal Himself to His brothers, it is He who does the revealing. That much is certain.

Rabbi Yisrael said the following:

When Joseph said, “I am Joseph,” God’s master plan became clear to the brothers. They had no more questions. Everything that had happened for the last twenty-two years fell into perspective. So, too, will it be in the time to come when God will reveal Himself and announce, “I am the Lord.” The veil will be lifted from our eyes and we will comprehend everything that transpired throughout history.

That moment will happen and Paul declares with absolute confidence, “all Israel will be saved.” (Rom 11:26)

Joseph tells His brothers not to be angry or regretful over the circumstances of the past. It was God's plan that He should be estranged from them. It was God's plan to send Joseph ahead of them to save lives.

So too Jesus' rejection by Israel has meant wealth for all nations. His rejection at the hands of His brothers was a central part of God's eternal plan to bring salvation and resurrection to all peoples, even to His own brothers. They rejected Him because God willed it. And God willed it to save lives. God sent Him ahead of His brothers to save lives.

So too with Joseph. His brothers' rejection of him was not accidental; it was necessary. It meant riches for the world, life to the dead. See Genesis 45:6-8 (ESV)

For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. [7] And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. [8] So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Just as Joseph was sent ahead of his brothers to preserve a remnant on earth and to save lives by a great deliverance, so too Messiah has been sent ahead of Israel to preserve a remnant and to save lives by a great deliverance.

We are not trifling with the text nor are we bending things to force the Hebrew Scriptures into the shape of Christian interpretations. If we let the story tell itself, the picture is simple and clear. Joseph is a redeemer of Israel. He is a demonstration of how God does redemption. He is a portrait of what the Lord's redeeming agent looks like.

Another important character in this story that we sometimes forget, overlook, or perhaps just fail to understand his role is Benjamin. In our Messianic interpretation of the Joseph story, the Joseph character symbolizes Messiah, and Joseph's eleven brothers symbolize Israel. But among the brothers is the odd character of Benjamin. Benjamin is the silent, yet key player in the whole narrative.

Who is Benjamin? He is the younger son of Rachel. He was not part of the rejection of Joseph. He was not party to the deception of Jacob. Where does Benjamin fit into the picture we are painting? What was his role among the brothers? If we apply to Benjamin the same midrashic reading which we have applied to the story of Joseph – if we apply this same methodology to Benjamin – who is he? What is Benjamin's role in the Messianic interpretive?

Once the question is posed, the answer follows quickly. Benjamin is the brother who did not reject Joseph. He is the brother who did not sell Joseph to the Egyptians. At the time the unpleasant incident happened, he was just a child. In fact, Benjamin seems to vanish from the narrative and to be all but forgotten until he reemerges here at the end of the story.

Who is Benjamin? If the other ten brothers represent Israel's rejection of Messiah, Benjamin must represent that portion of Israel that didn't reject the Messiah. In the narrative, Benjamin has a place among the brothers. He is one of the sons of Israel, but he never abandoned Joseph. By way of analogy, he can only be believing-Judaism. Benjamin must represent the believing remnant of Israel that did not reject the Messiah.

In the days of the Master, Benjamin was the disciples, the talmidim, the believers, that Notzrim, the Nazarene sect, those called HaDerek, The Way. Benjamin was believing-Israel. Benjamin represents the Jewish believers!

In our Genesis narrative, it is with Benjamin that Joseph has hidden his cup. It is Benjamin who receives five times the portion from Joseph's table. He has the cup of the Master. He eats from the table of the Master. It is given to Benjamin.

To put it into familiar terminology, Benjamin symbolizes authentic Messianic Judaism. The Apostle Paul was a product of first century Messianic Judaism. His amazing salvation story is a sort of paradigm for the Jewish experience with Messiah. His story involved a personal encounter with the Risen Master. In a vivid dramatization of the revelation of Jesus to him, Paul was literally blinded and then his eyes were literally opened. His shock at the revelation of Messiah's identity was no less than any of the brother's in Genesis 45.

By coincidence, Paul is the only Apostle to give his tribal identity. In both Romans and Philippians Paul tells us that he is of the tribe of Benjamin. He is the paradigmatic Jewish believer, and by coincidence, he is a son of the tribe of Benjamin.

In the Joseph narratives, Benjamin is introduced at his birth and then disappears from the story until near the end. The same is true of believing-Judaism. She appeared on the scene in the Days of the Master, but quickly vanished from the record of history, only to reappear now as the story begins to culminate. Messianic Jews claim that they are not Jewish converts to Christianity. Rather, they are Jewish believers retaining their full Jewish identity. Like Benjamin re-entering the Joseph story at the end of the narrative, believing-Judaism has returned. In the Torah, Joseph will not reveal his identity to his brothers until Benjamin is brought before him. Thus, we might well expect that authentic believing-Judaism yet has a great role to play in the revelation of the identity of Messiah. However, if she is to play this part, she must be true to her own identity. Messianic Judaism must not pretend to be Jewish, rather she must

live out her Jewishness as an authentic component of her faith in the Jewish Messiah.

This brings us now to the sons of Joseph. See Genesis 48:3-5 (ESV)

And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, [4] and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.' [5] And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are.

This is a reiteration of the covenant promises given to his great grandfather Abraham, then to his grandfather Isaac, and finally to his father Jacob. But why was his father telling him this?

By adopting Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob will elevate those two boys to a station of headship equal to the rest of Jacob's sons. Ephraim and Manasseh will become brothers of the twelve sons of Jacob. The two sons will double Joseph's standing among his brothers. When Jacob's inheritance is divided among his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh will each receive a portion equal with the other brothers. The result of the adoption maneuver will be to bestow a double portion of Jacob's inheritance upon the House of Joseph. Jacob's adoption of Joseph's two sons will also result in making Joseph's sons into his siblings. Thus, Joseph will become a "brother" of Ephraim and Manasseh.

Joseph was Jacob's firstborn son through Rachel. Rachel was Jacob's first love and the only wife he ever intended to marry. In Jacob's mind, Joseph is the true firstborn. As a token of his affection for

Rachel, he intends to accord the honor of firstborn to her son Joseph by adopting Ephriam and Manasseh as his own children.

Then, in keeping with the ancient ritual of adoption, Jacob sits the boys down on his lap. It is an awkward and comical shuffling about as the big teenagers find themselves being seated on the knees of this fragile old man. But this is the ancient ritual by which adoptions are made official, and rituals are sometimes awkward. As Joseph helps remove his sons from Jacob's knees, he realizes that they are no longer his sons. Instead, they are his brothers. In a gesture of gratitude, he bows down before Jacob with his face to the ground.

Notice now Gen 48:20 (ESV)

*So he blessed them that day, saying,
"By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying,
'God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.' "*
Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

What does it mean to be like Ephriam and Manasseh? The Torah tells us that during Joseph's time of estrangement from his family, he took Asenath, an Egyptian bride. Through her, Joseph bore two sons, Ephriam and Manasseh. The two sons of Joseph and Asenath later went on to become patriarchs of two of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Unpleasant as it may be for the sages to admit, this is the plain meaning of the text. Ephriam and Manasseh are the sons of an Egyptian mother. Furthermore, they are raised in the Egyptian court. Aside from a common faith in the God of their father Joseph, they seem to have no identity among the sons of Israel. They are grandsons, but not sons. By all appearances, Ephriam and Manasseh are Gentiles, raised in a Gentile environment.

It was not until Jacob deliberately adopted Ephriam and Manasseh as sons that they received their identity as Sons of Israel, whereby they

could take a direct share of the inheritance. When Jacob took the boys upon his knees in the rite of adoption, it accomplished more than giving a double portion of the inheritance to the House of Joseph. Subsequent to the adoption maneuver, Ephriam and Manasseh were accorded full status as sons of Israel. Their previous identities became irrelevant. Henceforth they were full-blooded sons of Israel regardless of their actual genealogical descent. They were no longer sons of Joseph and Asenath. They were sons of Israel.

Ephriam and Manasseh are not considered stepsons of Jacob, nor are they regarded as grandsons of Jacob. Rather, they are considered full-blooded sons. The Torah, of course, is not concerned with their Egyptian half-breed status because paternity determines identity. But subsequent to the adoption, neither their previous maternity nor paternity has any further bearing on their status. They are now full sons of Jacob. That is the result of the absolute power accorded to biblical adoptions.

We see an example of the absolute nature of the adoption ritual in the story of Samuel the prophet. Shmuel HaNavi was the firstborn son of an Ephraimite. Yet, when his mother fulfilled her vow not to redeem Samuel, he was adopted by Eli the priest. Eli and his sons were the physical descendents of the Aaronic priesthood. According to Torah law, only an Aaronic priest descended from Aaron could ever serve in the priesthood. A Levite from any other family than that of Aaron was barred from serving as a priest. How much more so an Ephraimite. Yet, after the death of Eli, Samuel became the acting priest of Israel and was fully engaged in the priestly services, even conducting sacrifices on behalf of the entire nation. Samuel became a priest. But according to Torah law, Samuel the Ephraimite should not have been allowed to conduct sacrifices or serve in a priestly role. How do we understand this seeming contradiction?

Samuel was adopted by Eli. His previous tribal affiliations (whether Levite or Ephramite or both) had no relevance subsequent to his adoption into the house of Eli. As an adopted son of Eli, Samuel became a descendent of Aaron and therefore qualified for the priestly service.

By Biblical standards, adoption is absolute. All previous familial associations are no longer relevant. By the same token, our measurement of Jesus as a son of David relies on biblical adoption. Tribal affiliation was never determined through the mother because whatever tribe a woman married into became her new and absolute tribal identity. Jesus is a heir to the throne of David through Joseph. When Joseph married Mary (and thereby adopted the as yet unborn Jesus), Jesus became Joseph's son in every right and respect. He was not the stepson or adopted son, he was Joseph's son, and thus an heir to Joseph's genealogy: the House of David.

Now we need to look at Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh and find out who they are. Previously we applied a Messianic interpretation to the story of Joseph to determine a deeper meaning of the text. Joseph was sent to his brothers, sent to them by their father, by his own beloved father. He was rejected by them, stripped, put in the earth, and ultimately given over to the Gentiles. However, the rejection turned out to be in accordance with God's purpose and plan for Joseph – so he could rise to a position of sovereignty, and from which he could extend salvation to all peoples, even to his own brothers. Adding to the richness of the analogy, Joseph's own brothers failed to recognize him because he had been among the Gentiles so long that he seemed to them to be a Gentile prince, and not a son of Israel. Only when he chose to reveal himself as Joseph did they realize his true identity.

The parallels between the story of Joseph and the story of Jesus are too many, too precise and too great for people of faith to discard as

coincidence. For this reason we identify the Joseph character as a type foreshadowing Jesus. The story of Joseph runs parallel to the story of Jesus.

Following the same line of inquiry, we asked if the character of Benjamin might also possess a typological significance. Benjamin was the brother who did not reject Joseph. He was the brother who did not sell Joseph to the Egyptians. He is all but forgotten in the text from his birth until he re-emerges near the end of the story. It could be construed that Benjamin foreshadows believing-Judaism, the remnant of Jews who did not reject Messiah, but embraced Him.

Having come this far down a perilous (yet rewarding) road of Messianic interpretations, dare we go any further? If we apply the same methodologies and symbolic interpretations to Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, where do they stand in the story of Messiah? Who are Ephraim and Manasseh?

Jacob himself poses the same question when he first sees the two sons enter his tent. He says, "Who are these?" (Gen 48:8) Who are they in the midrash we are spinning? They are Gentile Christians; non-Jewish believers. They are followers of Jesus. They are those born in the years while Messiah is estranged from His brothers. They are called "Forgetfulness" and "Fruitfulness." We Gentiles may have forgotten the house of Jacob, but we have been fruitful. We are like the children raised in Egypt, sons of an Egyptian bride, thoroughly Egyptians!

During our long estrangement from the House of Jacob, we have maintained a faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our faith was transmitted to us through Jesus, just as Ephraim and Manasseh maintained faith in the God of Abraham only through the testimony of their father Joseph. Like Ephraim and Manasseh, we have been complete strangers to Jacob and the sons of Israel.

But now, through the firstborn rights conferred upon Messiah, the only begotten of the Father, an amazing reversal of fortune has befallen us. Jacob took Ephraim and Manasseh on his knees in the rite of adoption. So too, we have been adopted into Israel. Like Ephraim and Manasseh we are no longer to be regarded as foreigners to Israel but as fellow citizens. (Eph 2:19) Like Ephraim and Manasseh, we are adopted sons. (Eph 1:5) Like Ephraim and Manasseh, we have received full rights as sons. (Gal 4:5) Like Ephraim and Manasseh, we have become heirs together with Israel. (Eph 3:6) Like Ephraim and Manasseh, we have been grafted into the family tree of Israel. (Rom 11) Just as Ephraim and Manasseh were raised to the level of brothers with Joseph, so too we have been raised to the level of brothers with Messiah. (Heb 2:11-17)

Isn't this the story the Torah is telling us here? We have been brought into Israel, adopted into Israel, as part of the firstborn rights of Jesus. We have a share in His inheritance, and we have been raised to the level of His brothers. This is our spiritual inheritance!

According to the story of Ephraim and Manasseh, it is not Israel that will be joined to the Church; it is the Church that has been joined to Israel. Gentile Christians are adopted into Israel with full rights of sonship. We are as much a genuine part of the family as a full-blooded Jew. After all, Paul tells us, even the natural born Israelite is an adopted child, adopted by God. (Rom 9:4)

In Romans 11:25 Paul summarized this thought by saying, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." "Fullness of the Gentiles" is the phrase that Jacob used to bless his newly adopted son Ephraim. Jacob said to Ephraim, "Your seed will be a fullness of the Gentiles

(nations).” A textual comparison of Romans 11:25 and Genesis 48:19 raises the possibility that Paul was directly alluding to this passage.

By invoking Ephraim’s “fullness of the Gentiles,” Paul perhaps means to infer that the Gentile believers adopted into Israel are to be regarded as the seed of Ephraim, a fullness of the Gentiles (nations) and the ultimate extension of the Abrahamic seed promises. Like Ephraim the son of Joseph, who was himself adopted by Israel, the Gentile believers are Messiah ben Joseph’s Gentile progeny, adopted into Israel. The Gentile believers are part of the Fullness of the Nations.

This brings us to the Exodus. Israel teaches that “in every generation it is one’s duty to regard himself as though he personally had gone out of Egypt, as it is written: ‘You shall tell your son on that day: “It was because of this that the Lord did for me when I went out of Egypt.”’ It was not only our fathers whom the Holy One redeemed from slavery; we, too, were redeemed with them.” (Passover Haggadah quoting Exodus 13:8).

On the Eve of Passover, at every Passover Seder meal, those words are recited from the Passover Haggadah. In a similar way, the Master Himself commands all of His disciples (in every generation) to do Passover in remembrance of Him. Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are what He referred to when He said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” (See 1 Cor 5:7-8)

Yet, how could a Gentile keep Passover? Was it not an exclusively Jewish celebration? Let’s fulfill the Haggadah’s mandate and imagine ourselves as if we personally had gone out of Egypt. Whether you are Jewish or not, imagine that you and I are part of the Exodus. We, personally, have gone out of Egypt. Look at:

Genesis 15:13 (ESV)

Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.

Genesis 50:24 (ESV)

And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

So, when Moses came to us with a message from the Lord, the God of Abraham, we were skeptical. When Moses said, this is what the Lord says: Exodus 6:6-7 (ESV)

Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. [7] I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians... we were more than a little skeptical.

We had heard of the Lord. We had cried out to Him; we had called to Him; we had longed for Him; we had even worshipped Him from afar – a God we had never seen. He was a God of long ago, a distant and remote God. The God of Abraham. But there were other gods in Egypt too; gods that we could see, gods that we could touch. The Egyptian gods were everywhere, all around us. They required no great leap of faith. We had built their temples with our own hands. And then, of course, there is Pharaoh, allegedly a god, a man, a god on earth, an immortal, clothed in mortal flesh.

The Contest of the Gods: As participants in the Exodus from Egypt, we were witnesses to that contest. We saw the great war between the gods unfold. The battle lines were drawn up like a chess game. On the one side was the Lord, "God of the Hebrews," and on the other was the mighty Egyptian pantheon. The Egyptian gods were represented on the playing board by a human incarnation in the person of Pharaoh: Pharaoh the supposed man-god, fully human, fully god. He was an Egyptian deity in the flesh. In order to challenge him, the Lord also needed a human representative, a sort of incarnation, a sort of god-man to carry out the contest. Moses was chosen to fill the role as it is written Exodus 7:1 (ESV)

And the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.

And that's how we saw it. In the drama that unfolded before our eyes, Moses played the role of the Lord, opposite Pharaoh, who played the role of Egyptian god. Aaron played the role of the prophet of God, manifesting the power of the Lord opposite the magicians of Egypt, who manifested the powers of the Egyptian deities. Those were the pieces on the playing board in the contest of the gods.

Exodus 5:2 (ESV)

But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go."

To Pharaoh, the god-king of the world's mightiest nation, Moses and Aaron must have presented a great insult. How dare some obscure Hebrew deity make a claim on his people? His slaves! Imagine the audacity of Moses and Aaron to suggest that Pharaoh, god-king of Egypt, respect the wishes of the deity of his slaves. Pharaoh replies, "Who is the Lord that I, Pharaoh, should obey him? I've never even heard of him."

Through the course of the ten plagues, we saw Him strike down the gods of Egypt. The Egyptian pantheon was supposed to be in control of the forces of nature. There was a god of the Nile, but the Nile turned to blood. The goddess of fruitfulness, symbolized by the frog totem, was mocked with a plague of frogs. The sun god, chief of the Egyptian pantheon, was blotted out in the plague of darkness. Then, in the final plague, the slaying of the firstborn, the man-god Pharaoh himself was shown to be powerless as his firstborn son (also a man-god) was found dead.

The Exodus from Egypt was God's opportunity to "declare His Name." He used the redemption of Israel to establish His reputation. Consider the following Scriptures pulled from the Exodus narrative. Each one is offered by God as His rationalization behind the plagues on Egypt and the deliverance of Israel.

Exodus 5:5 (ESV)

And Pharaoh said, "Behold, the people of the land are now many, and you make them rest from their burdens!"

Exodus 7:10 (ESV)

So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.

Exodus 8:22 (ESV)

But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.

Exodus 9:16 (ESV)

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.

Exodus 10:2 (ESV)

and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord."

Exodus 12:12 (ESV)

For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.

Exodus 14:14 (ESV)

The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

Why did God do all this? Why the big display of power? Why the contest? Why is He redeeming Israel? In order to show His power and in order to proclaim His Name through all the earth.

For the Lord, the contest of the gods is a demonstration of His sovereignty. Through the events of the Exodus story, God is establishing His Name in the earth. He is making His entrance onto the stage of world history. In redeeming Israel, God is sending a clear message to the whole world, "I exist, I am God, there is none like Me!" He is sending a message to the false gods of the world. He is demonstrating that He alone is God, and there is none other.

We are His trophies. Our redemption from Egypt serves His purpose, which is the establishment of His Name. We are part of something much bigger than just getting out of making bricks; we are part of a plan to reveal God's eternal glory to "gods" and men. We are to be like trophies of victory in the banquet hall of the King.

However, none of these grand theological notions are likely to occur to us as we leave Egypt. Our only thought is our personal salvation. For the moment, it is hard to see the bigger picture.

We are a vast number of people, a mixed multitude. Pharaoh wasn't partial to Hebrews. He took slaves from all nations. See Exodus 12:38 (ESV)

A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds.

So when we saw the Israelites marking their doorways with blood, we took refuge with them under the same blood. We are those who have left Egypt with Israel, and now we have set up our tents in the midst of their camp. Pharaoh, however, makes no distinction between the Hebrews and the non-Hebrews. We are all slaves to him.

When the people were trapped against the Red Sea, they heard the army of Pharaoh coming for them. It was like Pharaoh – their god -- was coming to get them. The people cry out to Moses in Exodus 14:11 (ESV)

They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?"

This Red Sea experience is about death and dying. In front of us is the sea. If we try to escape through it, we will drown and die. Behind us are the Egyptians. If we face the Egyptians, we will die.

1 Cor. 10:1 (ESV)

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,

Paul compares the crossing of the sea to immersion. Believers generally have different ideas about how baptism should be done,

but what might surprise us all is that baptism was not originally a Christian ritual. It was a Jewish ritual. From the days of Moses, immersion (baptism) was regularly practiced by all of Israel. Anyone who became ritually unclean needed to undergo an immersion before they could enter the Temple. The priests immersed every day. After a woman completed menstruation, she needed to immerse herself before she could rejoin her husband. Those who had become contaminated in any way (i.e. lepers) needed to go through immersion before they were deemed ritually pure again. In Judaism, immersions like this are referred to as immersion into a “mikvah.” Mikvah is a Hebrew word meaning, “gathering of water.” A mikvah could be a river, a lake, a spring, or any naturally fed gathering of water. Immersion in a mikvah was a regular part of Jewish life.

It was forbidden to come into the presence of God within His Temple without first passing through a mikvah. According to Judaism, a Gentile who wants to become Jewish must undergo several ritual requirements. For men, the two main requirements are circumcision and immersion. For a woman, immersion itself is the entire conversion ritual. In Jewish thought, a Gentile who converts to Judaism is still a Gentile until he comes up out of the water of the mikvah. Going down into the water, the convert is said to die to his old life. As he comes up, he is as a newborn child, a new creature.

The term “born again” was a rabbinic term for a Gentile who underwent a formal conversion to Judaism. In the Talmud, this concept is expressed in tractate Yevamot: “When he comes up after his immersion, he is deemed an Israelite in all respects” (Yevamot 47b).

In his book *The Waters of Eden*, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan comments on the imagery of being born again through the mikvah:

Emerging from the mikvah is very much like a process of rebirth. Seen in this light, we see that the mikvah represents the womb. When an individual enters the mikvah, he is reentering the womb, and when he emerges, he is as if born anew. Thus, he attains a completely new status...When a person immerses in the mikvah, he is placing himself in the state of the world yet unborn, subjecting himself totally to God's creative power.

When a person immerses himself in water, he places himself in an environment where he cannot live. Were he to remain submerged for more than a few moments, he would die from lack of air. He is thus literally placing himself in a state of non-existence and non-life. Breath is the very essence of life, and, according to the Torah, a person who stops breathing is no longer considered among the living. Thus, when a person submerges himself in a mikvah, he momentarily enters the realm of the nonliving. When he emerges, he is like one reborn.

To some degree, this explains why a mikvah cannot be made in a vessel or tub, but must be built directly in the ground, for in a sense, the mikvah also represents the grave. When a person immerses, he is temporarily in a state of death, and when he emerges, he is resurrected with a new status. We therefore see that immersion in the mikvah represents renewal and rebirth."

"Like one reborn" is a general Talmudic way of speaking about proselytes. The rebirth of Gentiles who passed through the mikvah was taken literally by the sages. Gentiles born again as Jews were regarded as having no kin. In a legal sense, they were regarded as completely new creatures. Old family ties and relations were considered defunct, as if the convert had actually died and then come back to life as a different person.

Understanding that the term "born again" originally referred to a Gentile who had undergone conversion to Judaism clears up a

difficult passage from the book of John. In John 3, Jesus and the famous sage Nicodemus are engaged in conversation about being “born again.” John 3:4 (ESV)

Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

However, in the Jewish context, the phrase “born again” was already in use. A born-again person was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism under the auspices of the rabbinic ritual. It referred to the symbolic death and rebirth the convert underwent as he passed through the waters of baptism. In Judaism, immersion is used as a conversion ritual. The mikvah is regarded as both a grave, in which the immersed dies, and a womb from which the immersed is reborn. “When an individual enters the mikvah, he is reentering the womb, and when he emerges, he is as if born anew,” Rabbi Kaplain wrote.

In light of this context, we can better understand the conversation of John 3:3-10. When Nicodemus objects and says, “How can a man be born when he is old?” it is not because the figurative language has left him baffled. Rather, he is employing the same metaphorical terminology that Jesus was using. According to that imagery, Nicodemus was objecting by saying, “I am already Jewish. How can I convert to Judaism?”

Jesus answers, “A man must be born of water and spirit.” In other words, Jesus tells Nicodemus that it is not enough to simply be Jewish. To be ethnically Jewish, or even to be a convert to Judaism via the rabbinic ritual, is not adequate for entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. A spiritual conversion of the heart is the conversion experience that is really necessary. In essence, Jesus is warning Nicodemus not to rely on his ethnicity (that is his Jewishness) for salvation. “You need to have a converted heart” is what Jesus tells him.

Paul understood the death and rebirth imagery of the immersion ritual as well. He applied the ritual's imagery to those in Messiah in a very similar manner. Romans 6:3-5 (ESV)

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

[5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Paul is invoking the rubrics of the rabbinic conversion ceremony to teach us about the transformation that occurs when we place faith in Messiah. Just as in the rabbinic ritual, the Gentile is said to die to his old life and identity, Paul tells us that as we place faith in Messiah, we actually do die to our old lives and identities. Just as in the rabbinic ritual, the proselyte coming up out of the water of immersion is regarded as a new creature, so too we are to actually be regarded as new creatures, walking in newness of life. What is the newness of life? It is the resurrected Messiah within us.

Thanks to this mystical immersion into Messiah (not the actual ritual of immersion, but that spiritual transaction of faith and redemption) we are reborn with a completely new identity. We are no longer who we used to be. We are no longer the old person. That identity is legally dead.

The sages of the Talmud explained, "When the proselyte comes up after his immersion he is deemed to be an Israelite in all respects" (Yevamot 47b). Our immersion into Messiah transforms us as well, not a transformation of ethnicity, but a transformation of spirit. We are transformed into the image of Messiah. We are remade, reborn, renewed and recreated in the living water of Jesus.

Perhaps we don't always feel totally different. It is very likely that the average Greek didn't feel very Jewish as he stepped out of the water of immersion either. But legally, according to the rabbinic standard, he was.

Paul has appropriated its symbolism (just as Jesus did in John 3) and is applying it to all who have placed faith in Messiah. The rabbinic conversion ritual is not biblical. By every standard except the rabbinic halachah, the Irishman who passes through the immersion of rabbinical conversion is nothing more than a wet Irishman.

The immersion into Messiah, however, is biblical. By God's standard, the Irishman who has immersed himself into faith in Messiah is no longer just an Irishman; he is the resurrected life of Jesus, a whole new creature. His entire life is different. He has a new identity, a new nature, a new purpose and a new destiny. The old man is no more. He is remade and made alive. He is born again.

When writing to those in Corinth, Paul compared the crossing of the Red Sea to immersion. They were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea. They were all immersed into Moses in the cloud and the sea.

We have descended into the mikvah, leaving behind forever our former lives of slavery, paganism and idol worship in Egypt. We are being baptized. We arise on the other side as free men, new creatures, every one of us born again.

The contest is over. God has made His point. He has established His reputation. There is none like Him. (Ex 15:1)

Deut. 4:34-35 (ESV)

Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? [35] To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him.

As a result of these great and awesome deeds, we stand on the opposite shore of the sea as a free people, a redeemed people. We are His people. The mixed multitude that went up from Egypt has been reborn as a free nation. We have all passed through the same immersion.

Paul borrows from the imagery of the Exodus as he describes our new lives in Messiah. In the following Romans 6 passage, he makes the case for why believers should live Torah lives.

Romans 6:16-23 (ESV)

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? [17] But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, [18] and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. [19] I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

[20] When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. [21] But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end

of those things is death. [22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. [23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

To Paul, our salvation in Jesus is comparable to the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Our re-creation in Messiah is comparable to Israel's passing through the Red Sea. However, Paul is not introducing anything that the Master had not taught already. It was Jesus who compared the transformation of spirit to being "born again." It was Jesus who told His disciples to henceforth celebrate Passover in remembrance of Him.

We are to keep the Passover in remembrance of this second and greater redemption. As Nicodemus learned, even Jews need to be born again in spirit. We need not be born again in the conventional sense of a conversion to Judaism, but in the sense of rebirth in Messiah. In Messiah, we have all experienced an Exodus from Egypt.

Moses our teacher, peace be unto him, was tending the flock of Jethro in the wilderness when a little kid escaped from him. He ran after it until it reached a shady place...and the kid stopped to drink. When Moses approached it, he said, "I did not know you ran away because of thirst, you must be weary." So he placed the kid on his shoulder and walked away. Thereupon God said: "Because you have mercy in leading the flock of a mortal, you will surely tend my flock, Israel." (Shemot Rabbh 2:2)

Jesus retells the story of Moses and the lost sheep as a parable. In the parable, He casts Himself in the role of Moses, seeking out the lost sheep of Israel. At one point in the gospels, Jesus even says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." But who are these lost sheep of Israel, and how do Gentle believers fit into that flock?

There are three parables. Luke 15:1-10 (ESV)

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

[3] So he told them this parable: [4] "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? [5] And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. [6] And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' [7] Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

[8] "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? [9] And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' [10] Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke 15:11-32 (ESV)

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. [12] And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. [13] Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. [14] And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. [15] So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. [16] And he was longing to

be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

[17] "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! [18] I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

[19] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." ' [20] And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. [21] And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

[22] But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. [23] And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. [24] For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

[25] "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. [26] And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. [27] And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' [28] But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, [29] but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. [30] But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' [31] And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for

this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

Luke 11:32 (ESV)

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.

Each of these three parables is linked by a common story, theme and meaning. The lost sheep correspond to the lost coin and to the prodigal son. The Shepherd that pursues the lost sheep corresponds to the woman searching for the coin and to the father waiting for his son's return. The ninety-nine other sheep correspond to the nine other coins and to the loyal but jealous son who did not leave home.

Jesus tells the three parables of Luke 15 in response to a criticism raised in verses one and two of the chapter.

The Pharisees were at a loss to explain His seemingly irrational behavior. Here was a man who claimed to be a prophet of God, and more than a prophet, but rather than rebuking the sinners, He rebuked the righteous!

When Jesus was among the irreligious, He did not rebuke them as He did the Pharisees and teachers of the Torah. The irreligious were outside of the domain of Torah. It does no good to rebuke someone for disobeying a law that they do not believe in. Therefore, He sought to first entice them to repent and return to obedience to the Father. He needed to bring them into the Kingdom before holding them up to the standards of the Kingdom.

However, the Pharisees and teachers of the Torah interpreted this behavior as hostility toward themselves and love for lawlessness. Therefore, they criticized Him saying, "He hangs out with bad

company.” This is exactly the situation to which the three parables in Luke 15 address.

Luke 15:1-2 (ESV)

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus attempts to explain His mission to seek and save the lost of Israel by retelling the famous story of Moses seeking after the lost sheep. The Master tells the story this way. Luke 15:4-6 (ESV)

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? [5] And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. [6] And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

In the parable, the lost sheep of Israel are symbolic of the “sinners and tax collectors.” The context makes that obvious. Jesus is the shepherd like Moses. The ninety-nine remaining sheep are the righteous of Israel who don’t need to repent (present company of Pharisees and teachers of the Torah included.) Jesus explains that just as the shepherd leaves the flock in order to pursue and rescue the one lost sheep, so too He leaves the religious and observant in order to pursue and rescue the irreligious and lawless of Israel.

In Luke 15, He goes on to tell the parable of the lost coins and then the parable of the prodigal son. The meaning of the three parables is the same. They are explanations of why the Master is seeking after the lost of Israel.

The prodigal son represents the “sinners and tax collectors.” The faithful son represents the observant and religious of Israel. The father who goes to meet the prodigal and then prepares a banquet for him represents Jesus who is pursuing the irreligious and lawless of Israel. He tells the parable to caricature the bitter attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Torah toward those who are turning to repentance. Indeed, they are jealous just like the loyal son, because the Master seems to disregard them and spend all of His attention on these people of ill repute.

Each of these parables concludes with a scene of rejoicing. If there was any doubt about the meaning of the parables, Jesus makes the meaning explicit in verse 7 when He says, “I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

The actual meaning of these three parables is obvious enough when they are read within the context of Luke 15. The context dictates the meaning. The lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son all represent Jews who have strayed from the covenant norms and are regarded by the religious of their day as “sinners and tax collectors.” In fact, they are sinners and tax collectors, but they are still Jews.

Matthew 10:5-6 (ESV)

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, [6] but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Matthew 15:24 (ESV)

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Who are the lost sheep of Israel that Jesus sought? They are clearly not Gentiles or even to be found among the Gentiles. They are the sinners and the tax collectors, the backsliders and the irreligious of

the Master's countrymen. They are the Jewish people. The meaning of the parable is patently clear.

Why am I belaboring an obvious point? Because it is possible that the Master's seemingly exclusive particularity might sometimes make non-Jews feel like second-class citizens in the Kingdom. The Master's teaching regarding Gentiles would have been Paul's primary source of information while weighing the implications of the Mystery of the Gospel. Therefore, it is an important piece to the puzzle.

When Jesus says things like, "Do not go among the Gentiles, but only to the lost sheep of Israel," and when He says things such as, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," we Gentile followers of Jesus are left feeling a little bit insecure. It seems as if the Master has no interest in us or as if we are second-class citizens in the Kingdom. It is disturbing to think that if we had been alive in the Master's day, He may have passed us by on the basis that we were Gentiles. It is unnerving to imagine.

While it is true that the Master focused on His expressed intent to seek and save the lost sheep of Israel, He was often confronted with Gentiles vying for His attention. We never see a single instance in the Gospels where Jesus does not ultimately meet the Gentile's request. Let's consider the first such occasion as an example.

The first Gospel instance of Jesus encountering a Gentile in need is the story of the centurion with the sick and dying servant. The story is set in Capernaum. In the story, a certain Roman centurion has a dear servant who is sick and dying. He hears of Jesus and entreats the elders of the synagogue to go and appeal to Jesus on his behalf. The elders come to Jesus and say, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue."

Like many non-Jews in the Hebrew Roots movement today, the centurion had a heart for Israel and the Jewish people. The elders testify, "He loves our nation." Surely this is a man with a "Jewish heart." Much like ourselves, he is certainly involved in the synagogue and is drawn to things Jewish. I would imagine he had a mezuzah on his door.

As a student of Jewish culture, the man was probably aware of the purity issues involved with Jews entering the house of a Gentile. Jesus Himself was not so concerned with the purity issues. He had already set out with the intent of entering the man's house and healing his servant.

The centurion, however, rather than inconvenience the Master, tells Him, "But say the word, and my servant will be healed." Jesus is so impressed with the man's demonstration of faith that He says, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Jesus is impressed with the faith of a Gentile. Matthew's version of the story continues with Jesus saying, "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This is a hard saying. In this saying, the many who will come from the east and the west are Gentiles like the centurion. He and his faith are contrasted against the faithlessness of Israel. Those who come to be seated are Gentiles. Those who are cast out are Israelites. This is a hard saying because it seems to play into the hand of replacement theology. However, it does not mean that all Israel will be rejected and replaced by Gentiles.

In rabbinic context, Jesus' words are shocking. The Feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a well-known fixture in Jewish

eschatology. However, in that eschatology, it is always Israel seated at the table with the Patriarchs, while the Gentiles are described as “the wicked.” They are envisioned outside of paradise, hungry and in torment. In Jesus’ version of the story, the criterion for sitting at the table is faith, not ethnicity.

Being seated at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not second-class citizenship. The Master clearly regards Gentiles as legitimate citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven, seated at the table of the righteous. Even seated with the Fathers! To be seated with the Fathers, one is certainly part of the family. Those Gentiles brought from the east and the west was not Israel, but they have been seated with Israel, and thus have become a part of Israel.

When Jesus says this, He assigns Gentiles of faith the highest possible honor accorded to anyone in the whole of the Kingdom of Heaven. From His perspective, there is no cause of a Gentile inferiority complex. The Gentiles of faith will sit at the table of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the table of Israel, together with Israel.

This saying also explains the Master’s ambiguity toward Gentiles and His passion for the “lost sheep of Israel.” Because He foresaw the Gentile inclusion in Israel that was coming, He was all the more passionate for the sinners and tax collectors among His own people – lest they be sent from the table, thrown outside of the kingdom and into outer darkness. The picture of Jesus in the Gospels is the picture of a man on a rescue mission. He holds no disdain for Gentiles; rather He is racing against time for the souls of His own people.

Matthew 8:11-12 (ESV)

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, [12] while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into

the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

There is no lack of seats at God's table!

In the parables of John chapter 10, Jesus further illustrates His concept of the Gentile inclusion in Israel. In those passages, He returns to the flock metaphors employed in the synoptic Gospels. Again, He is the shepherd and Israel is the flock. He speaks of guarding the flock, leading the flock and even laying His life down for the flock. He is speaking of His relationship to His people Israel. But then in verse 16 He introduces sheep from another flock.

In the John passage, the sheep being gathered and joined to the already existing flock under one shepherd are Gentiles. Notice that they are not of the flock of Israel. They are "not of this sheep pen."

Sheep that are not part of the flock of Israel and not from the sheep pen (the land) of Israel are Gentiles. This is good news for Gentiles looking for a place among Israel. Notice that the Master does not say, "There shall be two flocks." Rather, there will be one flock; and it is the Gentiles who are joined to the flock of Israel, not vice versa. In the parable, Jesus leads the Gentiles into the flock of Israel. Again, the Master does not assign Gentiles second-place status, nor does He separate them from Israelites. They are all to be in one flock, with one shepherd. The Gentiles are not second-class citizens. They have a full participation in the flock of Israel because the Good Shepherd joins them to the flock of Israel.

It is no surprise, then, that when Jesus delivers the Great Commission to His disciples He tells them, "Go and make disciples of all nations (Gentiles), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

The commandment to immerse the nations is evocative of the rabbinical conversion ritual. As we have learned previously, when a Gentile (that is, one from the nations) wants to convert to Judaism, he must pass through a ritual immersion. Subsequent to his immersion, he is regarded as an Israelite in every respect, and he is required to live a life obedient to the laws of Torah. Jesus takes the same model and adopts it for His purposes. He commands His disciples to immerse the nations in His Name! Just as Paul will later co-opt the rubrics of the rabbinical conversion ritual to describe the New Creation that results from faith in Messiah, the Master co-opts the very ritual itself and commands His disciples to immerse the nations into His Name. There is a conversion implied here. Not a rabbinically formulated conversion where one metamorphoses from a Gentile into a Jew, but a no less stunning conversion takes place as we enter the flock of the Good Shepherd.

In the rabbinic ritual, the proselyte is required to live a life obedient to the laws of Torah subsequent to his immersion. Jesus told His disciples, "Immerse them... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Those are His words and His instructions for us non-Jews. We are to obey everything that He commanded His disciples because we are to be disciples also. Our immersion into Jesus is a conversion of sorts. It does not make us Jewish, but it does make us disciples. Jew or Gentile, Israelite or not, discipleship to Jesus is our highest calling.

One of the things that the Master commanded His disciple to do was to keep the commandments of Torah. See Matthew 5:17-20 (ESV)

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. [18] For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. [19] Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will

be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. [20] For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, we Gentile disciples are also to obey His command. Just as the disciples were commanded by Jesus to obey the Torah, so too are we. We are disciples of Jesus just as Peter, Andrew, James and John were disciples of Jesus. Discipleship implies imitation. It is our job as disciples to imitate Messiah, and part of the imitation of Messiah is following Torah.

Exodus 19 is the story of how Israel became God's chosen people. It happened at Mount Sinai. The sages of Israel refer to chapter 19 of Exodus as "the Betrothal at Sinai." The picture is a simple one. The people of Israel are the object of God's affection. He is the suitor, asking for her hand in marriage. He is to be their God; they are to be His people.

The romance actually began while they were still in Egypt. There the Lord had declared to Israel, "I will take you for my people, and I will be your God." The expression, "You will be my people and I will be your God" is close to a legal formula from the sphere of marriage.

Moses brings them out of Egypt and to Mount Sinai for the big wedding. Moses, in his role as liaison between God and the people, is sometimes described as the "Friend of the Bridegroom". In Jewish wedding customs, the friend of the bridegroom was the intermediary between the couple. It was the friend's job to present the bride to the groom. Moses filled this role by leading the people to Mount Sinai, and conducting the negotiations between God and Israel. When at last the Lord descended on Mount Sinai, Moses led the people out of the camp and to the foot of the mountain, presenting them to God.

The giving of the Law at Mount Sinai is described in Jewish literature as a betrothal and a wedding. Within the midrash, there are several short parables, which develop this theme. They all follow the same basic construction: A princess (Israel) is captured by bandits (Egypt). A King (God) happens along, sees the princess in distress, and rescues her. He then takes her to his palace (Mt. Sinai) and asks her to marry him. That's the basic layout of the imagery.

Here's how God poses the question:

Exodus 19:4-6 (ESV)

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. [5] Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; [6] and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

Israel responds: "We will do everything the Lord has said." The girl said "yes," and the engagement ring is on her finger.

In Exodus 19, God asks Israel to enter into a covenant relationship with Him. For His part, He offers to make Israel His "treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation." He offers to make them into the People of God. For Israel's part of the deal, her responsibility is to "Hear God's voice," and keep the terms of His covenant. His covenant is the Torah. Israel's acceptance of the terms and conditions of the Torah qualifies her as the People of God.

Within the Church, we Christians often refer to ourselves as the bride. However, the Torah, and all the Scriptures, seem clear that Israel is the promised bride. Can there be two brides? Is God a polygamist?

Why would God choose one people above all others? Why are the Jews the Chosen People? Theologians call this seemingly unfair conundrum the “scandal of particularity.” Call it what we will, the Bible is very clear on this point. God has not made a covenant with any other people on the earth. There is no other nation born by Him. If non-Jews want to be a part of the People of God, we have to leave our people and join ourselves to Israel. God has made a covenant with no other nation.

Ephes. 2:12 (ESV)

remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Is this fair? Perhaps not. But God has never played by the rules of men. If He desired to take a single nation for Himself, to the exclusion of all other nations, then that is His business. He is, after all, God.

Israel alone, among all the peoples of the earth, enjoys a relationship with the Creator. If the Gentile wants to enter into covenant relationship with the God of Israel, he must enter into the nation of Israel. Another way of saying this is that if the Gentile wants to be saved, he must join the covenant God has made with Israel. How do we enter this covenant? The same way Israel entered the covenant. She entered by agreeing to “hear” God’s voice.

See John 10:16 (ESV)

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Notice that there is only one flock, and participation in the flock is based upon listening to the shepherd's voice.

In the story of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, Exodus 20:18 says, "And all the people saw the thundering..." In the Hebrew text of Exodus 20:18 does not actually use the word thunder. Instead of thunder, the word *qolot* is used. *Qolot* is the plural form of the Hebrew *qol*. *Qol* means "voice." So the Torah literally says, "And all the people saw the voices."

The children of Israel are brought to Mount Sinai to receive an offer of covenant. Through Moses, the Lord tells the Children of Israel that if they will indeed "hear His *qol* (voice) and keep His covenant," then they will be His special treasure: His people. "Even though the whole world is mine," He tells them, "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The only contingency is that they must "hear God's Voice."

In Hebrew, "hearing someone's voice" is idiomatic for obedience. God is asking Israel for obedience. In order to be His unique and separate people, (indeed, to be His bride) Israel must live in obedience to God's voice. What is His voice? It is the commandments of the Torah, the terms and conditions of His marriage covenant with her.

Even before hearing the actual *qol* (voice) of God, Israel agrees. The people respond by saying, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do." It is as if God has requested Israel's hand in marriage and she has consented. She has agreed to be His special intimate people.

Exodus 19:16 (ESV)

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

The revelation of God at Mount Sinai commences with voices, presumably thunder, accompanied by lightning, and the loud voice of the shofar. These voices crescendo into verse 19 where it says, "And the qol (voice) of the shofar was growing, and exceedingly strong! And Moses spoke, and God answered him in a qol (voice)."

All the people heard the voice of God as He spoke the Ten Commandments recorded in chapter 20. It was an unprecedented and not to be repeated moment in the history of the universe. An entire nation literally heard the voice of God speaking. They did not hear God in an ethereal or quasi-spiritual sense. Rather, they audibly heard the voice of God speaking. It was a vivid dramatization of the idiom employed at the beginning of the story, "If you will indeed hear my qol (voice)."

Most translations smooth out the Hebrew of verse 18 by translating the word "voices" as thunder. Thunder agrees with the context of the thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai. "The Torah says, 'And all the people saw the voices.' Note that it does not say 'the voice,' but 'the voices'; wherefore R. Yochanan said that God's voice, as it was uttered, split up into seventy voices, in seventy languages, so that all the nations should understand" (Shemot Rabbah 5:9). The Torah is offered to anyone who will "hear God's voice and keep His covenant." Anyone can be part of the marriage. Anyone can join the bride.

Only Israel was able to enter into covenant with God and become the People of God. Israel alone is a kingdom of priests and God's holy people. However, the invitation to Israel's covenant is left wide open to all mankind.

When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the Greek Bible was called the "Seventy" (Septuagint). Again, the image is of

the Torah going forth in all tongues. How are we to understand this idea?

When God offered the Torah to Israel, He offered it as the terms by which Israel could become His bride, His special treasure. "If you will hear my qol (voice) and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19:5-6)

However, the offer made to Israel does not exclude non-Israelites. Anyone from any nation who will hear God's voice and keep His covenant will be included in this relationship. Anyone who responds to God's invitation to covenant relationship is welcome to join the peculiar people and take a place among the kingdom of priests.

Rom 3:29 says, "Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles too?" Therefore, His Torah is an open invitation to the whole world.

At the end of the narrative in Ex 19 & 20, we read, "And all the people saw the voices and the torches." We would normally smooth out the Hebrew of verse 18 by translating the word "saw" as "heard," and by translating the word "torches" as "lightning." Thus, we can paraphrase, "And all the people heard the thunder and saw the lightning." The sages, however, read the passage literally. Based upon their literal reading of the Hebrew, the people saw voices and torches.

What does it mean, "the people saw voices"? How does one see a sound? How does one see a voice? Where did the torches come from? What are they?

In Deuteronomy, Moses retells the story of hearing God's voice at Sinai. In ten different passages, he reminds Israel that they heard God's voice speak to them "from out of the fire." Repeatedly he says, "You all heard the voice speaking from out of the fire."

Regarding this fiery voice of God, the disciples of Rabbi Ishmael applied a verse from Jeremiah. The verse says, "Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jer 23:29)

How is God's word like a fire? How is His word like a hammer? In explaining this verse, the disciples of Rabbi Ishmael vividly imagined God's voice at Mount Sinai to be like a sledgehammer breaking up large stones. With each successive blow a multitude of fiery sparks are scattered in every direction.

According to their reading, the voice of God at Mount Sinai not only split into seventy voices speaking seventy different tongues, but those voices were like hot sparks flying forth from a hammer's blows on stone.

Is not His word like fire? The sages of the midrash thought so. According to their interpretation of Exodus 20:18, all the people really did see the voice of God, and torches too, because the voice of God appeared to them like hot, burning torches. As He spoke, His words took shape as torches of fire.

Another ancient Jewish tradition about the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai has to do with the timing of the event. Judaism regards the festival of Shavuot (Pentecost) to be the anniversary of the day on which God spoke at Sinai. The festival is celebrated as the Festival of the Giving of the Torah. In the synagogue, a wedding contract between God and Israel is read on Shavuot. The Torah is dressed in white like a bride's gown on Shavuot. The whole congregation

recites the Ten Commandments together on Shavuot. Exodus chapters 19 and 20 are publicly read on Shavuot. Pentecost (Shavuot) is the day the Giving of the Torah is remembered and re-enacted. It is celebrated as a wedding anniversary for God and His bride.

Therefore, the Feast of Shavuot, in Jewish tradition, is also the anniversary of the day when God's voice spoke in all languages of the world and was visible as torches of fire which came "to every Jew individually."

In Acts chapter 2, Peter and the other disciples were gathered to celebrate this "Wedding Anniversary." They were gathered together to celebrate the festival of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell upon them in the form of tongues of fire. These torches of fire came to rest on each individual disciple. As a literary device and as a genuine supernatural phenomenon, the miracle is a clear allusion to the legend of God's fiery voice at Mount Sinai.

Acts 10:34 (ESV)

So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,...

Acts 11:1-2 (ESV)

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. [2] So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying,

That kind of thinking was a dramatic reversal of Peter's theology. Prior to his vision of the sheet and the unclean animals, Peter must have assumed that God certainly did show favoritism. After all, wasn't the nation of Israel God's special treasure, His kingdom of priests and His holy nation?

Cornelius and his household were not Jews. They weren't even Israelites. They were pure-blooded Gentiles without a claim or hope in Israel. Hence Peter refers to Cornelius as "one of another nation." The term "one of another nation" makes it obvious that Cornelius was not an Israelite in any regard.

Prior to his vision, Peter must have assumed that the Gospel of Jesus was meant only for Israel. He even intimates as much when he refers to the Gospel as the "message God sent to the people of Israel." (Acts 10:35) The people gathered in Cornelius's house are not the people of Israel. They are strangers to the covenant.

Imagine Peter's surprise. Imagine the surprise of the other Jews who had come with him. We read, "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues..." (Acts 10:45-46)

The significance of the miracle could not have been lost on Peter. It was God's confirmation that the Gospel was also meant for the Gentiles. Just as the voice of God was split into the seventy languages of the Gentiles at Mount Sinai (according to the legends), just as the Jewish believers had spoken the Gospel in all the languages of the Nations at Pentecost, now the Gentiles in Cornelius's house were experiencing the same miracle. The voice of God was speaking in various languages to them and through them. They had not gone through a rabbinic conversion ritual. They were still Gentiles.

When Peter heard them speaking in the seventy languages, he could no longer theologically exclude those Gentiles from Israel. They had heard the voice of God, just as Israel had heard it at Mount Sinai. They had heard the voice of God, and the promise was that anyone who heard His voice would be God's special treasure, a kingdom of

priests and a holy people: Israel. That was the promise of the betrothal.

For Gentiles converting into Judaism according to the rabbinically prescribed ritual, immersion is supposed to follow circumcision. Circumcision is the sign of entering the covenant. Immersion is a symbolic death and rebirth. The Gentile going down into the water of immersion is said to die to his old Gentile self. As he emerged from the water, he is said to be "reborn" as a Jew. Recall that the term "born again" originally referred to this symbolic rebirth as a Jew.

In rabbinic Judaism, one who has undergone a ritual conversion of circumcision and baptism is no longer referred to as a Gentile. He has been born again. He is a Jew and a full-blooded part of Israel.

The change in Peter's theology is evidence in his first Epistle. 1 Peter is a book written to Gentile believers. In fact, one source indicates that the early church used to read 1 Peter to new converts on the day of their baptism.

That the Gentile believers are the subjects of 1 Peter is clear from the outset. Peter contrasts their current state with "the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance." (1 Pet 1:14) He reminds them "you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers."

However, since their conversion, he no longer regards them as Gentiles. Instead, they are "God's Chosen, strangers in the world", the "born again." They are like "new born babies."

Peter points out to his readers that they are not included in God's household on the basis of their own bloodlines. They are not the natural seed of Abraham. Rather, they are part of the people of God on the basis of "an imperishable seed," planted in them "through the

living and enduring word of God.” This means that the seed implanted in them is not implanted by means of sexual reproduction, as would be the case if it were a genetic reference. Rather, the seed implanted in them is by means of the power of the word of God.

“Chosen people”, “royal priesthood,” “holy nation” and “people belonging to God” are all titles of Israel. They are the very roles God offered to Israel at Mount Sinai if only she would “hear His voice and keep His covenant.” Now the Gentiles have heard that voice which offered the Torah in the seventy languages of the nations. They have entered that covenant, to keep it through the auspices of Jesus. They have become a part of Israel the Bride.

As Gentile believers, we find our position in Israel spelled out here. We are no longer to be regarded as Gentiles. We are part of the People of God. We have become a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” We have been so made on the basis of an “imperishable seed” planted in us “through the living and enduring word of God,” not a perishable seed inherited from distant ancestors. We have become a part of the people of Israel.

In 1 Peter 2, verse 10, Peter tells his readers, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” His words are borrowed from the prophet Hosea.

Peter seized upon the image because it was most applicable to the Gentile converts to whom he was writing. The Gentiles, like Israel in the day of her apostasy, were previously alienated from God. They were not God’s people. They did not know God’s mercy. Now, like Israel in the future day of her repentance, the Gentiles had become “sons of the living God.” Peter declares to his Gentile converts, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God;

once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Paul uses the same passage for the same purpose in Romans chapter 9.

Then we come to Acts 15. Notice that they aren’t arguing about whether or not Gentiles should keep the Torah. That isn’t the question set before them. The question they are arguing is whether or not Gentiles must be circumcised in order to merit salvation. Circumcision stands for the rabbinic conversion ritual, so the question is, “Must Gentiles convert to Judaism under the auspices of the rabbinically prescribed ritual in order to be saved?”

The objection of Paul’s opponents is based upon the “theology of particularity” which characterizes Judaism. Israel alone is God’s inheritance and special treasure. There is ample scripture to support such a notion. To even consider opening the door of particularity to any and every ethnicity is to compromise that select status. Uncircumcised Philistines in the Kingdom of Heaven, sitting at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Unthinkable! Borderline blasphemy!

Simons argument is simple. He points out that even Jews are not saved through their obedience to the Torah. If used as a means to attain salvation, the Torah would be an unbearable yoke. Generation after generation of Jewish history has already proven that all men sin and fall short of the glory of God. No one is saved through keeping the Torah. Instead, salvation for the Jewish believers comes through the grace of Jesus. “Why would it be any different for Gentiles?” Peter asks. Why indeed?

Furthermore, when the Pharisees speak of obeying “the whole Torah,” they are speaking of much more than just the five books of Moses. The “whole Torah,” or the “yoke of Torah,” is idiomatic within rabbinical Judaism. It includes not only the written Torah, but

also all of the Oral Torah, along with its traditions, fences and halachic rulings. Everyone in attendance at the council understands full well what Peter means by referring to Torah as a “yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear.”

Peter himself and the other core disciples of Jesus were not scholars and sages, they were fishermen who ate bread before washing their hands and husked grain while walking through the fields on Shabbat. “Shall we then hold the Gentiles to a higher standard than we ourselves are beholden to?”

James says that “it is my judgment therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” What does he mean by “we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles?” The meaning is clear enough. We should not require circumcision and conversion to Judaism as the criteria for salvation. We should not require Torah (written or oral) as criterion for salvation. Salvation is by faith.

James selects four laws. The four laws he selects are socially obvious ones that will enable the Gentile converts to move among Jews. These four laws are not presented as if they are a replacement for the Torah, nor are they meant as the four minimum commandments that will merit salvation. They seem to be intended as a basic set of rules that will enable Jews and Gentiles to congregate together. Each law targets a specific facet of Hellenistic paganism: blood rituals; meats sacrificed to idols; ritual feasts; sexual immorality (whether overt temple prostitution or covert promiscuity). Each of these prohibitions applies specifically to the religious practices of the pagan worship systems of the Diaspora. These four laws will ensure that the Gentiles are no longer participating in the idolatry of their local temples, thereby making it possible for them to fellowship in the synagogue.

As for the rest of the laws of the written Torah, James neither binds their observance upon the Gentile believers, nor does he exempt the believers from them. Instead he says, "Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." What does he mean by that? That is to say that the Gentile believers will hear the Torah. They will hear it every week. They will hear it preached every week. The obvious expectation is that hearing it read and hearing it preached will eventually lead to doing it. Given time to hear and study, the Gentile believers will eventually learn the ways of observance. But to require observance of them prior to their salvation and their participation in the Kingdom, is putting the cart before the horse.

The Amos passage James quotes to support his decision is important to consider. The NIV translates Amos 9:11-12 as follows:

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my Name, declares the Lord, who will do these things."

The word the NIV translates as "tent" is the Hebrew word Sukkoth, which means booth or hut. Look at the condition of David's Sukkoth. It is toppled. It has broken places and ruins. It is not what is used to be, but one day it will be set back up and repaired. What does it refer to? What is David's fallen Sukkoth? The metaphor is in no way obscure. David's fallen Sukkoth is the dynastic rule of the House of David. It is the Davidic monarchy itself.

Amos lived in a time when ten of the twelve tribes were now outside of the Davidic monarchy. They had their own king, Jeroboam II. They had their own capital and their own holy places. The Davidic monarchy, which used to rule over all the tribes of Israel, retained only two tribes: Judah and Benjamin. By comparison to what it once was, it had collapsed.

Undoubtedly the prophet saw that one day David's house would collapse completely and there would be no king from the line of David sitting on the throne of Israel or Judah. But after that, Amos tells us, David's fallen Sukkoth will be rebuilt. The dynasty will be restored. A new king, a Davidic king, will sit on the throne of all Israel again. The broken places of the monarchy will be repaired; the ruins of David's dynasty will be restored. The Kingdom of the House of David will be rebuilt as it used to be.

When that happens, the house of David will possess the "remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear the Lords' Name." What does it mean by "all the nations that bear my Name?" The Gentile nations who bear God's Name are genuine Gentile nations. They are the nations the prophet invokes in verse 7 of the same chapter. In that verse, He says, "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites? Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" God's point is that He is working with other nations also. He is not just the God of Israel; He is the God of the whole world. His plan of redemption is universal in scope and not limited only to Israel. In that day, the day when David's fallen Sukkoth is restored, all these nations that He has patiently worked with will bear God's Name and be the possession of the House of David. They will be ruled by the King of Israel, as part of the commonwealth of Israel.

The Septuagint reading of Amos 9:12 is slightly different. According to the book of Acts, James quotes a reading of the Hebrew closer to the Septuagint's rendering of the passage. That version of the passage tells us that David's fallen Sukkoth will be restored so "...that the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles upon whom my Name is called, may earnestly seek me." Therefore, the purpose of a restored Davidic king is so that all mankind can seek God.

This Septuagint version apparently read the Hebrew Edom as adam, meaning all mankind. The two variants are not contradictory; rather, they complement one another's meanings. According to the traditional Hebrew reading, the restored Davidic dynasty will possess the remnant of Edom (a Gentile nation) and in fact, all the nations that bear God's Name. According to the Septuagint reading, the Davidic dynasty will be restored so that the aforementioned nations may seek the Lord.

In either case, the Gentiles who bear God's Name are Gentile nations who will be subject to an Israelite monarchy, a monarchy that will afford them the opportunity to seek the Lord.

The key to understanding how James uses the passage is identifying the Davidic king. To James and the believers in Jerusalem, David's restored sukkah is Jesus. He is the Davidic king who has come to rebuild the monarchy of Israel. Jesus is the repairer of the broken places, the restorer of the ruins, who rebuilds the legitimate throne of Israel. According to the Amos passage, the restored Davidic king will include those Gentiles who bear God's Name.

Apparently not everyone agreed with the decision of the Jerusalem council. This brings us to Paul's letter to the Galatians. Consider, for example, the situation in Galatia. The Galatians were new believers, converts out of paganism. They were the Gentiles of the city of Pisidian-Antioch, Iconium and Derbe. Faith in Jesus was their only rite of conversion. But subsequent to their conversion out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of God, some brothers and sisters from Jerusalem paid them a visit. These visitors were Jewish brothers and sisters who still held fast to the conviction that only Israelites could have a place in God's covenant. Only Israel could be saved. Only Israel was in the Kingdom.

The visitors from Jerusalem taught that it was necessary, in addition to faith in Jesus, that the Galatian Gentiles should also be circumcised – thereby signifying their formal conversion to Judaism. According to these people, only after circumcision could the Gentiles be regarded as truly a part of the Kingdom. Faith in Messiah alone was not adequate. According to these visitors, the Galatians also needed to become Israelites.

Paul's attitude reveals his priorities. The Gospel of Salvation, full and free, specifically salvation proclaimed to the Gentiles, salvation by faith through grace alone, was the very heartbeat of passion that fueled Paul's life. The Gentile inclusion through faith in Jesus was the Gospel to Paul. That was the good news. To him, anything that obscured that simple truth was some other gospel.

Carefully read Paul's words in Galatians 2:7-8 (ESV)

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised

[8] (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles),

In this passage, Paul uses the term uncircumcised with the term Gentiles. From Paul's perspective, to be uncircumcised was to be a Gentile: one from the Nations. No double meanings are implied here. Paul's world is very black and white. Gentiles are Gentiles.

The way Paul uses the terminology, circumcision refers specifically to the rabbinic conversion ritual, not to the written Torah command of circumcision. Thus Paul is saying, "Converting to Judaism or not is meaningless. Keeping God's commands is what counts."

So Paul responded to the Galatians by saying, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your

goal by human effort?" The specific human effort Paul was speaking of was a formal conversion to Judaism through the rite of circumcision.

In Galatians 3:16 Paul wrote, "The promises [given to Abraham] were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Messiah." This means that the receipt of the promises given to Abraham is not based upon an individual being part of the physical seed of Abraham. After all, Paul argues, the promise was not given to "seeds." "Seeds" in the plural form would suggest the many physical descendents of Abraham, the Israelite lineage. Rather, he says, it was given to a singular "seed." The singular "seed" of Abraham is Messiah. Thus, according to Paul, Messiah is the Seed of Abraham. Messiah is the promised seed and the fulfillment of the seed promises of the Scripture. Because of that, when Gentiles [those not of Abraham's seed] place faith in Messiah, the Seed of Abraham, they are spiritually connected to that seed.

When Gentiles place their faith in the Seed of Abraham [Jesus], then all the passages and prophecies which speak of Abraham's Seed blessing all nations, and the Seed of Israel becoming a community of nations, and the Seed of Ephraim and Manasseh becoming a fullness of nations, all of these prophecies are ultimately fulfilled in the Seed that is Messiah. From Paul's vantage, for a Gentile believer to become circumcised under the auspices of a rabbinic conversion to Judaism was redundant. It was, if anything, an affront to Messiah because it implied that faith in Messiah was not adequate to secure a position in the covenant with Israel. It was a denial of the Gospel. Paul says, "If you allow yourselves to be circumcised [that is to undergo a formal conversion into Judaism as a necessary component of your salvation], Messiah is of no value to you." Messiah is of no value because the convert has opted to accomplish his participation in Israel through his own physical efforts. To Paul's way of thinking,

ritual conversion after salvation is like campaigning for an office for which you have already been elected. Galatians was written to argue for Gentile inclusion in Israel, not Gentile exclusion from Israel.

When a Gentile [or an Israelite for that matter] places faith in Messiah, he becomes a part of the body of Messiah. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Messiah Himself?” (1 Cor 6:15) The Master taught us that when we place our faith in Him, we are in Him and He in us. We are no longer ourselves alone, but we are invested with a share of His identity. His life force, even His very identity, is planted within us.

In the same mystical and inexplicable sense that He is One with the Father because He is in the Father and the Father is in Him, so too we are made a part of this circle of unity when we come to faith. The Master tells us that He is in us and we are in Him. We are one with Him. As we partake of His body, we become His body.

How do we enter into Abraham’s seed, especially if that seed is one man? We enter into the seed of Abraham when we enter into Messiah. Only in Messiah can one be truly in Abraham’s seed.

The Master told us, “I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” (Jn 14:20) If we are in Messiah and He is in us, then we are in the seed of Abraham and the seed of Abraham is in us.

Paul said, “Therefore, if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creation’ the old has gone, the new has come.” (2 Cor 5:17) My Gentile *ethnos* is no longer relevant as regards my place in the Kingdom. I am in Messiah. I am in the Seed of Abraham. I am a new creation. I am part of the Seed of Abraham.

If I accept those truths, then I am no longer in any need of claiming Israelite ancestry; I have no need to search for a Jew in my genealogy.

If however, my identity in Messiah is not adequate to assure my position in Israel, then I have not fully understood my new identity.

If I have not embraced the reality of Messiah in me and myself in Messiah, then I am left outside trying to understand my position in the People of God. However, if I have admitted that through faith I am in Messiah the Seed of Abraham and Messiah the Seed of Abraham is in me, I need no further identification. To look for something more, something physical, something outside of my relationship with Messiah in order to offer me a sense of identity, is essentially the very sin the Galatians were committing.

Paul concludes his argument by saying, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” (Gal 6:15-16)

When he says “circumcision” he means being a natural Israelite, specifically a Jew, whether by birth or by auspices of rabbinic conversion.

When he says “uncircumcision” he means being a natural Gentile, specifically one who has not made a formal conversion to Judaism.

When he says “new creation,” he means Israelites or Gentiles who belong to Messiah. When he says “Israel of God,” he means all of us.

There was a wall inside of the Temple that Gentiles were not allowed to pass. It was this very wall the Apostle Paul was walking past when he was accosted by an angry mob. They were not angry with him for teaching the death and resurrection of Messiah; they were angry with him for teaching Gentile inclusion in Israel. They were angry with him for filling the synagogue with Gentiles and declaring

that those Gentiles were “joint heirs with Israel.” How dare he disregard the dividing wall!

Remember that to Paul, the mystery of the Gospel was not the mysterious incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. The mystery was that the Gentiles had somehow been included in Israel. Somehow, the dividing wall had been broken down.

Ephes. 2:8-13 (ESV)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

[11] Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— [12] remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. [13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Subsequent to our salvation, however, there has been a change in our status. Paul says that, while we were formerly Gentiles, somehow, through some mystery, our identify has changed. “But now in Messiah Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Messiah.” We who were once far away have been brought near. We have been brought into Israel. A radical transformation has occurred.

This transformation is in many ways equivalent to the legal transformation that occurs when a Gentile passes through the rabbinically prescribed ritual of becoming a proselyte. However, it is

not that conversion ritual which Paul is speaking about in Ephesians. Here he is making the point that the Gentile believers have received this new identity without a formal ritual conversion. “Not by works lest any man boast,” he says, and by works he means the conventional rabbinic conversion ritual, complete with the works of circumcision, immersion and sacrifice. Those are the “works” of the Pauline Epistles.

The conversion Paul is speaking of is “not by works, but by grace through faith.” It is the grace of God bestowed simply and purely through faith in Jesus. He goes on to explain the mechanics of this process in verse 2:14. “For He [Jesus] Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”

According to Paul, the wall of separation, the barrier between the people of the nations and the people of God, is destroyed by Messiah.

Ephes. 2:14-15 (ESV)

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility

[15] by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,

The translators of the NIV, like most translators of English versions of the Bible, have rendered the Greek to say that not only did Messiah’s death bring peace between Jew and Gentile, but it also abolished the Torah. How convenient for us Gentiles! Not only do we receive full rights of participation and citizenship in Israel, but we are scot-free from acting like it at all. Never mind that business about “Do not think I have come to abolish the law,” we have the evidence right here in Ephesians.

The actual sense of Ephesians 2:14-15 is not that Messiah's flesh abolishes the Torah, it is the enmity being abolished. For clarity, it should read, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity..." (See the KJV) It is the enmity between Jew and Gentile that Messiah's flesh abolished, not the Torah. It is abolished in the sense that Messiah has brought Gentile believers into Israel.

The Prophet Isaiah provides a vivid illustration of this principal. He declares that the stranger who keeps the Sabbath and holds fast to God's covenant will be received in the innermost courts of the Temple. His sacrifices will be received on the altar, and the Temple will be a House of Prayer for Gentiles for every nation (Is 56:7) It was probably this very passage that Paul had in mind as he wrote of Messiah abolishing the dividing wall. For the dividing wall, which would forbid the Gentile from entering the Temple to offer sacrifice, is completely absent in Isaiah's Messianic-age prophecy:

Isaiah 56:6-7 (ESV)

*"And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
[7] these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples."*

Therefore the Ephesians passage (2:14-15, quoted earlier) is not a contradiction of the Master's words in Matthew 5:17 ("Do not think I have come to abolish the Torah..."), nor is it a textual justification to

sin and sin boldly. Instead, it shows us how Gentiles are able to retain their Gentile identity while at the same time being regarded as part of Israel, living out the law of Israel. “For He Himself is our peace.”

Ephes. 2:15-22 (ESV)

by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16] and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. [17] And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. [18] For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

It is notable that Paul never makes an argument for Israel’s inclusion in the Church. Israel is not being joined to the Church. Jews are not being made into Gentiles. Quite the opposite. Paul’s theology has Gentiles entering Israel, joining with Israel as fellow citizens. We are strangers brought near Israel by faith.

Paul means to tell us that not only has the dividing wall which once forbade us from entering the Temple been broken, but we are actually being made into a Spiritual Temple for God to reside within. Gentile believers are being built together with Jewish believers into an eternal Temple.

Ephes. 3:1-9 (ESV)

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— [2] assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, [3] how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. [4] When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, [5] which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. [6] This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

[7] Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power. [8] To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, [9] and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,

It is a mystery that demands an explanation. It seems so irrational. What’s the point of calling out a separate people from the nations if you intend to allow all nations to be a part of that people? Where’s the sense in it? What might God intend to accomplish by extending the tent of Israel to encompass all nations?

The truly mysterious part of the Gentile inclusion is that it is at the very center of the Eternal Purpose of God. What was God’s intent in all of this? Through the mystery of the Gospel, God intends to bring the Gentiles into His people Israel. His intent is that the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the demonic rulers and authorities in heavenly realms.

When the Lord, through Messiah’s blood, takes Gentile people away from their pagan gods, there is nothing the enemy can do about it. Every Gentile who is taken from paganism, and joined to the people

of Israel, represents a loss of territory and prestige for the Adversary. That is the manifold wisdom of God.

Ephes. 3:10 (ESV)

so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Deut. 4:34-35 (ESV)

Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? [35] To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him.

Through the act of taking the Israelites out of Egypt and away from Pharaoh and the other gods of Egypt, the Lord established His superiority over all those other gods. Israel was His trophy of victory. He used the Exodus from Egypt to establish His name.

But the Lord was not about to stop with the redemption of Israel. The Exodus from Egypt set the pattern, but it was just the beginning. It foreshadowed a second Exodus, a greater Exodus, again effected by the blood of a lamb. This second Exodus is the mystery of Messiah, the redemption of the nations. It is as if God is repeating the Exodus from Egypt over and over again, and there is nothing Pharaoh or the gods of Egypt can do about it. The spiritual powers and principalities of the Gentile nations can only watch in dismay as their brick makers join themselves to Israel and slip away through the Red Sea.

God's Eternal Purpose is that His wisdom should be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly realms by means of taking

away their people, taking away their property, by means of redeeming a people out of every tribe, tongue and nation on earth.

Isaiah spoke of this Mystery of Messiah. Isaiah 49:6 (ESV)

he says:

*"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

The scope of Messiah's work is not limited to the restoration of the tribes of Israel. That purpose is too small when compared with the greater purpose God has in mind. The Eternal Purpose of God is that Messiah should carry the Lord's salvation to the Gentiles, even to the ends of the earth.

The Eternal Purpose of God culminates in a scene from the Book of Revelation. Rev. 7:9 (ESV)

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

The point of the passage is that God's salvation is universal and includes a Gentile majority from every ethnicity.

Therefore, we Gentiles have a legitimate place in Israel. We have a place more secure than any Jewish (or Israelite) ancestry, or spurious conversion ritual, could ever offer us. Our place is secured by the blood of Messiah and foreordained by the Eternal Purpose of God. We have an identity in Israel among the People of God. Just as Abraham believed by faith and it was credited to him as righteousness – before he was circumcised – we have a place in Israel.

Isaiah 2:2-4 (ESV)

*It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
[3] and many peoples shall come, and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
[4] He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.*

As the prophet Isaiah described the great pilgrimage ascending to Messianic Jerusalem, he saw that the pilgrims were not just Israelites. Among the multitudes ascending to the Holy City, he saw strangers, foreigners and people of other nations. He cried out to Jerusalem, Isaiah 60:3-4 (ESV)

*And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.
[4] Lift up your eyes all around, and see;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far,
and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.*

Isaiah 60:10 (ESV)

*Foreigners shall build up your walls,
and their kings shall minister to you;*

*for in my wrath I struck you,
but in my favor I have had mercy on you.*

We would do well to let the rule of the coming Kingdom dictate how the servants of the King live now. In that day, all nations will keep Torah. The Torah will go forth from Zion, a light to all nations and a law to all men. If the Torah is the law of the Kingdom, shouldn't all the subjects of the King obey that law?