

# The Effect of Mysticism and Gnosticism on the Messianic Movement

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The Messianic community today, as many of us genuinely know, has a great potential to enact a sizeable difference in the lives of many Jewish people and evangelical Christian Believers. Already in our generation, we have seen many scores of Jewish people come to faith in Messiah Yeshua, and many Christians embrace their Hebraic Roots and a life of Torah in a very tangible way. There is no doubting the fact that our Heavenly Father is accomplishing something very unique and quite special with the contemporary Messianic movement. We could very well be in the early stages of the final period of time before the Lord's return, when the Apostles' question regarding the restoration of Israel's Kingdom will finally get answered (Acts 1:6)!

As a still-developing and still-emerging faith community, today's Messianic movement faces many questions. We are wrestling with the issues of seeing Jewish and non-Jewish Believers come together in mixed assemblies, and inevitably with this come some clashes of ideology and worldview. Jewish Believers are obviously coming to faith in Israel's Messiah, and in the Messianic movement do not have to give up on their Jewish heritage and (mainline) traditions. Non-Jewish Believers, coming out of evangelical Christianity and embracing a Messianic lifestyle, enter into the Messianic movement for a variety of reasons. Presumably, the common thread for all of us should be that we are all trying *to grow and mature in our faith*, abiding in the Lord (John 15:4-5; 1 John 4:15).

No one should be under any allusions that bringing Jewish and non-Jewish Believers together as one in Messiah Yeshua is an easy process. *It is not!* Many mature Messianic people are rightly aware of the fact that our faith community has a treasure trove of Jewish and Christian insights to consider from over the centuries, which are spiritually edifying and will aid us in the times ahead. But, many of us are also aware that there are Jewish and Christian theological positions and ideologies, which are not only not Biblical, but can be very damaging to the work of the Holy Spirit in our day.

All of us, regardless of our backgrounds, are to be seeking truth, and eliminating theologies, ideas, and attitudes, which are clearly in contradiction to the ways of God. The Lord has given us as born again Believers His Holy Spirit, not just so that we would be able to commune with Him, but also so that we may be empowered to discern between truth and error. As Messianic Believers, we should have the Holy Spirit convict us when we fall short of God's standard contained in the Torah, and the Spirit should be leading us all to keep God's

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commandments, study Scripture, and adequately apply Scripture for our modern times. We should also have the Spirit to distinguish who false teachers may be, and what the problems are with their teachings. The Apostle Peter attested that there will be false prophets circulating in the Last Days:

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Peter 2:1).

While Peter’s words are sometimes applied by Messianics to refer to some false, non-Biblical Christian teachings<sup>1</sup>—they could just as well refer to certain Messianic teachers and/or populist figures, who are leading people astray into aberrant teachings, or worse, onto a path of falling away from faith in Yeshua. Let not any of us, in arrogance, think that we have “arrived” or “understand all things.” Let us be willing, as Messianic people, to put our feet to the fire sometimes and examine the errors that we as a community might have among us, which require an analysis and response.

One particular aspect of the broad Jewish theological tradition, the phenomenon of **Jewish mysticism**, is something that gets many Messianic people rightly disturbed. Many Messianic people, when hearing a teaching or viewpoint expressed from the Kabbalah, or quoted from the Zohar, for example, might get upset and a bit unnerved. It is unfortunate that there is a growing acceptance, in not only sectors of the more fringe and disorganized Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement—but also within established Messianic Judaism itself—to (highly) consider the Jewish mystical tradition. The problems that this can cause are immense—the foremost of which is that ideas from one sector of Judaism from the Middle Ages, can be anachronistically passed off as though somehow they are the ideas and worldview of Yeshua and His Apostles in the First Century C.E. Beyond this, some of the ideas and philosophies, represented by Jewish mysticism, might not have too much of a basis in rational or reasoned thought, and more of a basis in a Gnostic-style of spirituality.

The Jewish mystical tradition and associated ideas and beliefs, have notably never had a huge foothold within mainstream Synagogue teaching. Yet, today’s Messianic Believers need to begin to be much more discerning, and think much more critically about this. We will not only need to evaluate a few things originating from Jewish mysticism which have “slipped in” unnoticed, but as we consider what is in store for us in the future, and things which we must be a bit more careful of.

## Back to the First Century—and its Problems

It is commonly said in the Messianic movement that we as Believers need to be restored to the faith practices of Yeshua and the First Century Disciples and Apostles. *I could not agree more with this.* We must return to the Torah obedient faith of our Lord and Savior, and emulate His early followers as best and as closely as we can. We must return to the style of faith of those who originally had the Holy Spirit poured out on them at *Shavuot*/Pentecost. We need to recognize how the early assemblies of Messiah followers not only had Jewish Believers who had acknowledged the Messiah of Israel, but also Believers from the nations who had been forgiven of their sins. The two groups relied immensely on one another—and were a testament to how God is definitely concerned with saving all of humanity!

But aside from some of the important things regarding the Hebraic background of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), or reappreciating the Torah and its relationship to the

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<sup>1</sup> The foremost of these would obviously be the false idea that the Torah or Law of Moses was abolished by Yeshua the Messiah. For a further review, consult the author’s book *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

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teachings of Yeshua—how many of us fail to recognize that if we are returning to the First Century faith of the Disciples and Apostles, *that we will be facing some of the same problems that they faced?* And what are some of the problems that they encountered?

Obviously, as many people from the nations embraced faith in the Messiah of Israel, the challenges that the First Century *ekklēsia* largely faced dealt with how these new Believers were to grow in their faith. The primary issues they dealt with related to how they were to leave Greco-Roman religious practices and be discipled and properly trained in what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Among the things that they absolutely had to change, included how they had to leave idolatry, fornication, and other practices expressly prohibited by Tanach Scripture (the Old Testament). Many of these same issues, in various forms, lamentably, have plagued the Body of Messiah for centuries.

Specifically, as we strive to return to the First Century faith of the Disciples and Apostles, we will not just be facing “common problems” like adultery, idolatry, or even sins such as lying. We will also be contending with some of the more specialized religious problems that the First Century *ekklēsia* faced. Very few when examining Scripture, unfortunately, consider it in its historical context. Many do not have the understanding—of First Century Judaism, Greco-Roman religion, Second and Third Century Christianity, and the various mystery religions and cults which existed—that they need to have! Many of us fail to consider the gross religious errors that were circulating throughout the First Century which affected the early Believers in Yeshua, and how some of these same kinds of errors are affecting Believers today.

### **Religion of the First Century**

In seeking to understand the First Century origins of our faith, and thus fully comprehend some of the problems that are occurring in the Messianic movement today, it is important for each of us to have a basic, working knowledge, of the religion of the period. If you were a Believer in Yeshua in the First Century C.E., you were part of a mixed association of mainly Jews, Greeks, and Romans. If you were a Jewish Believer, you had received the long-awaited Messiah of Israel into your life, and you were still connected to the larger Jewish world as you had Jewish family members who likely did not receive or believe in Yeshua. If you were a non-Jewish Believer, you received the Messiah of Israel into your life, and you had undergone some major lifestyle changes, likely having come out of Greco-Roman religion. Many of your family and friends would not have understood the changes that you made, and you needed some extra help with your new walk of faith, unlike the Jewish Believer who was relatively familiar with the Scriptures of Israel. Consider the challenges that the First Century Body of Messiah faced, and when understanding this how it can change your perspective of the Apostolic Scriptures, notably the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles.

But things are even more complex. While we all might have a basic understanding of Judaism, primarily from what Judaism is today, and a basic understanding of Greco-Roman religion, from what we have read from Greco-Roman mythology—the truth of the matter is that ancient Judaism was factional (and sometimes referred to as ancient “Judaisms”), there was no “standardized” Greco-Roman religion as there were many regional variants, and there were mystery religions and cults that were competing for the attention of the people as well. Before we can address some of the problems that we are facing today, we must have a fuller understanding of First Century Judaism, Greco-Roman religion, and other influences that might have affected the early Body of Believers.

Many of you who have studied the New Testament and who have been in the Messianic movement for any period of time, are probably already familiar with First Century Judaism, at

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least in passing. The two dominant sects of Judaism in the time of Yeshua were the Pharisees and the Sadducees, which made up the religious council known as the Sanhedrin. An eclectic sect known as the Essenes also existed. But there were also other “side sects,” for lack of a better description, that were often influenced by the mystery religions of the Greeks and the Romans of the time.

### ***The Sadducees***

The Sadducees did not have a great amount of religious influence over the early Believers. The Sadducees are well-known in the Gospel accounts for *not* believing in the resurrection of the dead (Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). *ABD* indicates that “the Sadducees did not believe that the soul continued to exist after death or that people suffered punishments or received rewards after they died....The NT considers the Sadducees’ rejection of resurrection as their primary characteristic, for the issue of resurrection was of central importance to the early Church.”<sup>2</sup> The Sadducees did not believe in any kind of an afterlife, and/or a future reconstitution of mortal remains. The *Jewish Study Bible* also, records how “They held to a strict application of Torah and to maintain order to continue the Temple practices without interference, the Sadducees were apparently willing to collaborate with the occupying Roman power to some extent, including accepting Roman interference in the choice of high priest.”<sup>3</sup>

It appears that the Sadducees were largely in league with the Roman occupiers of the Land of Israel. They did not have a great amount of influence over the common people, who viewed them as collaborators with Rome. The historian Josephus would state, “the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.6).<sup>4</sup> *NIDB* tells us, “There is no record of a Sadducee being admitted into the Christian church. According to Josephus (*Antiq.* 20.9.1), they were responsible for the death of James, the brother of the lord. With the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Sadducean party disappeared.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Pharisees***

The Pharisees, probably more than any other group, had a great amount of influence on the early Believers in Yeshua. Many of the Jewish Believers were Pharisees, and in the case of the Apostle Paul, he was a Pharisee who had been trained by the Jewish sage Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).<sup>6</sup> The Pharisees were much more conservative in their doctrine than the Sadducees, believing in the resurrection of the dead, angels, demons, and an afterlife. “The Pharisees were concerned to extend Jewish practice into all areas of life, and followed the tradition of interpretation (**Oral**

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<sup>2</sup> Gary G. Porton, “Sadducees,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:892.

<sup>3</sup> Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2138.

<sup>4</sup> Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 335.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Barabas, “Sadducees,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 885.

More on the presumed details on the death of James the Just is discussed in the Introduction to the author’s commentary *James for the Practical Messianic* (forthcoming in paperback 2013).

<sup>6</sup> The Talmud says of Gamaliel, “*The rabbis taught*: From the days of Moses until Rabban Gamaliel, they did not study Torah [in any posture] other than standing. After Rabban Gamaliel died, an infirmity descended into the world, and they used to study Torah sitting. *And that is as is taught*: **After Rabban Gamaliel died, the honor of Torah was lost**” (b.*Megillah* 21a; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM).

Gamaliel was held in such high regard, that the Jewish Sages believed that full honor was not believed to be given to the Torah following his death. This indicates that Paul was indeed trained in his theology by a teacher who had substantial standing and influence in First Century Judaism.

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**Torah**) associated with the schools of Hillel and Shammai. They were thus proponents of a Jewish identity separate from the larger non-Jewish culture that surrounded Judea" (*Jewish Study Bible*).<sup>7</sup> The Pharisees followed the same Tanach Scriptures that are generally followed today, but they also gave credence to the Oral Torah or Oral Law that would later be written down in the forms of the Mishnah and Talmud.

The Pharisees are featured many times in the Apostolic Scriptures, and most of the time Christian examiners have concluded that they are antagonists of Yeshua. However, understanding the divisions among the Pharisees themselves, Yeshua often argued with the Pharisees in a very Pharisaical style. Yeshua's basic theology was closer to that of the Pharisees than any other group of people, and He Himself would have likely been classified as a Pharisee. In fact, in Matthew 23:2-3 He says, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*." Messiah's followers are to take their theological lead from the Pharisees, but be cautious of their works.

Of course, the Pharisees did have their problems. It has been observed, "Formulation and adaptation of Mosaic Law by scribe and rabbi, increased tradition, and a more rabid separatism from almost everything resulted in an almost new religion, much the opposite from that handed down in the covenant by the prophets" (*NIDB*).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, much of the disagreement in the Gospels between Yeshua and the Pharisees is often over interpretation and application of the Torah, as opposed to the validity of the Torah itself.

Even though some of the Pharisees did seemingly have a problem with Torah legalism, the Pharisees did have some very noble qualities we can admire. The Hebrew word *Parush* (פָּרוּשׁ), the singular form of *Perushim* (פָּרוּשִׁים), means "the separated ones, separatists,"<sup>9</sup> and they "vehemently oppose[d] all secularization of Judaism by the pagan Greek thought that penetrated Jewish life after the Alexandrian conquest" (*NIDB*).<sup>10</sup> The Pharisees were active in making proselytes, and had planted many synagogues in the Diaspora. Menahem Mansoor summarizes, "The active period of Pharisaism extended well into the second century C.E. and was most influential in the development of Orthodox Judaism... After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., it was the synagogues and the schools of the Pharisees that continued to function and to promote Judaism" (*EJ*).<sup>11</sup>

The Pharisees, perhaps more than any other group, had great influence on the development of the First Century Body of Messiah. Paul's declaration before the Sanhedrin was *ani Perush* (אֲנִי פָּרוּשׁ), *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι), "I am a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6). He plainly attested, "according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived *as* a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5). Mansoor also says that "Pharisaic doctrines have more in common with those of Christianity than is supposed, having prepared the ground for Christianity with such concepts as Messianism, the popularization of monotheism and apocalypticism, and with such beliefs as life after death, resurrection of the dead, immortality, and angels" (*EJ*).<sup>12</sup>

One problem present in the New Testament is that there was a specific group of those from Pharisaical sects, who had believed in Yeshua, who said that non-Jews coming to faith had to be circumcised and observe the Torah *first*, before they could be saved. Acts 15:5 attests, "But

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<sup>7</sup> *Jewish Study Bible*, 2136.

<sup>8</sup> Lorman M. Petersen, "Pharisees," in *NIDB*, 779.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 778.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 779.

<sup>11</sup> Menahem Mansoor, "Pharisees," *Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows 9x*. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

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some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.'" The Pharisees were a broad group of people, so we should not automatically believe, as some do, that these were *all* of those from the Pharisees who came to faith. Furthermore, the belief that physical circumcision and Torah observance (in other words, ritual proselyte conversion) were prerequisites for salvation was not only adhered to by various Pharisees.<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Essenes***

A third group which had far less influence on First Century Judaism than the Pharisees and Sadducees were the Essenes. They are not mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures, but rather by ancient writers such as Josephus and Philo. *The Jewish Study Bible* describes them as "a Jewish group that flourished from around the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE. They kept the Jewish law with utmost rigor, living apart from other Jews in their own communities."<sup>14</sup> The Essenes were a communal group that observed the Torah very strictly, and preferred to keep to their own affairs. The most widely known of the Essene groups was the Qumran community, which was responsible for writing what scholars refer to as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is debated among scholars whether or not the Essenes had any major influence on, or for that matter any contact with, the early Believers in Yeshua. It seems that there may have been a few doctrinal similarities, but those similarities would also have been shared with the Pharisees. *NIDB* comments that their "literature reveals that the people of the Qumran community were avid students of the Jewish Scriptures," and indicates that "Many of the Essenes perished in the wars against the Romans," speculating, "Many of the survivors probably became Christians."<sup>15</sup>

The Dead Sea Scrolls are primarily a collection of Scriptural documents, which are often employed by scholars in textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. But there were also texts describing the Qumran's community's behavior and practices, as well as some sectarian extra-Biblical works like the Book of Enoch. Again, how much influence the Essenes had over the First Century *ekklesia* is debated, although material such as the DSS does give a written witness to the theological and spiritual views of another major sect of Judaism, outside that of the Pharisees.

### ***The Jewish Mystics***

A fourth group, which is by far the least organized when compared to the Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes, that existed in the First Century, was the Jewish mystics. This would be a loose-fitting group of Jews who would practice some form of magic or sorcery along with their Judaism. There is no universal set of beliefs or practices for Jewish mystics of the First Century, other than the fact that they were a very small minority. In ancient times they appear to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, some of which are mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures and early Christian writings.

The Torah expressly prohibited the practices of divination and sorcery in Deuteronomy 18:9-14:

"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices

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<sup>13</sup> For a further evaluation, consult the author's article "You Want to be a Pharisee," appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*.

<sup>14</sup> *Jewish Study Bible*, 2128.

<sup>15</sup> Clyde E. Harrington, "Essenes," in *NIDB*, 326.

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witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you *to do so*."

These practices were considered by God to be "the abhorrent practices of those nations" (NJPS). They included using divination and witchcraft to cast spells on someone or to try to determine the future or communicate with the dead. The Ancient Israelites were brought out of Egypt and were going into a land where Canaanites practiced these things. Haim Hermann Cohn comments,

"It was to be the characteristic of Judaism that nothing would be achieved by magic, but everything by the will and spirit of God: hence the confrontations of Joseph and the magicians of Egypt (Gen. 41), of Moses and Aaron and Egyptian sorcerers (Ex. 7), of Daniel and the Babylonian astrologers (Dan. 2), etc., and hence also the classification of crimes of sorcery as tantamount to idolatrous crimes of human sacrifices (Deut. 18:10) and to idolatrous sacrifices in general (Ex. 22: 19) and its visitation, just as idolatry itself, with death by stoning (Lev. 20:27; see Capital Punishment). In a God-fearing Israel, there is no room for augury and sorcery (Num. 23:23; Isa. 8:19), and the presence of astrologers (Isa. 47:13) and fortune-tellers is an indication of godlessness (Nah. 3:4; Ezek. 13:20–23; et al.). Nonetheless, magic practices remained widespread throughout, and not only with idolaters (see, e.g., I Sam. 28:4–20; II Kings 18:4; Chron. 33:6)" (EJ).<sup>16</sup>

Leviticus 20:27 clearly states, "Now a man or a woman who is a medium or a spiritist shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their bloodguiltiness is upon them." Those people practicing witchcraft and divination were to be executed. But, the Scriptures do clearly indicate for us that these things were practiced by many in Ancient Israel, and later by some within Second Temple Judaism.

There are three primary examples in the Scriptures of those practicing divination we need to consider.

The witch of Endor was consulted by King Saul to bring up the spirit of Samuel from Sheol. Saul swore by the Lord that even though he decreed that all witches should be put to death, that she would not be put to death. King Saul sees the disembodied Samuel, who tells him that he will be defeated and will die and lose his kingdom. Saul, swearing by the name of God to a diviner, found himself the recipient of God's judgment:

"Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.' And his servants said to him, 'Behold, there is a woman who is a medium at En-dor.' Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, 'Conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you.' But the woman said to him, 'Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?' Saul vowed to her by the LORD, saying, 'As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.' Then the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' And he said, 'Bring up Samuel for me.' When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, 'Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul.' The king said to her, 'Do not be afraid;

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<sup>16</sup> Haim Hermann Cohn, "Sorcery," in *EJ*.

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but what do you see?' And the woman said to Saul, 'I see a divine being coming up out of the earth.' He said to her, 'What is his form?' And she said, 'An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe.' And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and did homage. Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' And Saul answered, 'I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has departed from me and no longer answers me, either through prophets or by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I should do.' Samuel said, 'Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has departed from you and has become your adversary? The LORD has done accordingly as He spoke through me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, to David. As you did not obey the LORD and did not execute His fierce wrath on Amalek, so the LORD has done this thing to you this day'" (1 Samuel 28:7-18).

Bar-Yeshua (Bar-Jesus), also called Elymas, encountered the Apostles Paul and Barnabas on Cyprus:

"When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also *known as* Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, 'You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.' And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:6-13).

Bar-Yeshua is described as "a Jewish sorcerer and pseudo-prophet" (CJB). We are not expressly told anything in the Biblical text about Bar-Yeshua, who was also called Elymas, other than the fact that Paul proves him to be an absolute fraud in front of the Roman proconsul, and a deceptive liar. Paul, via the power of the Holy Spirit, declared that Bar-Yeshua was to lose his sight. Sergius Paulus was greatly impressed, and believed in the good news as a result. *ISBE*, describing Bar-Jesus, speculates that he was a Jew from Babylon, having been influenced by astrology and the occult:

"The East was flooding the Roman Empire with its new and wonderful religious systems, which, culminating in neo-Platonism, were the great rivals of Christianity both in their cruder and in their more strictly religious forms. Superstition was extremely widespread, and wonder-workers of all kinds, whether imposters or honest exponents of some new faith, found their task easy through the credulity of the public. Babylonia was the home of magic, for charms are found on the oldest tablets. 'Magos' was originally applied to the priests of the Persians who overran Babylonia, but the title degenerated when it was assumed by baser persons for baser articles. Juvenal (vi.562, etc.), Horace (*Satires* i.2.1) and other Latin authors mention Chaldean astrologers and impostors, possibly Babylonian Jews. Many of the Magians, however, were the scientists of their day, the heirs of the science of Babylon and the lore of Persia, and not merely pretenders or

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conjurers...It may have been as the representative of some oriental system, a compound of 'science' and religion, that Bar-Jesus was attached to the company of Sergius Paulus."<sup>17</sup>

The final, and perhaps most significant example, is that of Simon, a Samaritan, in Acts 8. He is customarily called Simon Magus as he was a magician. "He 'believed' as a result of Philip's preaching there, though the real nature of his faith is not clear...He undoubtedly was especially impressed by the operation of divine power in Philip, a power that exceeded his own" (NIDB):<sup>18</sup>

"Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, 'This man is what is called the Great Power of God.' And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Yeshua the Messiah, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed" (Acts 8:9-13).

The Apostles Peter and John went to Samaria to see the work of the Lord being performed, and they encountered Simon:

"Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Yeshua. Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity'" (Acts 8:14-23).

Simon Magus, believing that he could advance himself by performing the same kinds of miracles the Apostles did, actually believed that he could buy the Holy Spirit from them. Peter directly told him, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!" (NIV). According to Church history, Simon did not go away. He apparently did establish a following that errantly influenced many as the gospel message spread abroad. Eusebius, an historian of the Fourth Century Church, has this to relate about Simon Magus in his *Ecclesiastical History*:

(1) THE FAITH OF OUR LORD and Savior Jesus Christ, having now been diffused abroad among all men, the enemy of salvation devising some scheme of seizing upon the imperial city for himself brought thither Simon, whom we mentioned before. Coming to the aid of his insidious artifices, he attached many of the inhabitants of Rome to himself in order to deceive them.

(2) This is attested by Justin, who was one of our distinguished writers, not long after the times of the apostles, concerning whom I shall say what is necessary in the proper place. The

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<sup>17</sup> S.F. Hunter, "Bar-Jesus," in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:431.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Toon, "Simon," in *NIDB*, 945.

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reader may see for himself in the first defense of our religion, addressed to Antonine, where he wrote thus: (3): "And after the ascension of our Lord into heaven, certain men were suborned by demons as their agents, who said that they were gods. These were not only suffered to pass without persecution, but were even deemed worthy of honors by you. Simon, a certain Samaritan of the village called Githon, was one of the number, who, in the reign of Claudius Caesar, performed many magic rites by the operation of demons, was considered a god, in your imperial city of Rome, and was honored by you with a statue as a god, in the river Tiber, (on an island) between the two bridges, having the superscription in Latin, Simoni Deo Sancto, which is, To Simon the Holy God; (4) and nearly all the Samaritans, a few also of other nations, worship him, confessing him as the Supreme God" (2.13.1-4).<sup>19</sup>

According to this tradition, Simon, who was a Samaritan, was considered to be among the milieu of Jewish mystics practicing sorcery, came to Rome and was performing mighty deeds that were supernaturally empowered by demons. He came to be worshipped as a god by many of the Romans.

### *The Greek Mythos*

Examining the religion of the Greeks, which many of the First Century non-Jewish Believers came out of, can be complicated, because it was not standardized to the same degree as Judaism, and there were many regional variants. Greek religion was a mix of various myths regarding the gods of Mount Olympus and their involvement with humanity, *and* the religious system as set forth by priests in the temples, as well as various political authorities. Often times, the Greek gods embodied the same qualities as human beings themselves. *ISBE* summarizes,

"Like other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples, the Greeks considered natural forces external to themselves to be divine. But, unlike many of those peoples, they came to conceive of natural powers in human form, with passions and experiences much like their own. They reduced their gods to a manageable number and pictured them as an extended family living on Mt. Olympus in northeastern Greece. Like the inhabitants of a Greek city-state, the gods engaged in interminable petty quarrels and infidelities. Although they had no real concern for humanity, occasionally some came down from their lofty home because of jealousy or fear of what human beings were doing or because of a petition expressed by someone on earth."<sup>20</sup>

This same entry goes on and comments, "The truth is that the myths present Greek gods in many immoral or compromising situations. Zeus, e.g., is portrayed falling in love with numerous women and then resorting to a variety of tricks to hide his extramarital activities from his wife. Scholars commonly have explained such involvement by the fragmentation and fusion of Greek polytheism. Geographical and economic conditions tended to divide the Greeks into divergent cultural and religious groupings with slightly variant myths" (*ISBE*).<sup>21</sup>

Greek religion, as it is attested, is complicated not because of the various myths surrounding it, but often because a story or myth was applied to a specific location in order to strengthen civil ties of the citizen:

"Religion was bound up with the life of the city-states early in Greek history. Although each city-state worshipped the whole pantheon, each tended to venerate a particular patron

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<sup>19</sup> Eusebius: *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> H.F. Vos, "Religions: Greco-Roman," in *ISBE*, 4:107.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 4:109.

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deity...State cults were established, so that religion became a social cement that bound the community together. Public officials led the ceremonies honoring the patron deity" (*ISBE*).<sup>22</sup>

An excellent example of this as attested to in the Scriptures is in Acts 19, when Paul's preaching of the gospel to the Ephesians hurt the business of Demetrius, and Demetrius wanted to stir up the mob against him. Demetrius sold silver emulates of the goddess Artemis, who was one of the major local deities of the Ephesians. In Acts 19:28, 34, the mob against Paul cries out: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" This is only one of many examples indicating the regional nature of Greek religion.

While there were many variants of Greek religion, often determined by location, there were also many constants. The Greek gods were considered to have many of the same qualities as humans. The gods in mythology could get drunk, have sexual relations and affairs, lie, steal, and cheat. They were not all-powerful or omnipresent, and were represented in their temples by statues. Ancient history later reveals that the Romans basically had the same Greek religious system, although some of the names of deities and their representations changed.

Just like Judaism had its mystics who used sorcery and divination, witchcraft was not unique to the Greek religion, either. In Philippi, the Apostle Paul encountered a woman possessed by "a spirit of divination" or the spirit of Python, *pneuma puthōna* (πνεῦμα πύθωνα). Even though what she said was true, Paul called her out as her power was from the demonic:

"And it came to pass in our going on to prayer, a certain maid, having a spirit of Python, did meet us, who brought much employment to her masters by soothsaying, she having followed Paul and us, was crying, saying, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who declare to us a way of salvation, who attests to the fact that he is a witness of the one true God'" (Acts 16:16-17, YLT).

Many non-Jews who came to faith in Messiah Yeshua in the First Century Mediterranean, came out of this Greek religious system, and had once been under the influence of the various myths and would have been familiar with divination and spiritism.

The Roman religious system was very similar to that of the Greeks as Hellenism spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Romans had the same basic mythos behind their deities, although the proper names that the Romans used for their gods did differ to an extent from that of the Greeks, being deeply rooted in magic:

"The earliest Roman religion was little more than magic or spirit worship. Believers in magic attributed to certain objects or actions the power to control nature or the actions of others...Over the centuries Roman deities were changed to resemble corresponding Greek gods and were represented by Greek cult statues" (*ISBE*).<sup>23</sup>

The formalization of Roman religion, just like Greek religion, was done to primarily be a civil affair. Loyalty to and patriotism to the Roman state was partially determined by one's devotion to Rome's gods. However, with the transformation of the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire, another dimension of worship was added with **the cult of the emperor**, the pattern of which began with Augustus Caesar:

"Augustus had an ulterior motive for [his] religious refurbishing: to use religion as a political prop. Julius Caesar was deified and a temple built to him in the Forum where his funeral pyre had been. Augustus did not seek full deity for himself in Rome, but he called himself *divi filius*, son of the deified one" (*ISBE*).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Vos, "Religions: Greco-Roman," in *ISBE*, 4:111.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

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Roman religion was more highly politicized than Greek religion, to give the people of the Italian peninsula something to rally themselves around, but basically it was the same as that of the Greeks. Worship of the emperor, in particular, as emperors would often be deified by the Roman Senate either during or after their reign, was something that came into direct conflict with First Century Judaism, and consequently Second-Third Century Christianity.

### *Greek Philosophy*

The second group related to the Greeks was that of the philosophers. Anyone who studies one of the social sciences today will no doubt be confronted with the sayings and writings of the classical Greek philosophers. Three of the main philosophers, whose works still influence many in the West, are Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as their philosophies often permeate Western government and how people are to conduct themselves as an orderly political society. Surprisingly, to some, various strata of Greek philosophy actually parallel what the Bible has to say, as far as intra-human relations are concerned, and how an upright and orderly person is to conduct himself in the world. The Greek philosophers, by-and-large, often in contrast to the dominant religion of their times, spoke against decadence and emphasized the responsibility of the individual to his or her fellow human beings. However, it must be emphasized that there was a *wide variance* of Greek philosophers as well. Some of them had huge followings, and some of them only had followings of two or three.

In the Apostolic Scriptures, there are only two specifically recorded groups of Greek philosophers mentioned: the Epicureans and Stoics. Paul encountered them at the Aeropagus or Mars Hill in Athens:

“And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, ‘What would this idle babblers wish to say?’ Others, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Yeshua and the resurrection” (Acts 17:19).

The Epicureans and Stoics, debating among themselves, as was their usual practice, stumbled upon Paul who was proclaiming the gospel message to those assembled. Not unlike the dominant Jewish groups of the time, they also had distinct philosophies that influenced the masses. The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus (341-260 B.C.E.). “He taught that nature rather than reason is the true reality; nothing exists but atoms and void...The chief purpose of man is to achieve happiness. He has free will to plan and live a life of pleasure” (NIDB).<sup>25</sup> Basically, the Epicureans believed in a life of no consequences, because their only existence was here on Earth, and there was nothing else to look forward to but empty void after death. Human beings were to try to please themselves through whatever way possible, because they faced no retribution. The idea of any kind of afterlife or resurrection or eternal consequences was absolutely foreign to the Epicureans.

Stoicism had a much larger influence in the ancient world, “Boasting a galaxy of distinguished exponents, both Greek and Roman—e.g., Zeno, Cleanthes, Seneca, Cicero, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius...[Stoicism] held that fire is the ultimate substance with God, the active principle of the cosmos, permeating everything as a sort of soul. Nature, it taught, is a hierarchical unity controlled by the universal Logos, an impersonal reason at once immanent and divine. As participant in the Logos, man is also participant in deity” (NIDB).<sup>26</sup> Stoicism had some parallels with what the Bible teaches, but then many things not in all in common with Scripture as well. “[T]he Stoic ethic is egocentrically negative. Nothing lies within man’s power except imagination, desire, and emotion,” although, “Implicit in Stoicism...was the idea of a

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<sup>25</sup> Steven Barabas, “Epicureans,” in NIDB, 318.

<sup>26</sup> Vernon C. Grounds, “Stoicism,” in NIDB, 964.

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universal morality rooted in the universal Logos" (*NIDB*).<sup>27</sup> It would have been difficult to reach these people with the gospel message as well, as the Stoics would likely think that there was really no difference between their universal Logos, and the *devar Elohim* (דְבַר אֱלֹהִים), the true Word of God, Yeshua (John 1:1), and between their universal morality and the message of the Scriptures. Unless God was truly wooing them, in their minds based on their moral experience, many Stoics would have seen no need to change their ways. Do we not encounter people today who believe that they are "saved" because they are upstanding, moral people?

These are just two examples of the types of philosophies that probably influenced some of the new Believers coming out the milieu of the Greeks and the Romans. The Epicureans and Stoics just happen to be the ones mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures by name.

### ***The Mystery Cults***

The last, but most complicated group, was the many mystery cults that pervaded the ancient world. As their name suggests, they were **mystery** cults, and were by-and-large a **secret**, except to those who entered in. As we have examined thus far, the religious world of First Century Judaism, combined with that of the religion of the Greeks and Romans, and the Greek philosophers, is already complicated because many of us do not often consciously realize that the first Believers in Yeshua the Messiah, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, came out of these religious and philosophical backgrounds. Making it even more complex are the mystery cults.

*NIDB* states that the mystery cults or mystery religions "were probably vestiges of earlier religions, maintaining themselves as secret societies after the introduction of the Olympian and other Indo-European deities, and ending after what seems a common social pattern, by winning their way with the conquered people."<sup>28</sup> It goes on to say, "Little is known about the rites of worship and initiation, for the initiates seem to have been faithful in the keeping of their vows of secrecy."<sup>29</sup>

*ABD* has more to say about the mystery religions, describing, "Unlike official, public religions, in which people were expected to show outward allegiance to the gods and goddesses of the *polis*, or state, the mystery religions stressed an inwardness and privacy of worship within groups that were frequently close-knit and egalitarian. The devotees of the mysteries ordinarily shared in celebrations that were public in nature...as well as in secret ceremonies that remain largely unknown."<sup>30</sup> *ISBE* adds that "The special appeal of the mystery religions was a threefold provision: a personal involvement, an emotional stimulation, and a promise of a future life—none of which the official cults could offer."<sup>31</sup>

Of course, as with all counterfeit religious systems, there were some parallels with what these mystery cults advocated and with what the Scriptures tell us. In the Bible, we are told to look at the Creator God as our Heavenly Father, and it is in that context that we are to have a union with Him. But at the same time, the message of Scripture cannot just be appealing to our human emotions, as was the case with the mystery cults; it must likewise be appealing to our intellect, and indeed our whole being.

It is widely believed that the religious system known as Gnosticism developed from the many mystery religions and odd sects that existed within the First Century. While it is common to hear that various First Century Believers encountered Gnosticism, that would not be as

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Edward M. Blaiklock, "Mystery Religions," in *Ibid.*, 685.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Marvin W. Meyer, "Mystery Religions," in *ABD*, 4:941.

<sup>31</sup> "Religions: Greco-Roman," in *ISBE*, 4:113.

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accurate as to say that various First Century believers encountered pre-Gnosticism or proto-Gnosticism or incipient-Gnosticism. Full-blown Gnosticism infected many in the Second and Third Century Christian Church, and is readily spoken against in the writings of some notable Christian leaders. Gnosticism “linked aspects of traditional Christianity with attractive ideas taken from Greek philosophy and Eastern religion, magic, and astrology” (NIDB).<sup>32</sup> *Gnosticism was a significant form of mixing the holy with the profane.* The word “Gnosticism” is actually just derived from the Greek verb *ginōskō* (γινώσκω), which simply means “to know.” However, the meaning that it has widely come to be associated with today relates to *secret knowledge*, very much emanating from the same spirit as the mystery religions or cults.

Concurrent with the influence of Gnosticism was that of Jewish mysticism. Gnosticism, for the most part, died out in the Fourth Century, as did its influence on parts of early Christianity, as attested by the historical writings of the Church Fathers. However, Jewish mysticism continued to live on in various forms, more fully developing in the Middle Ages, and now there is even an attempt among many to revive both of them in today’s world.

## The Anticipated Changes of the New, Non-Jewish Believers

Examining the varied and complex religious backgrounds of those coming into the assembly of faith in the First Century C.E. can be confusing for some, but recognizing it is necessary for properly understanding much of the setting of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament. Many people in our contemporary Messianic movement, unfortunately, tend to only and exclusively concentrate their area of study on the Torah and the Tanach, in an effort to more fully understand the Gospels and the sayings of Yeshua. They concentrate their efforts on studying First Century Israel, and the works of various ancient Rabbis, who may have been contemporaries of Yeshua, so that they can see the Messiah’s own Rabbinical teaching skills. While this is by no means something I discourage, it can be problematic when this is *all that one does*, because many of these same people often have no idea how to properly interpret or answer criticisms to their Torah observance from the writings of the remainder of the New Testament, notably the Pauline Epistles. This is because their understanding of the larger First Century Greco-Roman or Mediterranean world, which Israel was a part of, **is decisively lacking**. What is ironic is that often in criticizing the Greeks and the Romans, and sometimes even worse in criticizing the Spirit-inspired words of Paul and the other Apostles, they can find themselves falling into some of the same traps that these anointed servants of God warned about.

By far, one of the most complicated issues that the First Century *ekklēsia* had to face was the inclusion of Believers from the nations into the Messianic assembly. We have just gone through, in the previous sections, some of the religious backgrounds that many of the Greek and Roman non-Jewish Believers were coming out of, as they embraced the good news of salvation in the Messiah of Israel. But what were they to do once they received salvation? Coming out of errant influences which were widely opposed and spoken against by the Hebrew Scriptures, how were they to come into fellowship with their Jewish brothers and sisters, who had been trained from childhood that sins such as fornication and idolatry were absolutely abominable in the eyes of the Creator? These are things which were capital crimes according to the Torah, after all. How would Believers from the nations, coming out of Greco-Roman paganism, be trained up in the truths of the Scriptures, the Tanach?

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Toon, “Gnosticism,” in *NIDB*, 393.

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These were some of the issues that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 met to address, as they assembled to debate the issue of the inclusion of new Believers from the nations into the assembly of Believers. Some of the Pharisees, who believed in the Messiah, said that they must be circumcised immediately, convert to Judaism as proselytes, and only then could they receive salvation. If you were in the First Century group of Believers, and had just come to saving faith in Yeshua, you would no doubt be confused.

James, the half-brother of Yeshua, issued the following ruling, concerning the non-Jews coming to faith:

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19-21).

The non-Jews coming to faith were required to do four things:

1. Abstain from idolatry and pagan worship
2. Abstain from fornication and sexual immorality
3. Abstain from strangled meats
4. Abstain from blood

When we put ourselves back in the First Century, and we understand the Greco-Roman religious background that most of these non-Jews were coming out of, it only makes perfect sense for them to begin their walk of discipleship by adopting these four things. Much of what we consider Greco-Roman “mythology,” as demonstrated by literary works such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or Virgil’s *Aeneid*, had been the “theology” of these Greeks and Romans entering into the assembly. The need for them to be properly discipled and trained in the truths of the Tanach Scriptures cannot be overstated. They needed to be properly instructed in what the God of Israel considered acceptable and unacceptable, so they could cast off their former way of life in paganism. These four things, in perspective to their former religion, were:

1. Abstinance from idolatry and heathen worship directly related to the worship of idols, and the participation in the various temples of worship, be they focused around regional deities, or more widely known deities.
2. Abstinance from fornication and sexual immorality did not just relate to sex before marriage, extra-marital affairs, or homosexuality, but also directly related to temple prostitution, a common way to worship Greco-Roman gods.
3. Abstinance from non-kosher meat, animals that were strangled with large amounts of blood coagulated (perhaps in association with pagan sacrifice), related to the fact that the non-Jews were expected to eat kosher.
4. Abstinance from consuming blood.

When the new, non-Jewish Believers in the First Century adhered to these four requirements, they would be decisively cut off from their old, pagan social and religious spheres of influence. As Acts 15:21 implies, they would then be associated with a social and religious sphere of influence where the Torah of Moses was being taught every week on the Sabbath/*Shabbat*. James told the council, “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written...” (Acts 15:15), which meant that rather than the new, non-Jewish Believers having to be ordered to be circumcised or keep the Torah (Acts 15:1, 5), Tanach prophecy was instead in play. This would necessarily involve not only the restoration of the Tabernacle of David and the

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expansion of Israel's Kingdom realm (Acts 15:15-18; cf. Amos 9:11-12),<sup>33</sup> but also the accomplishment of prophecies such as the nations coming to Zion to be taught God's Torah (Isaiah 2:1-3; Micah 4:1-3), per the expectation that the Holy Spirit was to be poured out upon "all flesh" (Joel 2:28). No human, forced Torah observance would be necessary, if God's sovereign plan were instead allowed to be followed.<sup>34</sup>

When we understand the religious backgrounds that the Greek and Roman Believers of the First Century were coming out of, the ruling of the Jerusalem Council should be quite logical and fair-minded to us. The non-Jewish Believers were coming out of paganism and needed to be properly trained in what the God of Israel considered proper and improper conduct. Yet, rather than be forced to keep the Torah, as meddling mortals would have it, they were instead told to observe some significant, minimum requirements, which would see that they were set on the course of Tanach prophecy fulfillment. However, as should not surprise us—as far as *limited* human beings are concerned—in the Apostolic Scriptures we see that as many new, non-Jewish Believers received Yeshua and began to be trained in their walk of faith, errant influences crept into parts of the assembly. Some of these errant influences definitely involved various mystery religions and cults present in the Mediterranean basin.

### A Part of the Galatian Problem

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians is estimated to have been written anywhere from 48-59 C.E., either right before or right after the Jerusalem Council (usually dated about 48-49 C.E.). Historically, Galatians has been interpreted by most Christian theologians as being a treatise against the validity and relevance of the Torah or Law of Moses. However, Paul's letter to the assemblies of Galatia can be easily understood as an appeal to their good sense and an admonition to them not to take their focus off the Messiah. When we view it from the perspective that,

1. Paul says that Yeshua's words are primary (1 Timothy 6:3-5), and Yeshua said that the Torah will not pass away (Matthew 5:17-19).
2. Paul was a trained Rabbi, a student of Gamaliel, and a Pharisee (Acts 5:34; 22:3).
3. The Jerusalem Council (later) ruled in Acts 15 that the non-Jews coming to faith were participants in Tanach prophecy being fulfilled (Acts 15:15-18), which would have not only involved the restoration of David's Tabernacle (Amos 9:11-12) but prophetic words like the nations coming to Zion to be taught the Torah (Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 2:2-4). Obedience to God would come as they grew and matured in their faith via the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. The issue that the Galatians faced was actually that circumcision and Torah observance—ritual proselyte conversion—were being imposed as requirements for salvation and acceptance among God's community.

These are four things that are recognized by a wide sector of today's Messianic movement, which believes that the Torah is still to be followed today. The Galatians were being influenced by the Judaizers, a group of people who said that you must be circumcised *and* keep the Law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1). Many in the congregations of Galatia were being errantly influenced, and were straying from the path of simple trust in the Messiah. It got so serious that Paul said, "You have been severed from Messiah, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4). Notice that the issue was not the morality of the

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<sup>33</sup> Consult the useful discussion on Acts 15:15-18, and related topics, in the author's publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*

<sup>34</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author's commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*.

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Torah, nor the high standard of God in the Torah (including the command to love others: Galatians 5:14; Leviticus 19:18); the issue was how God's Torah was being used and misapplied. Many of the foolish Galatians thought that they would be forgiven and saved by God by just keeping the Torah's commandments as was promoted by those leading them astray.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing statements made by the Apostle Paul in his entire letter to the Galatians appears in Galatians 6:13: "For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh." This relates to the motivations of the Judaizers who were errantly influencing the Galatians. Paul basically says that they did not even keep the Torah that they claimed to uphold. Why would this be the case? Is not circumcision a part of the Torah? It is, but it is not primary to faith (cf. Romans 4:9-11). While not very likely within the Roman Empire of the First Century, physical circumcision could have been practiced with some future, eschatological realities in mind (Ezekiel 44:9), as a simple act of obedience.<sup>35</sup> The Judaizers/Influencers could only have been violating the Torah, if they were using a platform of "Torah observance" to bring in outside, errant influences that were contrary, and indeed opposed, by the Torah.

Two of the most misconstrued verses in Paul's entire epistle are Galatians 4:10-11: "You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain." These verses are often interpreted as meaning that the Apostle Paul was deathly afraid for the Galatian Believers, because they were keeping the appointed times of Leviticus 23. But in vs. 8-9 he prefaced these comments by saying, "However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?" In referencing "days and months and seasons and years," Paul asks, "how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?" (RSV). This is in reference "to those who by nature are not gods" (NIV). The Galatians seem to have been actually returning back to practices that somehow mirrored those things that they practiced in Greco-Roman paganism. The worthless, elemental things, cannot be the ways of the God of Israel as expressed in the Torah.

But how can this be the case? Were not the Judaizers forcing the Law of Moses onto the Galatians? Yes and no. They were forcing the Torah onto the Galatians, but they were accused by Paul of not even keeping the Torah themselves. Specifically, Paul had warned the Galatians, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8). Paul warned against anyone bringing in or teaching another gospel message. The specific reason why he warned against this may surprise you.

*IVPBBC* speculates that this may be because "Some Jewish mystics of the period claimed revelations from angels,"<sup>36</sup> a reference to those bringing in the "different gospel" or "so-called 'Good News'" (CJB). If the Judaizers/Influencers were indeed Jewish mystics of some sort, or adhered to proto-Gnostic ideas or other vain philosophies—then in fact the "days and months and seasons and years" mentioned in Galatians 4 that the Galatians were "returning" to, would likely have been related to astrology and the occult. It would make perfect sense for Paul to say that those who were forcing the Galatians to be circumcised did not even keep the Torah,

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<sup>35</sup> This is explored further in the author's article "Is Circumcision for Everyone?" appearing in *Torah In the Balance, Volume II*.

<sup>36</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 520.

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because what Jewish mysticism stands for is directly opposed and in violation of the Torah itself. Sections of Paul's letter to the Galatians take almost an entirely new light, when viewed from the perspective that the Judaizers errantly influencing the Galatians, could have included some practitioners of Jewish mysticism.

There is a standing opinion that what the Galatians were actually returning to were not the appointed times or *moedim* (מוֹעֲדִים) of the Torah (cf. Galatians 4:10-11), per se, but instead were the appointed times saturated with non-Biblical, mystical or proto-Gnostic elements introduced by the Judaizers/Influencers. Samuel J. Mikolaski states, "Are these Jewish or pagan observances? In writing to the Galatians, Paul clearly has Judaizers in mind. Did these worship elemental spirits? Astrological elements were at times infused into Jewish as well as pagan practices. The *elemental spirits* of this age refer probably to the ethos of an age traceable in part to pagan astrological mythology, but which had become a religious habit as much as, and perhaps more than, a metaphysical system."<sup>37</sup> Daniel C. Juster, in his book *Jewish Roots*, draws a similar, and quite useful conclusion:

"The fuller context of [Galatians 4:8-10] has prompted many commentators to hold that Paul here is not speaking of Jewish biblical celebrations. There must have been another problem in Galatia, it is thought. This problem is acknowledged to be connected with astrology. It is also known that heretical groups existed which *connected some of the Jewish holidays to astrology* and superstition. Paul could not be speaking of celebrations given by God as putting people under the bondage of evil spirits! Nor could he be speaking of Jewish holidays in saying that they, a non-Jewish group, are *turning back* to weak and beggarly elemental spirits.

"Apparently, what Paul refers to is a drift into superstition connected to special years, days and seasons—akin to astrology. This is a bondage, for during such days, some actions are safe and others are unsafe, some endeavors are to be undertaken and will be especially fruitful, while others are especially dangerous. This actually brings bondage to evil spirits. There may have been a perverted Jewish content added to some of this."<sup>38</sup>

The Galatian problem was something that was much, much more than just the Judaizers influencing a group of young, naïve Believers who were being trained in a Torah foundation. The Judaizers seem to have used the platform of "Torah observance" to promote some errant beliefs relating to Jewish mysticism. For this reason, the Apostle Paul would have been most justified to denounce those influencing the Galatians as not keeping the Torah.<sup>39</sup>

## The Colossian False Teaching

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians was written sometime between 60-62 C.E. As with most of his epistles, Paul admonishes the Colossians for errors circulating in their midst and strongly encourages them to recognize the Messiah as the center of their faith. It is widely agreed among conservative expositors that the Colossian false teaching, the error that was infecting the Believers at Colossae, was that of errant human philosophy, involving elements of a proto-Gnosticism that had affected sectarian Judaism. A general resource like the *NIV Study Bible* comments that "the seeds of what later became the full-blown Gnosticism of the second

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<sup>37</sup> Samuel J. Mikolaski, "Galatians," in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1100.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel C. Juster, *Jewish Roots* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1995), pp 114-115.

<sup>39</sup> For a further discussion of these and the relevant surrounding passages, consult the author's commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

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century were present in the first century and already making inroads into churches."<sup>40</sup> Proto- or incipient-Gnosticism would have most probably involved a mix of Greco-Roman religion, and beliefs from the mystery cults, Jewish mysticism, and Eastern religion. These sorts of philosophies were errantly influencing the Colossians and led to superstition and theologies that were taking them off the proper path.

The key admonition against whatever amalgamation of false beliefs had infected the Colossians, is seen in Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah." This is a direct reference to errant philosophies and teachings that were not originating with the Bible or with God. *IVPBB* states that "Because philosophy of this period grappled especially with moral and ethical issues, new Christians in the culture now struggling with the same questions would naturally be interested in philosophers' ideas."<sup>41</sup> Paul follows his warning against worldly philosophies with the words, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9), a direct reference to the Incarnation and Divinity of the Messiah. Whatever these human philosophies were, they were leading various people off the path of faith and from believing that Yeshua was God in the flesh.

Some use Paul's words in Colossians 2 as a treatise against the Torah and against keeping the appointed times and dietary laws. Colossians 2:16-17 say, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (ESV). Yet, the appointed times of the Lord are not vain philosophies and human traditions designed to lead people away from believing that Yeshua is God in the flesh. Rather, the substance of the appointed times is found in the Messiah, and they all point to who He is and what He has done. It is far best to understand verses like Colossians 2:16-17 in light of various Torah practices being taken up and hijacked into the false teaching addressed by Paul, and how for the Colossian Believers true to their faith in Yeshua, such practices would obviously have a much different significance for them than whatever value the false teachers or voices held for such practices.<sup>42</sup>

The Colossians were being errantly influenced by worldly philosophies, many of which seem to be represented by teachings that would later classify as being a part of Second Century Gnosticism. One of the gross errors of such Gnosticism was the teaching that what one did in the body, physically, did not affect a person spiritually. Perhaps with such views already being disseminated within the First Century, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). While indeed Paul prefaced his comments with "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2), this does not all of a sudden mean that sins committed in one's physical body did not affect them spiritually or their rewards (or punishment) in the hereafter.

While Gnosticism did die out by the Fourth Century, and did not have the type of influence on early Christianity as it could have had, ironically, there are people today who embrace some Gnostic ideas, while not even realizing it. The principle error of Gnosticism was the gross separation between physical and spiritual. There are people who consider themselves

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<sup>40</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, ed. et al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1851.

<sup>41</sup> Keener, 575.

<sup>42</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author's article "Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?" appearing in his book *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*.

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Believers today, who do not think it matters what they do with their physical bodies. They consider their faith secure because they prayed a prayer asking God to forgive them of their sins—and they feel so secure about it, so that when they commit errors they feel no need to repent or ask God for any kind of forgiveness. Paul spoke against these attitudes, by saying that the deeds of the flesh were to be put to death in the physical bodies of born again Believers.<sup>43</sup>

### The Errors Circulating Today

There are many theological errors and teachings circulating throughout the Messianic movement, which are seeing people taken off of the narrow way of coming into greater maturation in their relationship with the Lord. This is certainly not something new, as since the First Century the enemy has done his best to get people coming into the community of faith off track and away from Yeshua. Sadly, though, many of the errors that are circulating today directly relate to the same religious errors and outside influences that were disturbing the Galatians and Colossians, through the propagation of mystic and (proto-)Gnostic(-esque) beliefs. The Apostle John plainly warns, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Messiah followers always have to test what is being circulated and what people are doing against or with the Word of God, and see whether or not it has any substantial basis.

As Believers in the Messiah of Israel, we know that our ultimate loyalty is to Him, to our salvation experience, and to the instructions that God has given us in the pages of the Bible. Anything else that is outside the Bible must be viewed with some caution, especially if the fruit of such things is taking people away from their faith in Yeshua. In Galatia, Paul warned against those who preached “another gospel.” In Colossae, Paul warned against those teaching vain human philosophies leading people away from believing that Yeshua was God Incarnate.

It should be no surprise for us at all, especially if we are living in the Last Days, to see the errors that were going on in the First Century *ekklēsia*. However, we have one advantage over those who lived in the First Century. We have the advantage of looking at the Apostolic Scriptures, seeing what happened in the Book of Acts and Apostolic letters, and heeding the warnings described by them so that we not fall prey to the enemy. The Prophet Daniel says of the end-time saints, “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). This insight that Daniel speaks of must be the Divine insight of God that leads people into righteousness—and by no means should it lead people away from Him.

### Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, references to Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, and associated writings like the Zohar or Sefer Yetzirah, largely remained contained to the fringe of the broad Messianic community.<sup>44</sup> This is notably not literature that mainstream Biblical scholars, Jewish or Christian, employ in their research, as representing views and ideas from the Biblical period, or in the four to five centuries following. In the late 2000s and into the 2010s,

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<sup>43</sup> For a further discussion of these and the relevant surrounding passages, consult the author’s commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>44</sup> A most poignant example of this would be Brad Marcus (a/k/a Avi ben Mordechai), *Messiah Volume 3: Understanding His Identity and Teachings Through the Soul of the Torah* (Millennium 7000 Communications, 2001), which blatantly has on its cover an image of the Kabbalistic sefirotic tree. As a testament to this teacher’s inconsistency, though, his later volume *Galatians: A Torah-Based Commentary in First-Century Hebraic Context* (Jerusalem: Millennium 7000 Communications, 2005), endorses a Karaite perspective of the Torah, a definite flip-flop given the hyper-traditionalism and hyper-Talmudism of *Messiah Volume 3*.

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though, ideas stemming from either Medieval Jewish mysticism or traditional Kabbalistic literature and later offshoots, are becoming more and more “mainstream,” as it were. Whereas earlier, it would not be too common for various Messianic Jewish teachers to refer to Jewish mystical literature from the Middle Ages, as somehow paralleling the words and teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles, it is now becoming more and more commonplace. Aside from the obvious historical problem of acting like theological or spiritual views from a millennium or more *after* the period of Yeshua and the Apostles were very close to those of Second Temple Judaism—which would be anachronistic—the roots of such spiritual views have not often been approached with a great deal of discernment *or* trepidation. When one encounters the Jewish Kabbalah, he or she is going into a very dangerous area, which many persons in Judaism itself feel is either irrational, or just flat off limits.

Ideas and concepts originating from Jewish mysticism of the Middle Ages are beginning to spread in some distinct parts of the Messianic world, via various teachers and leaders, who are tickling many unsuspecting ears. Jewish mysticism had existed in various “primitive” forms, as there were fringe elements of influence present in Second Temple Judaism, perhaps associated with the ideas of proto- or incipient-Gnosticism (as would have been particularly confronted in Paul’s letter to the Colossians). But while Gnosticism became relatively dormant by the Fourth Century, Jewish mysticism continued to develop and actually became a formalized area of Judaism by the Twelfth Century. *The Jewish Study Bible* notes that “Kabbalah taught that God was inaccessible through direct experience, and could only be apprehended through emanations of the Godhead; Torah in kabbalistic teaching had a hidden meaning, and meditation on texts was a method of ascent to a mystical vision.”<sup>45</sup> One of the primary thrusts of Jewish mysticism was to view the Hebrew Scriptures as esoteric and try to find a hidden meaning behind almost everything. Consequently, many superstitions morphed into what became Kabbalah. “‘Kabbalah’ is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th century onward” (*EJ*).<sup>46</sup> *Everyman’s Talmud*, a condensed collection of writings from the Jewish Rabbis over the centuries, summarizes,

“The Talmud reveals very clearly a conflict between the pure, rational doctrines of the Bible and the debased beliefs and superstitions which pervaded the world in which the Jews lived. The Scriptures vehemently denounced every kind of magical practice and all attempts to pierce the veil which conceals the future from human men by means of divination. We see several Rabbis, particularly in the early period, waging a brave fight to stem the tide of sorcery which threatened their community, but in vain. In the later period even Rabbis succumbed, and credulity prevailed over faith.”<sup>47</sup>

At first, the study and practice of Kabbalah in Judaism was not popular. It arose during a time in the Middle Ages when superstition and myth saturated much of Europe. While the formalization of Jewish mysticism for the most part began in Muslim Spain where Jews were not as influenced by Christian European superstitions, Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike were nevertheless infected by superstitious beliefs, and mysticism was by no means limited to just Judaism. During this same period, Muslim mysticism, Sufism, also arose, and superstitious beliefs regarding Biblical saints or Biblical characters were affluent throughout Catholicism. As *EJ* notes, “there are elements common to Kabbalah and both Greek and Christian mysticism,

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<sup>45</sup> *Jewish Study Bible*, 2132.

<sup>46</sup> Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*.

<sup>47</sup> Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp 274-275.

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and even historical links between them.”<sup>48</sup> While those often practicing some form of mysticism were trying to seek a deeper and more profound experience with God, the way that many went about doing so was largely not only condemned, but explicitly prohibited by Scripture.

During the Twelfth Century, the primary texts and mythos surrounding Kabbalah were formulated. Many of these texts attest to this form of “communicating with God” going all the way back to Abraham, or perhaps even much farther to prior to the Noahdic Flood. True communion with God is described as something that is simply unattainable by people, and so humans must use esoteric and mystical methods to commune with Him. These include radical re-interpretations of the Scriptures, taking entire portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps putting pages of the Bible through some kind of numerical chart to determine one’s future, and even using séance-type techniques to communicate with the Higher Power. Certainly, while the study of Jewish mysticism is very complex, when one with a discerning eye looks at some of its practices, immediately the Holy Spirit inside the person should be convicting him or her that this is wrong. Consider this rather forthright description of Kabbalah from *EJ* regarding its origins:

“From the beginning of its development, the Kabbalah embraced an esotericism closely akin to the spirit of Gnosticism, one which was not restricted to instruction in the mystical path but also included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic. Only later, and as a result of the contact with medieval Jewish philosophy, the Kabbalah became a Jewish ‘mystical theology,’ more or less systematically elaborated. This process brought about a separation of the mystical, speculative elements from the occult and especially the magical elements, a divergence that at times was quite distinct but was never total....There is no doubt that some kabbalistic circles (including those in Jerusalem up to modern times) preserved both elements in their secret doctrine, which could be acquired by means of revelation or by way of initiation rites.”<sup>49</sup>

This Jewish source sums up what Kabbalah is all about quite well. It says it comes out of an esoteric strain of thought “akin to the spirit of Gnosticism,” which “included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic.” It says that there are many elements in Kabbalah that come straight from the occult. Does Kabbalah sound like something that would be supported by Scripture, or condemned by Scripture? Would one practicing Kabbalah be subject to the penalty of practicing divination and witchcraft? Certainly, according to Leviticus 20:27 if a person becomes a medium or spiritist, he or she would be subject to the Torah’s capital punishment.

Interestingly enough, within its entry for “Sorcery,” *EJ* tells us that “While there is no information about the measure of law enforcement in this field in talmudic and pre-talmudic times, it seems certain that this branch of the law fell into disuse in the Middle Ages. Superstitions of all kinds not only flourished and were tolerated, but found their way even into the positive law (see YD 179, *passim*, for at least eight instances). **What became known as ‘practical Kabbalah’ is, legally speaking, sorcery at its worst.**”<sup>50</sup> This same entry goes on and says, “The penal provisions relating to sorcery are a living illustration of the unenforceability of criminal law (whether divine or human) which is out of tune with the practices and concepts of the people. In modern Israel law, witchcraft and related practices are instances of unlawful false pretenses for obtaining money or credit (Penal Law Amendment (Deceit, Blackmail, and Extortion), Law, 5723–1963).”<sup>51</sup> While attesting to the fact that proper punishment upon those

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<sup>48</sup> Scholem, “Kaballah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> Cohn, “Sorcery,” in *EJ*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.

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practicing Kabbalah was not readily enforced in Judaism, it is nevertheless illegal in modern Israel to use witchcraft as a means for advancing oneself.

Unfortunately, as today's Messianic movement continues to develop and work through an entire host of issues—some will accept the teachings of the Jewish Synagogue without question and without discernment, not understanding some of the complexities and diversity of Jewish history (or for that same matter Christian history), and they will have little understanding that Judaism has its own internal divisions and theological errors just as Christianity does. Many who accept the study and practice of Jewish mysticism and/or the Kabbalah as being valid for their “Biblical faith,” have not recognized its highly esoteric, and even occultic origins in places, which are readily documented by Jewish sources.<sup>52</sup> In fact, few realize that when the Chassidic movement arose in Eastern Europe in the Seventeenth Century, that it was opposed as heretical by many of the Jews in Eastern Europe. One of the reasons that it was opposed by the mainline Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe was because some of the early Chassidic leaders practiced magic:

“Some 19th-century scholars described modern Hasidism, founded by Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, as a prime example of magic and superstition...[M]any leaders of the hasidic movement believed in magic and practiced it, especially in giving amulets (the Ba'al Shem Tov himself dealt in magic and probably made his living as a popular healer and magician)...” (EJ).<sup>53</sup>

However, in total fairness, this same entry does note that “the vast homiletic literature which describes its ideology, is devoid of all magic elements.” It goes on to say that “The difference between the ‘practical tradition’ of Hasidism, which practiced magic, and the ‘ideological (theoretical) tradition’ of the movement is probably more pronounced in modern Hasidism than in any other mystic movement” (EJ).<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, these sorts of attestations as to what the Chassidic movement and Chabad have included from their beginning, should make many of today's Messianic people be suspect of considering much of their theology, and whether or not it should really have a major place within the future development of our faith community.

The presence of Jewish mysticism, and specifically Kabbalah, has not gone unnoticed by various figures within contemporary Messianic Judaism. A brief article appearing in the May 2011 edition of the *Levitt Letter*, published by Zola Levitt Ministries, appeared largely denouncing Kabbalah as a danger to be avoided by contemporary Believers:

**Todd Baker, “Kabbalah and the God of the Bible” *Levitt Letter* May 2011.**

To amplify on a question posed to Dr. Seif (see p. 23), the Kabbalah poses many dangers to the Bible-believing Christian—chiefly how it views who God is. While its writings can inform us about how Jewish medieval thinking developed, its view of God is unbiblical. Today in Israel, the Kabbalah still has a pervasive and strong influence.

The Kabbalah, alternatively spelled Qabalah, or Cabalah, developed between the 6th and 13th centuries among the Jews in Babylonia, Italy, Provence, and Spain. The Kabbalah is a set of mystical/occult writings purporting to reveal and convey hidden wisdom and knowledge about God that only a few select people can secretly attain.

The word *Kabbalah* means “to receive” and refers to revelation from God received by Jews and passed to succeeding generations through oral tradition.

The Kabbalah views God as a series of ten descending emanations. God created the material world through these emanations with each one farther away and weaker than God

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<sup>52</sup> A rather extensive review is provided by Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton University Press, 1987). Also to be considered is his work *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941).

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Dan, “Magic,” in *EJ*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*.

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Himself. So the Kabbalah contradicts the Bible when it says that God directly brought Creation into existence by His spoken word (see Genesis 1; Psalm 148:5,6). Furthermore, the Bible reveals God as an externally self-existent Person who exists apart from Creation and is not dependent upon it for His existence (Acts 17:24-26).

The Kabbalah writings also view God through the lens of Pantheism. Pantheism views God as the universe and the universe as God. But again, the Bible repeatedly maintains an essential distinction between the Creator and the creation He brought into existence. The Bible teaches that God is infinite; His being is so immense that creation itself cannot ever contain Him. As it is written: "*Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You*" (1 Kings 8:27).

The Kabbalah does hold to the Bible being the inspired Word of God. But it claims that the meaning of Scripture must be found through decoding the numeric value of the Hebrew letters in order to find the true, hidden meaning of a passage. God, however, has made it clear that He desires *all* people to understand His Word in a clear and simple fashion (John 1:1-2,14; 5:39). The Kabbalah violates the first rule of Biblical interpretation: When the plain meaning makes sense, seek no other sense, otherwise you end up with nonsense!

Finally, the Kabbalah denies the Messiahship of Jesus and His incarnation as God in the flesh. It also believes the knowledge of the secret and hidden is the way to God. But again, the Scriptures teach that the only way to God is through His Son Jesus Christ (John 3:16) and that eternal life comes by knowing Him through a relationship of trust and faith (John 17:3). For these reasons the Kabbalah should be strongly rejected on biblical grounds.

A somewhat centrist position regarding presumed pros and cons of both the Jewish Kabbalah and the Chassidic movement, are summarized by Juster in his 1987 version of *Jewish Roots*:

The Kabbalah is an ancient Jewish mystical tradition. This tradition is primarily based in the Zohar, a late Middle-Age compilation of mystical ideas of God and creation, numerology, concepts of redemption and magic. From the Messianic Jewish perspective, the Kabbalistic tradition is truly a mixed-bag. At times, one can find within Kabbalism the most profound and Biblically-valid thoughts on everything from the Messiah's suffering for sin to even a Triune concept of the unity of God. However, Kabbalism also contains concepts from magic and paganism.

Gershom Shalom [sic.; actually Scholem], in his monumental book, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, shows that Kabbalism has roots in second and third century gnosticism. Gnosticism was a religious approach from paganism that influenced *heterodox* Christianity and Judaism. Gnosticism was a system that taught salvation by the way of a secret knowledge of spiritual and magical realities which was only to be conveyed to initiates. This secret knowledge assured passage after death unto salvation as well as a means to tap into spiritual powers whereby current events and situations could be manipulated. When the Kabbalah partakes of these magical and gnostic viewpoints, the Messianic Jew judges it to be dangerously occult and to be avoided. Yet not everything in Kabbalism is of this nature. No one but the most spiritually mature should seek to discern the difference between the strands of tradition.

*The Chasidic Movement* flourished in the eighteenth century and continues to this day. It traces its origins to the Baal Shem Tov, the Lord of the Good Name. Today's Chasidim are strictly Orthodox Jews; but in the beginning, the Chasidic Movement was considered to be heterodox. Martin Buber has sought to give us an appreciation for this movement.

Chasidism was a renewal movement within Judaism which brought exuberance, passion and dance back into a religion that many considered arid. However, the Chasidic leaders, although greatly interested in Torah and Talmud (traditional Jewish areas of study and practice), also were greatly influenced by and involved in Kabbalism. The Mitnagdeem, the Orthodox establishment of the day, condemned Chasidism. Usually a picture is painted of the Mitnagdeem as dry scholars with no spiritual life who rejected the Chasidim, who were themselves full of love, fervor and energy. It was not so simple. The Mitnagdeem not only

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recoiled at the untraditional actions in Chasidic life and worship, but at what they considered involvement in magic and heretical concepts!

In the Chasidic literature, we find many stories of rabbis who lost their minds in Kabbalism. There were many who dabbled in magic. However, there were other leaders who eschewed the magical aspects of Chasidism. Stories in the literature note the extreme dangers for even the most spiritual who became involved in magical means to produce certain ends or to bring the Kingdom of God. Some almost lost their lives. The dangers of Kabbalism are certainly at least reflected in the stories; yet, via the Zohar, the dangers exist even to the present day.

The Chasidic stories also recount teaching and examples that are closer to New Testament teachings and attitudes. The incredible example of Zusia, who allows himself to be abused for the sake of others, but thoroughly loves his enemies, is a primary example. The love of God and of neighbor, mercy and justice, are reflected in profound yet simple stories of great beauty. These aspects of Chasidism make it a great attraction to the rootless young today.<sup>55</sup>

Juster is someone who would probably not be too favorable for any of today's Messianic Jewish congregational leaders to really associate themselves with the Jewish mystical tradition. Yet, some of his colleagues in Messianic Jewish leadership show a much more favorable approach to it. Messianic Jewish theologian Mark Kinzer, is one, who while legitimately expressing how "Kabbalah remains repugnant to many evangelical Christians and rationalist Jews...[because] Jewish mysticism has often been associated with magic and superstition," is still tempted to conclude that "Jewish mysticism has much to teach us."<sup>56</sup> We should expect groups like the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute to promote some degree, albeit limited, of Kabbalistic observance in the lives of future Messianic Jewish leaders.<sup>57</sup>

Concurrent with a growing acceptance for the Jewish mystical tradition and the Kabbalah in various Messianic Jewish quarters, it is being interjected that Biblical literature like the Book of Ezekiel, the Book of Revelation, and the Gospel of John may be regarded as "mystical." There is no question that a simple survey of Biblical texts like these reveals that they are spiritually deep, complex, and that there are mysteries in them. *Whether Ezekiel, Revelation, or John can be declared to be "mystical," though, can and should be contested.* The term "mystical" does not appear anywhere in the Holy Scriptures, whereas the term "mystery" does—particularly as God's unfolding plan for the ages steadily presents itself to mortals in history.

We have to be extremely cautious of teachings circulating in our midst, and if someone is bringing Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah into our assemblies, he or she needs to be approached and silenced. The origins of Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah are not Biblical, and they lie with the occult and practices which are mainly classified in the Bible as being divination (Exodus 22:18; cf. Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-12). While some of these mystical teachings might sound good, and might even sound intriguing, their origin is not the Holy Scriptures. Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, even historically, come from a much later time than the broad Biblical period. There is too much that the Biblical period has to offer us, and a

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<sup>55</sup> Juster, *Jewish Roots*, pp 238-240.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Kinzer, "Hashem (The Name)" *Verge* Vol. 1, Iss. 7, December 2009.

<sup>57</sup> One piece of literature circulating throughout the Messianic movement, with a high degree of engagement with the Jewish mystical tradition, is *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009). This piece itself is a commentary based on the book Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2009), a 1923 work of comparative religion produced by an early Hebrew Christian pioneer, who was originally raised in the Chasidic tradition in Belarus.

The publication *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* has been negatively received by Tim Hegg, in his article "Are the Scriptures Alone our Sure Foundation or Do We Need Something More?" accessible via <[www.torahresource.com](http://www.torahresource.com)>.

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legitimate window of extra-Biblical literature, that will be overlooked and ignored if the Messianic movement has a wide tolerance for Jewish mysticism.

We as Believers are always called to test the fruit of something, to see if that fruit be good and wholesome, and that the fruit is leading into a greater and better relationship with the Lord. We also have to be very careful with the company that we keep. The Apostle Paul writes, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). It cannot go overlooked how the study of Kabbalah has actually become quite popular among some Hollywood celebrities. The most notable celebrity who has embraced Kabbalah has been Madonna. An article entitled “Madonna adopts kabbalah and a new wave of controversy,” appearing in the 26 July, 2004 edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, reports,

“On a recent news-magazine show, she discussed her interest in kabbalah and how she has adopted a Hebrew name, Esther. She has worn a red string on her wrist to ward off the ‘evil eye,’ and used sacred prayer accessories and symbolic Hebrew letters in music videos and concerts....Madonna is a student of the Kabbalah Centre, a worldwide education organization...The center does not require students to be Jewish, and the study can be incorporated into any faith, said Robin Davis, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles-based organization.”<sup>58</sup>

We know that the influence that this one celebrity has had on modern-day America, and indeed the world, has been anything but positive. The same can easily be said with some of the other celebrities who are likewise investigating Kabbalah. Is this just a passing fad for them, or is it something more permanent? Regardless of whether it is a passing fad or not, we do know that such celebrities have experimented with various religions, specifically those relating to New Age and the occult, and Kabbalah is of the same spirit as these things are. The Scriptures plainly warn us, “examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

### **PaRDeS**

While it is quite commonplace in many sectors of the broad Messianic community, to hear about PaRDeS—also referred to as something like the “four levels of Hebraic Scripture interpretation”—few Messianic people are likely to know what the origins of the PaRDeS hermeneutic actually are. The term *pardes* (פַּרְדֵּס) itself is a loan word from Persian, meaning “enclosure, park, pleasure garden” (Jastrow).<sup>59</sup> When one encounters the term PaRDeS used as a method for interpreting the Tanach Scriptures, it represents an acronym for: *p’shat*, *drash*, *remez*, and *sod*.

Within many sectors of today’s Messianic movement, it is frequently thought that the PaRDeS hermeneutic of interpreting the Tanach Scriptures, is something which was present in the Jewish world of the First Century, making it something that was probably used by Yeshua and the Apostles.<sup>60</sup> When a minimum amount of investigation is conducted, one finds that the

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<sup>58</sup> Tara Dooley (2004). *Madonna adopts Kabbalah and new wave of controversy*, 27 July, 2004. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved 10 October, 2004, from <<http://www.religionnewsblog.com>>.

<sup>59</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Baali, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004), 1216.

<sup>60</sup> The thought of Louis Goldberg, “Response: Testing How Jewish We Should Be,” in Louis Goldberg, ed., *How Jewish is Christianity? 2 Views on the Messianic Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 142, should not be overlooked: “[T]he first three guidelines of *pardes*...enable one to reflect and interpret a good part of the oral law.” He references “*peshat* (the literal interpretation of a passage from Scripture), *remez* (the use of allusion to explain Scripture), and *derash* (the literal interpretation of several passages of Scripture).” Notably missing from Goldberg’s list, though, is the presumed *sod* or hidden level.

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PaRDeS method of interpreting and applying the Tanach Scriptures is actually something that does not at all date from the broad Biblical period, or that of its secondary, tertiary, and quartary literature. The PaRDeS hermeneutic, in fact, originated directly out of Medieval Jewish mysticism, from the Thirteenth Century C.E.

The following is a selection of scholastic Jewish attestations on the origins of the PaRDeS method of interpreting the Tanach Scriptures:

*Essential Judaism:* "The medieval commentators recognized and practiced four principal methods of interpretation: *peshat*, the 'plain sense' meaning of a passage; *derash*, the homiletical meaning (from which the word *midrash*) is derived; *remez*, the allusive meaning; and *sod*, the hidden, mystical meaning. Taken together, they form the acronym *PaRDeS*, actually a word of Persian origin meaning an area surrounded by a fence, used in the Talmud to mean an orchard or garden..."<sup>61</sup>

*Jewish Study Bible:* "*pardes* a Late Biblical Hebrew word borrowed from Persian, meaning 'park, garden, orchard.' It was later employed as an acronym for the four levels of meaning in Scripture according to the *Zohar*: *peshat* (contextual sense), *remez* (allegorical sense), *derash* (homiletical sense), and *sod* (mystical sense)." <sup>62</sup>

*JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions:* "At the end of the 13th century, the Bible scholar Bahya ben Asher noted that there are four ways of interpreting Scripture, which came to be known by the acronym '*pardes*' (פַּרְדֵּי; *prds*, a Hebrew word meaning 'orchard' or 'Paradise'). This is a mnemonic for the initial letters of the following words:

"*Peshat* (plain, literal meaning of the verse in context).

"*Remez* (allegorical or symbolic meaning only hinted at in the text).

"*Derash* (homiletic interpretation to uncover an ethical or moral lesson thought to be implicit in the text).

"*Sod* (secret, esoteric, or mystical interpretation, emphasized by the kabbalists)." <sup>63</sup>

*Encyclopaedia Judaica:* "[I]n the Middle Ages the word *pardes* was used as a mnemonic for the four types of biblical exegesis, an acronym of *peshat* ('the literal meaning'), *remez* ('hint,' i.e., veiled allusions such as *gematria*, and *notarikon*), *derash* ('homiletical interpretation'), and *sod* ('mystery,' i.e., the esoteric interpretation), the word being made up of the initial letters of these words. For the meaning of the word in mysticism, see Kabbalah."<sup>64</sup>

The PaRDeS hermeneutic, as a formalized system of Jewish interpretation of the Tanach, dates from the Middle Ages. While many Messianics have made it some kind of a habit to use PaRDeS, and they derive various interpretations and applications of Scripture in an effort to perhaps arrive at the so-called *sod* or "hidden level" — PaRDeS was not only not present as a way of interpreting the Tanach during the time of Yeshua and His Apostles, but it dates from a millennium or so later.

PaRDeS was not present in the world of Second Temple Judaism, as is easily attested by history, and nor was it present in the formative centuries of Rabbinical Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. Jacob Neusner's book, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), summarizes

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<sup>61</sup> George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 303.

<sup>62</sup> *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2136.

<sup>63</sup> Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 495; cf. *JPS Guide: The Jewish Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 108.

<sup>64</sup> Editorial Staff *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "Pardes," in *EJ*.

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how the midrashic style of Tanach interpretation was present within the Biblical world of Yeshua and in the centuries following, as evidenced in a wide array of Jewish literary sources, especially the Midrashim. Yet, nowhere in Neusner's analysis is the PaRDeS hermeneutic referenced, and any entry on PaRDeS is also conspicuously absent from the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

**The PaRDeS hermeneutic did originate from Medieval Jewish mysticism.** The specific dynamic of the PaRDeS hermeneutic is so that its users can reach the *sod* level of interpretation. That PaRDeS was widely used by Kabbalists, and forms a wide basis for the Jewish mystical tradition and its ideology, is summarized by Gershom Scholem:

"The *peshat*...which was taken to include the corpus of talmudic law as well, was only the Torah's outermost aspect, the 'husk' that first met the eye of the reader. The other layers revealed themselves only to that more penetrating and latitudinous power of insight which was able to discover in the Torah general truths that were in no way dependent on their immediate literal context. Only on the level of *sod* did the Torah become a body of mystical symbols which unveiled the hidden life-processes of the Godhead and their connections with human life" (*E*).<sup>65</sup>

The central role of the PaRDeS hermeneutic is for readers of the Tanach (and apparently also the Mishnah and Talmud) to arrive at the *sod* level, as the *sod* level serves as the centrifuge for Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah. The 1898 work *Derekh Emunah Umaaseh Rav*, by Jacob Shalom Hakohen, testifies to how important PaRDeS and reaching the *sod* level is for the Kabbalah:

"There are four levels of interpretation of the Torah: the simple literal level [*peshat*], hints [*remez*], Midrashic interpretation [*derash*] and mystical secrets [*sod*]. The 'simple literal level' relates to the vital-soul [*nefesh*]; 'hints' relate to the spirit [*ruach*]; 'Midrashic interpretation' relates to the higher soul [*neshamah*]; and 'mystical secrets' relate to the soul of the soul [*neshamah* of the *neshamah*]. A person first of all needs to become involved with the simple literal level of the Torah, to keep and to establish this, so that he purifies his vital-soul and merits reaching the level of the spirit. The principal part and the foundation is the simple literal level of the Torah, for as long as a person has not purified his vital-soul in a fitting manner through the simple literal level of interpretation of the Torah, he is not able to become involved with the inner meaning of the Torah. For this would be dangerous for him."<sup>66</sup>

It has to be recognized that the main issue of contention, regarding the PaRDeS hermeneutic, is not so much being aware that there are different vantage points of interpreting Scripture. Literal, allegorical, and homeletical methods of interpreting the Tanach Scriptures are actually present within the Bible itself. In Galatians 4:21-31, the Apostle Paul uses the example of Hagar and Isaac, and says, "This is allegorically speaking" (Galatians 4:24) or "These things may be taken figuratively" (NIV).<sup>67</sup> The main problem with PaRDeS, aside from the fact that it originated in a much later time period—outside that of Yeshua and the Apostles—is its insistence that one must get to the so-called *sod* level to be "really spiritual." Such a *sod* level, though, forms the basis of the Jewish Kabbalah.

It has been our experience as a ministry that a great many of the Messianics, who employ a PaRDeS hermeneutic, are completely unaware of its origins in and significance for Jewish

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<sup>65</sup> Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah [J. mysticism]," in *E*.

<sup>66</sup> Alan Unterman, ed. and trans., *The Kabbalistic Tradition: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 39.

<sup>67</sup> The Greek verb *allēgoreō* (ἀλληγορέω) is employed in Galatians 4:24. The CJB renders this with, "to make a *midrash* on these things."

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mysticism. To an extent, they are using it “in ignorance.” However, we also must point out that those who believe that a hidden level of interpretation is the pinnacle of Biblical examination, do tend to make the serious mistake of trying to find hidden meanings in Scripture—when the answers men and women need to be effective servants of God are often right before them. A search for the so-called *sod* level, most often turns out to be an exercise in eisegesis: **reading messages into the Scriptures which are really not there.**

While Jewish users of PaRDeS will employ it to derive unique, and in many cases (extremely) eclectic, interpretations of the Tanach—Messianic users of PaRDeS will employ it for interpreting the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament as well. Why is it sometimes thought such a method of interpreting the Tanach **from the Middle Ages** is needed for properly understanding the Apostolic Scriptures? Most of the time when Messianics use PaRDeS for interpreting the New Testament, it is because there has not been a sufficient amount of exegetical analysis or historical background work conducted. PaRDeS is most frequently employed by people solely working from an English translation, unaware of potential textual or interpretational issues from the Greek source text, or background issues present for an ancient audience.

Employing PaRDeS for interpreting the Tanach, and arriving at the so-called “*sod* level,” can be a problem—because it frequently separates its users from understanding the Tanach within the context of the Ancient Near East. Employing PaRDeS for the Apostolic Scriptures can be just as big of a problem—because it causes Messianics to sidestep having to view passages within the context of the First Century Mediterranean.

While “*sod* level interpretations” have been able to tickle the ears of many in the broad Messianic movement, they often subtract from the value of the Biblical text itself, and likewise take no real consideration for the historical setting of a passage. By using PaRDeS, readers do not have to examine the Tanach for what it is as narrative, history, prophecy, wisdom literature, and law—but can instead search it for hidden meanings (of their own design). This means that when David struck down Goliath with a sling and five smooth stones, there has to be a hidden, esoteric meaning behind it—such as the five stones representing the five books of the Torah, and thus David’s Torah observance is what really killed Goliath. Such an esoteric meaning is not something that can be deduced from the evidence of the event that took place, but has to be *read into the text*. In factuality, though, David’s dedication to the Torah is something that does not need to be investigated from his killing Goliath, but is rather seen in what is testified of him in the Books of Samuel-Kings, and his own compositions present in the Book of Psalms.

What PaRDeS has the capacity to do Messianics in the long run, could be to encourage an inadequacy in teachers and leaders to use standardized hermeneutics that examine literary structures in a Biblical text, taking into examination texts as a whole and their source language(s), and incorporating the relevant secondary and tertiary background material. Tim Hegg makes the following useful observations in his workbook *Interpreting the Bible*:

“It is...a mistake to think that such a hermeneutic was in place in the 1st Century, or somehow that Yeshua and His Apostles would have interpreted the Scriptures from this vantage point. To postulate such a scenario would be entirely anachronistic.

“Further the PaRDeS schema undermines all sound hermeneutics, and divests the text of its literary meaning. Since the Pashat is considered to be the ‘surface’ or plain sense, this is considered less than significant for the true *chagam* or Sage. It is only when one arrives at the *sod*, the mysterious and mystical sense found through subjective criteria, that the text gives up its treasures. Such an approach simply combines a full-blown mysticism with a kind of ‘sensus

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plenoir,' leaving the text entirely manipulated by the interpreter, and thus unable accurately to bear the author's meaning. Such a hermeneutic should be avoided at all costs."<sup>68</sup>

One of the long-term challenges, facing the Messianic community, is properly interpreting the Hebrew Tanach using methods that were in existence in the First Century C.E., and hence what were actually options present for Yeshua and the Apostles. A criticism against the PaRDeS hermeneutic, which dates from the Middle Ages and bears great significance for Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah, should not be taken as a criticism against recognizing that there are multiple dynamics present for interpreting Scripture beyond the literal level. PaRDeS, however, has built within it the intention of reaching the *sod* or mystical level, which we need to stay away from.

The majority of the difficulties that today's Messianic Believers have for interpreting the Bible, actually tend to regard transmission of various terms from Hebrew or Greek into English, and/or not fully understanding their ancient audience and setting. This is something that requires teachers and leaders to be engaged with scholastic and academic resources and commentaries, and putting more time and effort into researching the issues and controversies that face our emerging Messianic movement.

### Numerology

One of the areas that has some substantial application by Jewish mysticism is numerology. Each Hebrew letter of the *alef-bet* (and each Greek letter for that same matter) has a numerical value. This is because in ancient times letters were often used to represent numerical values. The Romans had a more streamlined system, with only using a handful of letters of the Roman alphabet for numbers. From a purely practical perspective, using letters as numbers in day-to-day activities and normal arithmetic was not something odd or strange for the Ancient Hebrews, or those of other societies whose letters were used for numerical values.

Numerology, however, is an issue that has arisen with looking at the numerical values of words in Scripture. Some will take the numerical values of each letter of a Hebrew or Greek word, add it up, and then try to derive some theological meaning behind it. While this may reveal some interesting things, far too many conclusions drawn by those who do this are often questionable. This is because among proponents interpreting Scripture via Gematria, the usage of Biblical letters as numbers, is often used *first*—as opposed to examining a Hebrew or Greek word in linguistic and historical context, using a wide array of scholarly Hebrew and Greek lexicons, Biblical dictionaries, Biblical encyclopedias, and well respected commentaries. This is not to say that there are not numerical patterns in the Scriptures, but it is to say that before a reader examines possible numerical values or numerical patterns, he or she must first have a very clear understanding of the Biblical text trying to be interpreted, from a contextual, linguistic, and historical perspective.

*ISBE* describes Gematria as a "peculiar form of numerology...used for the interpretation of the Scriptures in later Judaism and adopted by some early Christians....The method employed the numerical values of the letters of the alphabet to find hidden meaning in scriptural passages."<sup>69</sup> This is an area of Scriptural interpretation that has been used by many practicing Jewish mysticism. "Cabalistic literature carries the unlimited possibilities of this method to incredible extremes" (*ISBE*).<sup>70</sup> Gematria has not only been used by those practicing mysticism,

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<sup>68</sup> Tim Hegg, *Interpreting the Bible: An Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Tacoma: TorahResource, 2000), 90.

<sup>69</sup> B.C. Birch, "Number," in *ISBE*, 3:560.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

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but also by those trying to use numbers in the Bible to predict the future. This might not just be predicting the future for oneself, and what one can expect for one's life, but predicting and forecasting certain global-changing events. In many cases Gematria has been used for fortune telling, which is a capital offense in the Torah. While there are some various numerical patterns in the Scriptures, numerical patterns in the Bible are *not* primary to Scriptural texts exegeted for what they say in the plain Hebrew or Greek as their original authors communicated them.

This same entry in *ISBE* quoted goes on to say that "The only clear example of a biblical writer's use of gematria is the mysterious number of the beast, 666."<sup>71</sup> Revelation 13:18 is one of the most fiercely debated passages today in Bible prophecy: "Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six."<sup>72</sup>

How many people who study and examine prophecy have claimed to know the "true identity" of the antimessiah/antichrist and know a person whose name adds up to 666?<sup>73</sup> How many have actually claimed to be that "man of wisdom" mentioned in this verse? How many theories have been espoused about who the man of lawlessness is that have later proven to be erroneous?

Historically, many expositors have believed that the individual referenced in Revelation 13:18 was Nero Caesar. But this might preclude the position that the Book of Revelation is not futuristic in its scope, and was only speaking of the First Century past. Revelation is widely agreed to have been written in about 90 C.E. during the reign of Dometian, whereas Nero lived from only 37-68 C.E.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, in recent days there has even been some debate among New Testament textual critics as to whether or not 666 is the correct reading in extant Greek texts of Revelation. An article entitled "666 wrong number of prophetic beast?" appearing in the 08 May, 2005 edition of *WorldNetDaily* remarks,

"While many Bible have footnotes saying the number translated from the original Greek could be 616, experts say new photographic evidence of an ancient fragment of papyrus from Revelation indeed indicates the number is indeed 616, instead of 666.

"Scholars in England have been using modern technology to scour some 400,000 bits of papyri which were originally discovered in 1895 at a dump outside the ancient Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. Many of the sections have been damaged and discolored, but an imaging process is shedding new light on the sacred text, believed to have originally been penned by John, one of Jesus' 12 apostles."<sup>75</sup>

This information may not be that substantial in the long run, but if the prophesied antimessiah/antichrist has his name add up to 616, *instead of* 666, then what it means is that

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Whether or not the Matthew 1:17 reference to "fourteen generations" is Gematria or not, has been disputed. However, if this is the only other significant example of Gematria employed in the Apostolic Scriptures, then it demonstrates how not only infrequent it is, but also how unimportant it is in the scope of wider ethical and moral issues.

Consult the author's publication *Confronting Yeshua's Divinity and Messiahship* for some further thoughts.

<sup>73</sup> Throughout the late 1990s, one popular proposal was that the name "Prince Charles of Wales" added up to 666.

<sup>74</sup> Consult the author's entry for the Book of Revelation in his workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>75</sup> 666 wrong number of prophetic beast?, 08 May, 2005. *WorldNetDaily*. Retrieved 08 May, 2005, from <<http://www.worldnetdaily.com>>.

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some prophecy teachers expecting a certain political leader to be the person may be deeply disappointed.<sup>76</sup>

The fact that the only specific, widely agreed-upon mention of Gematria in the Bible is in the prophecy of confirming who the antimesiah/antichrist should be, is disturbing. What if the antimesiah himself is a mystic, and his fellow mystics somehow identify him as “anointed” via the number 666 (or 616)? There are some in the Messianic community today using Gematria to interpret Scripture, predict the future, and/or make some rather outrageous claims—as opposed to looking at the Bible in its clear, contextual, cultural, and historical context. *This is problematic.* While there are numerical patterns in the Scriptures, they should only be examined after examining what the Bible says first, and its personal application to our lives, lest we run the risk of “running numbers” and fall into a dangerous game of trying to forecast the future and making connections that realistically may or may not exist.

### ***Hebrew Letter Pictures***

The idea that the ancient Hebrew language contains pictograms, which communicate certain spiritual and theological messages, has been largely popularized by the widespread circulation of the publication *Hebrew Word Pictures: How Does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths?* (Phoenix: Living Word Pictures, 1994) by Frank T. Seekins. There is hardly a Messianic congregation that has not been touched, to some degree, by Seekins’ book. Its author makes the claim, “You don’t have to read Hebrew to understand this book! When Hebrew was first written, each letter represented both a sound and a picture. Even if you don’t understand the sounds in the Hebrew language, the pictures inside of the Hebrew words will still be clear.” He further details, “What is a word picture? In Chinese and ancient Egyptian every word is formed by adding pictures together to ‘paint’ the meaning of a word. In Hebrew this is also done; a word picture is a word that is described by pictures.”<sup>77</sup>

According to Seekins, Bible readers do not at all have to actually learn Biblical Hebrew in order to know the meanings of Hebrew words used in the Tanach. All people have to do instead, is: identify a Hebrew word, know what the Hebrew letters are, and then they can use his workbook to decode the true meaning of the Hebrew word via the letter pictures.

Is Seekins’ method of employing Hebrew letter pictures, in order to find the real meaning of words in the Tanach Scriptures—at all something that is credible? His proposed method of using so-called letter pictures in Ancient Hebrew is something that few in today’s Messianic movement, who encounter it, are willing to seriously challenge. The most scholastic reference tool he provides in his publication is the *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*.<sup>78</sup>

*Where are the meanings of the different letter pictures for Ancient Hebrew to be found in firsthand sources? Who else has discovered this? Where is substantial documentation and verification about the Hebrew letter pictures to be found from actual Hebrew and Ancient Near Eastern specialists? **These are only a few of the critical questions that not enough people have been asking.***

The *Gesenius* lexicon, even if a little dated from the mid-Nineteenth Century, is still a valuable tool to have in one’s library. One finds a brief introduction to the origin of each

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<sup>76</sup> The textual variant of 616 instead of 666 may have been the result of some early Christian communities believing that Nero Caesar was the antichrist, whose name can apparently add up to both 616 and 666.

Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), pp 749-750.

<sup>77</sup> Frank T. Seekins, *Hebrew Word Pictures: How Does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths?* (Phoenix: Living Word Pictures, 1994), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Another one of Seekins’ reference sources is Dick Mills and David Michael, *Messiah And His Hebrew Alphabet* (Orange, CA: Dick Mills Ministries, 1994), which itself only has the *Gesenius* lexicon as its most scholastic reference (p 142).

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Hebrew letter, as one flips through its alphabetized entries. The *Gesenius* lexicon does provide a brief statement or two on the development of Hebrew letters from a Phoenician or paleo-Hebrew script, to the later block script used after the Babylonian exile. Included in the opening pages of the *Gesenius* lexicon is "A Comparative Table of Ancient Alphabets" (Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, Arabic, Samaritan, Syriac, Phoenician, Ancient Hebrew, Ancient Greek), and a "Table of Alphabets" (Aramaic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Coptic, Greek, German). When familiarizing oneself with the *Gesenius* lexicon, no one can historically deny that the block Hebrew script employed in the post-exilic era and up until today, was preceded by a paleo-Hebrew or Phoenician-derived alphabet, which was much more pictorial. Yet, nowhere in the *Gesenius* lexicon is it at all endorsed, or even implied, that the "real meaning" of a Biblical Hebrew word, can be deduced by determining what its individual letters pictorially communicate. The *Gesenius* lexicon, just like others which have followed it, bases its definitions of Hebrew words on how terms appear in the Biblical text, and associated literature from the Biblical period.

On first glance, the claim that deriving theological and spiritual messages from Ancient Hebrew letter pictures, sounds good. After all, did not the Ancient Egyptians use a language that used pictographs as well? Those who are completely unfamiliar with how Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics really worked, are those who are easily swayed by the premise of Hebrew letter pictures.

Other than artistic wall scenes common to many ancient cultures, which usually depict something like a monarch in battle or being anointed by the gods, Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics did not possess the kind of spiritual or theological value as some have thought that they possess. Many of the Egyptian hieroglyphics are not actual pictures of what they represented. In the publication *How to Read Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, produced by the British Museum Press, we see how on the whole, "hieroglyphic picture-signs are used to convey the *sound* (and meaning) of the ancient Egyptian language, just as the letters of our own alphabet convey the sounds of English."<sup>79</sup> Most of the Egyptian hieroglyphics that are studied by scholars employed symbols in nature to represent sounds common to human speech. "This is termed the *rebus principle*; it is as if we were to write the English word *belief* with a picture of a bee and a leaf as . On this basis hieroglyphics can be used to indicate *sounds* rather than things and can thus be used in words quite unrelated in meaning to the objects they depict."<sup>80</sup> (This is important to keep in mind, as human language always develops orally before being composed in some written form.)

When one sees various kinds of birds depicted in Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, each ancient bird represented a particular sound in antiquity, that the Egyptians could use to represent a sound in their written communications.<sup>81</sup> The principal exception to these symbols not representing sounds, are "writing words...sometimes written with meaning-signs, or *determinatives*, placed at the end of the word after the sound-signs."<sup>82</sup> These determinatives would have represented common things such as a "man and his occupations," "god, king," "sun, light, time," "town, village," or "day."<sup>83</sup> Such determinatives could perhaps have been the ancient equivalent of our common symbols like: @ or the at sign, # or the pound sign, \* or an asterisk, or perhaps some kind of arrow sign. About as far as one can push the uniqueness with

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<sup>79</sup> Mark Collier and Bill Manley, *How to Read Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, revised edition (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

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Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, is in recognizing that while frequently read from left to right, “hieroglyphs were used in a more decorative manner than letters in our writing system; in particular, they often formed a fundamental part of the aesthetic scheme of a monument.”<sup>84</sup> It is invalid to offer Ancient Egyptian as a corroborating example to justify the usage of so-called Hebrew letter pictures.

*How are we to properly understand the Hebrew Scriptures and words of the Tanach?* Obviously, in order to properly and legitimately understand Hebrew words, Bible readers need to have a working knowledge of the Hebrew language. They must know Hebrew from a *linguistic standpoint*, insomuch that they know how to read Hebrew, form simple sentences in Hebrew, know what Hebrew nouns, verbs, and adjectives are, and know what the linguistic meanings of these words are as used in passages of Scripture. Readers must be able to identify what the tense of a verb is in a sentence, and its relationship to other terms or clauses. Readers need to be able to look at a Hebrew term or clause in passages of Scripture, and see how it may be used in other passages of Scripture, to determine its best meaning and application. At times, it may be useful to consult ancient Bible translations like the Greek Septuagint, the Aramaic Targums, or the Latin Vulgate, to see how various Hebrew words (particularly those which are imprecise) were rendered into other languages, to gain a fuller theological perspective. And perhaps most importantly, as it relates to this subject matter, there are at Bible readers’ disposal an entire array of scholarly Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons, produced at universities and by scholars whose mastery of the Hebrew language and related subjects, has enabled them to produce the needed theological resources that today’s Bible students need for proper examination and interpretation of the Tanach or Old Testament. (Various Bible software programs like BibleWorks or Accordance, particularly with their parsing tools, can also streamline things significantly for those who need a little help.)

Those who employ so-called Hebrew letter pictures, seem to forget how language actually works. They are often content with a relatively sub-standard resource like *Strong’s Concordance*, they will look up a Hebrew word in *Strong’s Concordance*, and then finding out how it is spelled in Hebrew, they will proceed to determine its theological meaning on the basis of Hebrew letter pictures—often using a publication like Frank T. Seekins’ *Hebrew Word Pictures* to guide them. It seems that more complete Hebrew language tools used by Bible students today, which includes things like the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* or the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*—widely available and relatively inexpensive—based on Hebrew lexicography and how the Hebrew language is used in Biblical and related texts, are cast aside in favor of this “new interpretation.” Why are such standard Hebrew language tools often dismissed by those who favor so-called Hebrew letter pictures? Because to use an actual Hebrew lexicon is something that is a bit too hard. *One may have to actually learn Hebrew and read it, in the same way as other people have learned it for centuries.* Those who have championed Hebrew letter pictures have **marketed their technique** on the premise that anyone can understand the “true meaning” of a Hebrew word, without having to put in the same time and effort as other students of the Bible had to do in gaining Hebrew language skills.

*But where does the hermeneutic of interpreting the “real meaning” of Hebrew words via pictograms really come from?* If we cast aside the premise of interpreting the Hebrew language (or any language for that matter) from the basis of how its words are used linguistically in Biblical documents and associated literature, then where are we to get the meanings of the Hebrew letters? Do the meanings come from the Scriptures themselves, legitimate Biblical-period history, or do they come from outside sources?

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp 6-7.

## The Effect of Mysticism and Gnosticism on Today's Messianic Movement

Disturbingly, many of today's Messianics who have thought that Hebrew letter pictures might have some kind of validity, have not really wondered *where* such a methodology comes from. (It cannot be found in how Ancient Egyptian worked.) If they did a little more investigation, they might be shocked to see that a considerable bulk of the source material that is employed by those championing Hebrew letter pictures, is from the Jewish mystical tradition and the Kabbalah.

Linguists in Biblical Hebrew and related Ancient Near Eastern languages, recognize how for some letters, visible signs were to represent spoken sounds. They do not, however, think that such signs necessarily contain esoteric and hidden spiritual or theological meanings to them. The major sources of information detailing the significance of Hebrew letters, as having any kind of esoteric value to them, originate in the Middle Ages, from Kabbalistic sources where the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are thought to have some sort of meaning.<sup>85</sup>

One of the primary sources about the significance of Hebrew letters, which one is likely to find employed by some Messianics today, is *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* by Rabbi Michael L. Munk, published by ArtScroll.<sup>86</sup> This publication, in no uncertain terms, associates the significance of every Hebrew letter with the Kabbalah:

"The twenty-two sacred letters are profound, primal spiritual forces. They are, in effect, the raw material of Creation. When God combined them into words, phrases, commands, they brought about Creation, translating His will into reality, as it were. There is a Divine science in the Hebrew alphabet. *Sefer Yetzirah* ['The Book of Creation'], the early Kabbalistic work ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham, describes how the sacred letters were used as the agency of creation. The letters can be ordered in countless combinations, by changing their order within words and interchanging letters in line with the rules of various Kabbalistic letter-systems."<sup>87</sup>

To be fair, discussions over the significance of the form of some Hebrew letters, can be seen in the Talmud (b.*Shabbat* 104a). There are speculations over what appear to be odd and irregular forms of Hebrew letters, appearing in various Tanach passages here and there, which would have been inserted into the text by scribes. Such forms were thought to have some possible theological significance.<sup>88</sup> One can see how these handful of forms in the Tanach, inserted by the scribes and discussed by some of the Talmudic Sages, could then be embellished and expanded upon by the Kabbalists of the Medieval period.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, we see the statement made that Bezalel, who was commissioned to construct the Tabernacle, actually used a combination of Hebrew letters to perform his work. This remark, though, actually appears among several Rabbinic opinions about why Bezalel was wise:

Said R. Samuel bar Nahmani said R. Jonathan, "Bezalel was so named because of his wisdom. When the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses, 'Go to Bezalel and say to him, "Make me a tabernacle, an ark, and utensils,"' Moses went and got things confused and said to him, 'Make an ark, utensils, and a tabernacle.' "He said to him, 'Moses, our master, the custom of the world is that a person builds a house and afterward he brings in the utensils. But you say, "Make me an ark and utensils and then a tabernacle." As to the utensils that I am going to make, where shall I bring them? Is it possible, then, that the Holy One, blessed be he, told you to make a tabernacle, and ark, and then utensils!' He said to him, 'Is it possible that you have been in the shadow of God (besel el), that you should know all this?'"

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<sup>85</sup> Alan Unterman, ed. and trans., *The Kabbalistic Tradition: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp 102-104.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Mills and Michael, 142.

<sup>87</sup> Michael L. Munk, *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1983), 19.

<sup>88</sup> This is addressed a bit further, in the FAQ, "Jots and Tittles."

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Said R. Judah said Rab, “Bezalel knew how to join together the letters by which the heaven and the earth were made. “Here it is written, ‘And he has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding and in knowledge’ (Eze. 35:31), and elsewhere it is written, ‘The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding he established the heavens’ (Pro. 3:19), and it is written, ‘By his knowledge the depths were broken up’ (Pro. 3:20).”

Said R. Yohanan, “The Holy One, blessed be he, gives wisdom only to someone who has wisdom. For it is said, ‘It is said, ‘He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who know understanding’ (Dan. 2:21).”

R. Tahalipa, who comes from the West, heard this and stated it before R. Abbahu. He said to him, “You derive the proof-text from that passage, and we derive the proof-text from the following verse of Scripture, ‘In the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom’ (Exo. 31: 6)” (b.Berachot 55a).<sup>89</sup>

The view of R. Judah in b.Berachot 55a is something that readers are free to disagree with, as R. Samuel bar Nahmani and R. Yohanan, both chose to focus on the wisdom of Bezalel who made the Tabernacle, with wisdom being given to Bezalel by God because he had wisdom. The statement by R. Judah on Hebrew letters being joined together, while reflective of a view that would have significance for later Jewish mysticism, seems to be given in passing.

We should not be surprised to see that the Talmud does include some remarks about mystical, esoteric, or at least some kind of mysterious significance, applied by some of the Sages, to the Hebrew alphabet. The Talmud represents a large collection of opinions and debates from the Jewish world after the destruction of the Second Temple. There are Rabbis who disagree with each other, and their points of contention certainly served to allow for there to be various sects of Orthodox Judaism, and today multiple denominations of Judaism. That there would have been some Rabbinic views in the Talmud that would bear significance for later Jewish mysticism, is an indication that the literature of the Talmud is a bit broad and diverse. There will be opinions encountered that Messianic Believers are certainly free to disagree with.

(The idea that the universe was created via the employment of Hebrew letters by God, is something that we should all disregard as entirely implausible. Those Messianics today, who might be tempted to use Kabbalistic literature associated with the Hebrew alphabet—as some kind of defense against an evolutionary model for human origins—are all going to be disregarded as mentally unstable. The creation of the universe by God, goes well beyond the Hebrew alphabet, Greek alphabet, Roman alphabet—or any human known form of physics, mathematics, biology, or chemistry.)<sup>90</sup>

The method of using so-called Hebrew letter pictures, to determine the “true meaning” of Biblical Hebrew words, may be considered a form of *mysticism-lite*. While using so-called Hebrew letter pictures is not something directly witnessed in the Jewish mystical tradition, the idea that each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has significant spiritual and theological significance, is something that was developed into an art form in the Kabbalah. So-called Hebrew letter pictures, as seen in publications like Seekins’ *Hebrew Word Pictures*, may be considered a grandchild of what Jewish mysticism has done to the Hebrew alphabet. Those who use so-called Hebrew letter pictures cannot get away from Kabbalistic reference sources.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

<sup>90</sup> Consult the FAQ, “Creationism.”

<sup>91</sup> Perhaps the most well-researched of the Hebraic Roots publications, which gives significance to so-called Hebrew letter pictures, is L. Grant Luton, *In His Own Words: Messianic Insights Into the Hebrew Alphabet* (Akron, OH: Beth Tikun Publishing, 1999). Luton’s bibliography notably references openly Kabbalistic sources like Aryeh Kaplan’s translation of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (p 252), or Munk’s *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (p 253).

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The Lord has been gracious to raise up Hebrew linguistic and lexicographic scholars of the past few centuries, to give us the *right tools* to interpret the Hebrew language properly—through examination of words in the Biblical texts themselves! Those who employ interpretations of Hebrew words via so-called letter pictures, have embraced a methodology that has questionable origins, and will ultimately not stand in view of legitimate linguistic scholarship. No reputable Jewish scholar outside the extreme Right fringe of Judaism uses such a method to evaluate a word of Biblical Hebrew. No reputable scholar in Biblical Studies uses so-called letter pictures, as a means to interpret what a passage of the Hebrew Tanach says.

Advocates of so-called Hebrew letter pictures would really do well to engage a bit with fields such as Egyptology, and Hebrew's cognate languages in the Ancient Near East. When these disciplines are consulted, it is clear that any so-called Hebrew letter pictures have little scholastic support.

It is difficult, though, given the widespread, populist influence of so-called Hebrew letter pictures, for many to be willing to speak out against it. There is no doubting the fact that this methodology of trying to interpret Biblical Hebrew words, via the so-called values of what a letter picture means—has its roots within Jewish mysticism. Because of how popular so-called Hebrew letter pictures have become, few Messianic ministries, which know that it has significantly dubious origins, are willing to explain why.

We recommend that if you really want to learn Hebrew, or any language for that matter, that you study it in a classroom setting, employing linguistic tools, lexicons, dictionaries, and even flash cards that have been produced for you to have a basic reading comprehension. If you can commit yourself to the discipline of doing this, then you will be able to engage with Jewish and Christian Bible scholarship on the Tanach/Old Testament—and be the wiser for it!

For around \$25 or so, you can pick up good used copies of Menahem Mansoor, *Biblical Hebrew Step-by-Step*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), and William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988). These two resources are an excellent place for you to start, if you really want to have some basic Hebrew comprehension in reading the Tanach Scriptures.

### ***The Bible Code***

One area that is related to mysticism, but is much newer in scope compared to some of the “older” forms, is the Bible code. The Bible code, as you are no doubt aware, has even gained some notoriety among secularists. First developed by Israeli Dr. Eliyahu Rips, the Bible code is a computer program which attempts to look at equal-distant character spacing in the Biblical text of the Torah, and examine names of prominent world figures, dates of events, and what happened. Proponents of the Bible code believe that their research has revealed the future, insomuch that events such as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust, and the Apollo 11 moon landing were encoded in the pages of Hebrew Scripture. The problem with this conclusion, among proponents, is what to make of the origin of this so-called “Bible code.”

The Bible code was initially popularized by journalist Michael Drosnin, a secular Jew who has written for both the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post. His book *The Bible Code* was released in 1997, and got many people thinking. It also got some to go out and purchase the computer program used for determining what and who is mentioned in the characters of the Hebrew Torah, to possibly search for their own names and future destiny. The Bible code was never that popularized in the Messianic community, but our ministry does from time-to-time discover those who are trying to plug in data to discover events about the future.

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The problem with the Bible code is self-apparent. Drosnin writes that “The Bible is not only a book—it is also a computer program. It was first chiseled in stone and handwritten on a parchment scroll, finally printed as a book, waiting for us to catch up with it by inventing a computer. Now it can be read as it was always intended to be read.”<sup>92</sup> *Reading the Bible as it was always intended to be read?* Whatever happened to just reading Scripture, praying to the Lord, asking Him for spiritual guidance and direction, and learning from the stories that the Bible has for us? To this, Drosnin answers, “I had always assumed that the future does not exist until it happens.”<sup>93</sup> Certainly, we know as Believers that the Scripture does foretell the future, but Drosnin’s comments should be taken as meaning that it is not the plain reading of Scripture that reveals the future, but the hidden meanings in *his* “Bible code.” What does Drosnin say about “the code’s” origin? Does he say it is from “God”? Not exactly. He remarks,

“Many...will say...that we now have the first secular evidence of [God’s] existence. I am persuaded only that no human could have encoded the Bible in this way.

“We do have the first scientific proof that some intelligence outside our own does exist, or at least did exist at the time the Bible was written.”<sup>94</sup>

What are we to take from these words? Is Drosnin basically saying that extra-terrestrials invented this “Bible code,” that was only to be uncovered by humanity at a later point in time? Rather than believing in the God of the Scriptures, the Eternal Creator, why is Drosnin, who has popularized this, trying to find a way around believing in a Divine origin for Scripture? His answer: “The Bible was encoded to sound a warning.”<sup>95</sup>

What kind of warning are we talking about? The quintessential message of Bible prophecy is the Lord’s statement, “Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned *it*, surely I will do it” (Isaiah 46:11). What is in His Word is going to happen whether mortal people like it or not. It is not a “warning” for humankind in the sense that what He has decreed can be averted or stopped. But this is not what proponents of the Bible code believe. They believe that events are encoded in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures so that they can foretell the future to change things. In a manner of speaking, those who delve into the Bible code, secularists with little or no regard for the message of salvation and repentance that the actual text of the Bible presents, are using the Holy Scriptures to soothsay and predict the future. In his own words, Drosnin says,

“It [the Bible] is not a promise of divine salvation. It is not a threat of inevitable doom. It is just information. The message of the Bible code is that we can save ourselves.

“In the end, what we do determines the outcome...”<sup>96</sup>

This is the problem, because Drosnin, and other proponents of the Bible code, do not believe in a Divine Author of Scripture; they believe that at the most extra-terrestrials gave it to terrestrials/terrans to be a warning of what might occur in their future. He denies the Bible’s message of salvation and redemption. He treats it as just information.

There have not been that many, thankfully, who have delved into the Bible code, but the thinking behind the Bible code is very much related to the same thinking of Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism. There should be little doubt in our minds that if computers existed in the First

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<sup>92</sup> Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 25.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

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Century that there would have been Jewish sectarians and proto-Gnostics plugging names, dates, and events into the Bible code, and trying to predict the future or participate in some kind of fortune telling. The Bible code just happens to be a modern-day manifestation of some old methods to deceive people.

If indeed there are coded messages in the pages of the Scriptures, it is notable that all of them have been found *after the fact*. No one has been able to predict or stop anything by using the Bible code. This is because God is sovereign over the universe. What we need to be doing is to stop looking in hidden places for our deliverance, when our true Deliverer, Messiah Yeshua, is spoken of all throughout the pages of the Bible, **and He is not hidden**. The true message of Divine judgment is contained all throughout the pages of the Bible as well, and whether or not you consider it a warning does not matter to the Lord, because He has already decreed that it is going to come to pass.<sup>97</sup>

### ***Extra-Biblical Writings from Gnosticism***

Perhaps the most insidious area of all, as it relates to an infestation of mystic and Gnostic-esque beliefs and ideas present in the Messianic community today, relates to certain extra-Biblical writings. While on the surface, it is doubtful that many in the Messianic movement are actually practicing Gnosticism, there is nevertheless, in various fringe sectors of the Messianic movement, a tendency to gravitate *exclusively* toward consulting extra-Biblical literature in determining theology and doctrine.

**There has always been extra-Biblical literature** that is consulted in determining some Biblically-based belief. The most common extra-Biblical writings consulted in Judaism are, of course, the Mishnah and Talmud, which compose the Oral Torah or Oral Law. Even though ministries such as ours do not believe in the absolute authority of the Oral Torah, these writings do nevertheless offer a wide consensus of Rabbinic opinion and tradition throughout the ages, and are a valuable historical reference. In Christianity, the most commonly consulted extra-Biblical writings would be those of the Church Fathers, a collection of early Church writings from the Second-Fourth Centuries. They provide a picture of what early Christianity faced, the central figures and martyrs of early Christianity, *and* they also demonstrate how early Christianity distanced itself from its Hebraic Roots. The other most commonly consulted piece of extra-Biblical literature would be the books of the Apocrypha, included in the Greek Septuagint and considered canonical by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Neither Jews nor Protestants consider them canonical, but do consult them as a valuable historic reference.

While it can be important at times to consult extra-Biblical literature to get a feel for the times in which the Scriptures were written, it must always be emphasized that these writings are not canonical and they are not Scripture. The two principal keys regarding the canonization of any book of the Bible relates not only to its theology, and whether it can truly demonstrate being inspired of the Holy Spirit, but also how well disseminated a work is, so manuscripts of a Biblical book can be compared to other similar manuscripts to demonstrate some uniformity. A Biblical book must be very well disseminated so that it can stand up to the test of textual scrutiny and whether or not it can be considered as genuine.

This is not something that is new by any means. The Apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians, "that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by

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<sup>97</sup> While I have quoted from the 1997 version of *The Bible Code* in this sub-section, it should not go unnoticed that there have been two further releases from Michael Drosnin: *Bible Code II: The Countdown* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003); *Bible Code III: Saving the World* (Worldmedia, Inc., 2010).

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a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2 Thessalonians 2:2). He wrote regarding a "letter purporting to be from us" (RSV) or a "letter supposed to have come from us" (NIV), indicating that in the First Century there were those writing letters claiming to be from Paul, when in actuality they were not. They were nothing less than forgeries.<sup>98</sup>

Early Christian history reveals that it did not stop at Paul warning about people writing letters in his name. There is an entire collection of writings, pseudo-gospels, pseudo-epistles, and pseudo-apocalypses, claiming to be from various New Testament characters. Even though in the canonical Gospels themselves, we may have not heard much about Andrew or Bartholomew, there are nonetheless extra-Biblical writings that are ascribed to their names. Are these writings genuine, or are they false?

Sadly, in the Messianic community today, because there are many people who are open to new beliefs, there are those who are falling into the error of consulting some of these problematic works for spiritual edification. The most substantial of these works are the Gnostic Scriptures, compiled in the mid-Second to Third Centuries C.E. These were the writings of the Gnostics, who, while spread all throughout the Mediterranean basin, had a firm footing in Egypt. Most of what we know about the Gnostics comes from what the Second and Third Century Church Fathers wrote about combating their false teachings, including their belief that the Messiah was only resurrected spiritually, and not physically. In 1947 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, a large collection of manuscripts was discovered which included what we now call the Gnostic Scriptures, sometimes referred to as the Gnostic Gospels. By-and-large, these texts were written in Coptic, an Egyptian language written in Greek letters, although some of the texts were in Greek. (A major English translation of these is provided by James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* [New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990]).<sup>99</sup>

The exact array of the Gnostic Scriptures is extremely broad, ranging from the Apocryphon of James to the Gospel of Truth to the Gospel of Philip to the Apocalypse of Adam to the Gospel of Mary. Of all the Gnostic texts, by far the most popular of them all is the Gospel of Thomas. Unlike all of the other Gnostic texts, this one has the most parallel references to what we see in the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, the so-called Gospel of Thomas still reflects Gnostic thought and theology. One statement of the Messiah's that appears in its pages is, "Woe to the flesh that depends on the soul; woe to the soul that depends on the flesh" (*Gospel of Thomas* 112).<sup>100</sup> This reflects the Gnostics' main belief in the radical separation of body and spirit.

The problem with these Gnostic Scriptures, more than anything else, is that you will notice in reading them that they are fragmented. In many cases, entire pages or substantial parts of pages of the manuscripts were eaten away by the elements. There are no outside copies of the texts to compare them to, to determine an original reading. This is unlike the thousands of texts which exist for the Hebrew Tanach (Old Testament) and the Greek Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament).

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<sup>98</sup> For some further discussion, consult the author's commentary *1&2 Thessalonians for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>99</sup> One publication to be aware of is Willis J. Barnstone, *The Restored New Testament* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), which as its subtitle notes, is "A New Translation with Commentary, Including the Gnostic Gospels Thomas, Mary, and Judas."

What makes Barnstone's publication problematic, aside from that he is only a professor of comparative literature and not necessary a professed Believer—is that this edition of the Apostolic Scriptures, plus additional texts, is affluent with the same kind of Hebrew terminology seen in a work like David H. Stern's Complete Jewish Bible.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas O. Lambdin, trans., "The Gospel of Thomas," in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 138.

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Just like Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism are experiencing a revival, so are there some today who are advocating a revival of Gnosticism, and a reexamination of the Gnostic texts. One work that has been largely responsible for this is the novel *The Da Vinci Code* by author Dan Brown. This fictional novel goes into explaining, based in the Gnostic texts, how Yeshua was apparently not God in the flesh, how He did not ascend into Heaven, and how He and Mary Magdalene fled to France and their line of offspring produced the royal families of Europe. Much of Brown's work has been under substantial criticism by Christian apologists, and rightfully so, as it is based not only in the Gnostic texts, but also in a substantial amount of Medieval myth and superstition that has been proven to be fallacious.

Today's Messiah followers do need to be a bit suspicious and cautious of extra-Biblical writings—most especially those which today's Biblical scholars lack significant copies of, as is the case with the Gnostic Scriptures. In the Messianic community today, Bible teachers have the awesome responsibility of maintaining theological credibility, while at the same time legitimately challenging the status quo. This does not at all mean that extra-Biblical works cannot be consulted—but what it does mean is that some caution and tact must be exhibited in the works which are consulted. The Gnostic Scriptures and so-called other “lost Biblical texts” do not classify as works that we should be consulting for spiritual insight—as opposed to referencing for beliefs which we *should not adhere to*. If all that exist are one or two copies of these manuscripts, then we must exhibit caution, and indeed some criticism. We cannot fall prey to the enemy's tactic of just reading something because it “sounds good” and tickles our ears. The revelation that we need for certain is in the canonical Scriptures alone!<sup>101</sup>

(If you have not already, do consult the author's article “**The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation**,” appearing in his book *Introduction to Things Messianic*, which summarizes a relatively safe window of extra-Biblical literature appropriated by a range of Biblical scholars.)

## Applied Knowledge Versus Secret Knowledge

In this article, we have just examined an entire array of errant teachings and ideas, which have had, to various degrees, a negative influence upon the broad Messianic community. As with all illnesses, these things must be treated, and they must be purged from the Body. While these things on the surface might look like delectable tasty treats, once they are ingested they become quite poisonous. We always have to be asking ourselves where the inherent spiritual value in these things is. Are these things going to help us in our daily testimony to others? *Do these things have practical and valuable spiritual application to us?* Or, are they widely just speculations of limited mortals?

Regarding Ancient Israel's obedience to the Torah, the Lord said, “keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deuteronomy 4:6). The Israelites were commanded to obey God so that they would be a testimony to the heathen nations around them. These people were supposed to be attracted to Israel's God, because they saw that Israel was a wise and blessed people because it followed His Instruction. Yeshua reemphasized this by admonishing, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). **This is why today's Messianic Believers are to keep the Torah.** We are each to be spiritually blessed because of our obedience to God, and our obedience should serve as a testimony to others, *in*

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<sup>101</sup> One work which is unfortunately, widely consulted by a range of Messianic teachers and people, is the so-called Book of Jasher. Consult the FAQ, “Jashar, Book of.”

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action, of the gospel message and of the internal spiritual transformation we have each experienced.

*This is the difference between applied knowledge and secret knowledge.* Some people have the wrong motivation, which is not to be a testimony of God's power inside of them to others, but rather draw the attention toward themselves and toward what "they know." Things like Jewish mysticism, numerology, Hebrew letter pictures, the Bible code, and Gnostic writings have very little practical value in them. They have been used by the Adversary to take the attention of many, many people, off of Holy Scripture itself, and off its clear message for contemporary Believers and the real issues of human living which we face. They have taken the attention of far too many Messianic people off of clear, concise, and above all **realistic examination and exegesis of the Bible**. As it was true of the mystery cults, their appeal was to the emotions of a person rather than to the intellect and to accomplishing the mission of God. While these things tickle ears, in the long run they often make no rational sense, and do not bring theological credibility to the Messianic movement.

*We are not facing anything new by any means.* As commented and documented, these things plagued the First Century Body of Messiah as they plague us today. If there is any lesson to be learned by the present infestation of mystical and Gnostic-esque ideas in the Messianic movement, it is that we must reexamine ourselves to make sure that we have the proper motivations for being where we are today. Are we truly here so that we can become more Messiah-like, and grow and mature in our faith? Are we here so that we can be a better testimony to others? How well do we truly know the Bible in its full context, with an understanding of Hebrew and Greek linguistics and the history behind it? How well do we understand the errant influences in the First Century *ekklēsia*? More than anything else, how can we have the spiritual discernment to determine truth and error?

In Titus 1:13-14, the Apostle Paul wrote, concerning the proper overseers that his associate Titus would have to see installed on Crete, that "This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth" (ESV). Paul makes a specific reference to "Judaistic myths" (CJB),<sup>102</sup> which were apparently Jewish teachings with no inherent spiritual value. This is not an anti-Semitic statement by Paul, but rather is a statement regarding things passing themselves off as "Jewish" that were not Biblical if not anti-Biblical. David H. Stern says in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* that these things would be "imitative of Judaism without actually emanating from normative Judaism."<sup>103</sup>

**These are some of the very same teachings that are circulating in our midst today.** Just as Paul admonished Titus to expose those who are teaching such things as frauds, **so must we**. We have to have the proper testimony to others that we are Biblically and theologically credible, we must know what the Scriptures say, and above all pray for wisdom and discernment in all that we do.

Truly, the old adage, "**The more things change, the more things stay the same,**" remains true for us today as we are only seeing some of the old errors of the past.

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<sup>102</sup> Grk. *Ioudaïkois muthois* (Ἰουδαϊκοὺς μῦθοις).

<sup>103</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 655.

For some further thoughts, consult the relevant sections of the author's commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.