

Living Torah

by Vladimir Pikman

Preamble

The statement of the Helsinki Consultation in Berlin in 2012 says that the Torah is dynamic reality both multifaceted and paradoxical. Along those lines, my interaction with Boris Balter in preparing this paper was a very enriching enterprise. I have found our views to be not contradictory but rather complementary in emphasizing the multifaceted and paradoxical dynamic reality that is the Torah. I have chosen to develop the structure of my argument to be similar to Boris Balter's in order to more vividly bring out this complementary nature.

Introduction

The aim of my paper is to show how Messianic Jews relate to the teachings of Yeshua on religious observance. While the Torah is and signifies more than just a number of commandments in the Jewish worldview, it of course not only has implications for our life but also applications to it. Clearly, the modern messianic movement accommodates many different views regarding religious observance and the role of *mitzvot* in today's world. The spectrum of opinions is very broad, ranging from complete freedom from the law to an insistence on obeying the entire Torah within the boundaries of the contemporary Rabbinic understanding of it. In this paper I will present just one view among those belonging to that broad spectrum.¹

1. The Creative and Revelatory Role of the Torah

In the rabbinic tradition, the Torah is regarded as having played a key role in the creation of the universe, the Jewish people and humanity in general. It existed before everything else was created. God held counsel with the Torah at the creation of the world.² It was itself the creative Wisdom of God.³ The Torah as the pattern according to which the world was created is a concept both entirely Jewish and entirely Hellenistic (*logos*).⁴ In the Jewish mystic tradition, the Torah is the initial plan of the universe. The universe and the Torah are unrepeatable. In this sense, the Torah holds key significance for both the world's existence and its ongoing change. God uses the Torah to sustain and to change the world.

¹ It would be wrong to claim that we are presenting the view or the views of the messianic movement. It is also not my aim here to introduce a comparative messianic theology in this regard, a subject that has been treated of late in various bodies of research, e.g., Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*, Studies in Messianic Jewish Theology (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2009), Stefanie Pfister, *Messianische Juden in Deutschland: Eine Historische Und Religionssoziologische Untersuchung*, *Dortmunder Beiträge Zu Theologie Und Religionspädagogik* (Berlin: Lit-Verl., 2008), etc.

² The Torah existed before the universe (cf. b.Shabbat 88b, b.Pesach 54a). It is older than the world, for it existed either 947 generations (e.g. b.Zebahim 116a) or 2,000 years (Gen. R. viii., and parallels) before the Creation. The Torah is the beginning, the tool and the plan of the creation (cf. Abot, Berishit.R).

³ In Sirach 24:23, the creative Wisdom is identified with the Torah, the law of Moses. Identification of creative divine Wisdom with Torah is also found in Ber.Rabbah 1:1 (cf. also Philo, *On the Making of the World* 17-20; m. Avot 3:14). A correspondence between Wisdom and Torah is also drawn in calling the Torah "God's daughter" (b.Sanh. 101a).

⁴ In Hellenism, we find the hidden law governing the whole universe to be divine reason, *logos*; and the moral task of humanity is to live a life of conformity with this divine reason, which is the law of ethics as well as the law of nature. See Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 35-36.

Such rabbinic views find their roots in the Bible (cf. Ps 119:91, 93), relating the Torah to the creative “Word” of God (cf. Ps 33:6) and to the divine “Wisdom” (cf. Prov 8:22-31). They are also supported by the teachings of Yeshua connecting the Torah with the existence and sustenance of “heaven and earth,” e.g., when he says, “... *until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place.*” (cf. Matt 5:18; Luke 16:17). We can find similar indications in the New Testament that the “word of God” created the world that it now keeps (cf. Heb 11:3; 2 Pet 3:5-7).

What is said here about the Torah fully corresponds to what we know about Yeshua. He is described as the pre-existent creator of the universe, who sustains and changes it (cf. John 1:1-3, 14; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:2-3; Rev 2:8; 3:14). Therefore, Yeshua is the Torah in person. He is the Torah incarnate.⁵

Although we can see in the classical Jewish writings a number of the revelatory meanings assigned to this word,⁶ the Torah, according to common Jewish understanding, is the revelation Moses received at Sinai that was passed on through the generations of sages to follow (cf. m.Avoth 1:1). The Jewish worldview seems to assign the Torah an even broader revelatory meaning, however. In this broader revelatory sense, the Torah is an expression of God’s heart and intention as revealed to humanity.⁷ It can also be seen as an incarnation of a certain part of the divine essence and as the way of life that gives people the very goal of their existence, pointing the way to the Almighty.⁸ Clearly, such a Torah, in its entirety, was too great for people to comprehend (cf. Ps 119:18, 27, 96). Therefore, God revealed the Torah to people in part, in a way accessible for them, communicating the rest over time as people increased in maturity (Cf. Heb 1:1-2; 10:1).⁹ In Hebrews 1:1-2, it is stated: “*After God spoke*

⁵ The fact that mainstream Judaism came to identify God’s Wisdom, his assistant at the creation of the world, with the Torah, while believers in Jesus identified it with Jesus, the incarnate Word/Wisdom, explains why Jesus came to play much the same functional role in Christian belief as the Torah does in Jewish. Ibid., 229-30.

⁶ In the classical Jewish writings, we can see a number of the revelatory meanings assigned to this word, including a scroll with divinely revealed words, a revealed corpus of doctrine, an act of “studying” or “teaching” when one “does Torah,” the “written Torah” and the “oral Torah,” a source of salvation. Cf. Jacob Neusner, “Torah in Judaism,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, and William Scott Green (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2005), 3:1448.

⁷ Jacob Neusner writes: “Every detail of Judaism at hand exhibits essentially the same point of insistence, captured in the simple notion of the Torah as the generative symbol, the total, exhaustive expression of the system as a whole. That is why the definitive ritual of Rabbinic Judaism consisted in studying the Torah, and that is why the definitive myth explained that one who studied Torah would become holy, like Moses ‘our rabbi,’ and like God, in whose image humanity was made and whose Torah provided the plan and the model for what God wanted of a humanity created in his image.” Ibid.

⁸ E.g., according to Adin Steinsaltz, the Torah is the essence of the divine revelation. It is heavenly wisdom itself. It concentrates within itself different aspects of the divine wisdom. It is an incarnation of a certain part of the divine essence. Torah is an expression of the divine will. Torah is the way of life, giving people the goal of their existence that shows the path to the Almighty. See Adin Steinsaltz, *Roza O TrinadiSAti Lepestkakh* (Moskva: In-t izucheniia iudaizma v SNG, 1995).

⁹ According to Moses Maimonides, “The Torah speaks according to the language of man,” that is to say, expressions, which can easily be comprehended and understood by all, are applied to the Creator. ... It is the object of the Torah to serve as a guide for the instruction of the young, of women, and of the common people; and as all these are incapable of comprehending the true sense of the words, tradition was considered sufficient to convey all truths which were to be established. ... “When a man attains perfection and arrives at a knowledge of the ‘Secrets of the Law,’ either through the assistance of a teacher or by self-instruction, being led by the understanding of one part to the study of the other, he will belong to those who faithfully believe in the true principles, either because of conclusive proof, where proof is possible, or by forcible arguments, where argument is admissible; he will have a true notion of those things which he previously received in similes and metaphors,

long ago in various portions and in various ways to our ancestors through the prophets, in these last days he has spoken to us in a son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he created the world.” The Torah has a dynamic nature and is revealed to different people in different ways according to their maturity and personal ability to comprehend it.¹⁰ It includes human perfection and both “religious” and “secular” scholarship.¹¹ The elevated role of the sages in the Torah’s revelation, indicating that a saying falls into the category of Torah if a sage declares it as Torah, also suggests this revelation to be ongoing and progressive.¹²

Concerning the Torah given at Sinai, the Messiah Yeshua said, “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of your hard hearts, but from the beginning it was not this way*” (Matt 19:8, cf. also Mark 10:5), indicating that at least some parts of the Torah were of lower standards due to human weakness and inability to receive higher standards. Thus, the revelation given at Mount Sinai was only a part of the whole Torah in its broader sense. It was not perfect and not complete. It had to be supplemented and clarified. The greatest and most crucial advances in the Torah’s revelation were made by Yeshua, the Torah incarnate. He greatly elevated the standards we see in the revelation given at Sinai (cf. Matthew 5; Hebrews 1).

2. The National and Personal Role of the Torah

The Torah’s universal and creative character automatically presupposes her importance and relevance for the entirety of humanity on all levels of social and personal life, which the Torah is said to have been initially involved in establishing. Representing the heart and intention of God toward humanity, the Torah holds out different aspects for different groups of people and even individuals. God has been revealing His Wisdom to all peoples in different ways that should be comprehensible for them (cf. Rom 1:18-32).

Although this paper deals with the Jewish “Torah,” the Torah in the broader sense discussed above existed even before the creation of the Jewish nation. While the Torah given at Mount Sinai and in the desert was specifically given to the nation of Israel, we can nevertheless see

and he will fully understand their sense.” Moses Maimonides and translated by M. Friedländer, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 2d ed. (London, New York.: G. Routledge & sons; E. P. Dutton & co., 1904).

¹⁰ The Torah uses commonplace language (cf. b.Berachot. 31b); e.g., according to Adin Steinsaltz, Torah is not the frozen form of an immovable world. It is the dynamic plan of a constantly changing reality that points toward unity with the Almighty. It is an expression of the divine wisdom that is expressed in comprehensible forms. Comprehending the Torah with your entire mind and all your feelings means an encounter with God. It can reveal itself to each person from different perspectives – abstract philosophy and rational logic, the emotional side and simply as a set of commandments (Steinsaltz) .

¹¹ E.g., according to Moses Maimonides, “Consequently, he who wishes to attain human perfection must therefore first study Logic, next the various branches of Mathematics in their proper order, then Physics, and lastly Metaphysics” (Maimonides and Friedländer) .

¹² E.g., Jacob Neusner writes concerning the Traktat Abot: “But what defines and delimits Torah? It is the sage himself. So we may simply state the tractate’s definition of Torah: Torah is what a sage learns. ... At issue in Abot is not the Torah, but the authority of the sage. It is that standing that transforms a saying into a Torah-saying, or to state matters more appropriately, that places a saying into the classification of the Torah. Abot, then, stands as the first document of the doctrine that the sage embodies the Torah and is a holy man, like Moses ‘our rabbi’ in the likeness and image of God. The beginning is to claim that a saying falls into the category of Torah if a sage says it as Torah. The end will be to view the sage himself as Torah incarnate.” Neusner, 3:1453-54.

some aspects of it related to other nations (e.g., the rights and responsibilities of *gerim*, foreigners, etc.).

As the Torah was first more explicitly given on Mount Sinai, the Jewish tradition says that it was given in a way that all nations could understand it.¹³ While we cannot find sufficient evidence either in the Bible or within Jewish worldview that all the nations will keep the Torah of Israel, it was nonetheless not supposed to remain simply within Israel but rather to be proclaimed to all peoples through the Jewish people (cf. Isa 2:3). Yeshua, perfectly fulfilling this, Israel's role, came to bring the light of the Torah not just to the nation of Israel but also beyond it to other nations. In the apostolic council recorded in Acts 15, the apostles, while not imposing the Torah on believers from other nations, seem to exhort those from the nations to get instructed in the Torah (cf. Acts 15:21). Paul emphasises the role of the Torah for every believer in Yeshua (2 Tim 3:15-17). Therefore, the Torah of Israel has a significant role both for the Jewish community and for humanity in general, probably because it contains some essential parts of the divine Wisdom and His universal standards.

At the same time, the Torah is to be integrated and personalised within the heart and life of every person, beginning with the Jewish people (cf. Deut 6:5-6; 11:18; Ps 1:2; 37:31; 40:8; 119:11, 97; Prov 2:10-11). We can see this in the various biblical life stories of the righteous people. The "New Covenant" is to bring to its perfection the internalisation of the Torah that is related to the righteousness and absolute knowledge of God (cf. Jer 31:31-34). With the help of the Holy Spirit, direct divine revelations should become accessible to all people (cf. Joel 2:28-29/HB 3:1-2). This was emphasised and successfully initiated by Yeshua through the sending of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:26; 16:13; Acts 2; 1 Cor 2:10-13; 1 John 2:20, 27).¹⁴

3. The Eschatological Role of the Torah

The Torah, which finds her fullness in the Messiah, will be perfectly re-established in the new world of the Messiah's reign. As discussed above in regards to the Jewish people, while this encompasses the Torah given at Sinai, the standards will be elevated to the divine fullness. The world will be completely healed of its imperfection and its spiritual devastation – the consequences of humanity not living according to the particular divine revelations they have received. The world will be made perfect according to the perfect Torah that lays at its foundation. The Torah will fill the entire world and will transform the Jewish people and the whole of humanity. It will be real on both the communal and the personal level. (Cf. Isa 2:3-4; 11:9; 30:26; 49:6; 35:8-10; 51:4; Mic 4:1-3; Hab 2:14.)

The above-mentioned integration of the Torah into human hearts, initiated by Yeshua, will reach its fullness at the time of his return, with the Holy Spirit being poured out upon everyone (cf. Zech 12:10; Joel 2:28-29).

The eschatological restoration and the wellbeing of Israel in the Messiah's reign are related to completely and wholeheartedly living out the Torah of Moses (cf. Deut 30:1-10; Eze 11:19; 36:27; 37:24; Rev 22:14).

4. The Role of Jewish *Mitzvot*

As we have already been able to see, the universal Torah of God in its broader sense and the Torah of Moses in particular as a constituent part of the universal Torah are both essential for

¹³ Torah was spoken at Sinai in 70 languages for all to understand (cf. b.Shabbat 88b; Shemot R. 5:9).

¹⁴ Such actions on the part of Yeshua provide more evidence that he is Wisdom/Torah incarnate (cf. Prov 1:23).

the world and its changes according to the divine will and plan that the Torah represents. The Torah plays a key role for the perfection and wellbeing of humanity both now and in the *eschaton*. Yeshua, far from dismissing this place and role of the Torah, elevates it.

Having said all this, it is important to emphasise that the Torah does contain a number of commandments that correspond to the Torah's universal role and purpose. It would probably be impossible to require people to live out the universal Torah, even in its entire revelation, without arranging it into a set of comprehensible and doable commandments. Some of them are universal while others are distinctly given to the Jewish people. All of them are constituent parts of the whole and serve the goal of the entire Torah.

Performing each of the Jewish *mitzvot* (commandments) contributes to the performing of the whole Torah and to fulfilling its purpose of establishing this world in the way God wants it to be. Announcing his kingship, Yeshua gave his disciples the commission to teach everybody to observe his commandments, which is related to the advancement of his kingdom toward the *eschaton* (cf. Matt 28:20). By fulfilling a *mitzvah*, a person works together with God in healing/perfecting this world and so participates in the eschatological divine plan and purpose.¹⁵

Because the Torah represents the will and heart of God, according to the Jewish worldview, it is possible to assume that God himself studies,¹⁶ teaches¹⁷ and observes¹⁸ *mitzvot* that he reveals to the Jewish people and to all humanity.¹⁹ People are expected to grow in their comprehension of the Torah and in living it out accordingly. In fact, we can only comprehend the Torah properly by living it out (cf. James 1:22-25; 1 Cor 8:1-3; 1 Tim 1:5-7; 6:3-4).²⁰ The level at which we live according to the divine will and eschatological purpose, the level of our

¹⁵ In different variations, though, the Jewish people commonly believe that the performing of *mitzvot* is both ethically and ritually a means of *tikkun olam*, helping to perfect or heal the world. Such belief often goes even further to declare that the performance of more *mitzvot* will hasten the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic Age. The rabbis teach that we are never alone in doing a holy deed because we partner with God in the redemption of the world. Cf. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Rejesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Sydney: Strand Publishing, 2009), 152-53.

¹⁶ God Himself is said to be involved in studying the Torah. Cf. b.Abod.Zar. 3b: And has not R. Judah said Rab said, "The day is made up of twelve hours. In the first three the Holy One, blessed be He, goes into session and engages in study of the Torah." Cf. Targum Jonathan on Deut 32:4 Bamidbar R. on Num 19:7: "When Moses ascended into heaven he heard the voice of the Holy One, blessed be He, as He sat studying the section dealing with the Red Heifer."

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. Bereshit R. 49:2: "Not a day passes in which the Holy One, blessed be He, does not teach a new law (*halachah*) in the heavenly Court."

¹⁸ God Himself does the *mitzvot* that He commands Israel to observe, e.g., Shemot R. 30:9: "The ways of God differ from those of man; whereas man directs others to do a thing whilst he does nothing, God only tells Israel to do and observe those things which He himself does."

¹⁹ "Wie er sich liebend und sinnend in seine Thora vertieft, so erfüllt er ihre Satzungen. Denn die Thora ist die der Tiefe seines Wesens entstiegene Weisheit, sein Abbild, mit dem er in ewiger Liebesgemeinschaft lebt, welches darum auch sein eigenes göttliches Leben normiert." (Translation: "Just as he enters into the depths of his Torah with love and passion, so he carries out its commandments; for the Torah is the wisdom welling up from the depths of his being, his image, with which he lives in the eternal bond of love and that hence normalizes his very divine existence.") Ferdinand Wilhelm Weber, *Jüdische Theologie Auf Grund Des Talmud Und Verwandter Schriften Gemeinfasslich Dargestellt*, 2. verb. Aufl ed. (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1897), 18.

²⁰ "From within his own deed, man as well as nation hears the voice of God." Martin Buber and Nahum Norbert Glatzer, *On Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1967), 112.

participation in the *tikkun olam* and the level of our relationship to God are directly related to the ongoing life of the Torah. Yeshua emphasised this by saying, “*So anyone who breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever obeys them and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt 5:19; cf. also James 2:10-11; Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42). In a way that was very familiar to his listeners, Yeshua here vividly contrasts “breaking” and its consequential “will be called least” with “doing” and its consequential “will be called great” in the kingdom of heaven. By saying this, he leaves no doubts about the role of practical obedience both for the present and the future. Such obedience to the dynamic and progressive divine revelation is very common in his teaching. Yeshua requests his followers to keep his commandments as an essential part of believing in him, loving him and experiencing the love of God (cf. Luke 6:46; John 14:15, 21; 15:10, 14). He expects people not just to listen to God’s words or his words but also to do what is expected within those words (cf. Mat 7:24; Luke 11:28). According to the apostolic teachings, performing the commandments is evidence that a person knows and loves God (cf. 1 John 2:3; 3:21-22, 24; 5:2). One of the strongest exhortations in this regard is found in James 1:22-25: “*But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was. But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out— he will be blessed in what he does.*” Thus it seems that while studying and teaching the Torah in its dynamic development and revelation is very important, without living out the *mitzvot* that has been revealed to us, it all loses its meaning.

By practicing the commandments we derive from the dynamic and progressively revealed Torah, we unite ourselves with God in his heart, his purpose and his *tikkun olam*, starting at the present and moving toward the glorious coming kingdom of Yeshua; and in this, the Jewish *mitzvot* give us the chance to do so specifically as Jews.