It is I think the problem of how to determine the theological ‘location’ of
the Gentile believers in Yeshua according to the (halachic) categories
available in traditional Judaism that has — more than anything else — led
FFOZ to adopt the idea of ‘divine invitation’. This ministry has left its
earlier position that the commandments of the Torah are equally obligatory
and binding for Jewish and Gentile believers in Messiah Yeshua. It is
difficult to say whether this new idea of invitation is adequate for Gentiles,
because of its inherent vagueness. But let me first, for the sake of coming
to terms with the problem, consider it from the traditional Jewish
perspective just mentioned.

In our days traditional Judaism acknowledges only two basic categories of
people: Jews and Gentiles. These are mutually exclusive, for Gentiles are
defined as non-Jews. Gentiles are also often called Noachides, but this
name is not exactly to the point for the reason that strictly speaking all
people — including Jews — are Noachides. The b’nei Avraham (the Jews)
are a special category and thus a sub-division within the all-compassing
category of b’nei Noach. The Noachide commandments — as outlined and
interpreted by traditional Judaism — thus apply to all humanity, not just to
non-Jews. These commandments are considered truly universal and binding
for both Jews and Gentiles.

At first sight the categories of first century Judaism seem to be at variance
with the current halachic division between Jew and Gentile. The first
century is known for its threefold division between Ger Tzedek, Ger Toshav
and Gentile. Noachide theology as we know it nowadays had not yet fully
taken shape. This was a later development, which was not fixed as part of the
halachah before the time of the composition of the Gemara. As was
noticed by Tim Hegg, the seven commandments of b’nei Noach seem to be
wholly absent from the Mishnah.

1 Boaz Michael and D. Thomas Lancaster, "‘One Law’ and the Messiah Gentile”, in: Messiah
Journal #101 2009/5769.

2 Tim Hegg, p. 7: «Never does the Mishnah mention a body of laws that, if followed, would
render a Gentile righteous and therefore fit for the world to come.» Tim Hegg, "Acts 15
and the Jerusalem Council” at TorahResource 2008. Downloadable at:
The mutually exclusive distinction between Jew and Gentile doesn’t conflict, however, with the earlier distinction between *Ger Tzedek*, *Ger Toshav* and Gentile. This threefold division of mankind was not replaced by a later twofold division. The division between Jews and non-Jews is simply a more *basic* division, and the division between the *Ger Toshav* and the Gentile *tout court* — *i.e.* the *pagan* Gentile — is a *subdivision* between two categories of non-Jews. The *Ger Tzedek* is the proselyte Jew. This threefold division is thus not at all obliterating the basic distinction between Jews and non-Jews.

Now the question is to which category the Gentile believers in Yeshua, the Gentile Christians, belong. If we take first the *twofold* division between Jews and non-Jews, it is clear that these Gentiles belong to the category of the non-Jews, since they are neither Jews by birth nor proselytes. According to the above mentioned *threefold* division the Gentile Christian is thus either just a plain Gentile (*i.e.* a pagan), or a *Ger Toshav*. By way of reduction it turns out that he is a *Ger Toshav*, because he cannot be honestly held to be a pagan. According to later terminology this almost equates to classifying the Gentile Christian as an *observant* Noachide, since he has renounced idolatry. This name would be appropriate at least for Gentile Christians of the first century, or the first two or three Christian centuries — not however for later Catholic Christians, who fell back into idolatrous practices.

Qua religious practice and level of observance the *Ger Toshav* was in between the pagan Gentile and the Jew. He had left Paganism, but he had not fully entered Judaism. His observance thus could vary between the levels of just avoiding idolatry on the one and full Jewish observance on the other — with the obvious exceptions only of circumcision and/or the *mikvah* of conversion. This seems to agree with the diverse levels of observance nowadays found among Gentile Christians who are attracted to Messianic Judaism.

On second thought a difficulty appears, however, when we consider the *theological terms* applied to Gentile believers in the Apostolic Writings. The Gentile believer is called ‘son of Avraham’ (in Gal. 3:29) and is viewed as somehow included in the house of Israel (Eph. 2:11-13, 19; 3:6). Clearly this does not correspond to the status of the *Ger Toshav*, who definitely is *not* a son of Avraham and is certainly *not* included in Israel. The big question that needs to be addressed here is: *In exactly what sense* is the Gentile believer included in Israel and considered a son of Avraham?

One of the possible theological options to handle this difficult question is to comply with the traditional categories outlined above and to relegate the NT language of ‘son of Avraham’ to the level of ultimate salvation and having a share in the World to Come. According to this scheme no *halachic*
status change whatsoever is implied in the case of a Gentile coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua. This option uses the distinction between this world and the World to Come to make sure that — like all other distinctions, e.g. between man and woman, free and slave (cf. Gal. 3:28) — the distinction between Jew and Gentile remains intact in this world. Equality between all believers, it says, is strictly reserved to the World to Come. The equality only consists in the status of all believers as belonging to Messiah and as being saved for eternity. Not, however, in an equality *qua halachic status* between Jews and Gentiles in this world.

It is questionable whether this theological option can fully account for the fact that all believers in Messiah form a strong physical and social unity, which is partly described in the Apostolic Scriptures in *Torah*-like terms like ‘assembly of God’ (1 Cor. 1:1) and ‘holy nation’ (1 Pe. 2:9), and partly in new terms like ‘body of Messiah’ (1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12-27, Eph. 1:23; 3:6; 4:4; Col. 1:18). The concept of a spiritual unity which leaves intact all the traditional distinctions seems hardly adequate to describe a *community* which is instructed by Paul to keep the *Pesach Seder* together (1 Cor. 5:7-8) — both Jews and Gentiles — as an expression of its corporate unity in Messiah, and which is supposed to collectively celebrate the *moadim*, as appears in Col. 2:16-17.

On the other hand it cannot be said that by their faith the believing Gentiles are now Jews or proselyte Jews. If they were, they would be included in the *halachic* community of Israel. To my knowledge there are no historical indications that the believing Gentiles were ever considered to be Jews. Not in Paul’s letters, not in the other Apostolic Scriptures and not by the established Jewish authorities of the day. The particular treatment of the commandment of circumcision by Paul also seems to be an indication of a peculiar and exceptional status of the Gentile believers.

Another indication for this peculiar and exceptional status can be found in Paul’s rulings on marriage. It is beyond doubt that Paul permitted intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles, only with the caution that the marriage of a believer should always be “equally yoked” or “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39), i.e. with a partner who shares the faith. This permission of Paul seems to conflict with the *halachah* of his day, which, as far as I know, only permitted a marriage with a person of Gentile descent after *halachic* conversion. Thus it seems that Paul draws *halachic* consequences from the new status of Gentiles “in Messiah”. And this is only natural. It would of be preposterous to unite the Gentile believers with strong social ties to the Jewish believers in one “body of Messiah” and one local community and yet forbid intermarriage. If intermarriage should be discouraged or prohibited the proper measure would be to form separate communities of Jews and Gentiles, as nowadays is advocated by the UMJC.
The question of intermarriage in the Paul’s congregations of course leads us to the broader problem how Jewish-Gentile interaction was viewed upon by the Jewish community at large. For example, was a Gentile who was known as a Ger Toshav included in the Synagogue community in any real and practical sense? It is certain that the Synagogue authorities were involved in getting him exempted from idolatrous religious obligations imposed on him by the Roman Empire. But were they part of the worshipping and learning community and invited to have table fellowship with the Jews? I hardly think so (cf. Acts 10:28), because, inevitably, this would lead to intermarriage, something strongly disapproved by traditional halachah.

All this contributes to the impression that the Gentile believers were in a kind of halachic limbo at that time. They were neither Jews, nor Gentile pagans, and they didn’t fit nicely into the subcategory of the Ger Toshav. It is clear that Paul considers Jewish and Gentile believers equal in Messiah, but to what extend that equality was intended by him to have real effects in this world in removing ancient and established legal distinctions is extremely difficult to figure out. FFOZ’s invitation theology should be considered as a provisional attempt to deal with this difficulty. It remains to be seen whether it is tenable in the long run, for it cannot be excluded that the concept of invitation theology is more fit to smooth or cover up hitherto unsolvable difficulties than it is capable really to address and tackle them.

There are many critical questions raised by this concept of divine invitation. I only mention two. First, in light of the fact that the validity of the Torah instructions requires to have them set forth in the form of commandments, a theology of invitation seems to undo the very structure of the Torah. Second, it is clear from the outset that not all Torah commandments can be viewed as invitations by Gentiles. There has to be accepted a minimum number of unconditional and unavoidable obligations. It is not clear in the new FFOZ theology what are the minimum observances to be kept by Gentiles and how they are to be derived from Scripture. The whole idea seems to steepled in inescapable vagueness.

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