

Chapter Six

Ritual Conversion of gentiles

The history of Jewish/gentile¹ relations is not a pretty one, for either side. As is often the case, much of the tension is directly caused or influenced by errant theologies and misunderstandings of passages in the Bible. This section will not be exhaustive of the history and issues for that is beyond the scope of this book. Instead, the focus is on how a specific issue became an issue and what the Bible has to say about it.

How do gentiles become attracted to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? It was always the mission of Israel to “be a light to the nations”, referring to the gentiles. That light or witness is the Torah of God. This methodology is clearly represented in the famous passage in Deuteronomy 4:5-8, “Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do so in the middle of the land where you go in to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of

the peoples who shall hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to them as the LORD our God is whenever we call on him? What great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you today?”

One of the purposes for Israel keeping the Torah was that God gave it to them as the lifestyle of the redeemed. It was (and is) God's instructions for how to live and practice the faith. It is also God's ordained methodology for witnessing. We see in this passage that obedience leads to sanctification which leads to being a witness. As gentiles passed through the land of Israel, they would observe Israel's Torah practices and they would see them as having wisdom and understanding. They would be drawn to the worship of the one, true God. God's purpose for Israel was always to be that light to draw gentiles into a covenant relationship with Him².

So, what's the problem with gentiles ?³ Seen from the Jewish perspective, the issue was simple: idolatry. The gentiles had been steeped in pagan idolatry. They frequently fell back into it, taking Jews with them. It was pagan idolatry that led to the Northern kingdom of Israel being taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 732 BCE⁴. The same thing led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Southern kingdom of Judah being taken

into captivity by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Idolatry was a real threat. When the Jews returned to the land in the fifth century BCE, the Southern tribes followed the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra and began a sincere return to the Torah, forsaking any contact with idolatry including contact with gentiles. Unfortunately, this had the effect of marginalizing gentiles. They knew gentiles had significant involvement with paganism and idolatry, so the Jewish leadership “closed ranks” and Israel became an insular community. Prejudice and fear had won.

But what about sincere gentiles who were drawn to the worship of the God of Israel? Was there no path forward for them? The rabbinic answer to the problem of gentiles was to selectively redefine them “as a Jew”. Problem solved, right?

The Biblical command to circumcise had always been done as a sign of the covenant⁵. This was creatively misconstrued into an “entrance rite” where a gentile seeking to join in the worship of the God of Israel would undergo it to change his status to that of a Jew. The rabbinic answer is a direct violation of many, many Torah commands regarding the acceptance of gentiles. There is simply no provision or methodology given in the Torah whereby a gentile’s status is changed from being an ethnic gentile to being an ethnic Jew. This is an entirely man-made tradition that stands in direct violation of the written Word of God. One clear example is Numbers 15:16 “One law and one ordinance shall be

for you and for the stranger who lives as a foreigner with you.” If the seeking gentile (foreigner) “became a Jew” then there would be no need to state that the one Torah would apply equally to the native-born Jew and the gentile (foreigner with you).

In later times, about 20 years or so before the advent of the Messiah, the controversy over “what to do with the gentiles” rose to a fever pitch within the Jewish leadership. There is recorded a famous debate and legal battle between two prominent factions within the leadership of the nation, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. The end result was the creation of the “Eighteen Measures” which are a complicated list of rulings regarding Jewish/gentile relations and interactions. It placed many restrictions on Jews interacting with gentiles in direct opposition to the Torah. This new theology became a strong religious and cultural prejudice that exerted significant pressure on the Jewish people during the time of the Messiah and the early believers.

We see evidence of this with Peter in Acts 10:28 where we read of Peter’s reluctance to even enter the home of a gentile: “He said to them, “You yourselves know how it is an **unlawful thing** for a man who is a Jew to join himself or come to one of another nation, but God has shown me that I shouldn’t call any man unholy or unclean.” There is nothing in the Torah about restricting a Jew from having fellowship with or entering

the home of a gentile. Peter was struggling with the common prejudice of the day that arose from the Eighteen Measures against contact with gentiles. By the way, Acts 10 has nothing to do with food, it is about prejudice against gentiles. More on this later.

The issue of ritual conversion of gentiles became cemented in people's minds. It became accepted theology. The man-made "fence around the Torah" had the force of law. This is the problem with the traditions of men that are in conflict with the Word of God. It has the net effect of nullifying the Word.

1. The word "gentile" is a term that merely refers to a non-Jewish person. It is not meant in any derogatory sense.
2. One of my favorite books on this topic is "Take Hold: Embracing Our Divine Inheritance with Israel" Third Edition by Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz. at Amazon.
3. For an exceptional history of Jewish/gentile relations see the study on Galatians by Rick Spurlock at www.bereanonline.org.
4. The nomenclature BCE stands for Before the Common Era in place of BC and CE stands for the Common Era in place of AD.

5. Another excellent resource is titled “The Letter Writer” by Tim Hegg at www.torahresource.com and Amazon.