

The ‘Dividing Wall’” in Ephesians 2:14: What is it? Who made it? How was it broken down?

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The Dividing Wall of Hostility

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Introduction

Initially, my interest in the “dividing wall” spoken of by Paul in [Eph 2:14](#) centered on the place of the Torah in the life of the Messianic believer.^[1] Since [Eph 2:14-15](#) is an often used text by those who hold that Yeshua abolished the Mosaic Torah by His death, I felt it warranted a concerted study.

Recently I have heard teaching among Messianic groups that brought this text to mind once again. This teaching attempts to move the Messianic communities beyond the initial “vision” of the movement to a strategic “mission” of identity and purpose. To put it simply, the call has been issued to the Messianic community at large to move beyond the initial phase of recovering the Jewish roots of our faith and increasing our love for Israel. This call admonishes us to go further by living an authentic Jewish life that *would mark us as distinct in culture from both the non-believing Jewish community as well as from the non-Jewish Christian church*. “If one simply wants to enjoy the festivals and give support to Israel, this can be done within many Christian churches today,” so the teaching goes. “But what the Messianic community needs today are Messianic believers who are willing to stand as distinct from both the unbelieving Jewish community and the non-Messianic Christian church—to boldly embrace a Messianic-Jewish culture which is new and distinct—a third culture.”^[2] The emphasis is placed upon “Jewish,” not upon Torah.

My own reaction to this teaching was varied. Some of what I heard rang true to me. I too have encouraged Messianic believers (both Jew and non-Jew) to take upon themselves a Torah lifestyle and be recognized as those who, in practical ways, live in the footsteps of Messiah. But a great deal of what I heard caused me no small alarm. I am concerned not only that this teaching may be divisive, but that it also may be contrary to Scripture. At the least it deserves a fuller discussion and a thorough investigation. Perhaps the present paper will advance us in that direction.

“Community” — What Does it Look Like from God’s Perspective?

This paper is not about “community” *per se*, but it is important for us to understand at least one key issue with regard to a biblical perspective of community. We need to mark the difference between a Hebrew view of community, and that of the Greek. For the Greek, “community” may exist purely within the realm of ideas. That is to say, agreement upon an essential body of truths or ideas from a purely philosophical perspective is enough to constitute “community.” The idea that we have true community with people we’ve never met, simply because we all “believe” the same thing, is in harmony with this Greek mindset.

In contrast, the Hebrew perspective of community inevitably entails *actual life involvement*. Paul, from His Hebrew perspective, refers to the “church” (ἐκκλησία) in terms usually reserved for the “family.”^[3] We speak to one another, we exhort each other, we put up with one another. We bear the burdens of one another, and by so doing, we fulfill the Torah of Messiah.^[4] James likewise assumes that the commands he gives are fulfilled within a community that weeps and rejoices together, prays together, where elders are called when one is sick.^[5]

This is not to negate the concept that the body of Messiah consists of all believers throughout the ages, and that there is among these a sense of true unity, a unity based upon the indwelling Ruach HaKodesh. *But the commands of the Scriptures, both the Tanakh and the Apostolic Writings, are given to be lived out in actual life-to-life contexts, not in the ethereal world of philosophy.* I cannot, on the one hand, affirm the essential unity of the body of Messiah while on the other hand separate from those in that body on the basis of differing cultures. It is both dangerous and in error to encourage Messianic believers to adopt a lifestyle which, for its very maintenance, requires a practical, life-separation between Jews and Gentiles within the body of Messiah. The Apostolic message (which was based upon the present fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that “in your seed all the *nations* of the earth shall be blessed”) commanded the followers of Yeshua to participate in the filling up of Isaiah’s prophecy: “... My house will be called a house of prayer *for all the nations*” (Is 56:7).

Here, then, is my “bottom line”: I agree that Messianic believers should be encouraged to accept the mitzvot of the Torah and live a Torah lifestyle.^[6] But I believe the Scriptures command us to do this *together as a community of Jews and non-Jews*. To suggest that Jews have an obligation to Torah which Gentiles do not is to suggest something foreign to the thrust of the Prophets and the Apostles. We dare not take that which God has given to all His people, and relegate it to a select group on the basis of the non-biblical teaching of “unique callings.” But this means we will have to die to ourselves at times, as we bear with those who not only disagree with us, but are even at times antagonistic toward us. There is nothing more difficult than “dying daily,” yet this is the life to which we are called.

Surely this very issue was a hotly contested one in the 1st Century Messianic community. The “influencers” that Paul dealt with in Galatians and 2 Corinthians (among other of the Epistles) have, I think, been often misrepresented. There is very little evidence (if any at all) that “salvation by works” was a major tenant of the 1st Century Judaisms.^[7] More likely, the primary issue which raged among the Messianic communities of Paul’s day was whether or not God intended to bless the Gentiles *as a separate community or as part of the Jewish community*. It is to this issue I believe Eph 2:14-16 (as well as many other texts) speaks.

Ephesians 2:14-15 — The Context

In the second chapter of Ephesians the Apostle is arguing one of the central themes of his theology,

namely, the oneness of Jew and Gentile as united in Messiah. That the Gentiles should be blessed within the scope of the Abrahamic promise was never questioned. What had been left a mystery was the exact manner in which the blessing would come upon the nations, and this was revealed to the Apostles and especially to Paul.[8] The method of blessing the Gentiles is emphasized by the *συν* (*sun*, “with”) prefixes of 2:19 and 3:6, *συμπολίται, συνκληρονόμα, σύσσωμα, συμμέτοχα* (fellow-citizens, fellow-heirs, fellow-members, fellow-partakers)—they would be blessed, not in a separate community, nor through proselytizing, but by being grafted into the ancient community of God—the two would be wedded into one[9] and thus mutually share the blessings of God.

This teaching of the ingrafting of the Gentiles[10] was perhaps the most difficult Apostolic doctrine for the Jewish believers to accept. For centuries the Jewish nation had borne her distinction from the nations[11] and welcomed proselytes who not only embraced the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but willingly “became Jews.” The apostolic teaching, however, denied that such was ever necessary. Gentile believers were to be accepted as full citizens within the believing community without undergoing the ritual of a proselyte.[12]

Clearly, this issue brought division within the early emerging Church. Some apparently felt that a non-Jew had fewer privileges within the community than a Jew[13], some considered full-fledged salvation impossible apart from becoming a proselyte[14], and still others refused to fellowship in fullness with the non-Jews of The Way.[15] For Paul, each of these perspectives was ultimately a “different gospel,” since union with Messiah was the sole basis of entrance and privilege within the family of God, and this union was a matter of grace, not of the works of the Torah. All members had the same salvific position before the Father, because all members were in Messiah. Any activity or *halakah* that taught something different than this was “anathema.”[16]

The text before us centers upon this unification of Jew and Gentile in Messiah, but does so from the perspective of the cross. It is the sacrificial death of Messiah that has established the means of unity, for it was by His death that the enmity between Jew and Gentile was destroyed.[17] Thus, for Paul it is clear that the cross not only made atonement for sin, but it also established the basis for blessing the Gentiles[18] by removing all the obstacles to unity with the chosen people. But it did this, not by raising the Gentiles to the level of the Jews, for both Jew and Gentile, apart from union with Messiah, are excluded from the blessing of God.[19] Therefore, placement in the kingdom is a matter of God’s grace and leaves no room for anyone to boast, even the Jew.[20] Furthermore, the external labels given by the established, religious leaders are of no real consequence, for God is more interested in the heart than in one’s pedigree.[21] And God accepts into His family those whose sins have been forgiven by the death of Messiah.[22] The Gentiles have been “brought near” because the dividing wall that prohibited them from coming near has been broken down through the cross. If God the Father has accepted all who come by faith in Yeshua, then clearly the children ought also to accept each other.

Ephesians 2:14-15

The NASB translates [Ephesians 2:14-15](#):



For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.

The other modern translations give the same perspective:

For He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and

regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, [NIV]

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, [NRSV]

For he is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the barrier of enmity which separated them; for he annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace. [REB]

For he himself is our shalom—he has made us both one and has broken down the m’chitzah which divided us by destroying in his own body the enmity occasioned by the Torah, with its commands set forth in the form of ordinances. He did this in order to create in union with himself from the two groups a single new humanity and thus make shalom, [Jewish New Testament]

For it is he who is the maker of peace between us, he who has made us both one, tearing down as he did the barrier formed by the dividing wall which separated us, and wiping out in his own mortal nature that which wrought hostility, the law with its commandments—consisting as it did in precise enactments—so that he might recreate in himself the two, as one new man, thus making peace, [Cassurer, God’s New Covenant: A NT Translation]

Taken at face value, these translations present the text as a pointed assertion by the apostle Paul that Messiah abolished the Mosaic Torah by His sacrificial death, and that the Torah was the instrument of hostility that erected a dividing wall between Jew and Gentile.[23] The difficulty with such a reading is twofold: first, it contradicts the clear teaching of Yeshua Himself that He did not abolish[24] the written Torah,[25] and secondly, the written Torah never demanded a wall between Jew and Gentile.[26]

Notes on the Text Itself

The opening line of Eph 2:14 makes the remarkable statement that Yeshua “broke down” the dividing wall. The Greek term translated “broke down” is λύω (*luo*) which can mean “to loose,” “untie,” “set free,” “break up,” “destroy,” “bring to an end,” “abolish,” or “do away with.”[27] It is used of demolition of buildings, as in the famous saying of Yeshua regarding the Temple (John 2:19) or of the destruction of the ship on which Paul was traveling (Acts 27:41). BDAG list our text under the heading “break up,” “destroy,” “tear down.” Ephesians 2:16 further defines the use of λύω (*luo*) by adding ἀποκτείνας τὴν ἔχθραν ἐν αὐτῷ, “having put to death the enmity in (by) him (it).” Contextually, the abolishing action is viewed as final—as a death. Thus, the barrier is done away with forever.[28]

Καταργέω (*katargeō*), the term translated “abolishing” (NASB), describing what Yeshua did to the “enmity” between Jew and Gentile, usually means “to render void,” “make ineffective, powerless,” “abolish,” “wipe out,” or “set aside,” and is used in the context of rendering laws or edicts of no more effect.[29] It may have been in the mind of the Apostle that while the dividing wall was destroyed (*luo*), the enmity found in the “law of commandments contained in ordinances” was simply rendered ineffective, though still existing.

The object of the verb λύω (*luo*, “to destroy”) is τὸ μεσότοιχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ, “the dividing wall of the barrier.” But what is this dividing wall? μεσότοιχον (*mesotoichon*) is found only here in the Apostolic Writings and does not appear in the Lxx, so further definition must be sought outside of the biblical text. The word has been found in two inscriptions in the sense of “partition” or “barrier.”[30]

The genitive τοῦ φραγμοῦ (*tou fragmou*) is appositional: “the barrier consisting of the fence.” φραγμός (*fragmos*, “fence”) is found 3 other times in the Apostolic Writings, all with the sense of “fence.”[31] The Lxx

uses the term with this same meaning. Note [Sirach 36:25](#), “Where there is no hedge, a vineyard is plundered; where there is no wife, a man wanders about in misery.”



Some commentators have assumed the barrier spoken of in our text is the wall which separated the Gentile and Jewish courts in the Temple.^[32] It is true that Josephus uses the phrase ὁ μέσος τοῖχος (“the middle wall”) to describe the inner wall of the Temple^[33], but the balustrade preventing Gentiles and unclean-Israelites from proceeding into the court of the Jews was never so designated, nor is it labeled φραγμός (*fragmos*) by any ancient writer. Furthermore, in the inscription engraved on the balustrade itself, the wall is referred to by a different term:

No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade (δρυφάκτου, drufaktou) around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.^[34]

If Paul had intended his readers to understand the retaining wall of the Temple which separated Gentile from Jew to be what Messiah destroyed, he would have used the common Greek term, something he doubtlessly had seen time and time again as he entered the Temple. Josephus calls the separating wall in the Temple court δρυφάκτος λιθίνος (*drufaktos lithinos*) “fence of stone,” employing the same term used in the inscription, and describes the wall as three cubits high (1.5 meters; 4.5 feet) with gates.^[35] Philo also calls the wall δρυφάκτος^[36] (*drufaktos*) not μεσότοιχον (*mesotoichon*) or φραγμός (*fragmos*), the words of our text. The Mishnah and Bavli refer to the balustrade by the term סורג (*soreg*)^[37], “lattice-work fence.” As Barth writes:

If only in [Eph 2:14](#) one of the technical names of the temple wall, dryphakto lithinos or soreg, had been used! Then it would be certain that the balustrade or the higher wall was meant. But Paul uses a Greek formulation (mesotoichon tou phragmou) which suggests that his imagery may be taken from someplace else.^[38]



Moreover, the aorist participle λύσας (from *lyo*, “having broken down”), as well as the context, would require that the destruction had already taken place. But if Pauline authorship of Ephesians is maintained, this is impossible. It seems unlikely that Paul would teach the present reality of peace between Jew and Gentile on the basis of Messiah’s having abolished the separating wall in the Temple if, in fact, it were still standing!

Important for our study is the fact that the verb περιφράσσειν, (*perifrassein*) “to fence about” (the verbal root related to the noun φραγμός, *fragmos* “wall” used in [Eph 2:14](#)), is found in the *Epistle of Aristeas* to refer to the oral Torah as the fence around the Law which effects separation between Jew and non-Jew.



‘our lawgiver . . . fenced us about [περιφράσσειν] with impenetrable palisades and with walls of iron to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations, remaining pure in body and in spirit’ (139) and ‘so that we should be polluted by none nor be infected with perversions by associating with worthless persons, he has fenced us about [περιφράσσειν] on all sides with prescribed purifications in matters of food and drink and touch and hearing and sight’ (142)^[39]

The Rabbinic injunction regarding a fence around the Law is common, as in *Abot*:

. . . They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence [גזירות, גזירות in the Prayerbook] round the Law.^[40]

R. Akiba said, *Jesting and levity habituate [a man] to lewdness. [The] Tradition is a fence to the Law; tithes are a fence to riches; vows are a fence to abstinence; a fence to wisdom is silence.*[41]

Furthermore, the Qumran covenantors referred to Rabbinic interpreters of the Torah by the term “builders of the wall” (בּוֹנֵי הַחֵיִץ, *bonei hacheitz*).[42] As far as they were concerned, God had turned His anger toward these “builders”: “But ... because of His hatred for the builders of the wall His anger is kindled.”[43]

What was the Dividing Wall?

From these brief notes we may summarize: First, the wall spoken of by Paul in [Eph 2:14](#) was not the dividing wall in the 2nd Temple, because (a) it was still standing at the time Paul wrote Ephesians, and (b) the terminology Paul uses to describe the wall is different than the terms regularly used for the dividing wall in the Temple, terms Paul no doubt was familiar with.

Secondly, the Greek term φραγμός (*fragmos*) was used in the 1st Century to identify the oral Torah as a “wall” or “fence” around the written Torah, and the Pharisees as “builders of the wall.”

Thirdly, aspects of the oral Torah, not the written Torah, laid the foundation for a strict separation between Jew and non-Jew.

What I am suggesting is simply that the dividing wall that was abolished by Messiah was none other than those Rabbinic laws which had enforced a separation between Jew and Gentile in opposition to the written Torah. In fact, the Tanakh gives very clear instructions against erecting barriers to separate Israel from the nations. The foreigner who desired to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was to be welcomed into the community and treated with the same respect as was given the native born ([Ex. 22:21](#); [23:9](#); [Lev. 19:33](#), [34](#); [25:35](#); [Deut. 26:12](#)). They were to be given full participation in matters of Torah and Torah-life (Sabbath, [Ex. 23:12](#), cp. [Is. 56:3ff](#); Gleanings, [Lev. 19:10](#); Justice, [Ex. 12:49](#); [Lev. 24:22](#); Festivals, [Deut. 16:11](#), [14](#); Worship and Prayer in the Temple, [1 Ki. 8:41-43](#), cp. [2 Chron. 6:32](#), [33](#)). And the prophets pronounce judgment upon any who would neglect their God-given responsibilities to the “stranger,” on the same grounds as neglect of orphans and widows ([Ps. 94:6](#); [Is. 56:3ff](#); [Jer. 22:3](#); [Zech. 7:10](#)).

The extant Rabbinic literature is not consistent on the matter of relations between Jew and non-Jew. Clearly, it was an issue of debate in the 1st Century.[44] The practical outworking of the Rabbinic laws of purity, however, raised a strong wall of separation between the observant Jew and the non-Jew even if this was not the original intent. With the emphasis put upon purity by the Rabbis, separation from those things that rendered a person unclean was inevitable. And, when Gentiles were added to the “list” of those things that communicate uncleanness, the wall was built between Jew and Gentile.

According to oral Torah, mere contact with non-Jews could render a person unclean,[45] as well as contact with the residence of a non-Jew[46] or even with land outside the Land of Israel.[47] Contact with any object used for idolatrous worship was added to the list of what might render a person unclean.[48] Clearly, the oral Torah of the 1st Century functioned to separate Jew and Gentile in a dramatic way.



“The law of commandments in ordinances”

The Ephesian text before us helps define the dividing wall with the appositional phrase τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν, “the law of commandments in ordinances.” Did Paul use this phrase (rather than the simple ὁ νόμος, *ha nomos*, “the law”) to denote those Rabbinic laws which had, in fact, separated Jew and non-Jew?

The first thing to note is that the term δόγμα (*dogma*) is never used in the Lxx of any of the commandments, judgments, statutes, or laws of which, e.g., according to [Genesis 26:5](#), the total written Torah consists. In the Lxx δόγμα (*dogma*) normally designates the edicts of a king or court.[\[49\]](#) Some have concluded that the use of the word in [3 Maccabees 1:3](#) refers to the “Law of Moses,”[\[50\]](#) but an investigation of the text in no way substantiates this claim. The line in question is:

But Dositheus, known as the son of Drimylus, a Jew by birth who later changed his religion and apostatized from the ancestral traditions... (ὑστερον δε μεταβαλὼν τὰ νόμιμα καὶ τῶν πατρίων δογμάτων ἀπηλλοτριωμένο□)[51]

The phrase τῶν πατρίων δογμάτων (*ton patrion dogmaton*, literally “the dogma of the fathers”) is best understood not to refer to the Mosaic Torah but to the “traditions of the fathers,” the *halakah* of the community. Had the written Torah been intended the phrase ὁ πατρῶν νόμος (*ha patrōn nomos*), “the ancestral Law,” found only a few verses later (1:23) would have been used.[\[52\]](#) It hardly seems warranted, then, for the Greek lexicons to list “Mosaic Law” as a meaning for the term δόγμα (*dogma*) on the basis of this single Lxx passage.[\[53\]](#)

The noun δόγμα (*dogma*) is found five times in the Apostolic Writings. In [Luke 2:1](#) and [Acts 17:7](#) it is used of Caesar’s decrees, while in [Acts 16:4](#) it refers to the Apostolic decree formulated at the Jerusalem council. The other use of the word, besides our Ephesians text, is in a sister-text, [Colossians 2:14](#). Here, as in Ephesians, the decrees (τοῖς δόγμασιν, *tois dogmasin*) are viewed as hostile (καθ’ ἡμῶν, *kath hemon*, “against us”) and are removed through Messiah’s death on the cross. Particularly significant for our study is the fact that Paul goes on in the Colossian text, on the basis of the removal of this debt consisting of “decrees,” to admonish his readers not to let others judge them in regard to “food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day” (v. 16). These were the very items which occasioned the attention of the Rabbis in their “building fences,” and which had created the separation between Jew and non-Jew! Apparently, the abolishing of these decrees ought to have rendered the Colossian believers free from submitting to man-made fences such as “do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” (v. 20) when such fences effectively set aside the direct commands of God.[\[54\]](#)

A study of the word δόγμα (*dogma*) in the Lxx and Apostolic Writings confirms that the term was used of man-made laws, and not of the God-given Torah of Sinai. We may therefore conclude that Paul adds it to his description of νόμος (nomos, “law”) in order to identify the abolished law as the legal fence of the Rabbis, particularly the parts of the oral Torah that separated Jew and Gentile and thus were at odds with the written Torah that prophesied the unity of Jew and Gentile all within the promise of blessing given to Abraham.

This does not mean that Yeshua abolished the entire oral Torah in His death on the cross. In fact, there are many instances recorded in the life of Yeshua where He gives clear allegiance to oral Torah. What follows are examples of this:

Matt. 9:14, 15 – The argument of Yeshua, in which He defends the manner in which His disciples fast, is based upon a recognized *halakah* that it is improper to fast in the presence of a bridegroom. This is not found in the written Torah. Cp. *b. Sukka* 25b; *t. Ber.* 2.10.

Matt. 10:24 – A saying of the Sages, perhaps proverbial

Matt. 12:5 – The teaching or *halakah* which states that the priests break the Sabbath but are innocent is not found in the written Torah. Cp. *b. Shabbat* 132b. For other instances where the Sabbath may be profaned, cp. *m. Ned.* 3.11 (circumcision); *m. Pesah* 6.1-2; *t. Pesah* 4.13 (Passover sacrifices).

Matt. 15:1 – Pharisees are inquiring about the disciples of Yeshua: why do they transgress the traditions of the elders by not washing their hands according to *halakah* before eating? Yeshua rebukes them, citing also their use of *korban* to “hide” their wealth from aging parents who needed their support. In both cases, it is clear that the Pharisees consider the *halakah*, based on oral Torah, as binding. Cf. *m. Hag.* 2.5; *b. Sabb.* 13b-14a; *y. Sabb.* 1.3d; *b. Yoma* 87a.

Matt. 15:36 – There is nothing in the written Torah about giving thanks *before* eating. Saying the *berakah* before eating is part of the oral Torah.

Matt. 22:40 – Yeshua quotes the Shema and [Lev. 19:18](#), stating that upon these two precepts *hang* (krevmatai, *krematai*)[55] the Law and Prophets. The terminology of the Law and Prophets *hanging* from something is derived from oral Torah, cp. *m. Hagiga* 1.8; *b. Ber.* 63a.

Matt. 23:16, 17 – The Pharisees found a way to deny certain oaths (those sworn by the temple) and to allow others (those sworn by the gold of the temple), cf. *M. Nedarim* 1.3, 4;[56] cp. also *b. Tem.* 32a-33b. Yeshua argues that the Temple actually sanctifies the gold. This is not found in written Torah.

Matt. 23:23 – The matter of tithing very small amounts of produce from volunteer seedlings is not taken up in the written Torah, but is part of the oral Torah, cp. *m. Maasrot* 1.1; *b. Yoma* 83b; *b. Nidah* 5a; *b. Rosh HaShanah* 12a; *b. Shabbat* 68a.

Matt. 24:20 – The whole issue of travel on the Sabbath is defined in oral Torah, not written Torah. There are no *specific* prohibitions in the written Torah restricting travel on the Sabbath. [The prohibition of [Ex. 16:29](#) cannot mean that one is restricted to stay within his dwelling (the Hebrew has אִישׁ מִמֶּנּוּ קִוּמוֹ, “each man from his place” not אִישׁ מִבֵּיתוֹ, “each man from his house”). Yet the written Torah does not define the dimensions of one's “place.” It was the oral Torah that developed, for instance, a “Sabbath-day's journey.”] cf. *b. Erubin* 4.5; [Acts 1:12](#). [Jer. 17:19-22](#) prohibits the carrying of loads out of one's house, but this is clearly defined as “work.”

Matt. 26:20 – Reclining is the position of eating at the Pesach meal, but is not prescribed in the written Torah. Cf. *m. Pesachim* 10:1. Reclining is an *halakic* requirement before one can eat the Passover.

Matt. 27:6 - The written Torah prohibits the wages of a temple prostitute to come into the Temple treasury ([Deut. 23:19](#)). Of interest is *b. Aboda Zera* 17a where Jacob, a disciple of Yeshua of

Nazareth, is said to have had an interaction with R. Eliezer over a saying of Yeshua based on [Deut. 23:19](#). The oral Torah expanded this to include any money obtained for unlawful hire (cf. *b. Temurah*. 29b).

[Lk. 6:9](#) – Cp. *m. Shabbat* 22.5. The issues of healing (see the parallel in [Matt. 12:10](#)) on the Sabbath are part of the oral Torah, to which Yeshua no doubt refers.

[Lk. 11:44](#) – The written Torah declares that a person is unclean from a corpse if he touches it or is in the same room with it ([Nu. 19:11-15](#)). The Pharisees extended the communication of impurity to any object overshadowed by a corpse (or part of a corpse) or any object whose shadow contacts a corpse or tomb (*m. Oholot* 16.1,2). The oral Torah further elaborates the means by which impurity is transmitted from a corpse to an object. It appears that Yeshua accepted at least some of this oral Torah as grounds for His illustration of the Pharisees as concealed tombs that rendered those who overshadowed them unclean.

[Jn. 7:51](#) – The written Torah suggests that a matter of law be carefully examined, but does not specifically say that the accused must be given the right to speak (cp. [Ex 23:1](#); [Deut. 1:16](#); [17:4](#)). Oral Torah, however, required that the accused be given the opportunity to speak for himself (*Ex. Rabbah* 23.1)

[Ac. 18:13](#) – Paul is accused of teaching the Jewish community to worship contrary to the law, but by his own testimony he did not teach contrary to the written Torah ([Ac 21:24](#); [22:3](#)). He is accused of bringing Greeks into the Temple ([Ac 21:28](#)), and the issue in [Ac 18:13ff](#) consists of issues relating to “words and names and your own law” (v. 15). This must be oral Torah, not written.

[Ac. 21:21](#) – The phrase “walk according to the customs” (τοι̃ ~ e[quesin peripatei`n) is the equivalent of *halakah*—life regulated by issues of oral Torah.

[Ac. 23:3](#) - What law was violated when Paul was struck? The idea that a person was innocent until proven guilty is a function of oral Torah, not written Torah.

[Ac. 25:8](#) - The threefold designation, “law of the Jews, or against the Temple or against Caesar” seems to define the three most powerful arms of law: Pharisees (law of the Jews), Sadducees (against the Temple) and Rome (against Caesar). Each of these is referred to by the term “Law” in this instance.


With regard to the oral Torah, then, we may conclude that Yeshua abolished those Rabbinic laws which, when practiced, set aside the Torah of God by separating the Jew and Gentile which God intended to make one in Messiah. This was the “dividing wall, the (Rabbinic) law contained in the ordinances (of the oral Torah).” Those parts of the oral Torah that affirm the written Torah or are in harmony with it remain viable for the Messianic believer as the traditions of the fathers.

How Was the Dividing Wall Broken Down?

The Ephesian text before us is remarkable in its language. First, we see in no uncertain terms that Yeshua Himself is the peace. That is to say, it is the very person of Yeshua that enacts the real bringing together of Jew and Gentile. It is because of Messiah's having come *in the flesh* that shalom is now preached as good news to those who are near as well as to those who are far away (v. 17) in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy ([Is 57:19](#)). But the dividing wall of traditions that had eclipsed the Torah's perspective toward the Gentiles was not broken down simply by the event of Yeshua's birth. The repeated reference to His incarnation in our passage [\[57\]](#) leads us to focus upon the purpose for His coming, namely, the cross. It was “through the cross” that Yeshua effectively reconciled Jew and Gentile (v. 17) and established this long-awaited peace.

But exactly how did Yeshua accomplish this? How is it that His death affected what before seemed impossible, i.e., that Jew and Gentile should be equals within the same community and would view each

other as equals?

The key to this question of “how” may be found in the words “in one body” of v. 16. The dividing wall which separated Jew and Gentile was to be broken down by bringing both into “one body,” that is, into one community. And how? How were those who were far off to be brought near? By the Ruach HaKodesh: “for through Him (Yeshua) we *both* have our access in one Spirit to the Father” (v. 18). Paul teaches the unity of those within the body of Messiah in [1 Cor. 12](#) where, once again, the unifying factor is the Ruach. In fact, it was the out-pouring of the Ruach upon the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) along with the vision that Peter had previously which convinced him and the rest that God had united the believing Gentiles together with the Jewish believers. For Peter and the Apostles, if God sent His Ruach to dwell within Gentile believers, it was impossible to call them unclean. 

Now some might object that the present call to a separate Messianic Jewish culture is not a separation based upon calling non-Messianic believers “unclean.” In fact, those who propose such a “third culture” are quick to acknowledge that people in the Christian church are brothers and sisters who have the indwelling Ruach, and that we are all part of the body of Messiah. But my point is simply that if we speak of our unity as based only upon a common core beliefs, and not upon the life-to-life aspects of being a single household (v. 19), we have effectively denied the very thing that Messiah accomplished through His death, namely, the making of the two into one new man.


So, the middle wall of division was broken down by the death of Messiah because it was by His death that the promise of the Ruach was made sure.[\[58\]](#) That the Ruach was poured out upon the Gentiles was a direct result of Yeshua’s sacrifice, for He said, “if I be lifted up, I will draw all men to myself.”[\[59\]](#)

As Messianic believers we may be disgusted with the way the Christian church has lost her Jewish roots, or how much of man’s “religion” has overtaken the community of God. We may shake our heads at the latent and not-so-latent anti-Semitism found in the Christian community. We may even try to avoid being called “Christians” because of the mixed messages this label brings. But however we may react to these situations, we simply do not have the option of forsaking those within the Church who are genuine believers and therefore our brothers and sisters. In our desire to recover what has been lost (and, in some cases, removed) from the Church, we dare not rebuild a wall between Jew and Gentile that was removed by the very work of our Messiah. Thus, we must be careful to maintain the biblical mandates, but equally careful not to divide over man-made traditions.

Notes



[\[1\]](#) I delivered a paper at the regional Evangelical Theological Society meeting in 1994 entitled “‘Law’ in the NT and oral Torah.” A copy of this paper is available at www.torahresource.com.

[\[2\]](#) The sentences in quotation marks are my own words, paraphrasing some of the ideas taught by Murray and Kay Silberling in a Seminar entitled “Building Messianic Community” taught at Congregation Emmaus in 1996.

[\[3\]](#) [Gal 6:10](#); [Eph 2:19](#); [1 Tim 3:5, 15](#). Note that Peter uses similar language in [1 Pt 4:17](#). 

[\[4\]](#) [Gal 6:2](#). 

[\[5\]](#) [James 2:1-10](#); [5:14-16](#). 

[\[6\]](#) Of course, the motivation for doing the *mitzvot* must be right. Too often the *mitzvot* are kept as a means of obtaining personal identity or significance, or because of pressure from the community. In some cases, these influences may still result in a keeping of the *mitzvot* (as in those *mitzvot* which are fulfilled in a person-to-person relationship) even when the one who does them does so out of wrong motives. In those *mitzvot* which are primarily between the worshiper and his God, however, without the proper heart motivation, the “doing” of the *mitzvot* is pointless and futile. Ultimately, in all of the 


mitzvot, we ought to strive to perform them first and foremost from a heart that longs to obey God and is satisfied with the joy that comes merely from obeying God.

[7] See the work done by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (Fortress, 1977), where he gives a great deal of evidence that Jewish sources simply do not show “salvation by works” to be a major part of 1st Century teaching. His work has been criticized by some, but his research has at least caused everyone to reassess the nature of the problems which Paul addresses in his epistles. My suggestion is that Paul is often dealing with the problem of “fellowship by works.” In his soteriology fellowship (or community, if viewed from its widest perspective) is every bit as much an important component of “salvation” as is justification. For Paul, to form separate communities based upon differences in culture would be to pronounce the divergent culture as godless. So vital is this aspect of community that Paul is willing to view Jew and Gentile as though both were “one new man.” He does not negate the necessity of the Jew to remain a Jew, nor of a Gentile to remain a non-Jew, but he requires that these divergencies be lived out in the context of unity, not in separate cultures which do not touch each other and where unity is therefore impossible.

[8] Eph. 3:4-6.

[9] The “two will become one” language hearkens back to [Gen 2:24](#). In fact, marriage in the 1st Century Judaism was considered to constitute a “new birth,” where both individuals were accredited a new beginning, their former sins being remitted, cp. *y.Bikkurim* III, 3, 65c-65d; C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (Schocken, 1974), p. 210.

[10] Rom. 11:11ff.

[11] Ex. 19:5, 6; Num. 23:9; Deut. 32:9ff; Amos 3:2.

[12] Acts 15:28, 29; Gal. 5:1-6.

[13] Eph. 2:11; Gal. 2:11ff.

[14] Acts 15:1.

[15] 2 Co. 11:3-4, 13-15, cp. v. 22.

[16] Gal 1:6-9.

[17] Eph 2:16.

[18] cp. Gal 3:8-14.

[19] Eph. 2:3-5.

[20] Eph. 2:6-8

[21] Eph. 2:11-12.

[22] Eph. 2:13.

[23] This is almost universal with the commentators, and even the lexicographers. Eadie, Westcott, Hendrickson, Meyer, Abbot, all interpret the passage to mean that either some or all of the Mosaic Law is abolished by the cross of Messiah, and that some or all of the Mosaic Law created enmity between Jew and non-Jew. BDAG follows the commentators in adopting the meaning “Mosaic Law” for the term *dogma*, p. 200. Stern (*Jewish New Testament Commentary* [JNTP, 1992], pp. 585-588) labors in attempting to explain how Messiah could abolish the Torah (his translation in the Jewish New Testament) and at the same time not abolish it! He concludes that the commandments were re-prioritized, allowing Jewish and Gentile believers to put their unity as a priority over other matters of Law, but gives no real indication exactly how this would be done. In the end, he suggests that “Yeshua

abolished not the Torah in its entirety, but the *takkanot* (rabbinic ordinances) relating to the separation of Jews and Gentiles spiritually.” (p. 588). D. R. DeLacey, “The Sabbath/Sunday Question and the Law in the Pauline Corpus” in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Zondervan, 1982), 173-4, writes, “The law that was destroyed was precisely the law viewed from the perspective of the covenant between God and the people that was to be exclusively His people. This must have included the ritual element (including, of course, the Sabbath law), but in Paul’s view it went much further than that.”

[24] The word for “abolish” in [Eph. 2:15](#) is καταργήσας (*katargesas*, from καταργέω, *katargeo*). The word for “abolish” in [Matt. 5:17](#) is καταλῦσαι, *katalusai* from καταλύω, *kataluo*). The different meanings of each is discussed below.

[25] [Matt. 5:17-20](#).

[26] Contrary to D. R. DeLacey, Op. cit., p. 173, 191 n. 96. DeLacey claims that the “ritual law” constituted a barrier between Jew and non-Jew, and that even the “resident alien” (גֵר תושב), who was expected to keep the ritual law was nonetheless never considered part of Israel. But he does not define what he means by being “part of Israel,” nor does he give any data as to how the so-called “ritual law” created a barrier between the native born Jew and the resident alien.

Sanders (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism* [Fortress, 1977], pp. 206-12) gives good evidence that there were, even in the 1st Century C.E., different opinions about the salvific state of Gentiles. Cp. also Sander’s comments in *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63BCE-66CE* (Trinity Press International, 1992), pp. 233-235. The data would indicate that the Rabbis did not consider the written Torah sufficiently clear on what their attitude should be toward Gentiles to warrant an end of the debate. Ultimately, under the stress of persecution, the Rabbis took an increasingly harsh stance toward outsiders.

[27] *BDAG*, p. 484-5.

[28] The compound form (καταλύω, *kataluo*) is used in [Matthew 5:17](#), “Do not think I am come to abolish (καταλῦσαι, *katalusai*) the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish (καταλῦσαι, *katalusai*) but to fulfill.” The compound form is probably intensive or perfective, in the sense of “utterly destroy,” see Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (UBS, 1988), 1.234 who show that λύω (*luo*) and καταλύω (*kataluo*) fall into close semantic ranges.

[29] *BDAG*, p. 418.

[30] Carl Schneider, “μεσοτοιχον” (*mesotoichon*) in *TDNT*, 4.625.

[31] [Mt. 21:33](#), [Mk. 12:1](#); [Lk. 14:23](#).

[32] Stern, Op. cit., pp. 583-5; F. F. Bruce, Ephesians in *NICNT* (Eerdmans, 1957), p. 61

[33] *Ant.* 8:67, 71.

[34] Quoted from E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63BCE—66CE* (Trinity Press International, 1992), p. 61. The inscription along with the history of its recovery has been published in Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Baker, 1978 reprint), p. 80, where Deissmann has τρυφακτου (*trufaktou*) rather than δρυφάκτου (*druftakou*). Liddel and Scott list only δρυφάκτον (*druftakton*), noting that δρυφάκτος (*druftaktos*) is an erroneous form. See also Peretz Segal, “The Penalty of the Warning Inscription from the Temple of Jerusalem,” *IEJ* 39, 1989, pp. 79-84.

[35] *Ant.* 15.417; cf. *War* 5.193f; 6.124-6. The Bavli notes that these gates were closed up, cf. *b.Yoma* 16a.

[36] *leg. ad Gaium* 31.

[37] *m.Middot* 2.3; *b.Yoma* 16a. סורג (*soreg*) does not occur in the Tanakh.

[38] Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3 in the Anchor Bible*, vol. 34 (Doubleday, 1974), p. 284.

[39] English translation from Lincoln, *Op. cit.*, p. 141. The Greek text is available in H. B. Swete, *The Old Testament in Greek* (KTAV, 1968), pp. 551-606. The lines translated above are found on p. 575.

[40] *m.Avot 1.1 Cf. also b.Chullin 110a; b.Yebamot 20a.*

[41] *m.Avot 13.3*

[42] CD iv.19; viii.12, 18.

[43] CD viii.18

[44] Much can be found in the Rabbinic literature to show an open heart to the non-Jew, see Montefiore & Loewe, *Anthology*, pp. 556-565. But there is clearly a tension. Some statements seem very open and warm to non-Jews, while others logically preclude any contact with them. The conclusion of most scholars is that the issue was not fully formulated among the Sages, though in practice, especially in Jerusalem and the Temple, avoiding contact with non-Jews became the most practical method of maintaining ritual purity.

[45] *m.Pes. 8:8; m.Shek. 8:1; T.YomHaKipp. 4:20; Josephus, Ant. xviii,90; Acts 10:28*



[46] *m.Oholot 18.7, 9; John 18:28.*



[47] *b.Shabbat 14b; y.Shabbat I, 3c; T.Parah 3:10.*

[48] *m.Shabbat 9:1; m.Abodah Zarah 3:6; y.Pesach. II.36c.*

[49] *Est. 4:8; 9:1; Dan. 6:12.* The Hebrew words translated by δόγμα (*dogma*) in the Lxx are דָּת, אָרָר, תָּבֵב, טָעַם, דָּת (dat, 'esur, ti'em, ketav).



[50] Kittel "δόγμα" (*dogma*) in *TDNT*, 2.231; H. H. Esser, "Command, Order" in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* 3 vols. (Zondervan, 1975), 1.330; *BAG*, p. 200.



[51] English translation is from Bruce Metzger, ed., *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1977), p. 295.



[52] Note other, parallel phrases in the Lxx: τῶν πατρίων νόμων (*2 Macc 6:1*), νομοῦ ὑψίστου, (*Sir. 42:2; 44:20*).



[53] The same may be said of the word δόγμα (*dogma*) in Josephus (*War*, 2, 42; *Ap.*, 1, 42) and Philo (*Leg. All.*, 1, 54f; *Spec. Leg.*, 1, 269; *Gig.* 52). The contexts in which the word is used may easily be understood as speaking of the accepted, "lawful halakah." In those places where the written Scriptures are clearly in the mind of the writer, the word νομο is inevitably employed, see Gutbrod, "νόμο" (*nomos*) in *TDNT* 4.1052. Both Josephus and Philo use the articular ὁ νόμος (*ho nomos*, "the law") to denote the "Pentateuch."



[54] The verbal form of the word is used in *Col. 2:20*, δογματίζομαι (*dogmatizomai*). It is only used here in the NT.



[55] *Kremannumi* usually translates הִלָּח (talach) in the Tanakh, the meaning of which is "to hang." The NASB "depends upon" as a translation is a dynamic equivalence or extension and is not supported lexicographically.

[56] See the comments of Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, 4 vols. (Baker, 1979), 2.297 (quotes Korban Netnel).

[57] "blood of Messiah," v. 13; "abolishing in His flesh," v. 15; "in Himself," v. 15; "through the cross," v. 16; "And He came. . .," v. 17; "through Him," v. 18.

[58] Jn 7:39; 16:7-11; Ac 2:33-36.

[59] Jn 12:32.

