

Navigating Through a Very Small Messianic Movement

Many of us, at some significant point or another, have been greatly touched by the sentiments of Ephesians 3:17-19: “that Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Messiah which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God” (PME).¹ What Paul communicates here is that the love of Messiah is something which is broad and deep, and is undoubtedly something which will take a great deal of effort for Messiah followers to fully comprehend. A parallel passage to this would be Job 11:7-9:

“Can you discover the mysteries of God? Can you find the limits of Shaddai? They are higher than the heavens—what can you do? They are deeper than Sheol—what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea” (TLV).

Our God is big, in comparison to us small mortals. Given the greatness and majesty of God and His love for us—and our finality—we should each, as maturing Believers in Israel’s Messiah, be able to give others some space and maneuverability as they advance in their understanding of Him and His ways. Throughout a great deal of religious history, both Jewish and Protestant, people have been able to give others—particularly with those whom they might disagree on secondary and tertiary issues—the room that they need to accomplish the particular work or vocation they believe that they have been given by God. This is especially true of the different denominations and theological sectors of Protestantism, which is large enough to permit for there to be differences of opinion on various issues *and* for people to be spread out or part sufficiently so there are not unnecessary clashes or incidents.

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Throughout much of this year (2018), my youngest sister Maggie has been on deployment in the North Sea and Arctic Circle aboard the U.S.S. Farragut. We have been blessed to be able to communicate with her via social media. As we have talked with her about her Navy service, one thing that she told us about her cruise really impacted me: “Human beings were not intended to live in such close quarters for so long!” Keep in mind

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that the Farragut is a modern destroyer with a crew of around 300; it is not a wooden ship of past centuries where a similarly sized vessel might have a crew of over 1,500. Still, the point was made: **when kept too close together for too long a time, tensions do erupt between people, and the likelihood of there being disagreements and incidents increases.**

Today's Messianic movement is not like evangelical Protestantism, where you have a sufficiently large enough group of people, as well as a wide enough variety of denominations and local assemblies—where if an individual or family does not quite receive what they need in one place, they can go to another. **Today's Messianic movement is small**, and there are not that many options available to people. Today's Messianic movement is much more like the Jewish Synagogue, in that you have a very tight knit group of people—and as the old adage reminds us, "Two Jews, three opinions." Unlike the Protestant world, where if you disagree with the theology of a particular group, you can try another group—in the Jewish world you learn how to maneuver through a plurality of views and positions on a variety of non-essential issues. The Messianic movement is quite similar: on non-essential issues, people have to learn how to be flexible, respectfully disagree, and at least encourage reasonable dialogue on issues so as to decrease unnecessary tensions.

Over the past several years, when people have asked me if there is one thing that I would like to see greatly altered in today's Messianic movement, I have responded with something that has puzzled, if not bewildered many: **We need to fix our demographic imbalance.** When you look out at evangelical Protestantism, you will generally find assemblies where there is a fair balance across age groups, ethnic groups, economic income, and those of different social classes. In today's Messianic movement, a late-thirties single male such as myself, is a niche demographic. There are very few people in today's Messianic movement with whom I can immediately relate, and so I have to make the effort to befriend people who are sometimes still in high school, or who are approaching retirement age, among the various brackets. While I certainly have good and close friends in today's Messianic movement, not all of them are local, as I instead may only see them once or twice a year at a national conference. As it is with all friendships, some people I get along with extremely well, and some people I can only get close with when certain issues or topics are addressed.

Some might say that sometime in the near future, as we get closer and closer to the return of Yeshua—that things will all even out in today's Messianic movement, and we will become more demographically balanced among the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers who compose our ranks. Yet, as what has often been billed as "the end-time move of God," somehow making up "the remnant of her seed" (Revelation 12:17, KJV), I am less optimistic about the numbers of the Messianic movement increasing in the future, than some others might be.

Today's Messianic movement is small, and within such smallness is a wide diversity of opinions and approaches to non-essential theological and spiritual issues. There is more variety on a whole host of topics that face the Bible reader, than tends to be publicly acknowledged. Other than general appeals made like "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1, TLV), it is fair to say that we collectively try to avoid or dismiss the psychology of what it means to be a

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small, and internally diverse, group of human beings. While it is surely important for us to retain unity among brothers and sisters, as we anticipate more challenges as the Messiah's return draws near, how will we be able to successfully navigate through a very small Messianic movement?

Issues Worth Being Divided Over

In my multiple years of being associated with the Messianic movement, I have seen congregations and fellowships where people will divide with others, over the proverbial drop of a hat. They will divide over issues of minutiae, which have no direct bearing on one's salvation, and importance will be given to forms of *halachah* and faith practice, for which there can be a legitimate array of diverse opinions. More frequently than not, one will be prone to find an assembly which is factional, where various cliques in the group place a higher emphasis on non-essentials than is useful.

One of the reasons why we turn to the Apostolic epistles for guidance, is so we can avoid some of the mistakes and limitations of those in the First Century C.E. The Corinthians were one assembly particularly rife with factionalism, yet the Apostle Paul's imperative to them was, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Yeshua the Messiah, and Him executed on a wooden scaffold" (1 Corinthians 2:2, PME). The identity of Yeshua, His sacrifice on the tree, and the salvation He provides to those who trust in Him **constitutes those things which are to separate us from others.**

While in evangelical Protestantism, people are more likely to find another place to worship when discovering what certain people believe about controversies over eternal security, the spiritual gifts, the rapture, or women in ministry—because of our small size, people in today's Messianic movement do not often have the luxury of leaving one Messianic congregation to find another, on those sorts of issues. *If you are going to divide with other people who bear the label "Messianic" in some way, then it better be over a **major** issue!* In my ongoing studies and research over the past three to four years, the issues which are pressing upon today's Messianic movement—in which we definitely need more refinement and understanding—concern the Divinity and Messiahship of Yeshua. While most people in today's Messianic movement are to be commended for correctly believing that Yeshua is God, and certainly is the anticipated Messiah of Israel—many people in today's Messianic movement are also one conversation away from having their belief in Yeshua at least startled, if not shaken up. *Correct belief has not been followed up with correct doctrine*, and many have a blind faith in Yeshua of Nazareth because some subjective supernatural experience, and not because of their study of Holy Scripture.

Many in positions of congregational leadership and teaching are sufficiently equipped to address the major reasons often lodged by others, against why Yeshua is not God, or even the Messiah. But today's congregational teachers are often constrained to exposit on the weekly Torah portion, or some other ethical or moral issue facing the assembly. While surely important, when these important subjects are not expounded upon regularly in *Shabbat* teaching, one's congregational constituents will often look elsewhere for answers to the questions they pose. Usually accessing social media, individual Messianic people will be presented with scores of free teachings as to why Yeshua cannot be God, or why He cannot be the Messiah. In the past, Messianic congregations would have to guard

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themselves against a visit from a person passing out unauthorized literature, or a Jewish anti-missionary. While still a looming threat, the electronic tools at one's disposal make the probably of false teaching on the nature of the Messiah, entering into one's congregation, immeasurably high.

I have never hidden the fact that within my teachings, I consider the Divinity and Messiahship of Yeshua to be salvation issues. If I were in a Messianic congregation, where the leadership was questioning whether or not Yeshua was God, I would leave. *To me, the issue is that important.* More probably what we will each be confronted with, are individuals and families within Messianic congregations, who do not believe that Yeshua is God, and congregational leadership which does believe that Yeshua is God. What do you do, when it becomes public knowledge that there are people in your congregation who believe that Yeshua is Messiah, but a created being? It might be one thing if these people stay to themselves, visit on occasion, and say nothing. It might be something else if these have been congregational members for quite some time, have changed their minds, are active in various congregational programs, and have been spreading their ideas to others. The leadership of the assembly will ultimately have to decide how to confront such people, perhaps indeed issuing some disciplinary action, or asking them to leave.

Issues Not Worth Being Divided Over

While many of us can understand how individuals in a Messianic congregation, fellowship, or even ministry, may need to be asked to leave because they have denied Yeshua as God, and may not even be too sure about Yeshua as Messiah—most of the issues that we tend to divide over, and are the result of tensions within our rather small faith community, **do not bear a salvation level significance.** The basic common denominator for believing in the good news or gospel, is, "if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9, TLV). In view of Romans 10:13 following, quoting from Joel 2:32, one can insist that some recognition of Yeshua's Divinity as the LORD is required for salvation; unfortunately, all of us are at some point guilty of conflating *another issue* with the salvation of someone else.

The world of theology and Biblical Studies is evidence enough how there are many topics and subjects worthy of detailed discussion, analysis, and indeed debate. We are invited as followers of the Messiah to investigate God's Word, to probe the mind of God, and to consider our relationship to both His Creation and wider society. There are issues worthy of our attention, but they are hardly issues which will directly affect whether we spend eternity with the Lord, or separated from Him. For some people, particularly in larger faith communities such as evangelical Protestantism—how you approach certain secondary or tertiary issues of theology, means that if you disagree on an issue, you can find not only another church to attend, but another denomination to be a member of. In today's relatively small Messianic movement, how you approach certain secondary or tertiary issues of theology, means that you may have to proceed very cautiously regarding what you say—or do not say—around certain people. As James 1:19-20 advises, "Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger—for human anger doesn't produce the righteousness of God" (TLV).

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In a small faith community such as the Messianic movement, it would be naïve of us to think that every single person has the same orientation toward a number of secondary and tertiary, non-salvation issues. In fact, I am frequently asked about what I think about various subjects—which some think are entirely “off limits” for being discussed in their local Messianic congregations or fellowships. Yet, some of these subjects are, for certain, entirely legitimate and are indeed discussed in both Jewish and Protestant venues. That there might indeed be more variety in today’s broad Messianic community, *beneath the surface*, than a number of leaders and teachers are willing to admit to at present.

Bible Difficulties

The basic rule of good Bible interpretation, is to interpret a text for what it meant to its original audience first, and then to deduce principles for modern times. That is easier said than done! Many people incorrectly read the Bible as though it were written to them *personally and directly*, in the Twenty-First Century. More so than this, we often apply our Twenty-First Century standards of exactness to Holy Scripture. We have each expected certain things of the Bible, which the Bible does not expect of itself.

Too many people in today’s Messianic movement, particularly of the older generation, are witnessed to have not engaged that much with how the Scriptures came to be, how texts have been transmitted, much less with the degree of historical accuracy that certain texts have. For a movement which places a high degree of emphasis on the importance of the Tanach (OT), we are largely unconscious of how the further back one goes in history, the less and less evidence one will have for the events recorded.

I certainly hold to a high level of historicity and reliability for the Bible, but more and more younger people—who are receiving a theological education, and are going to be future Messianic leaders—are going to hold to a more diverse array of opinions on an entire array of Bible difficulties. More often than not, opinions which have been kept private, are going to be voiced. How is our small Messianic movement going to handle a diversity of views over the numbers of the Exodus, the extent of Noah’s Flood, or over the Genesis chs. 1-2 materials and age of the universe? For better or for worse, there is a greater selection of opinions and positions on these sorts of issues, which we are not willing to publicly recognize at times.

Spiritual Gifts

On the whole, it is fair to say that today’s Messianic movement would describe itself as “Spirit filled,” meaning that it would generally be positive about the operation of the Spiritual gifts. Today’s Messianic movement is broadly not cessationist, the idea that the Spiritual gifts ended with the death of the Apostles, and perhaps their immediate successors. This does not mean, though, that there are not some leaders and teachers who are cessationists—but more often than not today’s Messianic leaders, teachers, and people would be continuists. Today’s Messianic people generally believe that rather than ceasing with the Apostles, that the Spiritual gifts have continued to the present time.

Yet, among those who believe in the continuation of the Spiritual gifts, are certainly divisions. I am a continuist, but I also believe in the high priority of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and love (1 Corinthians 13:1). While in principle I believe in the operation of the Spiritual gifts, I am also on record as being quite skeptical, and even

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critical, to the excesses of the charismatic movement—which at the very least, I do not believe often exhibits a great deal of discernment of mind. Many people who label themselves as “charismatic,” do not tend to be very distinguishing between genuine actions of the Holy Spirit, actions of human flesh, and then actions of nefarious origin. Many of today’s charismatics want a subjective spiritual experience, rather than be committed to external acts of grace and holiness.

How do we reach a point of maturity, involving the Spiritual gifts, where God’s Holy Spirit is able to transform our hearts and minds—not only to empower us to do good deeds (Ephesians 2:10)—but to get us to think and process increasingly more complicated ideas and concepts? Much of the influence that a charismatic reasoning process has had, on various Messianic people, has hardly been positive. While we genuinely should want God’s Spirit to move, we have also been warned, “Many false prophets will arise and lead many astray” (Matthew 24:11, TLV).

The End-Times

All of us who have been involved with the Messianic movement, for any elongated period of time, are aware of our collective interest in the anticipated end-times. Because of our focus on Israel and the Jewish people, it is hardly a surprise that we pay attention to the Middle East and to *when* we are in human history. There are certainly debates—although much friendlier today in 2018 than they were twenty years ago—on whether Yeshua returns to gather the holy ones before or after the Tribulation period. There are different orientations witnessed among those who are convinced we are living in the end-times—with some of the conviction that the return of the Messiah is much closer than others, and should what they do or not do with their lives, be reflective of this. Certainly, if the Messianic movement is to be a significant venue of future Jewish salvation, and in seeing many non-Jewish Believers tangibly connect to their faith heritage in Israel’s Scriptures—then some evaluation of what we can legitimately do for the future, would be in order. We might be able to take some solace from Daniel 12:3, “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavenly expanse. And those who turn many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever” (TLV).

The Torah

Today’s Messianic movement, although with some exceptions, believes that per Yeshua’s word of the Torah or Law not passing away (Matthew 5:17-19), that Moses’ Teaching has not been abolished for the post-resurrection era. This does involve a more positive orientation for the role of the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*, the appointed times or Biblical festivals of Leviticus 23, and the kosher dietary laws—than is seen in today’s Christianity. There are debates, however, over the applicability of these instructions to Jewish and non-Jewish Believers. There are debates over the applicability of many Torah commandments for the Twenty-First Century. Far too frequently, voices trying to divide a rather small Messianic movement, or trying to establish extreme, inflexible positions—drown out those who want to encourage obedience to God’s Instruction as a genuine outworking of the good works that born again Believers are to have.

Today’s Body of Messiah needs a foundation in Moses’ Teaching. Much of the proliferation of sin and ungodliness, lamentably witnessed in contemporary

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evangelicalism, is a direct result of dismissing the relevance of the Tanach (OT) Scriptures for people of faith. While in the past, much of historical Protestantism artificially divided the Torah's commandments into the so-called moral, civil, and ceremonial law—the Torah's commandments which regulate ethics and morality are being eschewed by too many claiming faith in Israel's Messiah. How today's small Messianic movement can best tackle the extremes of legalism and lawlessness, and truly embody the Torah's principles in its missiology, may be a challenge—but not hopelessly impossible.

Men and Women

One of the biggest theological controversies today, certainly in Protestantism, and to a lesser extent Judaism, regards the role of men and women in spiritual leadership. Customarily from its beginning, the Messianic movement has broadly adhered to a theological position known as complementarianism, which while affirming the ontological equality of males and females (cf. Genesis 1:27-28; Galatians 3:28), also believes that various principal leadership roles, in both the family and Body of Messiah, are only reserved for males. Over the past half-century, for certain, in various branches of both Judaism and evangelicalism, females have been increasingly occupying more and more positions of congregational leadership, with the principle of "mutual submission" (cf. Ephesians 5:20; Philippians 2:4) being highly emphasized, and with females in leadership positions in the Bible a definite feature of study and discussion.

It would be a mistake, as a matter of information at least, to think that one-hundred percent of today's Messianic movement is complementarian, and that there is not a growing sector of egalitarians—who stress the equality of males and females—in our midst. Why have some people been open to egalitarian views on men and women serving as co-leaders of the home and of the assembly? The reasons are likely varied. None of these people, though, have done so for liberal intensions, with the result eventually allowing for homosexual marriage—but instead have considered egalitarian perspectives because complementarian perspectives did not answer certain questions that they raised. In our small Messianic movement, how are we going to handle the knowledge of there being people who hold to either complementarian or egalitarian theologies in our congregations? Are we going to be able to hear one another out, and not immediately dismiss them?

How will you navigate through our small Messianic movement?

Believers in Israel's Messiah are directly admonished, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14, NRSV). A number of the issues which I have noted, have served as dividing lines among different denominations and sects—even though none of them directly affect one's salvation. Of course, each one of these issues does involve how we read and interpret Scripture—and religious history is evidence enough of how not everyone reads and interprets Scripture in exactly the same way.

Today's Messianic movement is small, and that means that there is going to be a diverse array of opinions, on non-salvation, non-essential issues, likely enclosed in tight congregations and fellowships. If there is any issue over which we should divide, it is over the Divinity and Messiahship of Yeshua of Nazareth. While some of us might be seen to

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have a diversity of opinions and positions on the spiritual gifts, the end-times, or men and women in leadership roles—none of those issues have a direct bearing on whether or not we are forgiven of our sins. These are issues which require us to be diligent students of God's Word, and fair-minded, mature people, who can learn to be a little flexible amongst diversity.

As we approach the return of the Messiah, the need for the Messianic movement to recognize how the Jewish community has stayed coherent for centuries—despite its internal religious and philosophical diversity—will become apparent. The Messianic movement may never be as large, or as demographically balanced, or even as ideal, as some may want it to be. However, we should definitely be seeking the Lord and His ways more and more, and as we do this, ask Him to give us the ability to accomplish His tasks on Earth!