
FAQ

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Noahide Laws

J.K. McKee revised 13 August, 2019

I have been told by some Messianics that the only commandments that Gentiles are supposed to follow are the seven Noahide laws. I have then been told by other Messianics that the seven Noahide laws are an invention of later Judaism, and were not from the Biblical period. Can you please help me with this?

The following is a brief description of “Noahides” as provided by the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*:

“non-Jews who observe the seven laws that apply to the descendants of Noah (namely, all peoples). According to rabbinic authorities, these include the following prohibitions: idolatry, adultery and incest, bloodshed, blasphemy, robbery, social injustice, and eating the flesh of a limb cut from a living animal (T. Abodah Zarah 8:4-8).”¹

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 (cf. Ephesians 2:11-13; Galatians 6:16; et. al.). As the Torah itself communicates to Ancient Israel, “Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 31:10). Applied today, this would seem to mean that non-Jewish Believers should be directed from the Torah relatively the same as Jewish Believers, pending a few nominal differences.² 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.³

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 Messianic Jews we know 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

¹ “Noahides,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 456.

² 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.

³ Consult the article “Approaching One Law Controversies: Sorting Through the Legalism” by J.K. McKee, for a discussion of various passages that somehow speak of “one law,” “one statute,” etc., and the debates present surrounding them in today’s broad Messianic movement.

affecting the *b'nai Noah* or children of Noah, derived from Genesis 9. 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 animal⁴

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.⁵ But more problematic for those Messianic Jews who might want to view non-Jewish Believers only being some kind of “Noahides,” 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;⁶ *t.Avodah Zarah* 8:4⁷), and as David Instone-Brewer points out, “The two versions of the list in *Jubilees* and in later rabbinic texts have so little in common that we cannot know what this list contained in the first century or even if such a list existed.”⁸

⁴ Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), pp 376-377.

⁵ 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 editor’s commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* for more information.

⁶ “And 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).

⁷ “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).

⁸ David Instone-Brewer, “Infanticide and the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 52 No. 2 (2009):308.