

19th Century Messianic Jewish “Sages” in Context

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“And the New Testament, as the new Thora, the complete half of God’s revelation, must be translated into Hebrew; if we intend to make it a reading book for the Jews of all countries and a constituent part of the worship of the future Israel, who shall be saved after the entering in of the fulness of the Gentiles.”

– Franz Delitzsch¹

To translate the New Testament into Hebrew was an ambitious goal for Delitzsch, one certainly motivated by theological and eschatological convictions.² His Lutheran faith compelled him to reach Jews with the Gospel of the Messiah, “the new Thora,” in their traditional language.³ This is not to say that there was a lack of believing Jews in the 19th century who were already using the Holy Tongue to think, teach, and write about their faith in Yeshua. In many ways these rabbinically trained believers were much better positioned than Delitzsch to articulate the Gospel message to the broader Jewish world, for they could draw upon the whole of the traditions known to them when conversing with their fellow *Yehudim*. Nonetheless, it is evident that the Holy One of Israel had begun stirring the hearts of both Jewish and Gentile scholars to affirm the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith, even if some used this newly discovered “knowledge” polemically.⁴

Over the last year I have spent considerable time in the study of New Testament commentaries, written in Hebrew, of certain 19th and early 20th Century Jewish believers in Messiah.⁵ My growing awareness of such material was due in large part to the efforts of various Messianic Jewish interest groups to publish, preserve, and/or translate documents deemed important to the faith because of their intrinsic historical or theological value.⁶ The decision to study this material was spurred by two different but related challenges; first, I am always on the lookout for intriguing opportunities to expand my Hebrew skills, whether ancient, rabbinic, medieval, or modern. Second, I wanted to get a glimpse of how talmudically-trained Jews who came to faith in Yeshua over a

hundred years ago navigated some of the same more or less difficult waters that some faith communities still wrestle with today. What is the place of Torah for believers in Messiah Yeshua? How are Paul's letters to be interpreted? What is the relationship between the "Church" and the "Synagogue"?

In this paper I will compare some small but informative samplings of the writings of three such Jewish scholars.⁷ Though they all believed in Yeshua as the Messiah, drew upon Jewish tradition to inform their faith, and wrote extensively in Hebrew, it will be evident that they held diverse positions regarding the place of Torah in the believing community and the proper interpretation of Paul's letters.⁸ Individual biographies and bibliographies are beyond the scope of this paper, so I encourage the interested reader to seek this information from other sources. My plan here is to let the selections speak for themselves, inasmuch as my English translations reflect the intended meaning of the original excerpts. Each Hebrew text in the discussion can be found in the Appendix for comparison against my rendering, which is admittedly awkward at times.

I will begin with an excerpt from Paul Levertoff's book, *St. Paul: His Life and Travels*.⁹ Levertoff most often couched his interpretations in narrative form rather than commentary, but his views on Torah and circumcision will be clear from the following passage.

...Paul then began his work in Antioch, and soon afterwards he took Barnabas with him on his first journey to the Gentiles; where ever they went they saw Gentiles gathered in the midst of their *kehillot* without being circumcised. In his work, Paul not only emulated the work of Peter, but he had found the solution to that very question (concerning acceptance of the uncircumcised Gentiles) on his own. In his solitude in the Arabian desert, after his recognition of the Messiah, he carefully weighed and examined the idea from every side. He came to very definite conclusions and lofty opinions concerning the opinions of the other Apostles. He already knew from his own experience the price of the yoke of the Torah and understood that it (the Torah) was not a portion of Messianism, though with much preparation he had labored in it. The weight of this yoke upon the

shoulders of the Gentiles would mean the destruction of the very spirit of Messianism; the position of certain Tannaim concerning the matter of receiving salvation was opposed, at the very root of its world view, to the essence of Messianism. [Paul] arrived at a solution to the question based upon thought and deep meditation. But in addition to this he was skilled in the manners of the world and understood well there were among his fellow countrymen in Jerusalem many dangerous Tannaim that sought to strip Messianism away from the borders of the land of Israel. Neither the far-reaching Romans nor the Greek masters of sublime knowledge would ever agree to circumcise the foreskin of their flesh, and in general they would not confine their lives to the strange limitations of the national traditions of the people of Israel; such a religion that laid heavy burdens could never become a world religion.

Concerning the place of Torah in the life of the Gentile believer, Levertoff could not be clearer. “The weight of this yoke (of the Torah) upon the shoulders of the Gentiles would mean the destruction of the very spirit of Messianism.” No distinction is made between God’s written word on the one hand and the rabbinic interpretive tradition on the other. Rather, the whole of Torah is portrayed as a heavy, unbearable weight, entirely contrary to Messianism. Interestingly, at the same time that Levertoff describes the destructive nature of the Torah, he also relegates it to a mere “national tradition” and “religion.” These neutral labels strip the Torah of its honored place as God’s revelation and shelve it next to all the other sacred texts of the world. But which is it, spiritually destructive yoke or national tradition? Problematically, Levertoff attempts to say both.

We have seen Levertoff’s undeveloped view concerning the Gentiles and Torah, but what is his view regarding the commandments’ relevance for Israel? His comments on the famous incident in Acts 21 are informative. In *St. Paul*, he writes about this controversial episode between Paul and the Torah-zealous Messianics in Acts 21:

From this [episode in Acts 21] we clearly see that Paul did not consider it a part of his work to prevent Jews from holding to their national customs. It is almost

certain that he hoped they would do this, for his perspectives and discernments would have compelled him to oppose any thing relating to the old religion whose time had already passed. But he chose a different approach, and he had suitable reasons. We find that he counseled those uncircumcised [Gentiles] who came to Messiah that they not become circumcised. And those circumcised, not to draw out their foreskins; the reason he gives for the matter is that circumcision has no value, just as foreskin has no value. This difference, from a religious point of view, was not any greater than other differences – whether between man and woman, slave and master, or the like. In short, any national difference concerning religion was nothing in itself. But if a certain man of Israel held to the Israelite customs as a sign of his nationality, Paul would very unlikely have corrected him in this matter; On the contrary, he himself loved those customs to a certain extent. The conclusion of the matter – he neither fought *against* outward expressions nor did he fight *on behalf of* them; only if they began to separate the soul of a man from the Messiah, or a Messianic from his brother, only then did Paul fight against them with all strength and might. He would not be weakened by them.

With a phrase such as “the old religion whose time had already passed,” we can understand how Levertoff read the Scriptures. No more Torah. This message of an obsolete Torah coupled with the conception of it as mere “Israelite custom” functioning as a “sign of nationality” is confusing to say the least. What future did he envision for children of Israel? Were the Jews supposed to simply disappear into obscurity? Levertoff’s work leaves me disappointed as a reader hoping to find a defense of Torah rather than a capitulation to dominant Christian replacement theology. Accordingly, this hebraically minded author pictured Paul the Apostle as a defender of the Torah for neither Jew nor Gentile.

The second Jewish figure whose ideas will be of interest is Joachim Biesenthal, the most senior of the three scholars discussed here. In fact, it is probable that Biesenthal’s writing influenced – or at least reinforced - Levertoff’s disinterest in continuity of Torah observance among believing Jews. Both of these men refer to the

“yoke” of the Torah as something at odds with the spirit of the Messianic faith. In his commentary on Romans 14:1, Biesenthal’s thought concerning the relevance of Torah is captured.

Receive the weak of faith: Receive (plural imperative pi’el) – “You will receive” means do not distance yourselves from them simply because their knowledge is different than yours, or because they have not penetrated the sublime matters as you have. ***one weak of faith*** – those who in truth and sincerity believe in Messiah on high, and cling to Him, however their hand is still weak to penetrate the deep things of the faith of the Messiah, to understand and to know that the Messiah calls them (to) liberty to go out from the slavery of the commandments of the Torah, and that freedom has been given to them to break this yoke, which they are not able to bear, from off their necks. For the essence of service to God and His Messiah is a right spirit.

From this text alone it is clear that Biesenthal equated the commandments of the Torah to a yoke of slavery from which Messiah came to free Israel. The “weak” are those who believe in Messiah, but have been unable to penetrate the “deep things of the faith” to see that Torah is unnecessary. In fact, Biesenthal goes so far as to say that the Torah has been completely changed. Take, for example, his comments on Romans 14:14.

I know: in the strength of my understanding, ***and am certain***: by the Holy Spirit which shines in me with compassion and grace of ***Yeshua the Messiah***: Who enlightens my forgetful eyes, ***that nothing***: created by God ***is unclean***: of itself, of its own nature which was given to it by the Creator, may He be exalted, for all creation and nature have been good from their formation, and at first nothing was forbidden neither animals nor anything that is eaten. But afterwards some things were forbidden in the Torah for various reasons, and the prohibition concerning them did not stem from the things themselves, but for another cause or a different reason. Therefore our rabbis of blessed memory said that “In the days of the Messiah everything forbidden will be permitted,” which were mentioned before,

from Midrash Shoher Tov on the verse “*hashem mattir ’asurim*” (Ps. 146:7).¹⁰

But to him who considers it unclean: the man who has not plumbed to understand the depths of the secret of Messianic freedom, its mysteries are still sealed and hidden from him, and his soul is dejected when eating things which are forbidden in the Torah. ***To him it is unclean:*** not according to the essence of the thing which is eaten, but according to his displaced knowledge.

From this passage we can see that Biesenthal, along with popular Christianity, interpreted the Apostolic Writings to say that the Torah’s definition of clean and unclean foods had been changed with the Messiah’s advent. And just like Levertoff, he believed that the commandments written in the Torah of Moses had been abolished. But there was more. For Biesenthal, a secret Messianic mysticism lay behind the Torah’s obsolescence and only those who had plumbed the depths of this mystery would see its irrelevance for life in Yeshua. Any Jewish soul not blessed with a grasp of this hidden knowledge, still clinging to a love for the Torah, would continually fall short of the true freedom granted by the Messiah.

Jechiel Zebi Lichtenstein, born thirty years after Biesenthal, read this chapter in a completely different manner. Instead of quoting a rabbinic *midrash* or some secret mysticism to substantiate the claim that the Torah had been superseded, Lichtenstein held that Israel has always been and always will be obligated to its commands.¹¹ The laws concerning clean and unclean animals were therefore still in effect. This was the first 19th century Messianic “sage,” to my knowledge, that affirmed the relevance of Torah observance for the believing Jew. He does not include believing Gentiles in this arena, though. Rather, Lichtenstein agrees with the Talmud of old in his assertion that it is forbidden for Gentiles to keep the Torah. Paul’s controversial statements in Romans 14, according to Lichtenstein, are simply not intended for Jews at all. On the contrary, the Apostle is speaking strictly to non-Jews in this passage.

And to interpret this difficulty said in verse 14, ***I know that nothing is unclean (tamei) etc...*** (Actually, according to the Greek he says, “common” (hol) or

“simple” (pashut)) and thus in verse 20 ***Everything is pure (tahor) etc...***, it means that they do not eat *the meat* which is spoken of here because in their eyes it is not pure (tahor), rather than because of mourning or the like. In my opinion it is apparent that Paul is speaking generally about many opinions [*machshavot*, much like *halakhot*]; in verse 1 he says that *we are* not to judge the opinions and in verse 2 he takes two extremes, ***One eats everything and another eats only vegetables***. Between them there are some intermediate *opinions*, for instance meat containing no sign of *kashrut* [meat unobserved when delivered – and perhaps delivered by a Gentile] or that *the meat* purchased in the slaughterhouse was perhaps, heaven forbid, sacrificed to idols. The same with wine – perhaps it was a libation. Concerning men like these Paul says, ***I know that nothing is unclean etc...*** and thus in verses 20-21 his words are just like those in 1 Corinthians 8:4-13 and 10:19-31, where he speaks concerning meat sacrificed to idols. It is not Paul’s intention here to contradict the Torah, the Torah of HaShem, which forbids the Children of Israel to eat certain animals and clearly says, ***They are unclean to you*** (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). Rather, his intention was to override the words of the sages of Israel who erred, and thought that these animals are in truth unclean (In particular the Kabbalists who will say that their souls are three unclean kelipot (layers)), and Paul overrides this when he says, ***I know that nothing is unclean in itself***. But the Torah, forbidding the Children of Israel to eat these *animals*, says, ***They are unclean to you*** - that is, to the Children of Israel. But in and of themselves *these animals* are not unclean, and for all the Gentiles for whom these *animals* are permitted, they are pure (tahor) for eating. Therefore he says, ***Behold, everything is pure*** because he is speaking to Gentiles. And like he says, ***And to you Gentiles I am speaking*** (11:13). Accordingly, these words of his are just like what he said in the matter of the Uncircumcision and the Circumcision in 1 Corinthians 7:19, according to my commentary there.

I appreciate that Lichtenstein refers to the Greek text here, and acknowledges that the word ‘*tamei*’ (unclean) is not the appropriate Hebrew rendering for *koinos*. This, in my opinion, reflects a greater methodological care than we see in most of our English

versions of this passage. Nevertheless, he draws a distinct line between God's will for Jews on one hand and for Gentiles on the other. On this point he stays within the Jewish tradition that Torah is binding on the former but forbidden to the latter. An excerpt from his commentary on Galatians 3:1 shows the degree to which this tradition influenced his interpretations of Paul's letters.

You foolish Galatians, etc... The Gentile Galatians desired to accept upon themselves Torah observance, as certain of the brothers from Judah had taught them, even though the decision had already gone out from the Apostles to not put stringencies upon the believing Gentiles and to not place the burden of the Torah upon them, etc... In spite of this the Galatians imagined that even though they had no need for the Torah, keeping it would be best for righteousness, and it was praiseworthy for those who would take the stringencies upon themselves. Therefore, Paul warns them that they and all Gentiles are forbidden to observe the Torah and are forbidden to put stringencies upon themselves, as he clarifies below (in Gal. 5:1-7). If they become circumcised and seek the righteousness of the commandments - "whoever adds (to the Word of God) subtracts (from it)"¹² - they give the appearance that faith is insufficient for salvation in the righteousness of the Messiah, and therefore ***The Messiah will no longer profit them, for they are cut off from grace.*** Paul also knew by the Holy Spirit and by his visions (2 Cor. 12) that since he is an Apostle to the Gentiles, he needed to honor their observances. Thus, he was exempt from the Torah and was free from it (1 Cor. 9:1, 19) for the sake of the good of the Gentiles. And if the Gentiles were to see Paul observing the Torah and the commandment then they would want to walk in his ways and to seek the righteousness of the commandments. This would bring evil to them, for the Messiah would not profit them. Therefore he was compelled by the Spirit to be free from the Torah while among the Gentiles, since they would imitate him in all things, just as he says below in 4:12 ***Be like me, even as I am like you.***

Initially, it is difficult to imagine how two statements are made here: first, that Paul was “exempt from the Torah,” and second, that Gentiles would somehow be misled into mimicking him if they saw him keeping the commandments.¹³ But when we look at the history of Christian interpretation of passages like these we can understand that Jews who came to believe in Yeshua, regardless of their yeshiva education, could not help but have their faith informed by popular Church teaching. At the very least, though he did not recognize Paul as an observant Pharisee, Lichtenstein insisted upon the enduring nature of God’s Torah, albeit for Jews alone.

Should we expect more? After all, there was no strong, distinctively Messianic defense of Torah for Jews, let alone Gentiles, at that time. Institutions tend to determine what kinds of thoughts people are permitted to entertain. While Lichtenstein’s interpretation of the Apostolic Writings is built upon the assumed validity of the commandments for Israel, both Biesenthal and Levertoff take the opposite view, that “Israel has been freed from the yoke of Torah through Messiah.” A similar approach is found in Matthew Henry’s (17th Century) commentary to Acts 21.

[James and the elders of the Jerusalem Church] informed [Paul] of a prevailing infirmity these believing Jews laboured under, of which they could not yet be cured: *They are all zealous of the law*. They believe in Christ as the true Messiah, they rest upon his righteousness and submit to his government; but they know the law of Moses was of God, they have found spiritual benefit in their attendance on the institutions of it, and therefore they can by no means think of parting with it, no, nor of growing cold to it. And perhaps they urged Christ's being *made under the law*, and observing it (which was designed to be our deliverance from the law), as a reason for their continuance under it. This was a great weakness and mistake, to be so fond of the shadows when the substance was come, to keep their necks under a yoke of bondage when Christ had come to make them free. But see,

- (1.) The power of education and long usage, and especially of a ceremonial law.
- (2.) The charitable allowance that must be made in consideration of these. These Jews that believed were not therefore disowned and rejected as no Christians

because they were for the law, nay, were zealous for it, while it was only in their own practice, and they did not impose it upon others. Their being zealous of the law was capable of a good construction, which charity would put upon it; and it was capable of a good excuse, considering what they were brought up in, and among whom they lived.

Whether directly or indirectly, the anti-Torah spirit behind Henry's statement that "[t]his was a great weakness and mistake, to be so fond of the shadows when the substance was come, to keep their necks under a yoke of bondage when Christ had come to make them free" found a home in the work of both Biesenthal and Levertoff as well. And though Lichtenstein's disagreement on this important point was a bold step in the right direction, I do not know of any commentary from this same time period that adopts the interpretive stance that the Torah is God's good gift for both Israel and the nations.

While I enjoy the challenge of reading Jewish commentary on the letters of Paul, written over 100 years ago, printed in both square and Rashi script with the look and feel of rabbinic texts, I have been disappointed to find what feels to me a low ceiling when it comes to hermeneutical rigor. But the scholars are not to be blamed. The difficulties facing a traditionally observant Jew from a tight-knit community whose eyes are opened by the Holy Spirit to see Yeshua as the King Messiah must have seemed insurmountable at times. In addition, these honored and courageous souls did not have anywhere near the resources available to us today. We simply cannot expect them to have made discernments that we might take for granted. They invested their efforts to defend the Messiah Yeshua before educated Jewish audiences, and for this they are to be commended. Let Messiah be preached! And even if I find these scholars' arguments weak and methodologies flawed, I am yet thankful that Hashem continues through the ages to show His covenant faithfulness in drawing forth believers from both Israel and the nations, to awaken hearts to His precious Son Yeshua, in Whom we are truly one. May His name be sanctified in the earth!

Considerations:

What obstacles prevented these highly educated Messianic Jewish scholars from an interpretation remotely close to “Torah Ahat” – one Torah for Jew and Gentile – and reading Paul from the 1st century Hebraic perspective?

I have come up with four. They are:

1. **Anachronism** – misuse of later rabbinic sources (late antique and medieval), imagining them to “shed light” on the Gospels and other Apostolic Writings from centuries prior; lending 3rd-4th century “Oral Torah” ideology far too much weight when reading 1st century sources.
2. **Limited Resources** – the sheer immensity of scholarship ranging from ancient Near Eastern studies in general to that of ancient Israel/early Judaism specifically over the last century, not to mention the more recent advent of the internet, has afforded this generation with knowledge and resources that these scholars could not have dreamed of.
3. **Division over the place of Torah** – whether or not it is “still” for Jews, whether or not it was ever for Gentiles.
4. **Strength of Christian interpretive tradition(s)** – The institutions of Christianity have always been powerful shapers of thought. Breaking with “tradition” in favor of truth takes effort, not to mention an uncommon blend of faith, persistence, and a voracious appetite for truth! What were the options for a Jew who had come to faith in Messiah in 19th century Europe? Where might he have gone for fellowship? Did he toggle between communities? Through what institution(s) would his faith have been informed?

These 4 “obstacles” are intertwined, yet I believe an argument can be made that they are also unique issues in themselves. It should also be noted that any scholar from the 19th century – German, English, or otherwise - would have been susceptible to these limitations. What sets the scholars surveyed in this paper apart is that they were Jews educated in rabbinic texts, they wrote in Hebrew, and they were united in asserting their faith in Yeshua the King Messiah of Israel and of the Nations, based upon their reading of the “New Testament” textual canon preserved by Gentile Christianity.

Appendix

Hebrew Texts

Levertoff, *St. Paul and His Travels*, p. 82-83

פולוס החל אז את עבודתו באנטיוכיא, ומהר אחרי זה אחז יחד עם בר-נבא בנסיעתו הראשונה אל הגוים; ובכל מקום שראו הם הכנסו את הגוים אל תוך קהלתם מבלי המילה. פולוס במעשהו לא רק חקה את מעשה פטרוס בלבד, כי אם הוא בעצמו מצא פתרון לשאלה ההיא. בהתבודדותו במדבר-ערב, אחרי הכירו את המשיח, הוא כבר אָזן וחקר את הרעיון מכל צדדיו ובא לידי מסקנות יותר מוחלטות ודעות נעלות על דעותיהם של יתר השליחים. הוא כבר ידע מבשרו את ערך עול התורה והבין שהיא (התורה) לא היתה חלק מן המשיחיות, כי אם הכנה רבת עמל אליה. העמסת העול הזה על שכמ הגוים היתה בעיניו כעין הריסת עצם רוחה של המשיחיות; ההשגה על דבר איזה תנאים מיוחדים לקבלת הישועה התנגדה בעיקרה אל עצם השקפתו על מהות המשיחיות. הוא בא לידי פתרון השאלה על יסוד מחשבות והגיונים עמוקים; אבל מלבד זה הוא היה בקי גם בהויות העולם והבין יותר מחבריו בני עמו בירושלים כמה מסוכנים היו התנאים ששמו הם להתפשטות המשיחיות מחוץ לגבולי ארץ ישראל. הרומיים הנרהבים, היונים בעלי דעה נשגבנ – בשום אופן אי אפשר היה שיסכימו להמל את ערלת בשרם ובכלל לכלוא את חייהם בהגבולים הצרים של המסורות הלאומיות של עם ישראל; דת שעומסת משאות כבודות כאלו לא יכלה בשום אופן להיות דת התבל.

Levertoff, *St. Paul and His Travels*, p. 88

מזה אנו רואים ברור שהוא לא הביט כעל חלק מעבודתו – להפריע את היהודים מאחזם במנהגיהם הלאומיים. אפשר היה אמנם לחכות ממנו שיעשה כזאת, כי השקפותיו והכרותיו ימריצוהו להתנגד לכל דבר השייך לדת ישנה שכבר עבר זמנה. אבל הוא בחר בדרך אחרת, וטעמים הגונים היו בידו. מוצאים אנו שהוא יעץ אותם שנכנסו אל המשיח ערלים – כי לא ימולו, ואותם שהיו מולים – כי לא ימשיכו בערלתם; וטעם הוא נותן לדבר שהמילה אין לה כל שוא והערלה אין לה כל שוא גם היא. החילוק הזה, מנוקדת מבט דתית, לא נעלה בעיניו מחילוקים אחרים – בין איש לאשה, בין עבד לאדון וכדומה. בקצרה, - כל חילוק לאומי אינו נוגע בדת אף במשהו. אבל אם איזה איש מישראל אחז במנהגים ישראלים כאות על לאומיותו, פולוס רחוק היה מאד מהוכיח אותו בעבור זה; אדרבא, הוא בעצמו אהב את המנהגים ההם במדה ידועה. כללו של דבר, - הוא לא נלחם נגד צורות חיצוניות כמו שלא נלחם בעדן; רק אם החלו הן להפריד את נפש האדם מן המשיח, או את המשיחי מאחיו, רק אז נלחם פולוס כנגדן בכל תוקף ועוז ולא הרפה מהן.

Biesenthal on Romans 14:1

קרבו: (ציוו הרבים מבנין פעל הדגוש), וענינו כמו תקרבו לבל תרחיקם מאתכם בעבור כי דעתם שונות מדעתכם ועל כי לא חדרו בענינים נשגבים כמכם, את רפה אמונה: ענינו אלה אשר באמת ובתמים יאמינו במשיח עליון ובו ידבקו, אכן עוד רפתה ידם לחדר בעמקי אמונת המשיח להבין ולדעת כי המשיח קרא להם דרור לצאת מעבודות מצות התורה, וכי חופש נתון להם לפרוק העול הזה מעל צוארם אשר לנשוא לא יכלו, וכי עיקר עבודת אלהים ומשיחו הוא ברוח נכון.

Biesenthal on Romans 14:14

ידעתי: בכח בינתי, ובטוח אני: ברוח הקודש אשר הופיעה בקרבי בחמלת ובחנינת, ישוע המשיח: המאיר עיני השכחי, כי אין דבר: אשר נברא מאת אלהים, טמא: מצד עצמותו, מצד טבעו אשר נתון לו מאת הבורא יתעלה, כי כל הבריאה והטבע טובות היו בעת נוצרו, ובראשונה לא נאסר דבר מכל החי ומכל אשר יאכל, אך אחרי כן נאסרו כמה דברים בתורה לסבות שונות, והאיסור אשר על עליהן לא היה מצד עצמו כי אם מסיבה אחרת ומטעם אחר. ולכן אמרו רז"ל כי לימות המשיח אז יותרו כל אלה הדברים אשר נאסרו, והובאו הדברים האלה למעלה (דף ק"ה פסוק ג') ממדרש שוחר טוב על פסוק ה' מתיר אסורים. – אך לחושב דבר לטמא: איש אשר לא ירד להבין עומק סוד חפשיית המשיחית, ומסתריה עוד חתומים וצפונים לו, ונפשו תשתוחח עליו באכלו ממאכלים אשר נאסרו בתורה, לו טמא הוא: לפי דעתו התלושה, ולא לפי עצם הדבר אשר יאכל.

Lichtenstein on Romans 14:14

ולפירוש זה קשה שאמר בפסוק 14 ידעתי כי אין דבר טמא וגו' (בדקדוק לפי היונית דבר חול ופשוט) וכן בפסוק 20 הכל טהור הוא וגו' משמע שהמדובר פה שאינם אוכלים על שאינו טהור בעיניהם ולא מחמת אבלות וכדומה. ולדעתי נראה כי פולוס דבר פה בדרך כלל על מחשבות רבות ואמר בפסוק א' שלא לדין את המחשבות ותפס בפסוק 2 שתי הקצוות אחד אכל כל דבר ואחד רק ירק. וביניהם יש כמה ממוצעים על דרך משל שהיו אנשים שהיו נזהרים לאכול בשר שנתעלם מן העין או שנמכרו במקולין אולי ח"ו הוא מזבחי אלילים, וכן זה ביין אולי הוא יין נסך. ועל אנשים כאלה אומר בפסוק 14 ידעתי כי אין דבר טמא וגו', וכן בפסוק 20 21 דבריו המה כמו בראשונה לקורינתים ח' 4 – 13. י' 31-19 בדברו שם אודות זבחי האלילים. ולא כיון פולוס פה להכחיש התורה תורת ה' שאסרה לבני ישראל איזה בעלי חיים לאכול ואמרה בפירוש טמאים הם לכם (ויקרא י"א, דברים י"ד). אך כונתו היתה לדחות דברי חכמי ישראל אשר יטעו ויחשבו כי יש באמת טומאה בבעלי חיים האלה (ובפרט המקובלים אשר יאמרו כי נפשותיהם הן משלשה קליפות הטמאות), ואת זה דוחה פולוס באמרו בפסוק 14 ידעתי כי אין דבר טמא בפני עצמו, אך התורה בעבור שאסרה אותם לבני ישראל באכילה תאמר טמאים הם ל כ ם היינו לבני ישראל, אבל בפני עצמם אינם טמאים ולכל בני העולם שמוותרים הם להם באכילה הם טהורים, ולכן אמר בפסוק 20 הן הכל טהור כי מדבר הוא לגוים וכמ"ש (י"א 13) ואליכם הגוים אני מדבר. ועל דרך זה המה דבריו בענין הערלה והמילה בראשונה לקורינתים ז' 19 כמ"ש שם בביאורי ע"ש.

Lichtenstein on Galatians 3:1

אתה גלטים חסרי דעת וגו', הגלטים הגוים חפצו לקבל על עצמם קיום התורה כפי שהורו אותם איזה מן האחים שביהודה, ואף כי כבר יצא הפסק מן השליחים (מעשי השליחים סי' ט"ו) לבלתי להחמיר על הגוים המאמינים ולבלתי שום עליהם משא התורה וגו' עם כל זה דימו הגלטים שאף שאין צריך להם בתורה עם כל זה אם ישמרוה יותר טוב לצדקה וכל בעל נפש יחמיר על עצמו והרי זה משובח. ואולם פולוס מזהיר אותם שאסור להם ולכל הגוים לשמור את התורה ואסור להם להחמיר על עצמן וכמו שמבאר דבריו להלן בס' ה' 7-1, כי אם ימולו ויחפשו צדקת המצות כל המוסיף גורע מראים בזה חסרון אמונה להושע בצדקת המשיח ועל כן לא יועיל להם המשיח עוד כי יגזרו מן החסד. גם ידע פאול ברוח קדשו ועל ידי חזונותיו (ב' קורינתים י"ב) כי בעבור שהוא שליח לגוים צריך לכבד משמרתו וגם הוא פטור מן התורה ונעשה חפשי ממנה (א' קורינת' ט' 1, 19) בעבור טובת הגוים כי אם הגוים יראו את פולוס שומר התורה והמצוה אז ירצו ללכת בדרכיו ולחפש צדקת המצות ויגמלו להם רעה כי המשיח לא יועיל להם, על כן הוכרח גם הוא על פי הרוח להיות חפשי מן התורה בהיותו בין הגוים בעבור שידמו לו הכל וכמו שאמר להלן ד' 12 היו כמני כי גם אני כמוכם.

¹ *The Hebrew New Testament of the British and Foreign Bible Society: A Contribution to Hebrew Philology* (Leipzig, Dörffling & Franke, 1883), p. 31. Did the “we” in Delitzsch’s statement include any Jews? Regardless, the artificial renderings in his Hebrew New Testament, among its other problems, make the work practically useless for today’s readers. Those interested will be better served studying the newer Modern Hebrew translation, available for free online at www.biblesocietyinIsrael.com. See the brief but helpful history of Hebrew New Testament translation there as well.

² Delitzsch, a German Lutheran, likely drew from Luther’s early criticisms of the Church’s mistreatment of Jews as well as the Reformer’s belief that, if evangelized properly using Scripture, at least some Jews would be saved.

³ I remind the reader that the concept of a “new Torah” is foreign to the Scriptures, and should not be confused with the term *b’rit hadashah* (ברית חדשה), popularly translated “new covenant.” For the important distinction between the terms “covenant” and “Torah” see Tim Hegg, *The Letter Writer*, p. 213-232, esp. p. 217-219.

⁴ Indeed, the assertion that Jesus was a Torah observant Pharisee was made by 19th century German Jews who had no interest in embracing claims to his divinity or messiahship. Rather, this portrait of a “historical” Jewish Jesus was used by early Reform Jews as ammunition against a mistaken Christian Church and to champion an authentic “Judaism.”

⁵ I am grateful for the efforts of Jorge Quiñónez (www.afii.org/jorge.htm) to make these texts available online, and for his corrective comments concerning an earlier draft of this article.

⁶ For example: Keren Ahvah Meshihit in Israel; First Fruits of Zion in the United States.

⁷ Paul Phillip Levertoff (1878-1954), Joachim Biesenthal (1800-1886), and Jechiel Zebi Lichtenstein (1831-1912).

⁸ In their move to market some of these works, First Fruits of Zion resolved the conflict between their own mission of Torah apologetics and the great diversity of opinion among these revered Jewish scholars by forming a subsidiary publishing arm whose focus would be limited to “resurrecting the voices of Messianic luminaries and bringing back forgotten Messianic texts of the past.” (Vine of David White Paper: The Vision of Vine of David, p. 1-2. Available online at <http://vineofDavid.org/vision/index.html>)

⁹ London, 1907.

¹⁰ *Midrash Shoher Tov* is a late medieval rabbinic *midrash* on the book of Psalms.

¹¹ Though insisting that Paul himself was exempt from Torah observance for the good of the Gentiles, in his comments on Galatians 3 Lichtenstein yet affirms that “it is necessary for Jews to observe the Torah, since it was laid upon them back in ancient times from the mouth of Hashem, who says in the Torah, ‘*an everlasting statute for your generations.*’ They are not free to abolish it, for the Messiah did not abolish it, neither the Apostles, nor the congregations of believing Jews...”

¹² B. Sanhedrin 29a

¹³ Unfortunately, it did not occur to Lichtenstein that the Galatian Gentiles’ desire to walk in Torah, which he rightly acknowledged, was indeed motivated by the Ruach HaKodesh. His assumption was that this inclination to delight in the Torah of HaShem (Psalm 1:2, Romans 7:22, etc...), was somehow mistaken and to be discouraged at every turn.