

The Ancient Torah Cycle

By Glenn McWilliams

While the modern Messianic movement is in many ways a recent development, it is nonetheless rooted in the biblical history of the children of Israel. What we are witnessing in the sudden and rapid growth of the number of people leaving the Christian Church and other religions to embrace the teachings of the Torah is clearly a move of the Spirit of the Holy One. This sudden and rapid rise in the number of Torah-observant people from all over the world and from every ethnic group is nothing other than the fulfillment of the Scriptures.

***Deuteronomy 30:3** That then YHWH thy Elohim will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither YHWH thy Elohim hath scattered thee.*

***Isaiah 11:12** And He shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.*

***Isaiah 43:5-6** Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; ⁶I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth.*

***Isaiah 56:8** Adonai YHWH which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him.*

***Jeremiah 16:19** O YHWH, my strength, and my fortress, and my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come unto Thee from the ends of the earth, and shall say, Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity, and things wherein there is no profit.*

***Zechariah 8:23** Thus saith YHWH of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that Elohim is with you.*

***Acts 13:47** For so hath the Master commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.*

The children of Israel enjoyed life as a unified nation for a relatively short time in their history. They entered the land around the year 1406 BCE. These were the years of conquest. During this time the children of Israel were ruled by various *shoftim*, or judges, such as Gideon, Samson, and Deborah. This period of judges lasted until 1050 BCE when Saul was anointed as the first king over Israel.¹ Forty years later, in 1010 BCE, King David ascended to the throne and truly united the kingdom.² David reigned for forty years and then turned the kingdom over to his son Solomon in 970 BCE.³ Solomon built his palace and the Temple, and enlarged Israel's political and military prominence in the world. Upon Solomon's death in 931 BCE, his son Rehoboam became king and promptly divided the kingdom of Israel in two by

his ill-advised decision to exploit the people of Israel.⁴ It was at this time that the kingdom of Israel was divided into the House of Judah and the House of Israel.

Jeroboam, the king of the House of Israel, became concerned that his people would eventually return their loyalty to Rehoboam, king of Judah, because the Temple was located in the land of Judah. Jeroboam attempted to remedy this situation by building his own temples in the land of the House of Israel.⁵ Shamefully, Jeroboam erected golden calves in each of his temples. The idols and illegitimate priesthood of Jeroboam's temples led to unrestrained idolatry among the people of the northern tribes. Eventually The Holy One used the king of Assyria to chastise the Israelites, driving them from the land and scattering them to the ends of the earth.⁶ About two hundred years later the House of Judah would likewise be exiled into Babylon.⁷

While the northern tribes that constituted the House of Israel were scattered among all the nations, the House of Judah largely remained intact as they were deported to Babylon. In fact, many of the House of Judah established themselves firmly in Babylon. Seventy years after the deportation and exile of Judah, the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persians and then the Medes. The House of Judah was granted permission to return to the land of Israel and to rebuild the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.⁸

While seventy years may seem but a small blip in time in the grand scheme of Israel's long and ancient history, the significance of the Babylonian exile cannot be overestimated. Many of the children of Israel did not return to the land of Israel, but instead remained in Babylon and developed a very strong Jewish community there. This Babylonian Jewish community was still in place during the time of the Roman exile in 70 CE. For nearly 700 years the exiled Jewish Community thrived in Babylon, establishing synagogues and even academies. When Rome destroyed the second Temple and exiled the Jews from the land of Israel, many of these displaced Jews returned to the prosperous community in Babylon.

The influence of the Babylonian culture has left an indelible mark upon much of Judaism. We witness some of these influences even in the language of the Scriptures. Evidence of the Babylonian influence on exilic and post-exilic Judaism is witnessed in the sudden emergence of devils, demons, and the hierarchy of angels in the literature of Judah after the exile. There is no overt mention of devils, demons, or archangels in the Torah or the pre-exilic literature of Israel. All of these concepts come directly from Babylon.⁹ The Babylonian culture with its pagan, cultic practices has infected much of the known world, including Christianity. Many of the names assigned to the demons and angels mentioned in rabbinic and Christian literature come directly from Zoroastrianism. The writings of Zoroaster had a great impact upon the later rabbinic writings of the Babylonian Talmud.

*The Talmud was greatly influenced by Persian culture. It derives, in fact, much of its content directly from the Zend-Avesta....One finds in the Talmud not only Persian superstition and legend, but many legal decisions handed down in accordance with Persian life. Even the forms and expressions of the literary Pahlavi entered into the Talmud in no small way. The Persian influence on the Talmud is so great that, at times, it is difficult to separate what is Jewish from what is Persian in it.*¹⁰

A system of nomenclature for angels in Jewish lore, prior to the Persian influence, did not exist. We find, for example, angels being named for the first time in the Book of Daniel (a book compiled during the Persian exile). The naming of angels was important in Persian religion, and the Talmud itself relates that: "Shemot HaMalakhim Alu LaHem MiBavel"—"The names of the angels arose from Babylon."¹¹

The Talmud, in fact, went to the extent of borrowing the names of many of the deities and angels in the Persian pantheon, such as: Mithra (Called Metatron in the Talmud), Hadar (called Hadami'el in the Talmud)....Angra/Agra (called Agrat in the Talmud).¹²

As with angels, so did the Amora'im (the Rabbis quoted in the Talmud) of Babylon and the writers of the Christian Scriptures draw freely from the Zend-Avesta's troves of superstitions about demons and imps.¹³

While the Talmud was not written down and codified until several hundred years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Yeshua, the Persian influence on first century Judaism was substantial. After the Romans expelled the Jews from the land of Israel, the rabbis in Babylon became a powerful force to be reckoned with in the Jewish faith community. The Babylonian Talmud continues to be the predominant authority for much of the world's Jewish religious population.

The majority of the world's religious Jews practice, to one degree or another, Talmudic Judaism. Since the modern Messianic/Hebrew Roots movement began in Talmudic Judaism, we should not be surprised that many of these Babylonian and Persian influences have infiltrated Messianic practices, customs, and identity. When the Spirit of the Holy One first started stirring the hearts of the children of Israel that had been scattered to the ends of the earth, many of them were already entrenched in the Christian Church. As the message of Messiah and Torah reached their hearts, they longed to leave the pagan sun-god worship of Babylon and embrace the Torah. In ignorance and naiveté, many of these believers ran straight to the local Talmudic synagogue to learn Torah. As the Spirit of the Holy One continued to call more and more believers out of the Church, Messianic Synagogues modeled after Talmudic or rabbinic Synagogues began to emerge. Unfortunately, in their zeal to embrace the Torah, many believers failed to discern the fact that the Pharisees and the rabbis had leavened the Torah with all manner of pollution from Babylon. Little did unsuspecting and naïve believers understand that they had been called out of Babylon as it manifested itself in the Christian Church only to reenter Babylon as it has been integrated into the fabric of the Talmudic Judaism they now embraced.

Faithful to his promise, Messiah has not left his *talmidim*¹⁴ orphaned or alone.¹⁵ The Spirit of the Holy One continues to remove the scales and filters from the eyes of believers and emblazon the truth upon their hearts.¹⁶ As the Spirit of Messiah continues to teach his *talmidim* with greater clarity and understanding, a desire for the Torah as Moses received it and as Yeshua taught it has emerged. In the last couple of years we have witnessed a growing number of people seeking to walk in the teachings of Yeshua. The Spirit of Messiah has revealed Yeshua teaching a Torah free from the *takanot* and *ma'asim*¹⁷ of the rabbis. Steadily the teachings of Yeshua are setting people free from the Babylonian captivity that has ensnared the people of YHWH for far too long.¹⁸

One of the most significant changes to occur is witnessed in the calendar. Prior to the Babylonian exile, the months had no names. The Torah simply referred to the months by their ordinal numbers – the first month, the seventh month, and so on. After the Babylonian captivity, however, we read of months having specific names. It was also during this time that Rosh Hashana (the New Year) was moved by the rabbis from the first month, as is declared by YHWH in the Torah,¹⁹ to the seventh month, replacing Yom Teruah (The Day of Blowing of Trumpets).²⁰

Another common influence of the Babylonian rabbis upon the body of believers is the one-year or annual Torah cycle. Public reading of the Torah has been a part of the rhythm of life for the children of Israel from the very beginning.

Exodus 24:7 And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that YHWH hath said will we do, and be obedient.

Exodus 24:12 And YHWH said unto Moses, Come up to Me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and the Torah, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them.

Deuteronomy 31:11 When all Israel is come to appear before YHWH thy Elohim in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this Torah before all Israel in their hearing.

Joshua 8:34-35 And afterward he read all the words of the Torah, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the Torah. ³⁵There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.

Not only does YHWH command that the Torah be publicly read to the children of Israel; He commands that it is to be expounded upon as well. This charge to publicly teach the children of Israel largely fell to the Levites. Parents were likewise responsible for teaching their children the Torah.

Exodus 18:20 And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do.

Leviticus 10:11 And that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which YHWH hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses.

Deuteronomy 4:14 And YHWH commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go over to possess it.

Deuteronomy 5:31 But as for thee, stand thou here by Me, and I will speak unto thee all the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which thou shalt teach them, that they may do them in the land which I give them to possess it.

Deuteronomy 6:1 Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which YHWH your Elohim commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it.

Deuteronomy 6:7 And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Deuteronomy 11:19 And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

While it is clear that the Torah was to be read publicly, there is no commandment indicating how the Torah was to be divided up for the purpose of public reading or teaching. The only specific commandment concerning scheduled public reading of the Torah is the command that Torah be read at the Feast of Sukkot every seventh year.

Deuteronomy 31:9-13 And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, which bare the ark of the covenant of YHWH, and unto all the elders of Israel. ¹⁰And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, ¹¹when all Israel is come to appear before YHWH thy Elohim in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this

law before all Israel in their hearing. ¹²Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear YHWH your Elohim, and observe to do all the words of this law: ¹³and that their children, which have not known any thing, may hear, and learn to fear YHWH your Elohim, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.

After the return from the chastisement of the Babylonian captivity, the children of Israel once again embraced the public reading of the Torah. The Book of Nehemiah records the details of one such public reading.

Nehemiah 8:1-14 *And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which YHWH had commanded to Israel. ²And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. ³And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. ⁴And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: ⁶and Ezra blessed YHWH, the great Elohim. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped YHWH with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. ⁸So they read in the book in the Torah of Elohim distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. ⁹And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto YHWH your Elohim; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Adonai: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of YHWH is your strength. ¹¹So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be ye grieved. ¹²And all the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared unto them. ¹³And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the Torah. ¹⁴And they found written in the Torah which YHWH had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month.*

Many of the customs surrounding the reading of the Torah found in synagogues today have their origins in this ancient report.

Here, for the first time in the Bible, we have a detailed description of what took place when the Torah was read publicly. It is from this account that the later rabbinic traditions were derived: reading the Torah from a raised podium; standing when the Torah is read; pronouncing a blessing before reading; the response of the congregation to the blessing; translating the Hebrew for those not fluent in the language; and the giving of a midrash or homily after the reading to explain its meaning.²¹

What is not obvious from this lengthy text from the book of Nehemiah is any indication of the division of a Torah cycle. In fact, it is not until much later in Israel's history that we begin to find evidence of various divisions for the purpose of public reading. Tim Hegg rightly points out that uniformity was not always a matter of importance among the children of Israel.

And there is another factor to consider: the historical sources make it clear that there were Judaisms existing in the early centuries, not a monolithic, homogenous "Judaism." This changed, of course, after the destruction of the Temple (70 CE) and particularly following the defeat of Bar Kochba in the second Jewish revolt (135 CE) and the persecution under Hadrian that resulted. In fact, it was the utter devastation of the Jewish communities and their dispersion that compelled the Babylonian academies to create a unifying halachah forming what we now know as "rabbinic Judaism." But the pre-destruction Jewish sects were anything but homogenous – they differed both in theology and practice. This being the case, we should presume that synagogue worship and traditions differed among the various sects as well as from one region to another.²²

While there may have been great diversity in practice prior to the destruction of the Temple, there is evidence to suggest that the public reading of the Torah on Shabbat and the Festivals was indeed a central practice among the children of Israel and was well established by the first century. We even see evidence of such practices in the Brit Chadasha. The clearest evidence may be the reference to the weekly reading of Moses in the synagogue every Sabbath as mentioned at the Jerusalem council.

Acts 15:21 *For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day.*

Other references are also found in the book of Acts and in 1 Timothy.

Acts 13:15 *And after the reading of the law and the prophets the rulers of the synagogue sent unto them, saying, Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.*

1 Timothy 4:13 *Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.*

While there are clear indications in the text of the Scriptures that the Torah and possibly the Prophets and Psalms were read on a regular basis in the synagogues, there are only hints as to what system or division of readings was used.

Likewise, in some of the Qumran scrolls, we find divisions of the text clearly marked, and one could imagine that one purpose for such divisions was to facilitate the public reading of the text. For instance, in the Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus scroll (11 QpaleoLev), paragraphs are marked by an enlarged vav and roughly correspond to the parashot of the later Masoretic text of Leviticus. While the impetus for such paragraph divisions may have been exegetical, there is also the clear possibility that such thematic divisions of the text conveniently apportioned it for public reading. Indeed, when the Torah was read publicly, it is only natural to think that predetermined starting points for such reading existed within the text itself.²³

Moses' command that the Israelites should read the Torah on the Sabbath, on festivals, and on new moons, and Ezra's that it should be read on Mondays, on Thursdays, and on Sabbath afternoons (TJ Meg.4:1, 75a; BK 82a) are not historical statements in themselves; they point, however, to an early date for the introduction of regular readings. It may be assumed that the custom dates from about the first half of the third century B.C.E., since the Septuagint was apparently compiled for the purpose of public reading in

the synagogue. Josephus (Apion 2:175) and Philo (II Som. 127) refer to public Torah readings as an ancient practice. This contention is supported by evidence in the New Testament: "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogue every Sabbath day" (Acts 15:21). Elbogen is of the opinion that originally the Torah was read only on the festivals and on certain Sabbath days before the festivals; the reading was to instruct the people as to the significance of these days. If this is correct, the original Torah reading was didactic rather than liturgical.²⁴

The Masoretic divisions known as "sedarim" and variously indicated in the text, number 154 in the Pentateuch, and probably correspond, therefore, to the Sabbath lessons of the triennial system, as was first surmised by Rapoport ("Halikot Kedem," p. 11). The number varies, however, so that Menahem Me'iri reckoned 161 divisions, corresponding to the greatest number of Sabbaths possible in three years; the Yemen grammars and scrolls of the Pentateuch enumerate 167 (see Sidra); and the tractate Soferim (xvi. 10) gives the number as 175 (comp. Yer. Shab. i. 1). It is possible that this last division corresponds to a further development by which the whole of the Pentateuch was read twice in seven years, or once in three and a half years.²⁵

Clearly there is strong evidence that there was a regular pattern of dividing the Torah text for the purpose of public reading and study. We should note that there is also strong evidence that the pattern in use in the land of Israel by the first century was a triennial cycle which began on the first Sabbath of the month of the aviv (nearly ripe) barley.

A fixed cycle of Torah readings, only hinted at in the texts we have studied so far, is explicitly described by the rabbis. In m.Megillah 3.4-6 we read about the four special Shabbats of the month of Adar and the portions of the Torah that are to be read on each of these. However, in the Gemara of the Bavli (b.Megilla 29a), a controversy is noted. Various rabbis assign different Torah readings for the first Shabbat of Adar, Shabbat Shekalim. Diverse means of resolving the conflict are offered, but one is that two different reading cycles exist: an annual cycle in which the Torah is read in one year, which was the tradition of the Babylonian academies, and a three year cycle (called the triennial cycle) used by those dwelling in the land of Israel. It is interesting to note that this controversy, raised in the period of the Talmud (c. 220-500 CE), does not appear in either the Mishnah (c. 70-220 CE) nor the Tosefta (c. 220-300 CE). It is reasonable to presume that a dispute such as this arose in the 3rd or 4th Centuries, when the Babylonian academies attempted to standardize the weekly readings.²⁶

The passage in the Babylonian Talmud (Meg.29b) is the earliest reference to a fixed cycle of consecutive readings. It states that "in the West" (Palestine), they completed the reading of the Torah in three years. The old division of the Pentateuch into 153, 155, or 167 sedarim ("divisions") is based on this triennial cycle. Buechler, with great ingenuity, attempted to reconstruct the weekly portions of the triennial cycle, assuming the cycle to have begun on the first day of Nisan.²⁷

In Babylon and other communities outside Palestine, an annual cycle was followed according to which the Pentateuch was divided into 54 sedarim (sing. Sidrah, i.e. parashah). This became the universal Jewish practice, except for certain isolated instances. In Palestine, the triennial cycle was also superseded by the annual, possibly under the influence of Babylonian immigrants.²⁸

There is also some evidence that the triennial Torah cycle was being followed in the days of Yeshua.

The triennial cycle seems to have been established in New Testament times. John vi. 4 contains an allusion to the Passover, and vii. 2 to the Feast of Tabernacles, while in vi. 59, between the two, reference is made to a sermon on the manna delivered in the synagogue at Capernaum. This would be appropriate for a discourse on the text for the first or eighth of the month Iyyar (i.e., between Passover and Tabernacles), which, in the triennial cycle, dealt with Ex. vi. 1-xvi.1, where the account of the manna is given. So too, at the season of Pentecost the cycle of readings in the first year would reach Gen. xi., which deals with the story of Babel and the confusion of tongues, so that in Acts ii., Pentecost is associated with the gift of the spirit which led to a confusion of tongues. Similarly, the Decalogue was read on Pentecost in the second year of the cycle, whence came, according to Buchler, the traditional association of the giving of the Law with Pentecost. Ex. xxxiv., which contains a second Decalogue, is accordingly read on the 29th of Ab, or 80 days after Pentecost, allowing exactly forty days before and after the sin of the golden calf. So too Deut. v., containing a third Decalogue, began on the same day, the 29th of Ab.²⁹

While it is clear that the Babylonian rabbis have clearly prevailed in this matter, there is also evidence that the triennial Torah cycle was still being practiced as late as the twelfth century.

...the eminent traveler Benjamin Tudela writes about the community of Cairo (c.1170): "Two large synagogues are there, one belonging to the land of Israel and one belonging to the men of the land of Babylon....Their usage with regard to the portions and sections of the law is not alike: for the men of Babylon are accustomed to read a portion every week, as is done in Spain, and is our custom, and to finish the law each year; while the men of Palestine do not do so but divide each portion into three sections and finish the law at the end of three years".... Similarly in the twelfth century Maimonides (Yad. Tefillah 13:1) writes that the universal custom was to follow the annual cycle; he states, however, that the triennial cycle was nevertheless followed in some places.³⁰

This custom of following the triennial Torah cycle was clearly frowned upon by the Babylonian rabbis who sought to create a universal Judaism.

Since the early part of the nineteenth century, various attempts have been made to reintroduce the triennial cycle; Buechler, in reply to a query by an Anglo-Jewish congregation, observed: "If you ask me about the din ("law"), I have to answer that it is against our codified law from the twelfth century onward, and even much earlier in Babylon whence our law proceeded. If you introduce the triennial cycle, you separate yourself from the main body of Judaism."³¹

Here we see once again confusion between unity and uniformity. The children of Israel were united in Torah but diverse in application, custom, and practice. We have already stated from the beginning that there was no such thing as a uniform Judaism in the first century. The desire of the Babylonian rabbis to consolidate all Israel in submission to their interpretations, rulings, and customs served only to establish the rabbis' position of power over all Israel. Not everyone, however, was willing to submit to the authority of the rabbis. This struggle against the "leaven" of the Pharisees is clearly evidenced in the history of the Karaites.

The first reference in the history of Israel to more than one sect takes place some 200 years after the close of the Biblical period, in the first century BCE. Various sources tell us of two opposing sects, the Sadducees (Zadokites) and the Pharisees. The Sadducees followed the Torah as it was written, while the Pharisees believed in a second "Oral" Torah which they added to the real one. The Second Temple period saw the rise of several more sects, among them another group which only followed the written Torah, called the Boethusians; and a sect which added several books to the Bible called the Essenes (a.k.a. the "Dead Sea Sect").

Like the Karaites who were to follow them, the Sadducees and the Boethusians continued the tradition originated by Moses (Dt 4:2) of keeping the Torah's commandments with no addition. ...The Pharisees on the other hand believed that the interpretation of a particular teacher was divine, and elevated these teachings to the level of the Torah itself. ...The third major sect, the Essenes, had a Bible which consisted of more than our 24 Books; and as a result had practices which do not originate in our Bible, such as a solar calendar.

In the early Middle Ages the Pharisees continued to thrive. They began to call themselves Rabbis, and only used the name Pharisees when remembering historical events from the Second Temple period. In the 7th century the Islamic Empire swept the Middle-East. The Muslims had no interest in imposing Islamic religious practice on the Jews and gave them a degree of autonomy under a system known as the Exilarchate. The Exilarchate had been founded hundreds of years before under Sassanian rule, but until now only had influence in Babylonia and Persia. Overnight the Rabbanites turned from a localized Babylonian phenomenon into a political power which stretched throughout much of the Middle-East. From the 3rd-5th centuries the Babylonian Rabbanites had developed a body of religious law known as the Babylonian Talmud, which they now imposed on every Jew in the Empire.

Resistance to the Rabbinites was fierce, especially in the eastern provinces of the Empire which had never even heard of the Talmud. The historians tell us of Jewish leaders whose resistance against the Talmud put them in direct conflict with the Islamic government, which had empowered the Rabbis and given them full authority over other Jews. One resistance leader who refused to accept the Talmud was named Abu Isa al-Isfahani, and it is said that he led an army of Jews against the Muslim government. Other attempts to cast off the Talmud were also undertaken, but all failed and the Rabbanites and their Talmud seemed unstoppable.

Then in the 8th century a last glimmer of hope appeared in the form of a shrewd leader named Anan ben David. Anan organized various non-Talmudic groups and lobbied the Caliphate to establish a second Exilarchate for those who refused to live according to the Talmud's man-made laws. The Muslims granted Anan and his followers the religious freedom to practice Judaism in the way of their ancestors. Anan himself was not a Karaite; although Anan rejected the Talmud, he used similar irrational methods of interpreting Scripture as the Rabbis, such as intentionally taking words out of context. Anan's followers became known as Ananites, and this group continued to exist down until the 10th century. On the other hand, those Jews who continued to practice the Tanach-based religion of their ancestors became known as Bnei Mikra ("Followers of Scripture"), which was also abbreviated as Karaim ("Scripturalists"); in English "Karaites." This name derived from the old Hebrew word for the Hebrew Bible: Mikra, Kara. The name Karaim, meaning "Scripturalists," distinguished these Jews from the camp of the Rabbis who called themselves Rabaniyin ("Followers of the Rabbis"), or Talmudiyin ("Followers of the Talmud").³²

Since the return of Judah from the Babylonian captivity, the influence of Babylon has been asserting itself upon the children of Israel. The Messiah warned his *talmidim* to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and not to follow their enactments and precedents.

Matthew 16:6 *Then Yeshua said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees... ¹¹How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? ¹²Then understood they how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.*

Matthew 23:1 *Then spake Yeshua to the multitude, and to his disciples, ²saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: ³all therefore whatsoever he bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their *takanot* and *ma'asim*: for they say, and do not. ⁴For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.*

The apostle Shaul likewise called for the children of Israel to separate themselves from any such pollution.

2 Corinthians 6:17 *Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Master, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, ¹⁸and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the YHWH Almighty.*

Being free from the influence of Babylon gives us the freedom to study Torah in any manner beneficial to the community of believers. While the annual Torah cycle has been the dominant manner of studying the Torah for many years, it is clearly not the only manner. After considerable research and prayer, we have decided to return to the ancient triennial Torah cycle for three major reasons.

1. The triennial Torah cycle was in place in the days of Yeshua and was most likely what he followed in his teaching.
2. The triennial Torah cycle lines up with the Biblical Calendar (beginning on the first Sabbath of the month of the *aviv*).
3. The Torah portions are smaller and more manageable, allowing greater time for in-depth teaching and study.

This change may cause concern that those who choose to follow the triennial Torah cycle will be out of step with those who continue to study using the annual Torah cycle, and therefore cause disunity in the Messianic movement. We must remember that our unity is not in practice, but in Messiah. By keeping the triennial Torah cycle, the rhythm walked by Messiah will be restored. A focused study on a smaller portion of the Scriptures also seems a gentler introduction for those just coming out of Babylon. I am reminded of Jacob's response to Esau's request to follow him to Seir.

Genesis 33:12 *And he (Esau) said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before thee. ¹³And he (Jacob) said unto him, My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. ¹⁴Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir.*

As the barley slowly becomes *aviv* in Israel this year, we will wait in joyful anticipation of taking our first steps together into the new rhythm of the ancient triennial Torah cycle. We will begin the cycle with Bereshit/Genesis 1:1-2:3 on the first Sabbath after the sighting of new moon of the First Month. Step-by-step we shall walk through the book of Bereshit/Genesis together, walking with Messiah in the ancient rhythm of the triennial Torah cycle.

¹ 1 Samuel 8:1-10:27

² 1 Samuel 16:1-23; 2 Samuel 1:1-3:32

³ 1 Kings 1:1ff

⁴ 1 Kings 12:1ff

⁵ 1 Kings 12:25ff

⁶ 1 Kings 22:17; 2 Kings 17:7-41

⁷ 2 Kings 24:17-25:30

⁸ 2 Chronicles 36:22ff

⁹ www.jewishencyclopedia.com Demonology.

¹⁰ www.orahsaddiqim.org Unwitting Disciples of Zoroaster: The Influence of Zoroastrianism on Rabbinism in the Talmud and Midrash.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Talmidim* is Hebrew for “disciples.”

¹⁵ John 14:18ff

¹⁶ John 16:13

¹⁷ *Takanot* and *ma’asim* are rabbinic enactments and reforms to the teaching of the Torah.

¹⁸ John 8:32-36

¹⁹ Exodus 12:2

²⁰ Leviticus 23:24

²¹ www.torahresources.com The Public Reading of the Scriptures in the 1st Century Synagogue, Tim Hegg, 2007.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Encyclopaedia Judaica – CD ROM Edition, Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd. Torah, Reading of.

²⁵ www.JewishEncyclopedia.com Triennial Cycle, Joseph Jacobs.

²⁶ www.TorahResources.com, The Public Reading of the Scriptures in the 1st Century Synagogue, Tim Hegg.

²⁷ Encyclopaedia Judaica – CD-ROM Edition, Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd. Torah, Reading of.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ www.JewishEncyclopedia.com Triennial Cycle, Joseph Jacobs.

³⁰ Encyclopaedia Judaica – CD-ROM Edition, Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd.

³¹ Ibid.

³² www.karaite-korner.com, History of Karaism, Nehemia Gordon.