

Bible Study

Enigmas, Volume II:

*Applying cultural anthropology
to the New Testament*

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Preface

In Volume 1, we addressed some theological topics by applying cultural anthropology. In this sequel, we'll address some specific New Testament passages and apply some cultural anthropology. Some passages are Hebrew idioms and others a cultural story telling techniques used in Yeshua's¹ day. This volume is more practical in that it offers the Bible reader the opportunity to read with “Hebraic eyes”.

Most Christians have at one time or another, fantasized about sitting at the feet of Jesus to hear his teachings first hand. However, unless you grew up in that cultural environment, listening to Jesus personally, as a westerner would not help you to understand him any better. Jesus' teachings and sayings were a product of his time and place. Many of the questions asked of him were asked in common debates among the religious people of his day. A study of his time and place sheds light on the real Jesus, as his followers would have seen him. Seeing Jesus in his proper context is an anthropological study. To describe it I've coined the term, “Biblical Anthropology”. That phrase sounds academic or scientific but all it means is learning about the Jewishness of Jesus.

All culture can be described as descending from four topics, from spiritual realm down to the mundane. These topics are an outline for any cultural study, biblical or secular:

1. Deity Definition
2. World View
3. Belief Structure
4. Behaviors and Habits

The Deity Definition identifies their god(s) and the relationships to each other, if more than one. A World View describes to what degree the god(s) interact with the physical environment and human kind. A Belief Structure about how to act

1 'Yeshua' is Jesus Hebrew name pronounced 'Ye-shu-a' with the accent on last syllable.

with reference to the deities engagement in human society. The Behaviors and Habits are the resulting activities of a society which includes their physical artifacts. Altogether these four topics define a culture.

With a framework to study a culture, you can fit various parts into a whole picture. This allows the Bible reader to get into the physical, social and political environments to see Yeshua and his apostles, more like they really were, to see them in their true context. We will work at becoming amateur “Biblical Anthropologists”, no dirt digging or field work required!

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Introduction

The world of the first century Judeans and Galileans was a very different world from our modern western society. These two worlds could not be more different from each other.

In modern times, we tend to treat scripture from a modern Greco-Roman perspective. Our institutions are organized like the Roman Empire's government. Our thinking patterns are the lineal systems of the Greeks. To separate us even more, most western societies are greatly influenced by the European age of enlightenment of the 16th and 17th centuries. During that time, humanist philosophers removed God from His sovereignty over the human and made the human and his reasoning the supreme being. Hence, all western societies separate religion from government, education, commerce and nearly all other activities of modern life. Today, there is a canyon between the secular and the religious, the opposite of biblical times.

In the first century, everywhere and in all things, Torah² was central to all Jewish activities. Yeshua³ thought of himself as the living Torah since all of the writings of the Hebrew prophets spoke of the coming messiah, the redeemer of Israel. This is the cultural context of Jesus' statement recorded by Matthew:

*For where two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I among them. (Matthew 18:20 [ESV])*

It does not mean everyone talked about Jesus specifically. But it does mean in their society, any time two or three people met, they discussed Torah. All events of daily life, included Torah. If we were to live that way today, all the non-believers would accuse Christians

2 'Torah' is a generic term for the instructions of God. Sometimes only Moses is meant but other times it's used more inclusively of all the Hebrew prophets.

3 Jesus is Greek, Yeshua is Hebrew.

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of being radical extremists, even more than they do already. However, in Yeshua's day, the omission of Torah in any social event meant that you were out of touch with society. Yeshua's statement also reveals an idiom of the Hebraic way to communicating. Jesus did not mean that if anyone talked about the messiah or Torah, that he always showed up to discuss it with them. But in the spirit of the discussion, he was included as the living Torah.

Just how out of touch modern religious people are with the first century culture can be seen in an event in 2006 at Southwestern Theological Seminary, a school operated by the Southern Baptist Convention. A new president was installed who vowed to return the college to a more biblical foundation. His first act was to deny tenure and eventually fire a professor because she was a ... woman!⁴ This was done by interpreting a passage of scripture without any regard for biblical culture. The president, Paige Patterson, used this scripture as his justification:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. (I Timothy 2:12 [ESV])

This passage has been used by institutional Christianity for centuries to “keep women in their place”. So what's missing in this interpretation? They missed the cultural environment of the Roman city of Ephesus! In that situation, there was a reason for saying this. Paul's instructions to Timothy did not mean he hated women or despised them in any way. Indeed, Paul lauded more women in his letters than men. In the same letter, Paul praises two women as grand examples of faithfulness, Timothy's own mother and grandmother.

4 The professor was Dr. Sheri Klouda. The details were published by many news outlets including NBC News: http://www.nbcnews.com/id/16828466/ns/us_news-education/t/professor-seminary-ousted-her-over-gender/

But the culture of Ephesus required different practical instructions for women. Ephesus was the world wide center of a pagan fertility cult. The leaders of this fertility cult were exclusively women. These priestesses would intricately weave their hair and adorn their hairdos with gold and silver ornaments and jewels. They would don sheer gowns and parade about the city in elaborate religious processions, inviting all the inhabitants and tourists to come to the great temple of Artemus (Diana) to participate in the ceremonies.⁵

Paul did not want the Christians to reflect this pagan worship or appear to be participating in any way. For a woman to plait her hair, or dress in a fine gown or use colors on her face or wear jewelry, would have been interpreted as being a follower of the cult, if not a priestess herself. There was to be absolutely no confusion between the local cult practices and the Christian believers. Hence, instructions to not allow any woman in the fellowship to resemble a cult worshiper or cult priestess or take any kind of authoritative role.

The cultural context is what the Southern Baptist seminary president missed. Therefore in the end, they actually abuse their own women by disallowing them equal positions and authority befitting their academic achievements. This same seminary deeply considered prohibiting women to attend theological classes at all. This kind of abuse stems from a failure to understand that the behavior of believers should be adapted to the culture. This kind of abuse is what occurs when the culture of the biblical writings are unknown or at least not considered.

The Bible is not an inflexible set of rules, it's a story of real people in real places living life – the stuff of cultural anthropology.

⁵ This normally included visiting the temple prostitutes.

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I read a popular book about reading the Bible as literature written by a professor of English at a Christian college. Not once in two hundred pages did he even mention the word Hebrew and only twice said Jewish. He totally omitted the entire concept of the Christian's holy book as having any connection with the Middle East or the ancient Hebrew culture. Is it any wonder us regular pew sitters know little about Jesus in his environment?

The real question is not the omissions of others but “What can we learn from Jesus' first century world that will make his words even more powerful and life-changing?”⁶ In the last fifteen years, hundreds of books have come on the market applying culture to understanding the New Testament. What makes these most recent books different from academic books or textbooks is their readability. They are meant for us regular pew sitting, working people.

May this book join with many others to inspire further study into our Jewish Messiah, Yeshua Meshiach, Ben David [Jesus the King, son of David].

Time to don our Raiders of the Lost Ark Fedora hats and learn to be “Biblical Anthropologists”.

⁶ Question borrowed from the website of Lois Tverberg, author and lecturer on the life and times of Jesus. <http://ourrabbijesus.com/>

First Enigma: Hebrew Idioms

The language and manner of communicating in a culture are bound together. You cannot separate one from the other. The language comes from the culture, the culture is in the language. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Tanakh,⁷ carries the culture within it and communicates in a specialized way, unique to that culture but not necessarily totally different from nearby related cultures. While the Hebrew language was unique to the children of Israel, the ancient form was similar to other languages of the middle east. The Hebrew language did not drop from heaven nor came to exist in isolation from the cultures around the Hebrews.

As the children of Israel developed a unique perspective on their deity, spiritual matters, and lifestyle due to Moses receiving the Laws of God, so also their language and alphabet began to change. This occurred because the language and alphabet they used in Egypt were considered “of this world”. Starting with Moses and the exodus out of Egypt, they were to be a unique people unto Yehovah.⁸ Over time, the children of Israel changed their alphabet and developed a unique language, similar but still different from their neighbors.

It might seem complicated when a culture shares many of its features with another culture but while exhibiting certain unique features. When it comes to how the Hebrews communicate with their language, more in common with other middle eastern cultures than they do with any western culture. But their ideas about the spiritual realm and their relationship to it, were unique in the middle east.

7 Tanakh is an acronym taken from the first letters of the Hebrew words for Moses, Prophets and Writings – the three main divisions of the Old Testament: Luke 24:44 (Psalms means writings)

8 Yehovah, pronounced: Ye-o-vah, accent on the final syllable, The name of the Hebrew's God. This spelling and pronunciation was discovered by a Dead Sea scroll researcher, Nehemiah Gordon, in the Aleppo Hebrew Codex, the oldest complete Hebrew Bible.

A unique way of communicating in a culture is called an “idiom”. Every culture has them. Outside of a culture, a verbal idiom sounds like nonsense. Until recently, no one would have understood that “googling” meant looking up a search word or phrase on the Internet. Sometimes today, we might just say, “look it up on the 'net’”. That makes no sense to someone whose only concept of a 'net' means fishing. These things are unique to our modern culture and are idiomatic ways of expressing ourselves.

The Hebrews were unique in their time and place by following the Laws of God which contained instructions about fairness and morality. In a series of 613 commandments, they had a guide for a righteous way to live versus a sinful way to live. The knowledge of God's view about human beings and how to live properly introduced the dividing line of sin versus righteousness. The Laws of God or the Mosaic Laws showed the dividing line between unrighteousness (sin – wrong living) and righteousness (right living). This is what the apostle Paul meant with these words:

For by works of the law no human being [flesh] will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20 [ESV])

This verse also contains a rabbinical idiom, “works of the Law”. It is found in the Talmud (Pharisee Oral Laws) in reference to conversion to Judaism. Most modern readers think it refers to the Mosaic Law but it does not. This makes the point that when we read scripture, as biblical anthropologists, we are reading a middle eastern way of communicating the uniqueness of the Hebrew people, as the representatives of Yehovah to the world. Thus, for any given record, if you misunderstand how the Hebrews communicated Yehovah's view, you could very well miss the significance of the record and the insight you should gain from it.

The simplest way to understand the Hebrew culture is reading the Old Testament and reading modern authors who study the Hebrew language⁹ and their ancient culture.

In reading the Old Testament in English, most of the odd ways they communicate are translated for the western culture but there does remain quite a number of oddities which are not translated, especially names. Names are not usually translated but only 'transliterated'. That means the words or names are spelled out in English letters so pronouncing them in English makes them same sound like the original. This sometimes leads to small variations in spellings from one English Bible to another.

Names are important in the Bible. In the ancient Hebrew culture, names were not meaningless sounds like modern western cultural names. Hebrew names were words from the language. We do this to a much lessor degree in English when we name our girls, Faith, Hope and Grace. These are English words with meanings but names such as Bill, Joe and Ralph do not have simple English meanings, they're just sounds that we respond to when we hear them.

To make matters a bit worse, in the New Testament some words and names are transliterated from Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek, then transliterated again into English, then updated for modern pronunciation with new Bible version. That makes following names and other words sometimes difficult. Fortunately, modern Bible publishers note these things as footnotes or margin notes. There are dictionaries and lexicons which offer the Bible student some insight into these variations. There are also on line resources which will give the amateur biblical anthropologist the meanings of Hebrew word-names – no language skills required.¹⁰

9 Hebrew of the 1st century was not the same as the ancient form of Hebrew and different again from modern Hebrew. This would be expected in a multicultural environment. Words from one language get borrowed. The New Testament Greek has both Hebrew and Aramaic words untranslated.

10 <http://www.behindthename.com/names/usage/biblical-hebrew>

The appendix, “Hebrew Language Idioms”, lists over one hundred Hebrew language idioms which can still be found in our English Bibles. But there are other idioms which go beyond just odd ways of expressing one's self in the language. These are cultural idioms. If you don't know the original use in the culture, you'll be mystified and probably miss the point. Some of these are not only cultural but religious or perhaps you could call them “Pharisee-isms”.

Abolish versus Fulfilling the Law

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17 [ESV])

This may be puzzling to western readers but a biblical anthropologist sees a cultural idiom here. The first thing to note is the phrase, “I have come”. In the culture it means “my purpose is...”. It does not mean I traveled from somewhere else or dropped down from heaven and showed up here to do something, which is how some Bible commentators think of it. The King James Version (KJV) uses the word, “destroy” for abolish. “Abolish and fulfill” is a cultural religious idiom unique to the Hebrews.

When a rabbi heard Torah misquoted or misinterpreted, he would say, “You're canceling the Law” or to destroy or abolish it – to make it non effective. Fulfilling the Law is the same thing. If the rabbi heard Torah properly quoted or interpreted, he would say, “You've fulfilled the Law!”. Too often modern westerners think of fulfilling as bring something to an end, like fulfilling a contract. But, it is really the same things as fulfilling the law of love. Fulfilling the law of love does not terminate, negate or cancel love. Teaching correctly the Mosaic Law does not terminate, negate nor cancel the Law either. This is exactly what the apostle Paul says:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8 [ESV])

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:10 [ESV])

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Galatians 5:14 [ESV])

The expression “the law” in the New Testament always means the Mosaic Law found in the first five books of the Bible. Paul didn't preach against the Mosaic Law, he preached how to fulfill it by living love. That brings up another cultural issue: What is our modern relationship to the Laws of Moses? Modern western gentile believers largely ignore it as gone and done with – of no effect in our modern world. Discovering that the New Testament does not teach that would undermine the faith of many. For modern believers, the Law was never annulled, just condensed. Yeshua did this himself:

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?

And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:34-40 [ESV])

At the onset of this event, one can clearly see that the Pharisees were not being wholly honest. Once they heard Yeshua had so well answered the Sadducee that they were speechless, they decided to have a go at Yeshua themselves to put him in his place. First they refer to him as 'teacher' instead of the more respectful title of 'rabbi'. Then they test his knowledge of theology with the question of the greatest law of Moses. Yeshua answers them by condensing all of Moses into two principles: Love God, Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.

This brings up another cultural idiom with significance to modern believers:

Light and Heavy Commandments

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19 [ESV])

There are 'least commandments' and there are 'great commandments', love being the greatest of all. In the Hebrew religious jargon, these are light and heavy commandments. A light commandment is one which covers a situation you might never encounter. A heavy commandment is one you can apply nearly all the time. If you can not apply a commandment, that does not mean that it should be ignored or forgotten. All the commandments Torah are righteous but not all can be applied by everyone. Nonetheless, they all should be taught as Yehovah's instructions.

The Pharisees had categorized all the commandments into a hierarchy of importance, from the most important (heavy) down to the least important (light). They considered this commandment to be the lightest of all.

If you come across a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother

sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young.

You shall let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long. (Deuteronomy 22:6-7 [ESV])

How many people were likely to come across a bird's nest with chicks in it? Not many but it was possible, especially if you were collecting turtle doves for ritual use. But, should this commandment be taught but practiced? Yes because it shows God's concern for even the smallest of His creatures. Another commandment in the light category, but heavier than the one above, is this passage:

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it. (Deuteronomy 22:8 [ESV])

A 'parapet' is a wall around the flat roof of the house. It was supposed to be a standard feature of Hebrew houses. Its purpose to keep people who are on the roof from falling off and hurting themselves or worse, dying from the fall. Hanging out on the roof top was common in an area where there is no climate control or even screens on windows. The roof of the house functioned as summer sleeping area and as a guest room. You see this when Peter was praying on the roof top, while waiting for dinner to be served (Acts 10:9).

Building this feature into a house would only apply to those who build houses. That would only be a small portion of the population. But the insight to be gained from both of these laws, even if you can not apply them, is the great law of love. Therefore, whether you can apply them or not, they should be taught for the value of insight into Yehovah's great concern for His people. Even light commandments are important.

The concept of small things being important to Yehovah was addressed by Yeshua. Even the smallest things are not overlooked. Following Yeshua's statement about fulfilling the law

by teaching it correctly is another oddity of Hebrew relating directly to how Yehovah is concerned with the smallest of things concerning His Commandments.

Every Jot and Tittle

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:18 [KJV])

For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:18 [ESV])

Jot and tittle are rendered in ESV as 'iota' and 'dot'. That sort of makes sense in English but neither the Bible version communicates the idiom fully. We do not have a direct equivalent in English. What Yeshua is referring to are tiny decorations used to embellish the Hebrew letters in hand written manuscripts. They are so small that one might not even notice them in reading. The best way to illustrate this is using different fonts in English. We can type the number 'one' using different kinds of print. One way is to use a 'sans-serif' font to print this: 1. Another way is to use a 'serif' font to print this: 1. Can you see the difference? Serifs are putting slight decorations on the letter. In this example, there is a tiny swoop at the top of the serif number and a tiny line at the bottom. This is how the Hebrew letters are decorated, with very tiny markings.

Just how small and easily overlooked such character features can be, was brought home to me as a teenager. I had the privilege to learn Aramaic from a native of Iraq who grew up in a rural village speaking Aramaic natively. He eventually schooled up to a Ph.D. in languages. In the process of his education, he acquired some ancient manuscripts for his language studies. He said that the old manuscripts were sometimes problematic due to fly specks. Flies would land on the manuscript and leave a speck (poop) on it. If they did this in the right place, it could be mistaken for a letter decoration. Rabbis copying manuscripts had to be on the lookout for these problems. They would often scrape

some of these tiny decorations with their fingernail just to be certain their copy rendered even these tiny features correctly.

These very tiny letter decorations is what Yeshua was referring to. He says that even such tiny markings were important to Yehovah and He would not overlook even one tiny little letter decoration in His Word. How much does this teach us to pay attention to the details our Bibles?

The apostle Paul taught even the gentiles of pay attention to the Mosaic Law and to learn about the Hebrew Prophets and all the writings of the Hebrews:

As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.

*For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.
(Romans 11:28-29 [ESV])*

In Paul's day, most of the Jewish people had not only rejected their Messiah but made themselves very antagonistic against both other Jews and gentiles who had embraced Yeshua. As far as attempting to witness the gospel to them, Paul suggests just consider them enemies – forget about it. But it was through their ancestors that the Word of the Lord and the promises of Yehovah were made and that knowledge preserved. Therefore, treat the antagonistic Jews kindly and learn their heritage in their prophets. Indeed, Yehovah has not withdrawn the promises He made to them even though they rejected their Messiah.

This makes the covenants of Yehovah pretty much one sided. One side is keeping his part but the other side, the Jews, are not keeping their part. That does not cause Yehovah to reject His people, in spite of themselves. All the promises to Israel will be kept.¹¹

Paul's day was not unique with the Jews rejecting their God. Elijah had the same problem. He was so discouraged over Israel's obstinance that he thought he was all alone in honoring Yehovah.

11 See Bible Study Enigmas, Volume 1, "Who Is True Israel"

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He [Elijah] said, I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away. (I Kings 19:14 [ESV])

Yehovah had to intervene into Elijah's depression and show him that it was not true.

Yet I will leave [I have left] seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him. (I Kings 19:18 [ESV])

That has been the situation with the Hebrew people since Elijah's day. There have always been among Yehovah's people a remnant who honored Yehovah and kept His Word alive. Even through the centuries since the Messiah was born, there have been Messianic Jews ... just not very many. Today, a similar situation exists but it is more visible with the rise of the modern Messianic Judaism. The movement even has its own organizations, ordinations and schools. These modern day Jewish believers, more than most gentile believers, are keeping alive Yehovah's instructions for righteous living. They do it by teaching the original instructions given to Moses at Sinai. They also keep as much of the Mosaic Law as they can. It is part of their cultural heritage as Jews. However, they do not force gentiles in their congregations to do the same.

The people of God are one body, one community, one true Israel. We are a body of mixed heritage, languages and genders but we are all one in Yehovah's Messiah, Yeshua Meshiach, Ben David.

If every tiny detail of Yehovah's instructions given by Moses, was so important to Yeshua, why is it that we teach so little of it in our religious institutions and schools? Why do modern believers know so little of the Hebrew prophets and their writings?

Apparently some judgment has been used to sort out what is important for study in our modern pursuit of learning the Word of God. That has always been the case, what to learn within the time available. In ancient times, this issue was just as much of a concern as now. Back then, parental and educator's concerns were did not revolve around what to learn but what to apply. Indeed, since small children, Hebrews memorized Torah but applying Torah was another matter. Even Torah does not address all concerns and all situations. It was written for the children of Israel, to live in Canaan as an agrarian society. What about city dwellers? What about our modern western society? Some judgments must be made about learning and applying God's Word. Even Yeshua made this clear but he used the idiomatic customs of his day to describe it.

Binding and Loosing

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:19 [ESV])

This is a rabbinical idiom for judgments. The concept of binding is to tie up or tether something to something else. Loosing is just the opposite, to let it go. Since Torah does not address every possible situation, some judgment must be used to determine which part of God's Word to apply and what does not apply in this specific situation. In this passage, Peter is given the authority to make such a judgment. Once Peter makes a judgment, that decision would be honored in heaven, a euphemism for honored by Yehovah and His heavenly hosts, the angels. That is precisely the concept of agency discussed in Volume 1 of this series. Peter would have to judge according to his best understanding of Yehovah's heart on the matter at hand. Peter was standing in for Yeshua and Yehovah as the earthly agent. That decision was spiritual and would be effective in the spiritual realm as much as the material. Yehovah would stand by his agent and back his decisions.

This can be seen in action in the New Testament. Paul has been accused of violating Moses because he is not teaching the gentiles to adopt the lifestyle of the Judeans. To Paul, a Pharisee, there is a difference between gentiles learning Torah, practicing what they can with regard to the heart of the Law, as opposed to adopting the heavy religious lifestyle of the Judeans. In Judea, life was governed, not just by the Mosaic Law, but also by the many additions and habits of the Pharisees. It was these additions and habits of the Pharisees that Paul saw no need to burden the gentiles with. Indeed, it was not their culture and habit so why burden them down with it and make their faith in Yeshua a chore?

The Judean believing Pharisees (yes, they did believe in Yeshua as their Messiah) stirred up so much trouble that a major meeting with the heads of the messianic movement, Peter and James, was called to be held in Jerusalem. The Pharisees thought they would have the home court advantage by meeting there.

Paul went with a small contingent of believers he had been teaching. On arrival, Peter warned him that he was not well liked and he would be well served to do everything he could to appear as “one of us”. Paul obliged, went through some purification rites, shaved his head and appeared before the tribunal as “one of them” to state his case. Peter backed Paul by explaining how the Samaritans had received the mark of redemption when they embraced this faith and spoke in tongues, just like the first ones did on Shavuot (Pentecost).

James then stood up and pronounced a “binding and loosing judgment”. Basically, James urged the gentiles to live a moral life and avoid specific things that were certain to anger the Jews. That was a judgment about to what extent the gentiles were expected to keep the Mosaic Law. James, with Peter's endorsement, simply stated that the Judean lifestyle was not the culture of the gentiles and the Judean leadership would not require the gentiles to abandon their culture nor would they inflict the Judean culture on them. They instructed the gentiles to make a righteous adjustment to their culture. This judgment was written up, copies made and published to all the mixed, Jew and gentile, congregations throughout Asia, the area of Paul's ministry.

This judgment has had its consequences and influence for the last twenty centuries. It is the main reason gentiles today know so little about the Mosaic Law, to the point of ignoring it. But ignoring Moses was not what was taught by any of the apostles, and especially not by the apostle Paul. There are several passages taken by modern Bible teachers to indicate ignoring Moses. Not the least is the Colossians passage:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17 [ESV])

Certainly the substance of the presence of Christ in our lives is far greater than the shadow of his coming. But the shadow teaches us things that are not always apparent in reading of Yeshua's life or even reading about his apostles in the New Testament. Further, the Mosaic Law was all about how to live in a righteous way. The Law was instruction for righteousness – how to live rightly. Of course, any new believer would want to practice righteousness and come to understand Yehovah's heart on everything. But in accordance with James' and Peter's judgment, he didn't want new believers, Jew or gentile, to get hung up in details and argue about it. That was common in Judea and distracted from the substance of Christ.

Paul's instruction took the anxiety out of keeping the Mosaic Law. Paul made keeping the Law a joy, not a burden. Paul made the Mosaic Law a heart thing, not a legalistic thing. It didn't make any real difference if you celebrated Passover on this day or that in the calendar. It did not make any real difference if you ate shell fish one day, that did not make you ceremonially 'unclean' as the Jews taught. It was not a big deal if you rested on the Jewish correct day or chose another day. It is Yehovah's heart on issues that mattered, not the letter of the Law.

J. L. Brown

The promises of Yehovah were given to the Hebrew, the Jews being their descendants. But Paul redefined God's people as those who kept the heart of the Law.

*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly,
nor is circumcision outward and physical.*

*But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a
matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.
His praise is not from man but from God. (Romans
3:28-29 [ESV])*

That was in essence, the judgment of James and Peter, it is a matter of heart. Just like today, we are not an agrarian society for the most part but the heart of Mosaic Law can still be kept by city dwellers ... even Internet Cafe denizens and football fans.

People in every culture will have to make some adjustments to practice righteousness but no foreign culture should ever be forced to wholly adopt the Judean lifestyle or adopt the missionary's culture. That judgment has been violated in modern times and is the reason you can not go to a foreign country as a missionary. If only people would apply cultural anthropology, so much misfortune could have been avoided in our modern practice of this ancient middle eastern faith in the Hebrew Messiah.

In my family there is a story about keeping the Sabbath (Sunday for us). My grandfather had an opportunity to play professional baseball. However, he turned it down because he would be required to play on Sundays. As a paying occupation, baseball would have been his work, his job. Therefore, to honor God, he would not work on Sundays, play baseball for money. Instead, he became a school teacher. Classes never meet on Sundays. However, he played baseball without pay on Sundays. That was his cultural adjustment to keep the spirit of the Law.

If only we in modern times could grasp what Yeshua taught and take on his yoke as he meant for us.

Taking On Yeshua's Yoke

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
(Matthew 12:28-30 [ESV])*

For us, we might think of hitching up horses to a farm implement to till a field, like is done in many countries today. But was that their cultural reference? Actually, no, not exactly. This was another one of those religious idioms, a rabbinical reference. It does relate to agriculture but applied much more finely than we might get from this phraseology.

Yeshua was a teacher and rabbi. He was not just a run of the mill rabbi, he was one of the greatest, even in his day. Yeshua was permitted the highest honor of interpreting the Laws of Moses, an honor only reserved for the two or three greatest living rabbis of any time. It would have been a major honor to learn from him. But to do so meant walking with him as he traveled, or to walk in his dust, another local idiom.

A rabbi's yoke was not negative in their culture. It was a special honor, especially if he chose you himself. It did mean sacrifice. It meant leaving your family and perhaps even your home town to go wherever the teacher went. Not only did you travel with him but you disciplined your life to emulate him. We might say, "hook yourself to his wagon" to mean the same thing but in Yeshua's day, the level of commitment was far greater.

In Yeshua's day, taking on this responsibility was thought of as a very heavy burden to ask of someone, a painful experience. You became as it were, joined at the hip and became inseparable with your teacher, and separate from all that you hold dear, your family, your home town, everything. So Yeshua proclaimed the opposite of the local attitude toward discipling with him. His

burden is light, his yoke is easy. No other teaching rabbi of his day would have said that. It would diminish the teacher's reputation to say that. Yeshua was truly a unique person in his day, going against normal ways but exhibiting every characteristic of a great rabbi anyway. There was none like him, not before nor since.

But just to make sure that discipling with him was understood as not a bed of roses, he had this to say about following him:

And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Luke 9:58 [ESV])

He challenges some with other difficult statements.¹² It seems that those who did not have “the right stuff” were challenged. But others who did, he simply invited them and they responded. That makes the twelve apostles very special persons. They were not challenged, just invited and they responded without questions.

Another reason following Yeshua was a 'light burden' was what he would be asking his disciples to learn. In Galilee and Judea, the Pharisees dominated religious life. But, they had added much of their own ideas to the existing Laws of Moses, contrary to Torah. Jesus lighten the burden for his own disciples by eliminating the extra burdens of the Pharisees in accordance with this passage:

Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar. (Proverbs 30:6 [ESV])

One modern researcher calls these additions, “the iniquities of the Pharisees”. Their additions were thought of a hedges around the Mosaic Law. If Moses said to not take something, the Pharisees would say, “Not only that, but do not look at it either.”. Then another one would come along and say, “Do not even get near it.”. Then another would say, “Do not even think about it.”. And so on and so on until you could not go anywhere or do anything lest you sin. That mentality was a heavy burden!

¹² Luke 9:57-62

The Religion of the Pharisees

The Pharisee religion of the Jews has evolved since the 2nd century, into what is known today as Orthodox Judaism. Even in Yeshua's time, it had four burdensome characteristics.

#1 Two Torahs – Moses written Torah plus an oral Torah which only the Pharisees knew. This tradition of oral Torah was not written in Yeshua's day. It was eventually written down and is part of what today is called the Talmud. However, Yeshua knew its contents throughly.

#2 Authority of the rabbis – Only a few Pharisee rabbis could interpret Moses and make judgments. That gave them absolute authority and control over all religious life in Judea. When Yeshua interpreted Moses, it was a serious challenge to their authority. If he were really the son of God, then he had automatic authority from his Father in heaven. If true, they were in the back seat with Yeshua in charge. That could not be permitted. This was their main contention with him: his divine authority.

#3 Irrational Interpretation – With full authority over Law interpretation, they could say anything they wanted, to fit their own agenda. Yeshua interpreted Moses with honor, sense and love. That often did not fit with the Pharisee's agenda of control.

#4 Traditions of men – In Judaism, if they had done something for a long time, it became spiritual law, called a “precedence”. You can see this in the traditions of the Orthodox Jews. They froze their culture in the 16th century, in eastern Russia. That is the reason for their long coats, hats and curled long hair on the sides of their faces. Yeshua laid no such “precedence” burden on his disciples, he kept things light.

This can be seen in a Matthew pasage, when the Pharisees demanded to know why Yeshua's disciples did not wash their hands like the Pharisee's traditions demanded.

*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from
Jerusalem and said,*

J. L. Brown

Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat. (Matthew 15:1-2 [ESV])

Yeshua's answer is classic. He answered with a new question, a heavier question that the Pharisees dared not answer.

He answered them, And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?

For God commanded, Honor your father and your mother, and, Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.

But you say, If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, [an offering] (Matthew 15:3-5 [ESV])

Yeshua kept the focus on Moses and not any of the Pharisee additions and precedences.

He Said, They Said

Another passage which is somewhat contentious among modern theologians is when Yeshua directly responded to this question of how much Pharisee traditions to follow.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,

so practice and observe whatever they tell you—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. (Matthew 23:1-3 [ESV])

There was such a thing as a physical chair in the synagogues called “Moses Seat”. The Torah reader sat on it to read Torah. But when time came to discuss it, he would move off the chair. Whatever was said from the chair was Moses, whatever was said off the chair was not Moses. That is the background of the story.

In English, as in the Greek text, it sounds like the people should do what the Pharisees say but not follow what they actually do. But then the passage continues with a lengthy criticism of the Pharisees, the worst found anywhere in the gospels. It seems very contradictory to instruct the people to do as they say and then rip them up for what they say. There may be a solution which fits Yeshua's entire ministry but modern theologians do not generally accept it: a mistranslation or scribe copy error from an original Hebrew text to Greek.

That would mean that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew and to prove the mistranslation, you must find an original Hebrew text for this Matthew passage. Such a manuscript may very well exist. Matthew is thought, by nearly every biblical scholars, to be the most Hebraic gospel of the four. Many biblical scholars believe there once was an original Hebrew Matthew but lost in history.

There are a number of ancient records about the existence of a Hebrew Matthew. These records were written by trusted post apostolic scholars. The church historian, Eusebius¹³ (260 – 340 ACE) has this to say:

“For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence.”

Eusebius also comments in other places that Matthew was the translator of his gospel into Greek. Eusebius views both the Hebrew and the Greek versions of Matthew as equally truthful.¹⁴

There are several other post apostolic church leaders who also believe Matthew was originally written in Hebrew: Papias (100-120 AD), Pantaenus (?? – 200 AD), Epiphanius (320 – 403 AD),

13 Eusebius attended the council of Nicea, 325 ACE.

14 Longer documentation of the apostolic fathers in relation to a Hebrew Matthew can be found at <http://hebrewgospel.com/>

Augustine (354AD – 430 AD), Jerome (342 – 420 AD), Tertullian (160 – 220 AD) and others too.¹⁵

All this is fine but if a Hebrew Matthew does not exist today, it does the modern researcher no good to resolve the seeming contradiction in Matthew 23. However, such manuscript does exist. It was found with other 14th century documents belonging to a European rabbi and so named: Shem Tov.

There is much contention about this it because, while it claims to have been copied from a 2nd century manuscript of poor condition. It is possible that the rabbi's original manuscript was in such poor condition that some parts were unreadable and a Greek text was consulted to fill in missing words, thus explaining some of the Greek sounding Hebrew and obvious repairs to the text.

The problem passage of Matthew 23:3 in the Shem Tov manuscript shows a remarkable difference from both Greek and English and helps to resolve the apparent contradiction. A translation from the Hebrew Shem Tov text of Matthew 23:3 to English reads as follows:

*“The Pharisees and sages sit upon the seat of Moses. Therefore, all that **he** says to you, diligently do, but according to **their** reforms and their presidents do not do, because **they** talk but do not do.”¹⁶*

The difference is a singular pronoun versus a plural pronoun, changing “they” to “he”. In Hebrew, the difference between singular and plural is one very small letter – easy to overlook. If what Mr. Gorden has observed, then Yeshua is instructing his disciples to listen only to Moses and do what Moses says and ignore the hypocritical Pharisees. That fits with Yeshua's light burden for his disciples and the overall context of the passage. It also repeats the principle that Yeshua taught Moses' Laws and ignored the Pharisee additions and presidences.

15 Ibid

16 Translated by Nehemiah Gorden, “The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus”, page 48.

IMHO: There are many other features throughout the New Testament, that suggests that the all the writers were thinking culturally as Hebrews, even if writing in Greek. When scholars translate the New Testament Greek text back into Hebrew, many story telling idioms and Hebraic communication techniques reappear. That could not happen if the New Testament did not derive directly from the Hebrew's culture and perhaps the Hebrew language itself.

Second Enigma: First Century Culture

Education: In the first century, there was a educational structure described in the Jewish religious books found in the Talmud. Hebrew students, who excelled, could become teachers themselves. Once on their own, they would acquire disciples. These new teachers, if good enough, would gain many followers and gain their respect by the teacher's lessons and lifestyle. A top teacher earned the title 'rabbi' which means a 'great one'. The term is found in the New Testament, sixteen times in reference to Yeshua.

The word 'rabbi' is not Greek, nor English. There is no cultural equivalent word in Greek for the Hebrew concept of rabbi so the word is borrowed, and transliterated¹⁷ rather than translated. The term "teacher" lacks the degree of respect meant by the term "rabbi". The use of rabbi, along with other passages indicates Yeshua's educational background was far superior to the average Galilean or Judean.

Yeshua followed the standard educational path of first century Jewish boys. The Talmud describes of Jewish education like this: At five years of age, one is ready for the study of the Written Torah, at ten years of age for the study of the Oral Torah, at thirteen for bar mitzvah [the religious coming-of-age ceremony], at fifteen for the study of halachot [rabbinic legal decisions], at eighteen for marriage, at twenty for pursuing a vocation, at thirty for entering one's full vigor...¹⁸ Yeshua followed this path and excelled at each level.

By the time a student finished this fundamental education, he could recite most if not all of the five books of Moses. Graduation, at age twelve, required traveling to Jerusalem to participate in Passover at the Temple and be quizzed by the rabbis at the Jerusalem School of Torah. They would determine if the student could go on with further Torah studies and participate in

17 Transliterate means to phonetically spell a word in one language in another language.

18 <http://cometozion.org/Torah%20Scholar.htm>

the coming of age rite of Bar Mitzva a year later at age thirteen. However, Yeshua, being very advanced for his age, astonished the rabbis and spent extra time on his oral exams. He considered his education in Torah his occupation:

And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? (Luke 2:49 [KJV])

Yeshua's parents (Joseph and Mary) did not understand what he actually meant by this comment. They thought of Yeshua's father's business was carpentry. So young Yeshua returned to Nazareth where he began to learn Torah for his age level and learned Joseph's trade. At this level of education, he would learn from several teachers along side of the adults in the community. Learning Torah was a permanent passion for the ancient Jews, especially in the province of Galilee, even more so than in Judea.

Religious Culture: The culture of an area for a specific time period can be determined by the artifacts found by archaeologists.¹⁹ Biblical archaeologists and historians have found that while Judea had fallen under the influence of the Greek culture to a great degree,²⁰ Galilee was still nearly exclusively Hebrew in its culture in the 1st century. Greek and Roman artifacts do not show up in the archaeological record in Galilee until the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries.²¹ Judean (Jerusalem) archeology shows the Greek and Roman influence starting a century or two before Yeshua was born. It is not without divine providence that Jesus grew up and ministered in Galilee in the 1st century, the time and place of the last holdout for a nearly pure Hebrew culture. This also fits with Yeshua's stated mission:

19 Archeology is a branch of anthropology.

20 Some historians are quoted as saying the Sadducees, the priest of the Jerusalem Temple, were Jews by day but Greeks by night. The Temple priests also had Greek names. The influence of the Greek culture in Judea was that great.

21 Biblical Archeology Society essay, "The Galilee Jesus Knew" 2008, free download for members.

He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 15:24 [ESV])

Too often, without knowing the ancient Hebrew culture, Bible readers just assume Yeshua meant all Jews. However, culturally this is not what he meant. Jewish history tells us that the area of Palestine was divided into three provinces: Judea to the south, Galilee to the north and Samaria in the middle. Samaria was considered “back water country” and neither the Judeans nor the Galileans would have anything to do with them.

The disdain for the Samaritans had to do with several historical facts. It started with the fact that when the Hebrews were carried away to Babylon, Samaria was repopulated with non-Jewish imports. However, some Hebrew priest were permitted to stay behind and taught these new immigrants the existing version of the Hebrews' religion. However, the imports brought along their old pagan gods. What eventually emerged was a paganistic sect of Judaism, a mix of pagan and Jewish beliefs and practices. This grossly angered the Judeans and the Galileans who considered themselves to be the true keepers of the faith. To make matters worse, the Samaritans even built their own temple since neither the Judeans nor the Galileans would allow them to worship in their's.²²

Now combine this with a bit of subterfuge. When Judea came under attack in the centuries before Yeshua was born, the Samaritans agreed to ally with the Judeans to defend Judea. But when the time came, the Samaritans reneged and sided with the enemy. They did this twice, further infuriating the Judeans. All this made the Samaritans a hated people. This attitude is reflected in the gospel of John, but without applying cultural anthropology, and history, the reader would never know the reason nor the depth of the animosity against the Samaritans.

Galilee was more also commercial than Judea and had more varied kinds of schools. In Judea, the top school was the School of Torah but in Galilee, trade schools abounded as well as Torah

22 This is reflected in the Samaritan womans question about the correct worship location. John 4:20-26

schools. In Judea, there was a flourishing pursuit of Greek culture but in Galilee, they resisted, didn't learn Greek and cared little to nothing about Greek philosophy, Greek gods or Greek myths. Galileans were a working people highly devoted to Torah and Yehovah. They resembled what today in American is called, “fly over country”, the heart lands with their deep connections and devotion to traditional American values.

But all this aside, the main reason for Yeshua headquartering in Capernaum, the middle of Galilee, was what the area represented beyond its current state. In Jewish history, Judea represented the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Galilee was the area of the rest of Israel, the northern ten tribes. These were called the “lost tribes of Israel” and the “house of Ephraim”. Yeshua called them the “lost sheep of Israel”. Yeshua's ministry was to call back to Yehovah the lost tribes. There is a prophecy that when the messiah would come, he would reunite Israel, by bringing back the lost tribes to join with Judah.²³ Yeshua intended to do just that. Their current state of political affairs was not main the issue. Galilee was the lost tribes area.

Due to the prestige of Jerusalem in 1st century Jewish life and the Greeks' arrogant attitude about the superiority of their language and culture, the Galileans were thought of in Jerusalem, and throughout most of the Jewish world, as 'country hicks'.²⁴ The Galileans were narrow minded in religious devotion and resisted the influence of the Greek culture, including resisting learning any foreign language.²⁵ This can be seen in a passage which takes place in Jerusalem when the holy spirit was given at the celebration of Shavuot (Pentecost).

And they were amazed and astonished, saying, Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how

23 This restoration of the two sets of the Hebrew people is a common theme with the prophets. A shadow of this is in Genesis 45, when the ten sons of Jacob were united with Joseph's two sons in Egypt.

24 Their distinctive local accent also contributed to this attitude.

25 Josephus, 'Antiquity of the Jews', Section 20, Chapter 11, Paragraph 2

is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? (Acts 2:7-8 [ESV])

The ancient Hebrew culture was the culture of all the Tanakh (Old Testament) foretelling the savior of mankind, the Hebrew Messiah. Yeshua was also born at a time when the Middle East was relatively at peace due to Roman domination. One could book safe passage throughout most of the civilized world because of the Roman roads and commerce which were patrolled by the Roman military. Yeshua was born at a time and place, just before the ancient Hebrew culture was about to disappear but most of the civilized world was accessible. 1st century Israel and especially Galilee was a truly unique time and place in history!

There are some Bible researchers who also believe that the lost tribes migrated northward and populated much of Europe, and the British Isles. Eventually their descendants populated North America, making those populations Hebrew genetic descendants, not gentiles, though their cultures are western gentile. This raises the possibility that Yeshua might have been thinking about the redemption of the entire world by ministering in Galilee. No one knows but it's an interesting speculation.

As special as Yeshua was, due to his location and time in history, there is a major down side for us modern westerners. In Galilee, among the Israelites, existed a common knowledge of Torah and the culture of the Hebrew prophets. There was no need to explain cultural references or rabbinical idioms. But, as the Palestine became more Hellenized,²⁶ that cultural context for Yeshua's teachings, sayings and activities became less well known. Archeology reveals that even the Galilean Hebraic culture was over run by Greek and Roman culture by mid 2nd century, but not in the 1st century or earlier.

All this means that for gentiles and even for some Jews the correct understanding of Yeshua as a Hebrew was becoming overshadowed with Greek and Roman thinking as these foreign cultures diluted and corrupted the ancient Hebrew culture. This is reflected in the writings of Christians from the 2nd and 3rd

26 Hellenized means the culture was becoming Greek.

centuries and onward. Those writings reflect a distinct Greek way of thinking, contrary to the Hebrew scriptures.²⁷ Too often these post apostolic church leaders are quoted to prove that the “early church” believed the same doctrines as most of institutional Christianity today. This is a false use of those writings. What their writings really prove is how out of touch they were with the culture of the Yeshua and his apostles.

When the gentiles became the dominant ethnic group of the followers of Yeshua, everything changed. They changed the cultural definitions to suit a Greco-Roman way of thinking. They adopted a Greek definition of the former Hebrew Deity, they adjusted the Hebrew World View to fit the Greek world view. A Greek Belief Structure supplanted the Hebrew Belief Structure. For all purposes, the Hebrew influence on the Christian Faith was discounted and ignored. As of the middle of the 2nd century, the original Hebrew comprehension and practice of the Christian Faith had become another form altogether, it had become “westernized”.

The Christian Faith has been Greco-Roman since that time to the present. Our methods of understanding the Bible are purely modern western, reflecting this cultural change which took place over twenty centuries ago. Christians have been culturally out of touch with their savior and his apostles that long. Is it any wonder that teaching original Hebraic concepts, presented in the Bible, are vilified as heresy today?

By applying cultural anthropology today, can we unveil the original faith of Yeshua and his apostles. So many concepts are different in the culture of the Bible versus the modern West. Even the Hebrews' concept of their land where they lived has been lost.

The Desert Wilderness: To an ancient Hebrew, their land held special significance. My concept of wilderness, growing up in the farmlands of Ohio, was a state park or a wooded area surrounded by cultivated fields. But to the ancient Hebrews, it was an area outside of their towns where no one lived or had lived. Such areas, even in the first century, accounted for the majority of their

27 See “Bible Study Enigmas, Volume 1: What is a god-man Messiah?”

territories. But calling those untouched areas 'wilderness', misses how they viewed them.

The Hebrews' attitude about the wilderness was similar to the modern environmentalist's view: untarnished, pristine nature. To the ancient Hebrews, the desert wilderness was a place where Yehovah's creation was in perfect balance. It's where one would go to reconnect with Yehovah and get spiritually balanced again. This is reflected in Yeshua going out into the desert wilderness after his baptism. He was contemplating his ministry, getting balanced with himself and his Father.

The story of his temptations is an Hebraic way of describing his thought process. He was tempted to make himself a god-like civil ruler with supernatural abilities to influence and control the people. He considered the wealth he could acquire with such a rulership. He could have done all this, but instead he chose to fall in line with the Hebrew prophets words about the messiah. For him it was a choice, a conscious decision and he did it where all of Yehovah's creation was in balance, in the desert wilderness. All city life in Yeshua's time was defined by its proximity to the desert. Going out into the wilderness is a spiritual experience that all the people living in that area practiced and relished. Even today, for most of us modern westerners, we often still think of camping in that manner. It's almost instinctive, built into our very nature.

A wilderness experience was not all fun and games. The desert wilderness was also dangerous and life threatening. Water and food was scarce. That was the reality for the ancient Hebrew shepherds. They would stand with their sheep and look out over an inhospitable terrain and think, "I'm going to die here without Yehovah's help". The desert wilderness was a teacher.

A sojourn through the desert wilderness was a spiritual event for the ancient Hebrews. It taught lessons about vulnerability, suffering, loss, dislocation and helplessness. A desert wilderness trek was a humbling experience. But in the midst of weakness, the spiritual man learns to depend on his God. This was the lesson of the desert wilderness.

In Yeshua's time, they would read the accounts of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years under Moses and think about the purifying process to become righteous enough to enter the promised land. They would see in their wanderings, not a bland historical account, but a rich story of the pain and suffering that precedes deliverance. They would see a grand shadow of the messiah in Moses. That is the Hebraic concept of entering into the “Kingdom of God” as Yeshua termed it: first the suffering to get into alignment with Yehovah, then the deliverance.

A Faithful Shepherd: Just as the wilderness was a teacher, so also the shepherd who had the skills to sustain his sheep in such an unforgiving place. The shepherd was also a shadow of the messiah for the ancient Hebrews. With the ancient Hebrews' close association to the wilderness comes an intimate understanding of the shepherd, his abilities and character. To them, the shepherd was the highest occupation. Their great king David, was a highly skilled shepherd.

Psalms 23 lists the skills of the shepherd. By this concrete metaphor, the shepherd's skills represents how Yehovah cares for them. That makes Psalms 23 the Hebrew's love chapter. Yeshua's story of the shepherd who left his flock to find and redeem the one lost sheep would have been very inspiring to his audience! Without having grown up in that culture, the full impact of the lesson is lost on us modern westerners.

Yeshua's proclamation in the gospel of John that he was Yehovah's promised shepherd would have had an astounding impact on his audience.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11 [ESV])

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,

*just as the Father knows me and I know the Father;
and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:14-15
[ESV])*

To us, it is just a nice story. But to Yeshua's audience, they would have been shaken and moved to tears. Here was the MESSIAH! They would have been moved to fall down before him in worshipful respect. His pronouncement was so wild to some that it caused divisions among his listeners. Either he was telling the truth or he was possessed of a demon which is what some thought. This story does not evoke such emotions by westerners today. That's how out of touch we are with the ancient Hebrew culture!

The Rock of Our Salvation: Believe it or not, rocks have a spiritual significance in the culture of the ancient middle east. Going back to Moses, he struck a rock at mount Sinai, and life preserving water gushed out. With small rocks, David defeated Goliath.²⁸ Judea, Samaria and Galilee are rock strewn areas. No one would consider walking at night without a torch or lamp just to avoid stumbling over rocks in the path. Stumbling over rocks was a very clear metaphor for Yeshua's audience. He used it in his story of the good seed (Matthew 13:4-9; Mark 4:4-9; Luke 8:4-8).

Rocks had been a significant part of the Hebrews' heritage. They would pile up rocks for sacrificial alters. They would also pile up rocks and give piles names to commemorate events. Rock piles were used to mark the corners of fields. Moving such rock pile markers was severely punished in the Mosaic Law. Rocks were very important in their culture.

Homes and synagogues were made of rocks. A stone mason was a very highly respected occupation. In Yeshua's day, a carpenter, was not just a worker with wood but also with stone. The two trades were often not separated. The Greek word "tekton" is usually translated carpenter but it actually means "master craftsman". It can be applied to any trade skill but usually applied to wood and stone workers – their main building

28 Rock throwing is still an instinctive way middle easterners fight in the streets of modern cities.

materials. Yeshua might just as well have been a stone mason as a carpenter. That might make some of his lessons even more pointed.²⁹

In the desert wilderness, rocks had another value. A very large rock could provide shade and shelter. In an emergency, it could provide safety from a robber or an enemy. In that sense, a large rock represented salvation in the culture. Consider David's view of rocks, as the shepherd king who tended sheep flocks in the wilderness:

The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalms 18:2 [ESV])

The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation— (Psalms 18:46 [ESV])

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalms 19:14 [ESV])

IMHO: If we are to fully comprehend our Savior, we must get up to speed on the culture of the ancient Hebrews, their time and their place. Every humble believer needs to become an “amateur biblical anthropologists”.

²⁹ Only three miles from Nazareth was the Roman city, Sepphoris, under construction in the 1st century. Stone masons would have been in demand for it.

Third Enigma: The Sage Rabbi Yeshua

There is a very popular belief among modern Christians that the Mosaic Law has nothing to do with the modern practice of the Faith. This belief is founded upon viewing certain scriptures from a nearsighted modern western vision of scripture, founded upon interpreting phrases without their cultural context.

This errant doctrine is most often based on two passages in the New Testament, one by Yeshua and the other by Paul, especially as translated in the King James Version.

*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.
(Matthew 5:17 [KJV])*

There are three cultural concepts in this passage. The first is what did the 1st century followers of Yeshua understand when he said “The Law”. To us modern westerners, a law is a rule with consequences if broken. To the listeners of Yeshua, it had a very different meaning. As we saw in Volume 1 of this series, what is called “law” in Greek is Torah in Hebrew. Law is the best word to describe Moses' writings when referenced in the Greek language but it fails to completely to convey the Hebraic thought. To Yeshua's listeners, Torah meant far more than do this and don't do that. It was Yehovah's³⁰ instruction for living life.

The second cultural concept Yeshua was employing something known as an “idiom”,³¹ a form of speech peculiar to a culture. This one is found in the Jewish religious book, the Talmud, which is why many call it a “rabbinical idiom”. This saying was common in Yeshua's day among the rabbis. Rabbis would listen

30 Yehovah equals Jehovah equals God equals YHWH, the Hebrew name of God which no one is truly certain how to pronounce. The spelling used in this book reflects the vowel pointing found in the Aleppo Codex and discovered by Dead Sea project researcher, Nehemiah Gordon.

31 See Appendix: Hebrew Idioms for a list of idioms with biblical references.

as others were teaching Torah. If the rabbi misrepresented Moses, he was said to be destroying Moses or destroying the law. The phrase carried no meaning beyond teaching Torah.

The third cultural feature is what does it mean to 'fulfill' the law. Too often, this is taken by modern westerners as completion of a prophecy. This is not what is meant by this rabbinical idiom. Fulfilling the Law is to teach and live it correctly. A rabbi can fulfill the law by interpreting it accurately and conducting himself exactly in accordance with what the Law says.

Thus, Yeshua is saying that he both taught and lived the Mosaic Law accurately. Yeshua did not cross Moses in anything he ever said or did. Those who wish to live only by the teachings of Yeshua are in effect, living according to Yeshua's interpretation of Moses. Even for modern Christians, Moses as taught by Yeshua, is still in effect in spite of their denials about the Law.³²

A Pauline passage is misunderstood. It says something quite different from terminating the Law when read in the cultural context:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4 [ESV])

Too often, only the first phrase is remembered or quoted. However, a simple rereading reveals that this passage does not say, Christ terminated the Law. The point is that the Christ is the focus, the main point of the Law. Even the Greek word translated 'end' does not mean terminate. The word is 'telos' (Strong's # 5056) which means "the point aimed at as a limit". The Hebrew concept behind this is how a Hebrew thinks of an end. To a nomadic sheep herder (the culture of the language), he looks out to the horizon as the end of things. It's as far as he can see is the end. The Hebrew language even uses this concrete idea of horizon for our abstract notion of eternal. To a Hebrew, the horizon means a focus point, a place that is a long way off. When Moses gave

32 A longer discussion of this rabbinical idiom can be found in "New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus" by David Bivin, chapter 14.

the Law on Mt. Sinai, he said it was forever but he did not mean eternally in our western sense, he meant, “as far as we can see”.

This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. (Exodus 12:14 [ESV])

The horizon was his concrete symbol for where to focus afar off. That's the Hebraic meaning that Paul was referring to. The Mosaic Law focuses our attention on the Messiah and does so for the purpose of righteousness³³. It is valid for as long as there are humans on the earth, as far as we can see. Moses was given Torah, the instructions of Yehovah, for man to live by for a very long time, at least until the messiah comes. We know today that the messiah came and will eventually, return again, set up his kingdom on earth. At that time, his instructions will be followed ... to the letter. At that time, Yeshua's instructions will supersede Moses and all the other prophets who came after him, but not before his kingdom is established. That means that Yehovah's instructions are still to be followed, as much as one can do in his situation. At no time since Moses has godly instructions for living been nullified or superseded. Yehovah is still man's sovereign.

Another example of how the Hebrews lacked “an inquiring mind” for exact detail is how they would understand Noah's ark. The description is given in Torah, in exact measurements of cubits which engineers can appreciate. In modern times, people like to build replicas, even full sized ones and speculate on how much weight it could carry, number of animals, provisions needed and on and on. However, an ancient Hebrew hearing the story would only conclude it was a really big boat with a lot of animals on it. Some researchers into the ancient Hebrew culture say that the modern sciences would never have sprung up among the Hebrews. They just didn't ask questions about how Yehovah did things or why. It was enough that he did – end of discussion. They had more pressing matters to attend to like finding enough water

³³ Righteousness is not a spiritual term to the Hebrews. It meant to live uprightly, according to Torah, which is acceptable to Yehovah.

for their flocks, tutoring the children in Torah, teaching them family genealogies and passing on the family history through story telling.

Story telling was the main method of passing on family history and instructing children about moral lessons. The Hebrews raised story telling to an art form. Children were to memorize the stories, word for word just as they were expected to memorize Torah. They were drilled every night around the camp fires of the nomadic people, just like the Bedouin desert dwellers do today.

There was no better way to convey spiritual truths than story telling and sometimes no better way to hide some things too. It should not be surprising that Yeshua told stories to teach every lesson. We call them 'parables'³⁴ but his audience would have heard lessons presented in the familiar way they were used to. However, that did not mean they always understood every part of the lesson. Yeshua's parables usually had a twist that arrested the listener's attention and sometimes caused confusion over the real meaning of the story ... and it was intentional.

Even the apostles asked for explanations of some of the parables.

Then the disciples came and said to him, Why do you speak to them in parables?

And he answered them, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. (Matthew 13:10-11 [ESV])

Following this comment, he tells his apostles that they are supposed to know the meaning of his stories. Then he explains the parable of the sower and the seed. Then he explains several other parables to his apostles but not the crowds. When he finishes explaining, he checks up on their comprehension:

34 A parable is a figure of speech, an extended metaphor or simile.

Have you understood all these things? They said to him, Yes. (Matthew 13:51 [ESV])

At this point, he will expect his apostles, the students of the Galilean sage, to remember the stories and their lessons.

The most fundamental of Yeshua's teachings was his main message, "The Kingdom of God is near". This is where he started his ministry, right where John the Baptist left off.³⁵

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God,

and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:14-15 [ESV])

In Volume 1 of this series, we discussed the *Hebrew Concept of Agency*. By that cultural feature, a representative, the agent, was to be treated and addressed as the principle himself. In that respect, the principle was near or at hand. This is the cultural sense of Yeshua's proclamation. While he, as the future king of the heavenly kingdom was present, that kingdom was near at hand. Much of Yeshua's teachings about the kingdom, he did as its prime representative bringing to mind that future kingdom.

In Christianity there is much confusion about Yeshua's kingdom message. Some think he meant a spiritual thing or a mental attitude. But within the culture, in accordance with the prophets, it meant a physical kingdom, with a king and territory. The kingdom was the promised land, the land was the place of the future kingdom – no difference. The kingdom message and the land were inseparable.

Yeshua was making a well known point about the kingdom. He was referencing the prophet Daniel:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man,

35 Also see, Matthew 3:2 and Matthew 10:7.

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and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14 [ESV])

And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them. (Daniel 7:27 [ESV])

That kingdom is obviously future. It is the one described by John in his revelation of Yeshua, a kingdom that comes down from heaven, with Jerusalem as its capital:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, (Revelation of John 21:10 [ESV])

This is no spiritual state of mind. This is physical, in the material realm of the earth and humans. That's the kingdom of Yeshua's message. Just to make this certain, in spite of theologians and commentators, John also recorded in his gospel that this kingdom was not of this age or era:

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world [cosmos]. If my kingdom were of this world [cosmos], my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world [cosmos]. (John 18:36 [ESV])

Yeshua said that he was of a kingdom that was not of this “cosmos” (Strong’s #2889). The Greek concept for this word is the universe. Yeshua is saying, his kingdom doesn't even belong to this universe. How can that be? Peter makes the case that this universe will end in a cleansing fire. Another universe will be inaugurated by Yehovah. Universe may then be thought of as an 'age' or 'era'. It is in that new age that the kingdom of God will exist. This present heaven and earth will pass away just like the first one did in the time of Noah. The third heavens and earth is the kingdom of God cosmos.

So all of Yeshua's teachings about the kingdom of God are futuristic. But that too fits with the culture. Since Abraham, the Hebrew people have looked forward to dwelling in the promised land. They did for a little while after Joshua and the children of Israel conquered Canaan but that was a far cry from the prophets' description of the promised land. It was also a far from Yeshua's description of the kingdom of God. That too was a shadow of things to come for the Galileans and Judeans of the 1st century.

Of course, for those who believed Yeshua was indeed the promised king of the promised land, they thought the kingdom was going to be set up soon.

As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. (Luke 19:11 [ESV])

The point of the story was a noble man who is awarded a kingdom by going away to receive it. Upon his return, he takes an account of what his people have done in his absence. To those who did well, a reward is given. To those who have not done well, a punishment. So it will be with Yeshua. He must go away to receive his kingdom. It comes to earth when he comes back, having received his kingdom. At that time, there will be an accounting of his followers. This theme is reflected in the teachings of his apostles after Shavuot (Pentecost) also.

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Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. (Colossians 4:23-25 [ESV])

Yeshua's message of a future kingdom was continued by his apostles and even the apostle Paul, contrary to what some modern Bible commentators say.

He [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, [in his own rented house] and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 1:30-31 [ESV])

The apostle Paul and all the other apostles preached the kingdom of God is at hand, all throughout their respective ministries. It is the central message of gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

IMHO: Today, a different gospel is preached. Why? You'll just have to ask the proponents of this new gospel. There is no biblical reason to change the original message other than a translation from the Hebrew culture to our Greco-Roman culture. That cross cultural change resulted in reinventing of the Yeshua's gospel itself.

Today, the gospel message should still be a prophetic as it was for Yeshua: The Kingdom of God is near, prepare yourself to enter it.

Fourth Enigma: Pentecost Festival

Every ancient middle eastern disciple of a notable rabbi, at some time must break off and become a worker or teacher in his own right. Shavuot, or Pentecost, was that kind of an event for the twelve apostles. It was their graduation day.

Yeshua had taught his apostles and they had disciplined themselves to emulate him. The major advantage Yeshua had over all other sages, was his anointing of holy spirit at his baptism. Yeshua's disciples got a taste of doing Yeshua's ministry in his stead, when he sent them out with his authority to minister.³⁶ At Shavuot (Pentecost), Yeshua's apostles were anointed with the same authority as Yeshua had by receiving the anointing of holy spirit themselves.

Most Christians do not connect Jewish history or Jewish festivals with their reading of the New Testament. To most Bible readers, Christianity starts in the gospels. To others, Christianity starts at Shavuot, calling it the birth of the church. But, for those living in that day, there was no new beginning, nor restart of anything, not even of Yeshua's ministry. For his apostles the only change was a shift in who was responsible for proclaiming the "Kingdom is at hand" message of Yeshua and do it with supernatural abilities like Yeshua had done.

In popular Christianity, there are more myths about Pentecost than there are truthful facts. Most Christians think holy spirit was given to about one hundred and twenty, hidden away in an upper room. Then the apostles took to the streets to proclaim it. This view of Pentecost is a myth which the application of biblical anthropology quickly dispels.

Pentecost was one of three festivals which Jewish men were expected to attend in Jerusalem. It did not matter if you lived in Judea, Galilee or in a far country. Consequently, Jerusalem would swell to three and four times its normal population for these festivals. The apostles might not have had a place to sleep had

³⁶ Matthew 10:5-7, Mark 6:7

they not arrived in Jerusalem well in advance. The crowds would have exceeded Disney World on a holiday! At the Temple prayer times, the focus of the festival, it was standing room only. On the day of Pentecost, devout Jews would have arrived very early in the morning to get a good seat. The apostles, being devout religious men, would have arrived one or two hours before the mid morning prayer time. That's where they were and why they were in the Temple at the third hour of the day (9 AM) – the mid morning prayer time.

The Pentecost record also says there were women gathered with them. Their culture had very specific rules regarding the mixing of men and women. Women were not allowed in the Temple proper. But they were permitted in the court of the gentiles, also called Solomon's Portico – an attached court yard to the east of the Temple. Here, both gentiles and women could gather with Jewish men.

Another place women were not permitted was in the bed chambers of men. The apostles had rented a room³⁷ for their stay in Jerusalem which the record calls an upper room. That was their bed chamber, their bed and breakfast room. No woman was allowed in that room while men were occupying it. Even servants for the men's rooms had to be male. If a woman ever entered the quarters of men, she would be instantly disgraced, her family reputation tarnished for the rest of her life. No self respecting woman in the middle east would ever do such a thing, much less a devout Jewish woman!

The main reason popular Christianity says holy spirit was given in a house is this passage:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. (Acts 2:1-2 [ESV])

37 The upper room in Jerusalem would have been a roof top with a low wall around the flat roof. Also see page 11, under Hebrew Idioms.

It is assumed that “the entire house” means the rental facility of the apostles, their upper room where women were also gathered. We have already seen that such a proposition must be false. But does “house” always mean a family home or bed and breakfast inn? Not at all.

The word house is generic and its use is determined by context. In Jerusalem, The House means Temple. It was an idiom, a shorthand expression.

And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold,

saying to them, It is written, My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers. (Luke 19:45-46 [ESV])

What were the apostles doing early in the morning on the great prayer day of Pentecost? Praying in the house of prayer, the Temple!

Resetting the Pentecostal event, the apostles were quietly sitting (on their knees, like Muslims pray today), in Solomon's Portico on the east side of the Temple, surrounded, elbow to elbow with hundreds of other devout Jewish men and women.

Then the whole Temple is filled with a sound like a heavy breathing. This was the sign Yeshua gave them at the last supper, when he instructed them in how to recognize the out pouring of holy spirit.

Jesus said to them again, Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.

And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. (John 20:21-22 [ESV])

Some Bible commentators say the apostles received holy spirit at that time. Though the idea is somewhat popular, it is obviously false. Yeshua had called holy spirit, a helper, or an assistant to

help them in his absence. It would come only if he left, so this incident cannot be the receiving of holy spirit.

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. (John 16:7 [ESV])

How can something be given when Yeshua said it would only come if he was absent? The fact that he was present must mean that the record in John 20:21-22 is not the actual event but instructional, to prepare the apostles for receiving holy spirit. That is exactly what Yeshua is doing, he demonstrated the sign of the outpouring of holy spirit by exhaling his breath on them. Please note, these instructions were given in the upper room (roof top) with no else present but the twelve. Only the apostles knew the sign of the outpouring of holy spirit.

What the apostles did not know, was what day or what hour this might happen. However, Pentecost, with its throngs of people filling the Temple, was a pretty good guess. Since it had not happened in the days leading up to Pentecost, their excitement was probably at its peak on that day.

Another question that should be asked, but rarely comes up, is why would the apostles open their mouths and say anything when they saw and heard the signs of the out pouring of holy spirit. Why speak out at all?

Here again, culture provides some insight. The Hebrews all knew from their study of Torah that when the spirit of the Lord came upon men of old, they opened their mouths and spoke the Word of the Lord. That's how the ancient Hebrew prophets prophesied, by the filling of Yehovah's spirit. To them, it was obvious to do the same thing. What surprised them and everyone around them was that the languages they spoke were not Hebrew, nor Aramaic nor even languages that they knew. Remember, they were from Galilee where religious jealousy discouraged them from learning any language other than Hebrew.

The miracle of Pentecost was not that they spoke but that they did so in language unknown to them. That does not mean that speaking in tongues is an unknown language to anyone, just unknown to the one speaking. Indeed, on that day, there were only twelve foreign languages listed ... one for each apostle. There were not one hundred and twenty languages spoken, only twelve, a different one for each apostle. Further, all the speakers were called Galileans, as indicated by their 'hick accents'. In the this large mixed crowd gathered in the Temple, only a small group were identified as Galileans, the only ones speaking in foreign languages.³⁸

The outpouring of holy spirit, was a public event, in the Temple, witnessed by hundreds of devout Jews. However, the outpouring of holy spirit was soon spread around until over three thousand people received holy spirit as evidenced by more people speaking in tongues. How else would anyone have known they were all filled with holy spirit without this obvious obvious sign? Remember, these people were culturally Hebrews, with their emphasis on what can be seen and heard. If they couldn't see or hear or touch something, it was not real to them. That culture required action to validate ideas. To them, without concrete action or something obvious in the realm of their senses, there was no abstract reality.

The book of James makes this aspect of the Hebrew culture clear:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14 [ESV])

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:24 [ESV])

In that culture, a man can think or profess to think anything, but his actions reveal what he truly does think. The common saying, "Take it on Faith" would be laughable to a Hebrew. No

³⁸ For another view on this topic:
<http://ourrabbijesus.com/2012/05/31/what-really-happened-at-pentecost/>

Hebrew would take something on faith alone. That's the whole point of the book of James. The Hebrew needs to see some action to prove the belief is true. That's why speaking in tongues was an absolute necessity in the 1st century to prove one had accepted the reality of trust in the messiah.

Some people think that speaking in tongues and prophecy was fairly rare and perhaps isolated to the Corinthian believers. However, a careful reading of the church gospel, the book of Acts,³⁹ reveals it was common throughout the assemblies of believers in the 1st century. It was the only way Peter would have accepted the conversion of gentiles, to hear them speak in tongues. This happened with Cornelius,⁴⁰ the Roman centurion and his household.

Perhaps fortunately for us, the Corinthian believers needed instruction in how to properly handle this expression of holy spirit. Paul devotes considerable space in his first letter to them on this topic alone. Yet, the modern church ignores these chapters only to cherry pick isolated verses for preaching and teaching. Why devote so much instruction for expressing holy spirit in public meetings? Very little else gets this much attention. Have we ignored an important aspect of the faith? Popular theology has ignored this section because it does not fit into their modern Greco-Roman concept of Christianity.

IMHO: What we have seen in this apostleship graduation, is that popular theology is not always founded on biblical and cultural facts. Beware of pop-theology, it can be misleading and misdirecting. Only by applying cultural anthropology, by studying the ancient Hebrew culture can one truly relive the events and learn the proper lessons of the Bible.

Misunderstanding the culture of the times, leads Bible readers to uneducated and errant views about biblical events

39 Acts is a much a gospel as the previous four. All five books tell a story about beginnings. The first four about Yeshua, the last one, about what happened after the apostles graduated into their own ministries.

40 Acts 10:1-48. The story is retold in Acts 11:1-18.

Fifth Enigma: The Pharisee Saul

Different scholars voice very different views on what this man preached and believed. There are even some scholars who believe Saul was out to discredit the religion of the Jews. Some so called scholars think Saul was a liar, a hypocrite, an egocentric dishonest preacher who only considered his own reputation and following. However once the whole biblical record of him is considered and a cultural understanding of his time and place is applied, Saul⁴¹ becomes a man who carried on the mission and message of Yeshua to the gentiles, without change. By applying cultural anthropology, Saul becomes the finest example of a believing Jew anyone could imagine.

Saul was a devout Pharisee, more devout than most of his peers. That was the same Jewish sect who gave Yeshua much trouble and were responsible for his death. To the Pharisees, these Nazarenes⁴², were the extremists and religious terrorists. The Pharisees had the same contempt for them that militant Islamics have toward Christians today. They were worthy of persecution and death in the opinion of the 1st century Pharisees. This was Saul's attitude, until he met Yeshua himself, then everything changed.

Saul's conversion was as dramatic as any conversion could be. He was on his way to persecute and imprison Nazarenes in Damascus. He carried a document from the Jerusalem court, the Sanhedrin, proving his official authority. He was hell bent on putting these religious terrorists down and quell the rebellion. In his mind, he was on a mission from Yehovah to purify the religion of the Jews.

41 Saul was his Hebrew name, Paul was his name in Greek. He did not have a name change, just the same name in two different languages.

42 Nazarenes was the name describing Jews who followed Yeshua, the Jewish Sage from Nazareth.

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But Yeshua met him along the way and confronted his attitude, beliefs and mission. Yeshua came to him in a bright light and spoke to him, probably in Hebrew. That event left Saul so shaken that he abandoned his mission. The bright light of Yeshua even left him temporarily blind. From then on, Saul was a changed man. The biblical record does not indicate that he stopped being a Pharisee but he had a whole new perspective on their attitudes and view of the Nazarenes. Indeed, later in the book of Acts, it becomes obvious that some Pharisees believed in Yeshua themselves. Little did Saul know at that time, he was not the first Pharisee convert to the Nazarene form of Judaism.⁴³

Saul was the best of Phariseeism, by his own word:

though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law [in the law] blameless. (Philippians 3:4-6 [ESV])

If you examine the whole of Saul's activities, by using the perspective of an anthropologist, you can see that while he ministered to the gentiles, he conducted himself as a Pharisee ... but with a more magnanimous attitude. He did that by redefining some narrow cultural attitudes of the Pharisees into a more broad, Torah based, set of views. Consequently, Paul did not teach the gentiles,

⁴³ Note that in the 1st century Judea, Samaria and Galilee, Christianity was not a separate faith from Judaism, it was just one more sect, a subversive movement, within the religion of the Jews.

the Pharisee Oral Law, just written Torah. That was the point of contention later on, not teaching gentiles Pharisee Oral Law and not requiring them to convert to Judaism through circumcision. In accordance with his gentile ministry, he began to use his Greek name, Paul.

In Judea and Galilee, all the devout Jews practiced the Pharisee form of their religion. The Pharisees exclusively controlled education in the synagogues and taught their Oral Law as just as inspired and divinely inspired as Moses. Anyone who wanted to worship the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had to convert to the Pharisee version of the religion of the Jews. There was no other option. This was the belief of the Judean Nazarenes as well. To become a follower of Yeshua, you still had to convert and accept circumcision and perform the Oral Law (works of the law in rabbinical jargon). It was just a given and no one dared challenge this belief ... until God did.

What changed was that Peter went to the house of Cornelius, in Joppa, and told the story of Yeshua including their Pentecost experience. Suddenly, these gentiles manifested the out pouring of holy spirit and spoke in tongues and prophesied. That outward expression of holy spirit proved that they too had accepted Yeshua as their messiah but they were still uncircumcised and unbaptized gentiles! That should not have been possible! Their theology dictated that they must perform the rites of conversion, as Peter had thought, up to that moment. Now it appeared that conversion to the Pharisee version of Judaism was not necessary to become a true follower of Yeshua. That was a crisis of faith for Peter and the rest of the Nazarenes.

Now, it appears that their whole concept of what is required for becoming a follower of Yeshua was in error. This same revelation was given to Paul as well. However, he worked on his Torah teachings to explain it. That's where the concept of following Yeshua as a matter of heart and faith alone originates. That did not mean that the concept of a combination of faith and works as a

foundation for salvation was null and void. But Paul did conceive that one could believe in Yeshua for redemption without having to make it real by converting to Judaism. It was real even if you did not act in full accordance with the Judean lifestyle.

There is much confusion in Christianity today over this change in the belief structure of the Nazarenes. In the 1st century there was not only confusion but great animosity over this concept. Mostly it was Paul who preached this message and was condemned for it by the believing Pharisees in Jerusalem. In Judea, this message was heresy but for the gentiles in the outlying towns, it was a relief. The whole concept of cutting off the penis foreskin of adult men with a knife just to be qualified to worship the God of the Jews was quite discouraging ... to say the least. Then to pile on top of insult to your body, all the Oral Laws of the Pharisees too? That was just not practical or desirable for gentiles. Not surprisingly, few gentiles converted to Judaism.

But Paul was given this revelation personally by Yeshua and embraced the Joppa experience as the foundation for his apostleship to the gentiles. The degree that his ministry was founded on this revelation is somewhat obscure in our English Bibles and the fact that some alterations to his letters apparently have occurred in the transmission of his letters from the 1st century to the present. Not everything makes perfect sense about Paul's teachings today, at least as we have a record of them. However, a few mysterious things can be unraveled to clear up our view of this enigmatic figure, Paul.

A few scholars search the ancient non-inspired Jewish writings looking for cultural details which might illuminate the Bible and especially the New Testament. While such dull reading often does not reveal much, sometimes gems are discovered. One such gem is that Paul used a lot more Jewish jargon than most readers suppose, not having been exposed to it. The ancient rabbis had "code words" and phrases for things common to them but are not in use today. One such code is things that mean conversion to Judaism by rites,

ceremonies and teachings in Oral Law. They used the phrase, “works of the Law” and “circumcision” to mean the whole process of converting to Phariseeism style Judaism. This bit of anthropological insight suddenly changes how we understand what Paul is talking about in Romans and Galatians. Consider this passage in Romans:

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— (Romans 3:20-21 [ESV])

What Paul is saying is that no man is justified in God's sight by converting to Judaism. But through the Mosaic Law (The Law) comes the knowledge of sin (doing wrong). The right way to live (righteousness) has been expressed apart from the Mosaic Law (viz the Joppa event) although the Mosaic Law and the Hebrew prophets attest to this.

The Hebrew prophets had prophesied that even the gentiles would eventually be justified. The Pharisees interpreted that to mean they would convert to their form of their religion to Phariseeism but that is not what the prophets actually said (more Pharisee additions).

Again in the same passage:

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Romans 3:28 [ESV])

Paul was teaching that a person can be justified, reconciled to Yehovah, apart from conversion to Pharisee Judaism. Now that would not bode well for even the believing Pharisees in Jerusalem

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who considered themselves the keepers of the true Nazarene faith. Paul makes this same point with the Galatians.

yet we know that a person is not justified [counted righteous] by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, [through the faithfulness of Christ] so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:16 [ESV])

In this passage, Paul says three times, there is no justification by converting to Pharisee Judaism. He is not discounting the Mosaic Law or condemning the Hebrew prophets, just against converting to Phariseeism as a means of gaining righteousness. Again in Galatians:

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— (Galatians 3:5 [ESV])

See it now? The spirit of God does not justify by converting you to Pharisee Judaism. Justification is by faith without Judaism. But what of Paul's attitude about Mosaic Law itself?

So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Romans 7:12 [ESV])

This passage is a completely different attitude from converting to Judaism. To Paul, the Mosaic Law was divine and good. To Timothy he says this:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, (I Timothy 1:8 [ESV])

That is a totally different attitude than the attitude Paul has for converting to Judaism. There is a place for the Mosaic Law in Christianity but no place for Pharisee Judaism which is largely their

Oral Laws, their additions to Moses and their habits. So, is keeping the Mosaic Law contrary to Christianity? Not at all, it is what Yeshua taught and lived. It is what Paul taught and lived. But the burden of legalistic Phariseeism is not what Yeshua lived and taught and neither did the apostle Paul.

That does not mean that Paul abandoned living like a Pharisee himself. There is an extended record of Paul wanting to go to Jerusalem but warned against it in prophecies by believers and prophets. He went anyway and eventually got arrested. From that time on until he was executed in Rome, he was never free. So if being warned not to go, why did he anyway? Simple, he was a dyed in the wool Pharisee. He deemed it necessary to travel to Jerusalem, in spite of the dangers to himself, just to fulfill his role in life as a hard core Pharisee. Paul never stopped living as a Judean Pharisee, he just did not preach that cultural lifestyle for the gentiles.

IMOH: Paul was perfect apostle to the gentiles. He, himself grew up bilingual and multicultural. He had the courage of his convictions to hold fast to what he knew to be the truth, even to withstand beatings, whippings and ridicule. Pharisee Judaism was a lifestyle choice for himself but certainly not a formula for salvation. Pharisee Judaism was not a burden he was willing to place on the gentiles. He was backed in this conviction by the Jerusalem apostles, Peter and the half brother of Yeshua, James.

Why Peter and James never taught this truth to the believing Jews, no one knows but it is apparent from Acts and their writings that they did not. Fortunately, for all us modern gentile believers, Paul knew the truth and wrote it in his letters which we still have today.

Appendix: Hebrew Language Idioms

| Verse | Idiom | Meaning |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Gen 4:6 | Face fallen | sad |
| Gen 6:8 | Found grace in the eyes | accepted |
| Gen 22.17 | Seed | descendants |
| Gen 24.60 | Possess gates | capture cities |
| Gen 27.41 | Said in heart | thought to self |
| Gen 31.35 | The way of women | menstruation |
| Gen 40.13 | Lift up your head | restore to honor |
| Ex 1.5 | Loins | descendants |
| Ex 3.19 | Mighty hand | force |
| Ex 13.2 | Open the womb | be born |
| Ex 15.25 | Sweet water | water fit to drink |
| Ex 34.6 | Long of anger | slow to get angry |
| Lev. 20.18 | Her sickness | her period |
| Lev 22.6 | Soul | person |
| Deut 5.6 | House of bondage | (land of) slavery |
| Deut 8.14 | Heart lifted up | proud |
| Deut 15.7 | Close hand | selfish |
| Deut 20.8 | Heart melt | lose courage |

| Verse | Idiom | Meaning |
|--------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Deut 21.17 | Beginning of his strength | his firstborn |
| Deut 23.13 | Squat outside | defecate |
| Deut 23.13 | What comes from you | excrement |
| Deut 28.28 | Heart | mind |
| Josh 10.6 | Slack hands | abandon |
| Judges 13.5 | From the womb | from birth |
| 1 Sam 10.9 | gave him another heart | changed his attitude |
| 1 Sam 24.3 | covered his feet | relieved himself |
| 2 Sam 1.12 | house | nation |
| 1 Ki 2.10 | slept | died |
| 2 Ki 2.7 | sons of the prophets | group of prophets |
| 2 Ki 4.29 | gird up your loins | get ready |
| 2 Ki 19.26 | small of hand | weak |
| 2 Chr 25.17 | look in the face | meet each other in battle |
| 2 Chr 36.13 | stiffened his neck | became stubborn |
| Esther 1.7 | Open hand | generosity |
| Esther 1.14 | Saw his face | had access to him |
| Esther 2.21 | Send a hand against | assassinate |
| Esther 6.10 | let fall | neglect |
| Job 1.12 | Put hand on | harm |

Bible Study Enigmas, Volume II

| Verse | Idiom | Meaning |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Job 20.20 | Knew no quiet in their bellies | greedy |
| Job 23.16 | Soft heart | fearful |
| Job 31.10 | Kneel over | have sex with |
| Job 33.16 | Opens the ear | informs, reveals |
| Job 35.8 | Son of man | other humans |
| Ps 3.7 | Break teeth | make powerless |
| Ps 4.1 | Enlarge space | set free |
| Ps 6.7 | Eye is consumed | vision is blurred |
| Ps 7.3 | Iniquity in my hands | guilty |
| Ps 7.9 | Hearts and kidneys | thoughts and emotions |
| Ps 10.5 | Snorts | scoffs |
| Ps 11.6 | the portion of their cup | their destiny |
| Ps 12.2 | double heart | duplicitous |
| Ps 17.8 | Little man of the eye | pupil |
| Ps 24.4 | Clean hands | act purely |
| Ps 25.1 | Lift up my soul | pray |
| Ps 27.8 | Seek my face | seek me |
| Ps 33.18 | Eyes are upon | watches over |
| Ps 41.9 | Lifted heel against | turned against |
| Ps 75.5 | Lift horn | defy God |

| Verse | Idiom | Meaning |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Ps 89.13 | Right hand | might |
| Ps 89.22 | Son of wickedness | wicked person |
| Ps 90.12 | Number days | use time wisely |
| Ps 94.9 | Planted | created |
| Ps 102.2 | Hide your face | refuse to answer |
| Ps 121.1 | Lift up eyes | look up toward |
| Ps 124.3 | Swallowed alive | killed |
| Pro 17.22 | Dries bones | drains strength |
| Pro 22.9 | Good eye | generous |
| Pro 23.6 | Bad/Evil eye | stingy |
| Pro 18.20 | Fruit of the mouth | what someone says |
| Pro 24.20 | lamp will go out | will die |
| Song 2.17 | Until the day breathes | until dawn |
| Song 4.2 | none is bereaved | none is missing |
| Is 9.9 | Arrogance of heart | arrogant |
| Is 14.12 | Son of the morning | morning star |
| Is 52.7 | Feet | person |
| Is 57.4 | Open mouth wide | sneer |
| Is 60.16 countries | Suck the milk of nations | receive the wealth of other |

| Verse | Idiom | Meaning |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Is 61.3 | Oil of gladness | joy |
| Jer 4.19 | Walls pain | |
| Jer 4.30 | Seek your life | want to kill you |
| Jer 5.5 | Broken the yoke | rejected God's authority |
| Jer 6.10 | Ears are uncircumcised | don't listen |
| Jer 9.1 | waters | spring of water |
| Jer. 25.15 | Wine of wrath | my anger |
| Jer 50.33 | Sons of | people of |
| Jer 51.37 | Hissing | scorn |
| Lam 1.16 | Eyes run down with water | eyes flow with tears |
| Ezek 3.7 | Hard forehead | stubborn |
| Ezek 16.25 | Spread feet | offer self for sex |
| Ezek 16.26 | Big of phallus | lustful |
| Mal 1.11 | My name | me |

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