

A Survey of Messianic Theology

Every one of us, as a mature Believer in Yeshua the Messiah, should recognize the importance of regular, Bible study and reflection. “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword—piercing right through to a separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12, TLV). While people in today’s Messianic community tend to be committed to a regular study of the weekly Torah portion or other parts of Scripture, **what do we do about theology?** Theology is the technical “study of God,” or of matters relating to Biblical doctrine. While theology can, at times, be a term reserved for more academic or scholastic settings, people in today’s Messianic community tend to have a genuine interest in more specialized and detailed studies, not only of the Holy Scriptures, but of issues that pertain to their understanding of God, His Word, who we are as His people, and what we are to actually believe.

Today’s Messianic movement, as a still-developing and emerging move of God, has many areas of its theology which are sufficiently developed, and others which are presently in various stages of maturation. Over the course of the past two decades, general resources such as *Voices of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer Books, 2001; ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok) and *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013; David Rudolph and Joel Willitts, eds.) have, in broad terms, laid out a number of critical topics, and presented a selection of diverse perspectives. The authors of the workbook *Messianic Judaism Class*, following their local congregation’s statement of faith, summarize a number of issues including, but not limited to: the nature of God, the Divinity of Yeshua, the power of grace in salvation, the future resurrection, Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in the Body of Messiah, and even marriage and homosexuality.¹ This section of our workbook will mention these, and some other issues, presently being discussed in Messianic theology *or* soon to be on our horizon.

When people enter into the Messianic community, whether that be from a background in the Jewish Synagogue or evangelical Protestantism—it would be an understatement to say that there can be some tension, and even fights, over major matters of theology. One’s local congregation, or assembly, is likely to be a microcosm, of the diversity of opinion and perspectives witnessed in the wider Messianic world. (This has especially become even more complicated in our information age, and with the wide

¹ *Messianic Judaism Class*, Teacher Book, pp 126-160.

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array of online venues spouting off theological opinions and perspectives.) What are some things that you certainly need to be aware of, as you continue in your Messianic walk?

The Holy Scriptures

To its great credit, the Messianic community tends to have a very high view of Holy Scripture, believing that the Bible is inspired of God, and that the Tanach and Apostolic Writings (also frequently referred to as the B'rit Chadashah by Messianics) are authoritative and reliable for instructing the people of God today (cf. 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Romans 15:4). While Messianic people may tacitly employ terms such as Old Testament or New Testament, at times, for the familiarity of Christians—Messianics today hardly believe that the Holy Scriptures are to be starkly divided in two. Messianic people stress continuity throughout the Word of God, Genesis to Revelation, as God has steadily revealed more and more of His plan for salvation history (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2). While it may seem that Messianics focus heavily on the Torah and Tanach in teaching and preaching, be aware that many of today's Believers do not have any kind of theological foundation in the Tanach. The Bible of Yeshua and His first disciples was the Tanach. Messianic people rightly look for a unifying theme in Scripture, such as the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Deliverer, and the future arrival of the Messianic Age on Planet Earth.

While the authority of the Scriptures tends to be rightly upheld by today's Messianic people, our faith community does not tend to have as well rounded an understanding of *how the books of the Holy Scriptures were composed*. The books of the Bible, while the inspired Word of our Creator, hardly just "popped out" of the sky. Human beings had to actually collect data, transcribe information, catalogue commandments, record history, and copy manuscripts over many centuries to see that they were preserved. Conservative Biblical scholars recognize that the period of the composition of the books of the Bible stretches from the time of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt, the Fifteenth or Thirteenth Century B.C.E., to the close of the First Century C.E. Texts regarded as the Word of God were composed in the languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. And, while the major players include Ancient Israel prior to the exile, and later the Second Temple Jewish community after the exile—there are other major civilizations which directly intersect with the Biblical story (Sumer, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome).

Today's Messianic movement is in need of significant improvement of its understanding of the composition of the Tanach. A great deal of contemporary Jewish Tanach scholarship is liberal (as would be especially seen in a resource like *The Jewish Study Bible*), and will posit that the Torah or Pentateuch is a compilation of multiple sources from the Sixth Century B.C.E., after the Jewish return from Babylon (the JEDP documentary hypothesis). (Liberal Christian scholars will also be seen to espouse this position.) Being familiar with critical theories of Biblical composition, as a matter of navigating different study Bibles, theological dictionaries, and commentaries, is an area where today's Messianic people need to significantly improve. The past several decades, of critical scholarship, have seen the introduction of liberal proposals which regard most of the Tanach as little more than ahistorical fiction. Our Messianic Torah studies tend to completely ignore the presence of a great deal of such information, and tend to more widely rely upon Orthodox Jewish perspectives, not too interested in areas of Biblical historicity or reliability. Yet, when stressing a Tanach foundation, you inevitably have to

deal with issues of when and how many of its events took place, whether there is available archaeological evidence confirming them, and how things might not be as simplistic as an English Bible translation may lead you to believe on first glance.

Today's Messianic movement also needs some greater improvement in its approach to the composition of the Apostolic Writings. No Messianic congregation is immune to somebody brazenly declaring that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew, even though no original Hebrew New Testament exists from antiquity. All Messianic people agree that there is a genuine Hebraic and Jewish background to the Apostolic Writings, not only including quotations from the Tanach and concepts from Second Temple Judaism, but also various Hebrew idioms such as "whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, NASU). It is one thing though, to propose an ancient Hebraic and Jewish background to the Apostolic Writings; it is another thing to declare that the Greek Apostolic Writings are to be treated as untrustworthy and uninspired. It is sad to say this, but not enough of today's Messianic congregational leaders possess significant Greek language skills. Being able to better engage with the Greek Apostolic Writings, and hence also with a wide degree of contemporary Protestant scholarship and commentary, is an area where progress must be made in the coming years!

The Nature of God and Divinity of Yeshua

Because of the intersection witnessed in the Messianic movement between Judaism, Christianity, how both religions have approached the Supreme Being—and a diversity of people in today's Messianic congregations with their own opinions about the Supreme Being—the nature of God and Divinity of Yeshua is a big issue that can divide people. While the religious traditions of both Judaism and Christianity affirm monotheism, Judaism has widely approached God's oneness as being monolithic, whereas Christianity has approached God's oneness as permitting an internal plurality (most frequently witnessed via the traditional doctrine of the Trinity). Today's Messianic movement certainly does affirm monotheism, but would be seen to employ alternative terms to "Trinity," such as either "tri-unity" or simply "plurality," to describe an internal plurality of *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) or God.

Today's Messianic movement affirms a belief in one Almighty God, Creator of the Universe, and that He has primarily revealed Himself to humanity in three separate, but unified co-existent manifestations: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14), although many would leave room for more to be revealed about God in the future eschaton. Recognizing our limitations in evaluating the nature of the Supreme Being, many of today's Messianic people would be keen to emphasize that as mortals we cannot fully comprehend the Godhead and how He chooses to manifest Himself to us, although it is evident from the Scriptures that God is a plurality. This is clear as the main Hebrew word for "God," *Elohim*, is plural; and that He is one or *echad* (אֶחָד), denoting a composite, **not** absolute unity. This can create some challenges in not only Jewish outreach and evangelism, but even with the increasingly large number of Unitarians in fringe sectors of the Messianic community. These are people who would widely affirm that Yeshua the Messiah is supernatural, but that ultimately that Yeshua is a created being or entity.

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Whether or not Yeshua the Messiah is God, is a major debate among many individual people and families within today's broad Messianic movement. On the whole, today's major Messianic Jewish denominations and ministries affirm that Yeshua is God, but this does not always mean that individual people attending Messianic congregations would follow suit. Certainly while each of us, in our spiritual quest and study of Scripture, have had questions about the nature of Yeshua, which have needed to be answered, it is very disconcerting for many to know that there are probably people sitting near them in their congregational *Shabbat* service, who do not necessarily believe that Yeshua the Messiah is God.

We fully affirm the complete Divinity of Yeshua the Messiah, that Yeshua pre-existed the universe and created the universe (John 1:1-3; Philippians 2:5-7; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:2-3), that Yeshua is to be worshipped (Mark 5:6-7; Matthew 2:2, 8, 11; Matthew 14:32-33; 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; Hebrews 1:6), and even though in Yeshua's human Incarnation the Father is greater than the Son (John 14:28), that the Son is genuinely God (John 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1). We believe that acknowledging Yeshua as Lord, meaning YHWH/YHVH, is mandatory for salvation (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:10-11). We believe that He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18, 20, 23, 25; Luke 1:26-33), and that He is the prophesied Messiah of Israel (John 1:45). However, as students of the Holy Scriptures, we should not simply accept these tenets on the basis of blind dogma, and must conduct more thorough investigations of the Divinity of Yeshua, and how Yeshua the Son is integrated into the Divine Identity. Fortunately, there are leaders and teachers in today's Messianic movement, who have taken an active interest in seeing our understanding of the nature of Yeshua improve—not only as we spread the good news to Jewish people, but also encounter an increasingly complicated number of false teachings from the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, many of whose supporters do not believe that Yeshua is God.

Salvation and the Work of the Holy Spirit

Today's Messianic movement, with a theological tradition inherited from both Judaism and Protestantism, stands at a clear intersection when it comes to evaluating the major issues of salvation. Evangelical Protestantism tends to almost exclusively focus on the salvation of the individual person, and the subsequent work of the Holy Spirit. Judaism has historically focused on the corporate salvation of Israel, something which is to involve the arrival of the Messiah, the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, and the defeat of Israel's enemies. Both of these vantage points of salvation are critical to understand in your Messianic experience. Without the redemption of individuals, there can be no corporate redemption.

Today's Messianic community, in concert with evangelicalism, would affirm that salvation is a free gift of God available through acknowledging Yeshua the Messiah as Lord (Romans 10:9) by repentance and confession of sin (Luke 5:32; Acts 5:31; Romans 2:4; 10:10; 2 Corinthians 7:9-10; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Peter 3:9), which results in a person being born again (John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:3, 23) or regenerated by an indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Given our widescale conviction that God's Torah does remain relevant instruction for God's people today, does today's Messianic community at all promote any kind of

“salvation by works” doctrine? **Salvation does not come via human action or obeying commandments** (Matthew 5:20; John 1:17; Romans 2:12-13, 25; 3:20, 27; 4:14; 8:3; 10:5; Galatians 2:16, 21; 3:2, 11, 21; 5:4; 6:13; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 3:9), but if one is of the faith, then he or she will have “works” (James 2:14-16) resultant of one’s spiritual transformation. The commandments of Scripture define sin (Romans 3:31; 5:13; 6:15; 7:7-9, 12; 8:2; 10:4; Galatians 3:24; Hebrews 7:19; 10:28; James 2:9) and therefore define every person’s guilt. God’s commandments also provide the basis for the good works that His people are to be actively accomplishing (Ephesians 2:10).

A longstanding debate in Protestantism, since the Reformation, involves whether or not God has predestined some to salvation, and others to damnation, and also whether those who have made a profession of faith in Yeshua can at a later point lose their salvation. All Believers are required to “work out” their salvation (Philippians 2:12), meaning not taking it for granted, and we should all be actively maturing in our walk of faith. However, there is no consensus on the longstanding debate between Calvinists and Arminians in today’s Messianic movement, the former advocating a doctrine of eternal security, and the later advocating that, however unlikely, a person can in principle renounce his or her salvation and lose it. Many of today’s Messianic congregations and fellowships have individual people reared in both theological traditions. It often follows that congregational leaders and teachers who received theological training at either Calvinist or Arminian institutions, will follow suit.

Another longstanding debate, in evangelicalism today, concerns the continuation of the spiritual gifts from the First Century C.E. (John 14:16-17; Acts 1:8). Today’s Messianic community has both leaders and people who are cessationists, believing the gifts of the Spirit to have terminated after the death of the Apostles; continuists who believe that the gifts of the Spirit continue in vitality to the present; and today’s Messianic community has those who would identify as charismatic, often meaning that the dramatic gifts of the Spirit should manifest themselves at every gathering of Messiah followers. The spiritual gifts are for the corporate edification of all of God’s people (1 Corinthians 12:7; Ephesians 5:18-20), most especially involving the virtues commonly called the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is the formal study of the *ekklēsia* or the people of God. In evangelical Protestant settings, ecclesiology often involves the life body of the local faith community. In today’s Messianic movement, however, discussions and debates over ecclesiology often involve the place of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers together, in the Body of Messiah. While no one doubts how Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah remain Jewish, and they clearly are a part of the community of Israel—what is the relationship of non-Jewish Believers to the community of Israel? Much of this involves what it specifically means for non-Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah to be reckoned as members of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13) or grafted-in to the olive tree (Romans 11:16-18).

Throughout a great deal of academic Messianic Jewish writing, one will commonly see the concept of a **bilateral ecclesiology** promoted. A bilateral ecclesiology would affirm that Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are together a part of the Commonwealth of

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Israel, but that such a Commonwealth of Israel is to be composed of two distinct segments: the Messianic Jewish community, and the Christian Church. The term “commonwealth” is approached from the position of it being like the British Commonwealth of Nations, rather than *politeia* (πολιτεία) in its classical context of it being, “**the right to be a member of a sociopolitical entity, citizenship**” (BDAG).² Those who adhere to a bilateral ecclesiology model are not always welcoming of non-Jewish Believers in today’s Messianic movement. While Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are not exactly the same, and do have their natural distinctions—those who promote a bilateral ecclesiology can be seen to rigidly emphasize distinctions among God’s people, at the expense of the common faith that we are to have in Yeshua.

A competing model that is seen at many Messianic congregations—particularly those which would emphasize that Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are to function as “one new man” or “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15)—is probably best labeled as the **enlarged Kingdom realm of Israel** model. In Acts 15:15-18, James the Just placed the salvation of the nations squarely as a component of the restoration of the Tabernacle of David, referencing Amos 9:11-12: “The words of the Prophets agree, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David. I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it, so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord—namely all the Gentiles who are called by My name—says Adonai, who makes these things known from of old’” (TLV). During the reign of King David, Israel was not only to be regarded at its ideal peak as a state, but as indicated in the Hebrew of Amos 9:12, “That they may possess the remnant of Edom” (NASU), noting how the borders of Israel’s jurisdiction reached beyond the Twelve Tribes. An enlarged Kingdom realm of Israel model would regard all of God’s people as members of the Commonwealth of Israel, with a restored Twelve Tribes at the center, and enlarged borders to welcome in the righteous from the nations.

For the authors of the workbook *Messianic Judaism Class*, “We believe that the Jews according to the flesh (descendants of Abraham through Isaac; whether through the blood line of the mother or the father) who place their faith in Israel’s Messiah Yeshua have not disowned or separated themselves from their race and Judaic heritage, but remain sons and daughters of Israel. Gentiles who place their faith in Israel’s Messiah Yeshua are also, spiritually sons and daughters of Israel.”³ For the latter, even though reckoned as “fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19, TLV), they are also strongly warned against being arrogant to the Jewish people who have yet to receive the Messiah (Romans 11:19-20). **Non-Jewish Believers should not just call themselves “Israel,”** as that can be frequently construed as arrogant, insensitive to the Jewish struggle throughout history, and even supportive of replacement theology. Non-Jewish Believers should qualify their participation within Israel’s Commonwealth, as being grafted-in, fellow citizens with Jewish Believers, and most especially co-laborers in the restoration of Israel’s Kingdom with Jewish Believers.

² Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 845.

³ *Ibid.*, 148.

Being Patient in Your Theological Studies

Each one of us, as a man or woman of faith, is probably aware of the fact of how our maturation in the Lord is contingent on us being diligent and consistent in terms of praying each day, being in fellowship with brothers and sisters, and regularly studying the Bible. While Qohelet issues the fair warning, "There is no end to the making of many books, and excessive study wears the flesh" (Ecclesiastes 12:12, TLV), there are necessary books to be read and studies to be conducted, as a part of one's spiritual growth and transformation. Some of these might indeed involve having to wade through some academic and scholarly perspectives, evaluate various Hebrew and Greek language issues, weigh statements made in ancient literature and philosophy, and engage with technical commentaries. Some of the studies conducted in various Messianic congregations and venues today, are not as fruitful or beneficial to one's understanding of God and of His Word, than some others are. But some of the studies conducted in various Messianic congregations and venues today, are indeed required if we are to be a stable and effective Messianic movement, as we approach the final stretch of salvation history.

Many of you, because of your participation—no matter how long or short—in a Messianic congregation and in things Messianic, are aware of the importance of the subjects just summarized. We need to improve our understanding of how we got the Bible. Each one of us unfortunately, is likely to have witnessed or heard about someone, at some time in our Messianic assembly, who denied or at least severely questioned the Divinity of Yeshua. Today's Messianic people need a better approach to their salvation, because even if we are genuinely saved from our sins and proceeding in sanctification—how many of us think of salvation in entirely individualistic terms, and do not really concern ourselves with what is intended for the corporate Kingdom of God? And, when a word like "ecclesiology" appears on our scopes, we tend to have no idea how fraught it can be with controversy among today's Messianics, and the implications it has for Jewish and non-Jewish Believers getting along and respecting one another.

As exciting as it is for many of us to be involved in the Messianic movement—and the great potential is has—none of us has the time or the energy to absorb information and teaching on all the great issues of theology all at once. Each of us, has to deliberately pace ourselves, as we move forward in our individual walks of faith, and as we see the Messianic movement steadily emerge into what the Lord intends for it to become. The issues noted in this chapter are some of those which many of us already know about, or have at least indirectly encountered, in our Messianic experiences. These subjects can be addressed on their own, or can be addressed in segments as people read and study Holy Scripture. *The key is whether you will now consciously remember that these are some of the known issues present in Messianic theology.* How will you, as you proceed in your Messianic walk, know that you might need to dig a little deeper with how a particular Biblical book was composed, or that you might need to be on guard with certainly controversial issues? Qohelet advises, "Better the end of a matter than its beginning. Better a patient spirit than a proud one" (Ecclesiastes 7:8, TLV). Where you should ultimately end up as a mature Messianic person, requires you to be patient today, as we steadily and consistently study God's Word, and the theological issues of substance.