

TORAHSCOPE: Shelakh-Lekha (Send on your behalf)

by Mark Huey posted 04 June, 2010 www.outreachisrael.net

Numbers 13:1-15:41
Joshua 2:1-24

“Scriptural Equality”

Shelakh-Lekha is best known for the account of the twelve spies who are sent into Canaan to scout out the opportunities for the Israelites, so they can occupy the Promised Land.¹ We witness the classic scene of how two spies, Joshua and Caleb, came back with a good report—and the ten spies who reported negatively.² Our Torah portion for this week records a critical part of Ancient Israel’s history, which must be studied properly today. Great lessons on faith can be *contrasted* with an inherent lack of faith—and negative consequences which can ensue for not believing the promises of God.³ While the messages seen in *Shelakh-Lekha* have been the substance of much theological and spiritual reflection for over three millennia, I think we can also see how it likely inspired many in the Zionist movement of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries to want to return to the Land of Israel. **For this, we must be very grateful!**

Now after over a half-century of existence, the modern-day State of Israel is a viable country, uniquely existing as a testimony to the validity of the promises made by God contained in the Holy Writ. We all know that the Scriptures are replete with statements and prophecies which indicate that Israel would eventually be reconstituted, as a fulfillment of the promises given by the Lord to the Patriarchs.⁴ Many of the promises seen in the Tanakh were used to inspire the original Zionist settlers to make the necessary sacrifice, and perform the hard work and labor, required to establish a Jewish homeland in the Middle East.

As you read our *parashah*, I would urge you to not exclusively reflect on some of its positive aspects as they concern the Promised Land and the vibrancy of Israel today. Consider the reaction of Moses when he hears that God is planning to wipe Israel out because of rebellious attitudes toward Him (Numbers 14:11-12). Will God be known as being cruel and despicable, who led His chosen people out of Egypt only to slaughter them mercilessly in the desert (Numbers 14:13-16)? Even with the promise of Moses’ seed being made into a nation mightier than the Israelites set before him (Numbers 14:12), Israel’s humble leader intercedes on their behalf, appealing to God as One who is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness:

“But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth *generations*. Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.’ So the LORD said, ‘I have pardoned *them* according to your word; but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD’” (Numbers 14:17-21).

Shelakh-Lekha is an appropriate point in our Torah readings where we should reflect upon the humility of Moses as Israel’s leader. Not only do we see Moses plead before God on behalf of the people, but the burden of service he carries for Israel cannot be denied. Moses is

¹ Numbers 13:1-24.

² Numbers 13:25-33.

³ Numbers 14:1-38.

⁴ These prophecies may include, but are not limited to:

Deuteronomy 30:1-5; Isaiah 14:1, 34:16-17, 35:10, 65:9-10; Jeremiah 3:18, 16:14-15, 29:14, 30:2-3, 31:16-18, 50:19; Ezekiel 11:17, 20:41-42, 34:13-15, 36:8-12, 36:24-28, 38:8; Amos 9:14-15; Micah 4:6-8; Zephaniah 2:7; Zechariah 2:11-12, 8:7-8, 10:8-10.

You may also wish to consult the article, “The Two Houses of Israel: Biblical Passages That Deserve Our Attention” by J.K. McKee.

willing to stand as an advocate for the people before the Lord, even when they might prefer to stone Him to death (Numbers 14:10).

Entering the Land

While the Lord does not wipe out the people of Israel, “starting over” with Moses’ descendants, it is nevertheless decreed that all of those twenty years and over—save Joshua and Caleb—will die in the wilderness. *Only the children of the Exodus generation are qualified to enter into the Promised Land* (Numbers 14:29-31). With this said, the remainder of our Torah portion narrates some of the instructions and laws that are to be observed when Canaan is eventually occupied by Israel.⁵ Of particular importance will be how the Israelites will offer various animal sacrifices to the Lord, doubtlessly as an expression of their thanksgiving to Him for His bounty and provision in the Land He has granted them:

“Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When you enter the land where you are to live, which I am giving you, then make an offering by fire to the LORD, a burnt offering or a sacrifice to fulfill a special vow, or as a freewill offering or in your appointed times, to make a soothing aroma to the LORD, from the herd or from the flock’” (Numbers 15:1-3).

The bulk of what is seen in Numbers 15 elaborates upon the various procedures for offering grain, rams, and bulls before the Lord. Within these instructions some specific statements stand out, regarding who they apply to:

“All who are native shall do these things in this manner, in presenting an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the LORD. If an alien sojourns with you, or one who may be among you throughout your generations, and he *wishes to* make an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the LORD, just as you do so he shall do. *As for* the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns *with you*, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the LORD. There is to be one law and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you...You shall have one law for him who does *anything* unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. But the person who does *anything* defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from among his people” (Numbers 15:13-16, 29-30).

Here, we see two categories of people referred to, who exist within the community of Israel: the *eizrach* (אִזְרָח) or “native,” and the *ger* (גֵּר) or “alien.” While the instruction here specifically concerns “an offering by fire” and “a sin offering” (Numbers 15:13, 27), it does lay the important legal precedent that the same standard will be adhered to by those within the Promised Land, regardless of if they are native born Israelites or those who have entered in from outside to the community. As the NIV renders Numbers 15:16, “The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.” Dennis T. Olson explains how “non-Israelite groups are welcomed into the center [of the sanctuary] to offer their sacrifices and offerings. In this way, they are given the same status as native Israelites before God.”⁶ In today’s Messianic community, the idea that there is to be “one law” for both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers to regard as having the same spiritual relevance, has certainly caused a great deal of discussion—and even some controversy.

A Few Challenges Seen in Today’s Messianic Community

The reasons why Numbers 15:15, 29-30, and other Torah passages that use the terminology “one law”⁷ are controversial, are too lengthy to be discussed in this brief commentary—because they carry a great deal of complex emotions for people in significant sectors of the Messianic

⁵ Numbers 15:1-41.

⁶ Dennis T. Olson, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Numbers* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 93.

⁷ Exodus 12:48-49; Leviticus 7:7; 24:22; 24:22; Numbers 9:14.

For a detailed analysis of these passages, consult the exegesis paper “One Law for All” by J.K. McKee.

movement. It is undeniable that the Lord has been moving in the past thirty to forty years, as the number of Jewish people who have come to publicly acknowledge Yeshua as the Messiah has exploded. There are now Messianic Jewish congregations all over North America and English-speaking countries, with some also in Europe and Latin America. Yet as this has occurred, many non-Jewish Believers have been drawn into Messianic congregations in an effort to be enriched by their Hebraic and Jewish Roots.

It is understandable, given the complex history of the relations between Judaism and Christianity, why many Messianic Jews want to have their own congregations separated out from the wider Body of Messiah. Yet, with the majority of people in most Messianic congregations *not Jewish*, is it acceptable for there to be special treatment and ministry given to Jewish Believers, and less attention given to non-Jewish Believers? Our family's experience in Messianic Judaism in the late 1990s was that while we were welcome to attend congregational services, our place in Messianic Judaism was not one as full equals in Messiah. We were told on several occasions by the leadership that our place was to pray for and financially support Jewish ministry, and that we could be associate members. *Perhaps this was just our experience*, and the experience of other non-Jewish Believers in Messianic Judaism is a little different. Nevertheless, we did feel some discrimination directed against us during our time in Messianic Judaism.

Personally, for one who believes that in the Lord we are all equal before Him as human beings, because of the reality of sin and how we each require the same salvation—I found much of Messianic Judaism to be a bit immature in terms of how the community of God's people is to function. After three or four decades of Messianic Judaism as a movement, one would think that some of today's Messianic Jews would get over their xenophobia to Christians who genuinely and sincerely want to fellowship with them as their fellow brothers and sisters. *Is this not to be preferred over some of the past social ostracism and discrimination of Jews by Christians?* Unfortunately, some of the reverse discrimination that our family witnessed in Messianic Judaism shows no significant signs of being stopped any time soon.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul acknowledges how a great level of equality has been brought about by the sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua:

“For all of you who were baptized into Messiah have clothed yourselves with Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua. And if you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:27-29).⁸

All people, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or even gender, **stand equal before the Father because of the work of His Son.** What Paul says here was absolutely radical for the First Century, as it directly subverted an ancient Jewish prayer (t.*Berachot* 6:18), that is even seen in the Orthodox Jewish *siddur* today. The observant Jew proclaims, as it appears in the *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*,

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a **heathen** [*nakri*, נַכְרִי].

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a **bondman** [*aved*, עֶבֶד].

Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a **woman** [*ishah*, אִשָּׁה].⁹

Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 not only subvert the message of this errant prayer—but attack its message of assumed superiority in the same order in which someone would pray it!¹⁰

⁸ Referenced by Olson, 93, after his comments on Numbers 15:15.

⁹ Hertz, *Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, pp 19, 21; Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, 21.

Noting these distinctions, F.F. Bruce concludes, “It is not unlikely that Paul himself had been brought up to thank God he was born a Jew and not a Gentile, a freeman and not a slave, a man and not a woman. If so, he takes up each of these three distinctions which had considerable importance to Judaism and affirms that in Christ they are all irrelevant.”¹¹ Certainly while there are natural distinctions that exist for people who acknowledge Yeshua as Savior—any ethnic or gender differences are insignificant compared to who He is and what He has accomplished for us. While the post-resurrection era is dominated by an equality not necessarily seen in the previous era, it does not mean that the distinctions of ethnicity, social standing, or gender are entirely erased, **but instead they are to be things which are to contribute to the vitality of the *ekklēsia*.** The theme of much of Paul’s letters (i.e., Ephesians 4:11-12) is how Jewish and non-Jewish Believers can come together as one in the Lord, and *all can be encouraged* to use their gifts and talents to His glory! While in a Messianic setting the virtues and edifying traits of Judaism are emphasized, the same courtesy is often not granted to those of us from evangelical Christian backgrounds.

The Messianic movement where the value of *all* of God’s people is emphasized, and all are encouraged to be everything they can be, really does not exist at this point in history. Our broad faith community has little or no understanding of what it means for us to all be in mutual submission to one another, where someone else’s needs are regarded as more important than your own (cf. Ephesians 5:21; Philippians 2:3-4). Even in the independent Messianic movement, much of which has arisen because of the various issues seen in Messianic Judaism, the concept of “mutual submission” is quite foreign.¹² Yet, it is something that definitely guide the Messianic movement of the future, as the Father’s plan of restoring all Israel comes into greater focus. I have confidence that regardless of some of our current limitations, what lies ahead is going to be a significantly exciting time of growth and maturity!¹³

Only the Noahide Laws?

The conviction of many of today’s non-Jewish Messianic Believers is that they are a part of the community of Israel via their faith in Messiah Yeshua. As the Torah itself communicates, “One law and one standard applies for you and for the alien residing with you” (Numbers 15:15, Keter Crown Bible). This would seem to mean that non-Jewish Believers should be following the Torah no differently than Jewish Believers.¹⁴ They should consider the Law of Moses to have relevance and blessing for their lives, informing them how the Lord wants all of His people to be holy and set-apart unto Him. In fact, while the Torah originally communicated to Ancient Israel that there was to only be one standard for the native or sojourner, in the post-resurrection era non-Jewish Believers are to be regarded “no longer [as] strangers and aliens, but...fellow citizens with the saints, and...of God’s household” (Ephesians 3:6). Such a classification of native, sojourner, or even “God-fearer”—is to be regarded as a part of the pre-resurrection era. If anything, all Believers in Messiah Yeshua are sojourners and aliens *in the world*, their citizenship in Heaven (1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 3:20).

¹⁰ For a further discussion, consult the exegesis paper on Galatians 3:28, “Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement” by J.K. McKee.

¹¹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 187.

¹² Editor’s note: This is because being mutually submissive does not just affect the interactions of those within the local assembly, but how husbands and wives are to serve one another as co-leaders of the home.

¹³ For some additional thoughts, consult the article “Is God’s Purpose Bigger?” by J.K. McKee, appearing in the October 2009 issue of Outreach Israel News.

¹⁴ Editor’s note: This does not, however, mean that such non-Jewish Believers need to live as *culturally Jewish* in all aspects of their lives. While Jewish tradition should have a role in one’s Torah observance, there are many aspects of Jewish culture that do not have to be followed by non-Jewish Believers, mostly regarding non-congregational related issues.

For a further discussion, consult the relevant chapters of the *Messianic Torah Helper* by TNN Press (forthcoming 2011).

Many of today's Messianic Jews eagerly embrace non-Jewish Believers as their fellow brothers and sisters, and are more than happy for them to be considering God's Torah as relevant instruction. They want the Messianic movement to be the "one new humanity" (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV/CJB). They know that the enemy wants to keep Jewish Believers and non-Jewish Believers divided as much as he can. They know that a Messianic Judaism off to itself, with an evangelical Christianity still often disregarding the Law of Moses, is not at all a good thing. Even if there are some obstacles and difficulties along the way, many of my Messianic Jewish friends recognize that we all have to work together to see a restoration of Israel come forth that is more all-encompassing than just involving the Jewish people; it is something that involves the entire world.

Contrary to the thought that the Torah is relevant for all of God's people is the Jewish theological construct that the Torah is only to be followed by the Jews. The nations at large are thought to only have to really follow seven precepts affecting the *b'nai Noach* or children of Noah, derived from Genesis 9.¹⁵ Much of this concept has made its way into parts of Messianic Judaism as well, which has thought that non-Jewish Believers can become "righteous Gentiles" by only following the seven Noahide laws. By extension, some even think that the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:19-21 is based in these Noahide laws, which include:

1. a prohibition against idolatry
2. a prohibition against blasphemy
3. a prohibition against bloodshed/murder
4. prohibitions against incest and adultery
5. a prohibition against robbery
6. the need to establish courts of law
7. a prohibition against eating flesh cut from a living animal¹⁶

While these seven prohibitions are surely righteous injunctions to be observed by all Messiah followers, suggesting that these are the *only* "commandments" that non-Jewish Believers are to follow today is a bit of a hasty conclusion. The Apostolic Scriptures include clear instruction to mixed assemblies of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers that goes well beyond these seven issues—as important as they are.¹⁷ But more problematic for those Messianic Jews who might want to view someone like me as only being some kind of a "Noahide," is the fact that these so-called Noahide laws were likely not formulated until after the destruction of the Second Temple. There are two lists of these different regulations found in Jewish literature (*Jubilees* 7:20-21;¹⁸ t.*Avodah Zarah* 8:4¹⁹), and as David Instone-Brewer points out, "The two versions of the list in

¹⁵ Cf. "Noahides," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 456.

¹⁶ Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp 376-377.

¹⁷ The prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:19-21 are best thought of as being those areas where the First Century Jewish community was unwilling to compromise or be lenient toward outsiders. The prohibitions issued by James the Just would require the new, non-Jewish Believers to effectively cut themselves off from their old, pagan spheres of social interaction, making their new spheres of social interaction those who followed Israel's Messiah (Jewish Believers) or at least Israel's One God (the Jewish community).

Consult the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee for more information.

¹⁸ "An in the twenty-eighth jubilee Noah began to command his grandsons with ordinances and commandments and all of the judgments which he knew. And he bore witness to his sons so that they might do justice and cover the shame of their flesh and bless the one who created them and honor father and mother, and each one love his neighbor and preserve themselves from fornication and pollution and from all injustice. For on account of these three the Flood came upon the earth. For (it was) because of fornication which the Watchers, apart from the mandate of their authority, fornicated with the daughters of men and took for themselves wives from all whom they chose and made a beginning of impurity" (O.S. Wintermute, "Jubilees," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 [New York: Doubleday, 1985], pp 69-70).

¹⁹ "Concerning seven religious requirements were the children of Noah admonished: setting up courts of justice, idolatry, blasphemy [cursing the Name of God], fornication, bloodshed, and thievery" (Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002], 2:1291-1292).

Jubilees and in later rabbinic texts have so little in common that we cannot know what this list contained in the first century of even if such a list existed.”²⁰

Moving Forward by the Will of the Spirit

I think it is safe to say that with the Holy Spirit dictating the enactment of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27), **the Lord wants non-Jewish Believers to follow more than just seven injunctions.** While non-Jewish Believers should be very sensitive to the needs of Jewish Believers, it is unfortunate that too many people—such as myself and my family—have been “unwelcomed” in Messianic Jewish congregations. If, for a season, we have to be a part of independent Messianic congregations and fellowships, let us not be unwelcoming of *anyone* who may enter in. Let us not reciprocate any rejection by Messianic Judaism, and desire unity and reconciliation in the future.

Many of us, regardless of whether we are Jewish or non-Jewish, know that following God’s Torah need not be a burden, but can be a great delight! *To know that one is obeying his or her Heavenly Father is very encouraging.* As we are molded by Him to accomplish His tasks, let us truly be those who can make a difference by our obedience to God, building bridges and bringing His people together. Our world—and even many religious people in Judaism and Christianity—lacks a firm ethical and moral compass. Having a foundation in the Torah will help many people return to the path of obedience and holiness, and enable them to appreciate more fully why Messiah Yeshua came to die in their place.

None of us should exhibit any pride about our heritage or lineage, blinding us to the necessary service we should offer as Messiah followers. As witnessed here in *Shelakh-Lekha*, we should strive to have the humility of Moses, who stood up for an entire generation of Israelites that really did not want him around. Some of us may not be wanted in various sectors of the Messianic community. But rather than moving aside and letting God judge, or at least penalize, others, for their inappropriate behavior—**let us stand and defend them.** Let us be patient and stand in awe as He really does promise a grand restoration of all Israel before His Son’s return!

Mark Huey (B.A., Vanderbilt University in History and Graduate Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is the Director of Outreach Israel Ministries (www.outreachisrael.net). He is the author of several books, including: *TorahScope, Volumes I & II*, and *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*. He is also co-author of *Hebraic Roots: An Introductory Study*.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

²⁰ David Instone-Brewer, “Infanticide and the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 52 No. 2 [2009]:308.