

# From Curiosity to Captivity

## The Journey into Torah-Observant Christianity

*By R. L. Solberg*

Over the years, I've had countless conversations with Christians who have become curious about the Torah-observant (or "Hebrew Roots") movement. In most cases, that curiosity begins innocently, even admirably, with a sincere desire to understand the Jewish context of Scripture and to take the Bible seriously. At times, however, that interest is carried too far and gives way to something far more complicated and spiritually dangerous. Torahism is the umbrella term for the unbiblical belief that new covenant Christians are required to keep the old covenant rituals and that not doing so is sinful and disobedient.<sup>1</sup>

It is often at this point—when a curious believer has crossed that threshold—that our ministry is contacted. A family member, friend, or often a pastor, notices a change in someone they love: they've become contentious, critical of the modern church, and have begun challenging Christians on why they aren't keeping the feasts or the diet commanded in the Torah. Confused and frustrated, they reach out to us for help for their loved one. Having walked this road with many families, I know firsthand how vexing this moment can be. They just want to understand what's happened and, more importantly, how they should lovingly and wisely respond.

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<sup>1</sup> It's important to understand that the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is a fundamental and beautiful part of the Christian faith and is in no way to be rejected or dismissed. Torah-*ism*, on the other hand—treating Torah observance as an imposed covenant obligation under Christ—is an unbiblical and dangerous belief system that misapplies God's Word. During the Jerusalem Council in 50 AD, the Apostle Peter described such a position as "placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10, ESV).

One hard lesson I've learned over the years is that no single verse or argument will snap someone out of this mindset. That doesn't mean we stop speaking truth, but it does mean we need to adjust our expectations. These aren't merely theological or intellectual issues; I am convinced there are deeper emotional and spiritual factors at play. For that reason, determining when and how to engage someone caught up in this belief system requires prayer, patience, and discernment.

My expertise lies in theology, not the social sciences; however, through years of walking alongside individuals and families affected by this movement, I've noticed a fairly consistent pattern that I believe can help us respond with both grace and truth. I've come to frame it as a five-stage progression, which I summarize with the acronym TORAH.<sup>2</sup> Understanding where someone may fall within this progression can help us discern how best to engage them. Let's briefly walk through each of these five stages.

### **1. Treasure**

It begins with a believer discovering hidden treasure in the New Testament (NT)—namely, the Jewish roots of Christianity. Imagine someone carefully excavating an ancient site and uncovering the edge of something valuable beneath the soil. This is the excitement a Christian feels as they become aware of and are fascinated by the Jewish context of the Christian faith. As they continue “clearing away the dirt,” they discover the many Old Testament (OT) quotations, allusions, and assumptions woven throughout the NT, and begin to see Jesus and the apostles in their original historical and theological setting. This stage is not only harmless; it's

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<sup>2</sup> I'm indebted to Dr. Michael Brown, who sketched out the first four phases of this process when we spoke on the Biblical Roots Ministries' YouTube channel in August of 2023. I have since developed and expanded upon that framework through my own experience and reflection.

highly encouraged. The better we understand our OT—including the Torah—the better we will understand Jesus and His glorious gospel, and the critical role it plays in God’s grand story of redemption that began all the way back in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:15).

## 2. Ownership

As fascination deepens, the believer begins to take greater ownership of their study. What started as curiosity becomes a more intentional and personal engagement with the living Word of God. Rather than passively receiving what they were taught, they actively engage with the text, seeking to understand it more fully. *Why do Jesus and Paul so commonly say “as it was written”? Why does Matthew mention fulfillment so often in his gospel? What does Passover have to do with the crucifixion of Jesus?*

They begin studying the OT more closely, exploring the history of God’s people and the foundations of the law, the temple, the priesthood, and the feasts. At this stage, many also begin to recognize how these institutions point forward to Jesus, and some even take up the study of Hebrew or explore Jewish customs more deeply. At this point, the process remains healthy and life-giving. For many believers—pastors and scholars included—this stage represents genuine growth and maturity in their faith and understanding.

## 3. Reorientation

This is where the tension begins. At this point, some believers start to wrestle with the idea that maybe they should be observing the OT rituals they’ve been studying. Their faith walk begins to feel more complicated, and questions arise: *Is it okay to celebrate Easter? And if so, can I eat ham? Should I be keeping the Sabbath?* This is a critical crossroads at which the believer is essentially deciding whether to follow Jesus or Moses. They would never see it that

way, of course, but when viewed objectively from the outside—having seen so many cases—this is what it amounts to.

This is not to say that Jesus and Moses are rivals, as though one must be chosen over the other. Not at all. Rather, it's to recognize the hierarchy between the two that Scripture itself imposes. In the Torah, Moses prophesied of Christ, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen" (Deut 18:15, ESV, emphasis added). Jesus is the fulfillment of everything Moses pointed to. Christ confirms this Himself, saying, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (John 5:46–47). He even rebuked the Jewish religious leaders for looking to Moses rather than Him, saying, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40).<sup>3</sup>

At this stage, some believers recognize the warning signs, sense that something is amiss, and wisely reorient themselves around Christ and His gospel. Others, however, press forward through the tension and uncertainty, persuaded—often quite sincerely—that they have uncovered a truth long overlooked or suppressed. It is here, perhaps more than at any other point, that conversation can still be fruitful, because hearts are not yet hardened and questions are still being contemplated.

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus and Moses are not in competition with one another. Moses was given the Law for Israel under the old covenant, while Jesus brings the new covenant that the Law was always pointing toward. Jesus didn't come to reject or undo Moses' teaching, but to fulfill it and bring it to its intended goal. Christians, therefore, follow Jesus—not because the Law of Moses was wrong, but because its purpose is now fulfilled in Him (see Matt. 5:17; Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:6–13).

#### 4. Alienation

For those who continue down this path and adopt the OT rituals for themselves, their faith walk (and even their demeanor) begins to change at this stage. What was once outward-looking and life-giving can slowly turn inward, becoming increasingly rigid and insular. As their attention becomes fixed on ritual observance, their relationships often begin to fray, leading to growing alienation from family, other believers, and the Christian church.

And here's what's really interesting: Those walking this road frequently feel a deep sense of purpose and conviction, even enthusiasm, as they embrace what they believe to be a more authentic expression of their faith. From the outside, however, their friends and family are seeing something very different: the joy of the gospel begins giving way to anxiety over proper ritual observance, and grace starts to displace scrutiny as their loved one becomes increasingly judgmental and legalistic. As a result, relationships strain and conversations narrow. Fellowship is increasingly defined by shared ritual observance rather than by shared life in Christ. It's here that walls are often erected, conversations become guarded, and distance begins to displace communion.<sup>4</sup>

#### 5. Hostility

At this final stage, what began as curiosity has hardened into conviction, and conviction into open hostility toward historic Christianity. Those who reach this point are no longer merely exploring ideas; they have crossed into an entirely different theological allegiance. They've

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<sup>4</sup> I have lost count of the number of parents and grandparents who have shared their grief with me, having found themselves unexpectedly distanced from children or grandchildren they dearly love because of Torahism. And while the severing of family relationships is not a formal tenet of modern Torah-keeping, it is an all-too-common byproduct of it.

effectively become prodigal sons and daughters occupying an uneasy liminal space somewhere between Christianity and Judaism. And from here, a small percentage will drift into full apostasy. I have personally spoken with individuals who have gone all the way down this path, ultimately rejecting Jesus as Messiah and dismissing the NT as corrupted or irrelevant.

At this stage, conversation gives way to confrontation, and what was once a sincere search for truth hardens into an aggressive certainty that brooks no disagreement. Sadly, these individuals often feel compelled to legislate their new beliefs to those around them, rebuking fellow believers, dividing and fracturing faith communities, and labelling the Christian church corrupt and apostate.<sup>5</sup> The tragedy is that the “mission field” for these Torah-keepers and their false gospel is the body of Christ. Rather than proclaiming Jesus to a lost and broken world that does not know Him, they spend their time and energy policing and disrupting the faith of those who do.

### **Why Torahism Is So Difficult to Address**

I remember carefully looking for a silver bullet in my early years of engaging with Torahism. I searched high and low for that Bible passage that would take the legs out from under their theology once and for all. In the end, I found at least a dozen such passages. The NT unambiguously teaches that followers of Jesus are not required to keep the old covenant rituals.<sup>6</sup> But it turns out I had completely misdiagnosed the problem. What I had assumed was a simple

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<sup>5</sup> Readers will find ample examples of this posture in the comment sections of our videos and social media posts. While not all who identify with Torah observance engage this way, many interactions reveal an argumentative and dismissive posture that sometimes even devolves into the mocking of Christians, the church and historic Christian belief. These patterns, observed repeatedly over time, help explain the relational strain described above.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Matt 5:17–18; Acts 15:1–11, 19–29; Rom 6:14, 7:4–6; 14:5–6; Gal 2:15–21, 3:23–25, 4:9–11, 5:1–6; Col 2:16–17; Heb 7:11–19, 8:6–13, 9:9–10, Heb. 10:1–10.

matter of theological error was in fact a much more complex emotional and spiritual issue deeply tied to identity.

I've now come to view Torahism as an intoxicating blend of modern Gnosticism (the pursuit of "hidden knowledge") and the same spiritual elitism displayed by wayward Pharisees on the pages of the NT. Like them, modern Torah-keepers often begin with sincere motives: a genuine love for God and a desire to obey His word. When the Pharisees began "building a fence around the Torah" back in the 6th century BC, it wasn't out of rebellion but out of a desire to avoid disobedience.<sup>7</sup> Yet over time, those protective measures began to eclipse the law itself, and the traditions of men were elevated above the commandments of God, placing them squarely in the sights of Jesus' sharp rebukes (cf. Mark 7:1–13; Matt 23).

For both ancient Pharisees and modern Torah keepers, passion for the Word of God can turn into what Augustine called a "disordered love." He taught that sin is not primarily about loving the wrong things, but about loving good things in the wrong order (*ordo amoris*). Love of the law displaces love of the Lawgiver; zeal for holiness displaces compassion for sinners; the letter of the law is cherished while the heart of the law is neglected. This is precisely this inversion of priorities that Jesus confronts so sharply in His rebuke of the religious leaders of His day:

This people honors me with their lips,  
but their heart is far from me;  
in vain do they worship me,  
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.  
(Matt 15:8–9; *citing Isa 29:13*)

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase "building a fence around the Torah" comes from early rabbinic teaching (cf. Pirkei Avot 1:1), which encouraged the creation of additional safeguards to prevent accidental violation of God's commandments. These protective traditions were intended to preserve obedience but, over time, sometimes came to be treated with the same authority as the law itself.

The difficulty in engaging with Torah-keepers is that the conflict often appears to be theological, when in reality it is far more a matter of the heart. Our instinct is to respond by carefully reasoning from Scripture why Christians are not required to observe the dietary laws and holy days given under the old covenant. So we cite passages like Colossians 2:16–17:

Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

And the problem is that believers who are deeply immersed in this movement rarely engage these passages with openness. Instead, they respond combatively with well-rehearsed talking points. Many, I am convinced, have moved beyond a posture of teachable humility. Scripture repeatedly warns against such an attitude: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice” (Prov 12:15), and again, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Pet 5:5–6). In this sense, the dynamic we often encounter among Torah-keepers resembles the spiritual blindness described in Scripture (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; 1 Tim 4:1–5).

This is why logic alone rarely breaks through. Conversations tend to circle endlessly, with both sides talking past one another. I once asked a woman who had come out of this movement how she responded to passages like these while she was still in it. She told me they essentially flew right past her; she never truly engaged with them because her mind was made up.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See “Straight Outta Hebrew Roots (A True Story),” a live interview with Katryn Dockins on our YouTube channel from January 5, 2025.



People rarely reason their way out of a belief system they didn't reason themselves into. And Torahism, in my assessment, is not a theology arrived at through careful study of—or submission to—Scripture. Rather, it reflects an emotionally driven search for hidden knowledge and a sense of spiritual exclusivity. And the bad news is that I have yet to find a reliable formula for reaching those who are deeply entrenched in this way of thinking. There are unmistakably cult-like dynamics at work, and once someone has crossed a certain threshold, reasoned arguments fall on deaf ears.

The good news is that we serve a big God who delights in redemption. I know many who eventually found their way out of this movement, but, unfortunately, it's a timeline typically measured in years, not months. Among those I've spoken with who have come out of this belief system, I have noticed a few patterns. Here are three anecdotal observations I offer in the hope they will prove helpful to the reader.

First, for many women, it seems to be selfless acts of kindness from Christian friends or family that begin to soften the armor. They seem to respond most deeply to relational grace. One woman, for example, shared that the moment which finally began to open her heart was when a close friend voluntarily removed her own Christmas decorations out of a desire to preserve their relationship. That quiet act of humility and love spoke more powerfully than any argument ever could.

Second, men seem more responsive to arguments that place a “stone in the shoe,” so to speak; ideas that make their current position increasingly uncomfortable to maintain. But it can take a while for them to wrestle through their cognitive dissonance, repent, and turn the ship around. Which is understandable. For someone deeply invested in Torahism—someone who has repeatedly made bold public arguments, reordered their lives, and fractured relationships based

on their beliefs—it is no small thing to turn back. Like the prodigal son, it can take time for a person to “come to his senses” (Luke 15:17). And yet, as C. S. Lewis so wisely observed, “If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.”<sup>9</sup>

The final encouragement I would offer is this: prayer and patience remain our greatest weapons in this struggle. The process is slow, but I’ve seen God faithfully bring people out of these systems through His Word and through the steady presence of loving, faithful believers. So, if you’re walking alongside someone caught in this movement, don’t lose heart. You are not responsible for their awakening, only for your faithfulness. Pray. Speak truth when invited. Love without condition. And trust the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do. No one is beyond God’s reach.

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<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), Book I, chapter 1, “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.”