

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement 2007

Today's Messianic movement is in a very precarious situation. On the one hand, some good things are happening as many Jewish people are coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua, and Christians are expressing a love for Israel and embracing their Hebraic Roots. Our numbers are getting larger and larger—with many not having to really wonder what “Messianic” is any more. Many people know that when you call yourself “Messianic” you are either a Jewish Believer in Yeshua, or a non-Jewish Believer in Yeshua who has some kind of strong connection to Israel.

On the other hand, though, there are some not so good things happening today in the Messianic movement. The theology of the Messianic community and its understanding of the Bible have largely not been able to keep up with its growth. On the whole, many of the answers that we have to give in response to external criticisms of our convictions have not been very deep. They have sometimes not been examined very well from the Scriptures, and our engagement with theological discussions—in some cases going back several centuries—is often just not there. We have a great deal of progress that we must make in the coming years as a more coherent and scholastically-minded Messianic theology begins to come forward.

What needs to be done to secure a stable and secure future for today's emerging Messianic movement? How can we be people who make a positive difference in the fallen world in which we live?

A Required Change

As a teacher surveying today's Messianic community, I have to admittedly guard myself to not be pessimistic. I have committed, and continue to commit, a great deal of time, energy, and financial resources to research various theological issues and perform what I hope will be capable exegesis of the Scriptures. I try my best to be engaged not only with the subjects that impact us as Messianic Believers, but also with various theological and academic conversations that have been occurring for centuries. I see a great opportunity on the horizon as the Messianic movement gets larger, and the need for us to examine things from a unique Messianic perspective becomes more apparent. But this is not going to be easy with some of the trends that have been allowed to occur in our “theological studies” for the past decade.

For the most part, our ministry reaches out to non-Jewish people who are pursuing a Messianic walk of faith because they are sincere, God-fearing individuals who want the most of Him in their lives. They take their relationship with the Lord very seriously, wanting to be true

Confronting Critical Issues

to the Word, and wanting to be transformed by His love. They are not concerned with the approval of others, but instead want to be men and women who are empowered by the Lord for His service. They want to obey Him to the fullest possible extent and realize that this obedience begins with a morality and ethics rooted in the Torah of Moses. Above all, such people often have to recognize that the Messianic road is not an easy one, and that it will take time for us to become a mature group of people who can be used by God to make a significant impact on our world. We have more work ahead of us than what lies behind us.

The above paragraph should encapsulate many of your reasons and spiritual motives for being Messianic.

While I do not wish to speak in broad terms, the growth of certain segments of the Messianic movement during the past decade has not always come from people wanting to live more like Yeshua and make a change in our desperately sinful world. As with all religious movements since the Reformation, opportunists have entered onto the scene and have sensationalized things like Torah obedience. Rather than encourage this obedience as a means to emulate our Lord and Savior, unwarranted criticisms against the Christian Church, theologians and Bible teachers, and even the Jewish Synagogue, have been allowed to prevail. Unsubstantiated remarks about Scriptural interpretation, ancient history, and contemporary theology have been allowed to disseminate. In many cases, some of the Messianic “literature” that is allowed to circulate as being “must reads” is little more than pulp fiction.

Looking back on my experience in the Messianic movement in the past decade—and some of the things that have occurred—I believe that the next decade is going to be a very tenuous time. There will be some extreme tension when people who were told the grossly exaggerated, “The Church lied to you,” then get to hear “Messianic TEACHER X has not done his/her homework on SUBJECT Y.” The examples that I could list regarding this are quite numerous. I am certainly thankful that our ministry has adopted the policy of preferring to addressing *teachings*—rather than *teachers*.

In the years immediately ahead of us we will need to solve some of the problems, and theological and Scriptural issues, which the Messianic movement since the 1960s has largely not addressed. At first, posing the question itself on an issue may be controversial—but over time *if this truly is a move of God* we will have to move toward adulthood and recognize the cold reality that Biblical interpretation and making a difference in a fallen world are not as “black and white” as we may want them to be. We will have to endure some growing pains, and some teachers and leaders may actually have their faith shaken. Ironically, the issues we will have to address are not issues that are new. In many cases, they are theological and historical issues that go back several centuries—some even before the founding of an independent United States of America.

How much longer will we be able to “plead ignorance,” especially if many people in our faith community claim to only be following “the Scriptures”? If we truly follow the Scriptures, then should we not be more familiar with the impact that they have made since the first texts were (presumably) composed about 3,300 years ago? Should we not be familiar with some of the criticisms that exist against the Bible? Do we not realize that as a Messianic movement that gives a great deal of attention to the Tanach (Old Testament) that we will inevitably be dragged into discussions concerning its reliability and accuracy?

The scope of this article cannot possibly address all of the issues and controversies that are on the Messianic theological horizon. However, in an effort to prepare you for some of the things that we will all be discussing in the future, I would like to address what I consider to be the **Top Ten Urban Myths of Today’s Messianic Movement**. I believe that these undercurrents—be they statements that are made in Messianic preaching or teaching, ideas that

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

can go unchallenged, or conversations that take place at meal gatherings—are things that need to be brought out into the light and seriously questioned. A great deal of our work as a ministry (Outreach Israel and Messianic Apologetics) is spent having to counsel people who have fallen into some of these traps, showing them a better and more constructive way so they can be effective in their relationship with God.

Admittedly, some of the tension we will face over the next decade will come as a direct result of these urban myths—concepts and ideas that are allowed to pass themselves as being one-hundred percent factual—when they are shown to not be factual. At best some of these things are someone's opinion, but in many cases they are things that have been over-exaggerated, or are even outright falsehoods. When we can move beyond having to resort to a “one-liner” as our deep theological response to criticisms, perhaps then we can begin to have a much larger influence on those around us. We can then demonstrate ourselves to be men and women empowered by God in both heart *and* mind.¹

Consider the following ten urban myths, and where we as the Messianic community need to exhibit some serious improvement.

Myth #10:

I do not need to understand ancient history to interpret the Bible.

One of the most serious errors that can be made by anyone wanting to really dig into the Word of God is thinking that the books of the Bible were written *directly to people* living in the Twenty-First Century. While Scripture should certainly minister to our Twenty-First Century needs, as the human condition is largely the same in any time period—we should not apply the text to our modern circumstances *before* we have concluded with some accuracy what the meaning of a text was for its ancient audience or recipients.

All of the books of the Bible were written in different historical periods. One of the most difficult sections of the Bible for Messianic Believers today to understand is the New Testament. The Apostolic Scriptures, while mostly written by First Century Jews, were written in a time when the Roman Empire dominated the Mediterranean. Jewish history *and* Roman history both undeniably affect the composition of the Gospels and Epistles. Balancing its Jewish *and* classical Mediterranean background is not something that is done easily by many Messianic Bible teachers. It has certainly led to some historically-divorced interpretations of Paul's letters, written to groups of Believers in distinct cities and regions of the Roman Empire. This leads many Messianics to not know what to do with these texts and to simply “retreat,” as it were, to what they consider the “safe ground” of the Torah and Tanach—books that they believe will not cause them to encounter any kind of so-called “Hellenization” or “Romanism.”

Surprisingly though, the historical world of the Tanach is even more complicated than the Apostolic Scriptures. Old Testament scholars are keen to point out that the first chapters of Genesis are profoundly influenced by Mesopotamian literature. The end of Genesis and almost all of Exodus are profoundly influenced by Egyptian composition. Books such as Esther, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel all bear various strands of Babylonian and Persian influence. Ancient Israel was a people group which lived in the Ancient Near East. While Messianics commonly disregard classical studies in their interpretation of the Apostolic Scriptures, they even more frequently fail to acknowledge the unique cultures and societies that impacted the composition of the Tanach. (Ironically in this view, the New Testament is actually

¹ Consult the author's articles “The Work of the Holy Spirit: Perfection of the Heart” and “The Work of the Holy Spirit: Perfection of the Mind” (appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*).

Confronting Critical Issues

the “safe ground.”) These histories all ask us questions about the text, and hopefully provide a unique framework for us accurately interpreting its message.

It is absolutely true that any one of us can pick up a Bible, begin reading, and have the Holy Spirit minister to us without us having any background knowledge about a particular passage. **But this is only the beginning of good Bible reading.** Too many Bible readers, however, stop here—and in too many Messianic venues a reflective and historically-disengaged reading of Scripture is too often allowed to pass as legitimate and thorough “exegesis.” But for those who engage with an historically conscious reading of Scripture, the possibilities of applying the text for modern issues are often enhanced and widened. Consider this example that sheds some considerable light on a common problem in today’s Messianic community.

I am sure that each one of you has encountered friends or family members who read the Torah and consider its commandments to be tedious, burdensome, and legalistic. How do you respond to their criticism? How does your congregational leader respond to questions such as, “Do I really have to keep all of those 613 laws?” Albeit that most of the Torah’s commandments are divided by one’s status as a man, woman, child, etc., the Torah as a religious code is *generally small* compared to its contemporary religious codes in the Ancient Near East.² An Egyptian sojourning with the Israelites through the Exodus would have considered the requirements of the Lord upon His people to be quite relaxed, having come from a society where major religious festivals were a weekly, if not bi-weekly practice. Just imagine if we were commanded in the Torah to observe something like the Passover every week, or twice a week, instead of just once a year. Consider the major burden it would be to set aside the time, energy, and food to do this. Yet, festivals like this were frequent and common in some Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Some of these societies had many more than just a minimal seven religious holidays every year.

Set against the background of the Second Millennium B.C.E., the Torah was anything but legalistic or burdensome. On the contrary, those who would join to Israel’s God in this time sometimes *had to do less* than their pagan religion required. Unfortunately today, we live in a minimalist society and religious culture that largely wants as little as possible to do with God. We can apply this attitude to the Torah and the rest of Scripture as well. But what would happen if we told people what the original recipients of the Torah were asked to do against the backdrop of their contemporary societies? What if we said what the Ancient Egyptians or Ancient Canaanites did, and then what the Ancient Hebrews had to do when compared and contrasted to them? Would it help our case in favor of the Torah? Would it not help people who struggle with thinking that the Torah is just “dead legalism”? Where might the Torah of Ancient Israel have actually been *subversive* to the other law codes of the Ancient Near East?³

This is only one of many examples where history really can improve our understanding and orientation toward the Biblical text. I believe we must improve greatly in this area if our application of Scripture is going to be relevant for our times. Understanding the ancient world and the cultures contemporary to Israel need not take away from the authority of Scripture; in most cases it significantly enhances its authority and adds important dimensions to our interpretation of it.⁴

² For further reading on this and related subjects, consult the relevant sections of K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity, 1966) and T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

³ Some of this is further discussed in the author’s article “Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah” (appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*).

⁴ For a further discussion of this issue, consult the author’s article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

Myth #9

All I need to examine the original languages of the Scriptures accurately is my copy of Strong's Concordance.

Most people in today's Messianic community do properly recognize that we are limited when we read the Bible from an English translation, as value judgments frequently have to be made in the translation process concerning the type of translation that needs to be made and the complexity (or lack thereof) of the language offered. Many correctly recognize that our final appeal to the Biblical text needs to be made to the original languages, which often give us important clues as to why a translator chose a particular rendering. But how we properly make use of the Hebrew and Greek source texts that lie behind our English versions is another issue altogether.

In the ideal world, you should have access to a teacher who has formally studied *both* the Biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, knows the basics of both languages, and has access to resources such as academic lexicons and commentaries that can aid him or her in adequately addressing the issues of Scripture. This is certainly the norm for most in evangelical Christian denominations, and similar requirements are placed upon Jewish Rabbis from all three main Jewish sectors (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform). Unfortunately, the ideal is not sometimes present in the Messianic movement. In fact, even a minimal familiarity with the Biblical languages is sometimes not present, with some teachers unable to read both Hebrew and Greek.

Too many in today's Messianic movement have limited their examination of the original languages of the Bible to *Strong's Concordance*. On the one hand, most of the people who use *Strong's* are those who do not need to be doing any kind of detailed examination of the Bible. All they need is a basic source to access to get a gloss for some words and where they might be used in Scripture. This was the purpose of *Strong's Concordance*. *Strong's* becomes a problem, though, when it is the *only resource* that we use to exegete Scripture, and not only do we not have any experience dealing with other Biblical lexicons, we might not even have a Hebrew Tanach and/or Greek New Testament in our theological library.

The *Strong's* dictionary itself is not intended to give a thorough explanation of how words are used throughout Scripture. It is intended to only be a brief dictionary, giving one a condensed definition of a term. These things are accessible via more thorough lexicons such as *Brown-Driver-Briggs* for Hebrew and *Liddell-Scott* for Greek. Furthermore, *Strong's* cannot tell you about parts of speech in a Hebrew or Greek sentence. It cannot identify a Hebrew verb stem or a Greek case. It cannot tell you what the verb tense is in the original language, nor how one clause relates to another clause. It certainly cannot tell you how words or phrases are used in extra-Biblical contexts. Sometimes our examination of the "meaning" of words is not sufficient to interpret a passage, and the answer we need is made on a point of grammar—something no lexicon no matter how thorough is going to tell you. Such a thing requires more hands-on knowledge of the Biblical languages.

If you are an average Bible reader, you should not have that much to worry about. Many tools are available, designed with you in mind, that can enhance your understanding of Biblical vocabulary.⁵ At the same time, we have all been subjected—at one point or another—to a Messianic examination of Scripture that has ended with *Strong's Concordance*. Some among us have no competency in the Biblical languages and will make assertions—sometimes false assertions—based on what they see in *Strong's*. Is this a problem?

⁵ Consult Chapter 12, "Getting Beyond Strong's Concordance," for a listing of these resources.

Confronting Critical Issues

Are we recognizing that we must make some substantial improvements in this area? I sincerely hope you recognize that as a movement we must make some significant progress in how we exegete the Scriptures from Hebrew and Greek that takes a broader approach than is largely present today. It may require you to think twice when someone says “the Hebrew says...” and no evidence is provided *for what it actually says*, or a Hebrew quotation is made from the Biblical text.

Myth #8

I cannot trust any form of contemporary Christian or Jewish Bible scholarship.

This urban myth has caused an extreme amount of problems, especially for the credibility of many in today’s Messianic movement in the eyes of many outsiders. It is not uncommon to be told from various Messianic pulpits, usually in the more independent branches of our faith community, that “The Church lied to us” and thus no form of Christian scholarship can be trusted or even considered when doing Biblical research. This means that not only can we not trust Christian books or publications for having any Spirit-inspired or valuable insight, but that Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, commentaries, and other reference works can likewise not be trusted. At worst, they may belong in our next yard sale—but at best belong in our fireplaces.

This kind of logic certainly leaves a person wondering what can be trusted since Christian Bible scholarship, be it liberal or conservative, often dominates the scene when it comes to compiling research on any given topic. When one wants to know what the background behind Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians might be, does this mean that we can no longer look up entries in a New Testament introduction book, or a Bible encyclopedia? Should we not be smart enough to consult several entries, and draw intelligent and reasonable conclusions based on the data provided? Or, do we just begin making assumptions about 1&2 Thessalonians *without reading what others say about it*? How do we properly date the text? Who was the audience of these letters? What have theologians across the spectrum said about them, and how have they interpreted them?

This is only one of many possible examples where Christian scholarship has been conveniently and haphazardly avoided. Many Messianics are leery of consulting Christian works or commentaries on the Bible because they are afraid that they somehow might be “converted back” to an anti-Torah position. In actuality, by failing to consult such works they are often unable to properly gauge where *they need to improve* in their pro-Torah views and in their own living of such convictions. Furthermore, by disregarding Christian reference tools we hinder our ability to grow as a movement and build upon the work of men and women who have come before us—who are our brothers and sisters in the faith and are doing their best to serve the Lord in the calling(s) He has placed upon them.

While respecting Christian Bible scholarship is an area in serious need of improvement in today’s Messianic community, some trends over the past few years have likewise rendered Jewish scholarship inoperative. While there are Messianics who only consider Jewish Biblical scholarship—as opposed to some kind of balance or synthesis of Christian and Jewish scholarship—Jewish Biblical scholarship is undeniably polarized between the Right and the Left. Christian Bible scholarship usually has a fair mix of the Right, Center, and Left—but Jewish scholarship tends to not be so mixed. You usually find yourself encountering the far Right from Orthodox publishing houses, and then find yourself encountering the far Left from more liberal sources. One side tends to advocate that the Hebrew Scriptures are totally without

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

error or any human discrepancies, and the other side tends to advocate an extreme that the Hebrew Scriptures contain important mythologies and stories people can learn from.

Those who may encounter this, or who encounter things they are uncomfortable with, may just throw their hands up in the air and decide that *no Biblical scholarship of any kind* can be trusted. After all, they may think, how can any of these people be spiritual? The person who takes this viewpoint is often left—in his or her estimation—with an English Bible and the Holy Spirit as a guide. (Of course, it was those same scholars that gave them their Bible translation.) Now proper Scriptural interpretation can come entirely “by what the Holy Spirit says,” which may be little more than one’s feelings or emotions. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit should not be communing with us, nor that we should be insensitive to the Spirit’s leading. But when all we do is pick up a text and then start interjecting our thoughts into it—without any frame of reference or larger discussion guiding or informing us of important things—it becomes an extreme problem.

We have a great deal to improve upon if we are to be a movement that is engaged with Biblical scholarship and conversations that are presently going on in the larger Judeo-Christian world. We need to make use of the work of men and women—both Christian and Jewish—who have committed their lives to understanding the Bible and making sense of its times. On the one hand, some of our teachers and leaders will expose themselves as being ill-equipped to deal with criticism against the Bible that has existed for centuries. This is unfortunate and I personally do not wish it to happen. On the other hand, it will cause new teachers and leaders to emerge who are able to bring more credibility to the Messianic movement and allow our unique perspective(s) to be given greater merit and wider consideration. Most importantly, it will help us to be a relevant spiritual move for our times that is able to better minister to the life needs of other people, contributing to greater human wholeness.

Myth #7

The Pharisees of Yeshua's day were the bad guys.

While it is deeply apparent in a great deal of Christian approaches to the Apostolic Scriptures, there are a sizeable number of Messianic non-Jewish Believers who are anti-Pharisee. This is mostly the result of people not reconsidering positions in common Christian belief that consistently afford the Pharisees of the New Testament the position of always being antagonists against Yeshua. Fortunately, though, this is changing in sectors of Christian theology as scholars examine First Century Jewish literature and consider the wider array of beliefs advocated by the Pharisees. Ironically, many are discovering that the Pharisees as a whole were not so much the antagonists against Yeshua—as much as how people in various *sects* of Pharisees were antagonists against Him. When reading the Gospels and encountering the Pharisees, we have to ask the question of “Which Pharisees might Yeshua be speaking to or about?” For example, might Yeshua be speaking to a Pharisee of the School of Shammai or the School of Hillel?

Liberal critics against the Scriptures (such as those of the Jesus Seminar) doubt the authority of the Gospels because if Yeshua were indeed the perfect embodiment of love, then He could never call the Pharisees things like vipers, whitewashed tombs, or even murderers. Thus, liberals may assume that such statements may have been added later to the Biblical text and compose anti-Semitic remarks. What such people often do not realize is that *Pharisees frequently called themselves these things* when they fiercely disagreed with one another. The conflict that we see in the Gospels between Yeshua and the Pharisees is not often a fight of one outside force opposing the religious establishment—as much as we see Yeshua entering into *internal debates among the Pharisees*.

Confronting Critical Issues

When we look at the theology of the Pharisees and compare it to the theology of the First Century Messianic Believers, one undeniably sees Apostolic theology and Pharisaical theology to have extreme common ground. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection to come, angels, demons, the work of God's Spirit, miracles, an afterlife, and the need to go out into the world and spread the message of the God of Israel. The Sadducees, in contrast, did not believe in any of these things. The Pharisees of the First Century and evangelical Christians today share a great deal in common that is often not realized, and why some Messianics would dismiss these things is odd indeed.

When we read the Gospels and see the Pharisees portrayed, we are looking at a Jewish reformation movement that was probably several centuries old when Yeshua began His ministry. Like many reforming movements, the motives of the founders were pure and good and they were concerned with making a difference. By the time Yeshua enters the scene, there were still many Pharisees who were good people who loved God, who were concerned with obedience to the Torah and social justice, and who were definitely helping others in need. It is no surprise that many Pharisees believed in Yeshua and were leaders in the First Century *ekklēsia*. However, the leadership of the Pharisees by this time was largely legalistic and had lost touch with the common people they had originally intended to help—not unlike any Christian denomination today whose leadership has lost touch with those it presumably serves.

Yeshua Himself said of the Pharisaical leaders, “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*” (Matthew 23:2-3). He affords some level of authority to the leadership of the Pharisees to determine proper Torah *halachah*, but by no means endorses all of their behavior or their hypocrisy. By extension this would require Messianics today to recognize some kind of authority by mainline Judaism, but be leery of some of its activities. We are to recognize their leading in regard to orthopraxy, but do so with some caution and discernment.

It is notable that the Apostle Paul considered himself a Pharisee long after his coming to faith on the road to Damascus. He testified before the Sanhedrin, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” (Acts 23:6). In defending the Messiahship of Yeshua, he identifies with the Pharisees on the major issue that divided them from the Sadducees: the affirmation of the resurrection. The Greek *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι), appearing in the present active indicative tense, makes it quite clear that Paul *actively considered himself a Pharisee* when he spoke these words. Paul's ideological and theological orientation is undeniably Pharisaical.

We need to have a better handling as Messianic Believers when the subject of “the Pharisees” comes up. While it is absolutely true that there were many Pharisees who were antagonists against Yeshua, there were likewise many Pharisees who were some of His strongest followers and supporters. The Apostle Paul, author of almost one-third of the Apostolic Scriptures, was meticulously trained as a Pharisee. The core of our theology as Believers in Yeshua is undeniably Pharisaical. Our affirmation that Yeshua was resurrected from the dead is derived from Pharisaic beliefs and interpretations of the Tanach. Can we casually dismiss *all* the Pharisees as being enemies of Yeshua—as many Christians have done—or is a fresh approach required? Is it possible that we could gain some serious insight from the early Pharisees, and be concerned with social justice and the care of others, just like they originally were?⁶

⁶ For a further discussion of this issue, consult the author's article “You Want to be a Pharisee” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

Myth #6

Karaite Judaism is an accurate representation of the style of Torah observance Yeshua would have followed.

The assertion that Karaite Judaism would have been an accurate style of Torah observance, consistent with how Yeshua the Messiah lived, is an anachronistic statement to make since Karaite Judaism was founded in the Middle Ages. Karaite Judaism appeals to Messianic Believers who largely want nothing to do with any kind of extra-Biblical Jewish writings or tradition in their theology. Believing themselves to follow an hermeneutic of “Scripture Only,” they reject the guide of tools such as the Mishnah, Talmud, or Midrashim, and instead prefer to stick to the text of the Bible *exclusively* in their Torah observance. Ironically, they do not follow a style of interpretation consistent with the “Scripture Only” Protestant Reformers, who still consulted history and Church tradition to guide their research. (What the Reformers largely lacked was access to literature such as the Mishnah, Talmud, or Midrashim.)

We should all understand why some people believe that Karaite Judaism, which rejects the validity or relevance of the Oral Law, is a better representation of Yeshua’s way of living. Those only reading the Biblical text—without any kind of historical guide—could see how Yeshua denounced the hypocrisy of many Pharisees in His day, by extension denouncing the hypocrisy or extremes of many in present Orthodox Judaism. This is what Karaite Judaism today does and it is considered at best a fringe, and perhaps even a heretical sect of Judaism, by most mainline Jews.

Against these opinions are studies into the Gospels that are revealing more and more that Yeshua was in agreement with many of the customs and traditions of His era. This requires each of us to be familiar with the broad First Century and submit ourselves to more detailed teachings on the Gospels and life of Messiah than is commonly seen in parts of today’s Messianic community influenced by Karaitism. Research that has been conducted by scholars and is available in critical commentaries is often not easily accessible to the normal layperson. Showing the continuity between Yeshua, His Apostles, and the mainline Judaism of His time will be a major area of study in the forthcoming decades of the Messianic movement—and will clearly reveal the fallacies of anyone embracing a form of Karaitism.

Myth #5

The Council of Nicea and Constantine completely severed the Church from its Hebraic Roots and Judaism.

When the subject of “Church history” commonly comes up in Messianic settings, it is plain to me that a great deal of improvement needs to be made in the future among our ranks. It is not sufficient for us to say that a single ancient council “completely severed the Church from its Hebraic Roots and Judaism”—when such things began to take place during the lifetimes of the Apostles themselves. Paul’s letter to the Romans thoroughly addresses the reliance that non-Jewish Believers have upon their fellow Jewish brethren as salvation was brought to Israel first.⁷ While space and time limit us from addressing some of the unfortunate circumstances of the emerging Second Century Church severing itself from Judaism, it would be too rash of us to say that one council alone was responsible for it all. The roots of such division were spoken against by the Apostles and divisions were taking place very early. But since a great deal of publicity is often given to the Council of Nicea, it is imperative that you know what it actually was—lest you have encountered any misinformation in the Messianic world of ideas.

⁷ Consult the author’s commentary *Romans for the Practical Messianic*.

Confronting Critical Issues

The Council of Nicea met in the Spring of 325 C.E. to address the Arian controversy over the Divinity of Yeshua. Arius of Alexandria taught, as explained in *History of the World Christian Movement*, “that the Logos” or incarnate Word “was not eternal but was the firstborn of creation. God the Father alone was unbegotten and eternal...and thus there was a time when the Son was not. This in turn meant that the Logos was capable of change, even if only in theory.”⁸ The followers of Arius were denying the eternality of the Son, and advocating that He was only a human man. Across the Roman Empire, Christianity had recently been made legal by the decree of the Emperor Constantine. Bishops were taking on new roles as civil leaders, and doctrinal disputes like this were causing civil instability and unrest in the empire. Constantine, only a recent convert to Christianity, forced the bishops to meet at Nicea for there to be some agreement concerning this issue, lest the empire become unstable.

The Council of Nicea was the first major occurrence of a political authority forcing a theological consensus. The Nicene Creed was composed to establish the belief among all the churches that Yeshua the Messiah was the Incarnate Word, and shared the same Divine nature as the Father. It was not adopted or agreed to by all the bishops in attendance, but has remained the watchword for many in Western Christianity since its composition, affirming both the plurality and the Oneness of God:

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us as men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and cometh again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end:

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceedeth from the Father, who with Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spake through the prophets:⁹

The Nicene Creed actually helped establish the plurality found in the Oneness of God, and the Divinity of Messiah Yeshua, for centuries to come. Any Believer true to the Scriptures cannot deny the accurate statements that it makes about the Father and Son. Unfortunately, too many people in the Messianic movement are unaware of history and make hasty conclusions.

Can any of us affirm the Scriptural truths contained in the Nicene Creed? **I know that I can**, even though the Apostolic Scriptures record ancient hymns and creeds affirmed about Yeshua by the First Century Believers themselves (i.e., Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16).

There are a few Messianic ministries out there that are actually asking some people to denounce these statements issued by the Council of Nicea. Things are not that simple, though, as believing in a Divine Messiah is mandatory for salvation. The Hebrew Tanach itself clearly tells us “God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me. Selah” (Psalm 49:15), and “I *have been* the LORD your God since the land of Egypt; and you were not to know any god except Me, **for there is no savior besides Me**” (Hosea 13:4). Only a Divine Savior

⁸ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 175.

⁹ Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp 28-29.

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

can redeem us from the power of the realm of death, and eternal separation from Him. If Yeshua is not a Divine Savior, the LORD God made manifest to us in the flesh, then who is He?¹⁰

True Scriptural balance will reveal that we do not reject everything that occurred at Nicea, or in the councils following, because if we do we ultimately have to reject Yeshua's Divinity and Messiahship. True Scriptural balance will also reveal, however, that we must be fair in our dealings with these Christian councils, recognizing that further problems *did* ensue as a result of the Council's rulings. In later councils that followed Nicea, often convened by the political authorities, anti-Semitic laws were put into place that forbade the Hebraic practices that the Lord is restoring to His people today.

The Council of Antioch (341 C.E.) decreed that anyone caught celebrating the Lord's resurrection ("Easter") at the same time as the Jewish Passover would be excommunicated from the Church, and be considered to be causing destruction to his soul:

But if any one of those who preside in the Church, whether he be bishop, presbyter, or deacon, shall presume, after this decree, to exercise his own private judgment to the subversion of the people and to the disturbance of the churches, by observing Easter [at the same time] with the Jews, the holy Synod decrees that he shall thenceforth be an alien from the Church, as one who not only heaps sins upon himself, but who is also the cause of destruction and subversion to many; and it deposes not only such persons themselves from their ministry, but those also who after their deposition shall presume to communicate with them (Canon 1).¹¹

The Council of Laodicea (363 C.E.) decreed that Christians should not rest on the Sabbath, but instead observe "the Lord's Day":

Here the Fathers order that no one of the faithful shall stop work on the Sabbath as do the Jews, but that they should honor the Lord's Day; on account of the Lord's resurrection, and that on that day they should abstain from manual labor and go to church. But thus abstaining from work on Sunday they do not lay down as a necessity, but they add, 'if they can.' For if through need or any other necessity any one worked on the Lord's day this was not reckoned against him (Canon 29).¹²

Things certainly did change with the establishment of Constantine as emperor. Religious tolerance for "Christianity" later progressed, as did the birth of the Roman Catholic Church. From that time onward many things have happened to our faith that have distanced it from the Biblical Hebraic practices that were adhered to by Yeshua's Disciples and the early First Century Believers. We have the responsibility as Messianic Believers to correct these errors and not look back at the past with hatred toward those who are long since dead—but look at the future and realize the sacred trust we have been given to secure a stable and secure *Messianic future* for our posterity. A great part of that future rests with us being objective and factual when it comes to Church history (be it ancient, Medieval, Reformation, or modern), recognizing that it may not be as simplistic as we want it to be. What solutions do we intend to provide for those living today?

¹⁰ For a further discussion of this issue, consult Chapter 3, "Answering the 'Frequently Avoided Questions' About the Divinity of Yeshua."

¹¹ *The Post-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff, ed.; [Libronix Digital Library System 1.0d: Church History Collection](#). MS Windows XP. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software. 2002.

¹² *Ibid.*

Confronting Critical Issues

Myth #4

There is a concentrated conspiracy in the Christian Church against all things Hebraic and Jewish.

We do not have the time or space in this article to address the Messianic urban myth that all Christians for all time have hated Judaism. Like Church history itself, the factors and people involved are too complex and diverse for us to draw any rash conclusions. An objective and broad survey of Christian history will certainly show that there have been many Christian leaders who opposed Judaism and were vehemently anti-Semitic. Likewise, a broad survey of Judaism will reveal that there were many Jewish leaders who were equally opposed to their Christian counterparts, and were prepared to add fuel to the fire of debate. While again—there was separation going on in the First Century itself in sectors of the *ekklesia* as attested in the Apostolic Scriptures—it may be that Judaism “threw the first punch” in this fight by widely ejecting Believers from the Synagogue. Consider the Benediction Against Heretics, a Second Century addition to the *Shemonei Esrei* or traditional morning Jewish prayers:

And for slanderers let there be no hope; and may all wickedness perish in an instant; and may all Your enemies be cut down speedily. May You speedily uproot, smash, cast down, and humble the wanton sinners—speedily in our days. Blessed are You, HASHEM, Who breaks enemies and humbles wanton sinners.¹³

There is more than a fair share of Christian diatribes against Judaism from the early centuries of the Church that are just as bad as the prayer above. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, made reference to Yeshua having “endured the cross at the hands of the Christ-killing Jews” (*Epistle to the Magnesians* 11)¹⁴ as early as the late First or early Second Century. Anti-Semitism is an horrendously bad rash on much of the Christian Church that also permeated a great deal of European society and culture.

The problem is not that some Messianics are pointing out sins of the historical Church that Christians need to know about, and possibly even (severely) repent of. The problem is that some Messianics act as though no progress has been made and that no Christians or church denominations have ever tried to make restitution for anti-Semitic atrocities. Some try to castigate all Christians as being involved in some concentrated conspiracy against the Jewish Synagogue, which simply cannot be substantiated. These claims at best are overstated opinions, and at worst are purposeful distortions of the facts.

This can best be seen by the widescale unfair handling of Martin Luther’s anti-Semitism in much of today’s Messianic community. I am the first person who will say that **I do not agree** with all of Luther’s theology, and recognize that he made some fallacious errors. But should we not try to understand the circumstances that gave rise to his behavior?

The need for radical change in the Medieval Church was recognized by many Catholic scholastics who saw the high level of corruption and political intrigue, at the expense of the work of helping the common people. Martin Luther had difficulty with the Catholic practice of selling indulgences, and while he originally intended to simply reform the Catholic Church from within, he eventually had to break from it, and was declared a heretic.

¹³ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur: Nusach Ashkenaz* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2001), 107.

An explanatory note indicates, “The blessing was composed in response to the threats of such heretical Jewish sects as the Sadducees, Boethusians, Essenes, and the early Christians. They tried to lead Jews astray through example and persuasion, and they used their political power to oppress observant Jews and to slander them to the anti-Semitic Roman government” (*Ibid.*).

¹⁴ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Libronix Digital Library System 1.0d: Church History Collection.

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

Luther, as one of the early Reformers, was challenged left and right from many of his former Catholic colleagues. Some accused him of denying the Divinity of Yeshua, and claimed that he only said that He was a human. In the course of the accusations levied against him, Luther published many works. One of his early works, published in 1523, was the sermon *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. This was specifically intended to show that Luther believed in the virgin birth, but he had also hoped to convince Jews of his beliefs as a secondary result of this. His comments in this work demonstrate that early on Luther was very gracious toward the Jews in Germany, recognizing many of the errors made by the Church, and that he hoped to see them come to faith. He wrote,

...Our fools, the popes, bishops, sophists, and monks-the crude asses' heads-have hitherto so treated the Jews that anyone who wished to be a good Christian would almost have had to become a Jew. If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian.

They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs rather than human beings; they have done little else than deride them and seize their property. When they baptize them they show them nothing of Christian doctrine or life, but only subject them to popishness and monkery. When the Jews then see that Judaism has such strong support in Scripture, and that Christianity has become a mere babble without reliance on Scripture, how can they possibly compose themselves and become right good Christians? I have myself heard from pious baptized Jews that if they had not in our day heard the gospel they would have remained Jews under the cloak of Christianity for the rest of their days. For they acknowledge that they have never yet heard anything about Christ from those who baptized and taught them.

I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs. They will only be frightened further away from it if their Judaism is so utterly rejected that nothing is allowed to remain, and they are treated only with arrogance and scorn. If the apostles, who also were Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles. Since they dealt with us Gentiles in such brotherly fashion, we in our turn ought to treat the Jews in a brotherly manner in order that we might convert some of them. For even we ourselves are not yet all very far along, not to speak of having arrived.¹⁵

Perhaps the most important statement to take note of are Luther's words, **"If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian."** Martin Luther recognized here, that the Church of his time had hopelessly failed in its job to provoke Jews to faith in Jesus the Messiah, and actually used some very crass words to describe this.

Some twenty years later, though, in 1543, Martin Luther published another work on the Jewish people, called *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Here, Luther treated the Jews as a cursed people and worthy of nothing less than God's wrath. While there are many damning excerpts from this work, the following quote sums up Luther's thoughts fairly well:

In brief, dear princes and lords, those of you who have Jews under your rule: if my counsel does not please you, find better advice, so that you and we all can be rid of the unbearable, devilish burden of the Jews. Lest we become guilty sharers before God in the lies, the blasphemy, the defamation, and the curses which the mad Jews indulge in so freely and wantonly against the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, his dear mother, all Christians, all

¹⁵ Martin Luther (1523). *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations. Retrieved 19 August, 2011 from <<http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources>>.

Confronting Critical Issues

authority, and ourselves. Do not grant them protection, safe-conduct, or communion with us. Do not aid and abet them in acquiring your money or your subjects' money and property by means of usury. We have enough sin of our own without this, dating back to the papacy, and we add to it daily with our ingratitude and our contempt of God's word and all his grace; so it is not necessary to burden ourselves also with these alien, shameful vices of the Jews and over and above it all, to pay them for it with money and property....With this faithful counsel and warning I wish to cleanse and exonerate my conscience.¹⁶

Luther actually instructed the German princes in this piece, "to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. For whatever we tolerated in the past unknowingly and I myself was unaware of it will be pardoned by God."¹⁷

How could Martin Luther have gone from being a supporter of the Jewish people, to one who advocated that the German princes burn down their synagogues and eject them from their lands? *How could he become an advocate of such violence?* What were the series of circumstances that precipitated these horrendous things said by Luther?

Did Luther experience a great deal of rejection from the Jews, and that is why he lashed out against them? Was Luther under political pressure from the German princes to write a treatise against the Jews? Did Luther suffer from poor health, and if so did Luther possibly suffer from a mental disorder like dementia (or perhaps even Alzheimer's disease), which would surely not have been able to be diagnosed by Sixteenth Century medicine? Ruth Tucker makes the following observations in her essay "Lonely Prophets," appearing in *Jews and the Gospel at the End of History*:

"Can we excuse him? Was he merely an ordinary man crawling out of the medieval backwater of pre-modern Germany? Or was he mentally disturbed? Did he suffer from a personality disorder that would thwart ministerial ordination today? He did endure a wide range of physical ailments for which there were no adequate treatments. Likewise, he 'complained of headaches, insomnia, and what he called "night wars"—nightmares, anxiety attacks, and *Anfechtung*, meaning "inner turmoil" or "temptation."'

"It is no wonder that Luther, the prolific writer and speaker (with students taking notes) is a psychoanalyst's dream. Freudian psychologist Hartmann Grisar diagnosed Luther as having a pathological, manic-depressive personality. The most popular of these historical analyses was *Young Man Luther* (1958) by Erik H. Erikson. Here, Luther's emotional impairments are linked directly to emotional and physical abuse as a child, causing him to rebel against his parents and even more so against the established church."¹⁸

Sadly, we will never know the definite answer regarding Luther's anti-Semitism, even though these are all possible factors.

What we do know for certain is that Martin Luther died three years after the publication of *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1546. Luther was born and lived in a society that had anti-Semitic currents, as the Christians and the Jews seldom interacted, and people were subjected to a great deal of anti-Jewish stereotypes. Near the end of his life, Luther had definitely fallen prey to all

¹⁶ Martin Luther (1543). *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations. Retrieved 19 August, 2011 from <<http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources>>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ruth Tucker, "Lonely Prophets," in Jim Congdon, ed., *Jews and the Gospel at the End of History: A Tribute to Moishe Rosen* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009), pp 54-55.

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

of the stereotypes and urban myths circulating about the Jewish people. He made a foolish and absolutely egregious error in writing *On the Jews and Their Lies*, which Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were able to use for anti-Semitic propaganda in the 1930s.

The challenge with Martin Luther and today's Messianic community is that many fall into the reverse errors that Luther did. Luther fell for much of the unsubstantiated prejudice against Jews that was present in Sixteenth Century Germany, and some in today's Messianic community have invented their own prejudice against today's Christian Church. Martin Luther was by no means the only Reformer, and he was clearly a human being who made mistakes. In spite of his mistakes, God was still able to use him, just as He is able to use any of us in spite of our own weaknesses. King Solomon, for example, composed many valuable proverbs—but at the end of his life he was an apostate against God, responsible for the ultimate split of Ancient Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, and in all likelihood will suffer eternal punishment.

Much of the anti-Jewishness that we see in any writings of Martin Luther and any of the other Reformers are largely the result of figures like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and others who never had any kind of substantial interaction with European Jews. Many were simply repeating the anti-Semitic social prejudices that they encountered, in the cultures into which they were born. We need to understand Luther and the Reformers for the times and cultures in which they lived.

It is grossly unfortunate that Adolf Hitler was able to use the writings of Martin Luther to his advantage to promote his regime of despotism and horror. **Humanity will forever be stigmatized with the tragedy and catastrophe known as the Holocaust.** However, too many Messianics ignorant of modern Church history ignore the actions taken by many German Christians against Hitler and the Nazis, sometimes in an attempt to castigate the modern Christian Church since that time. Is this because some in our ranks are ignorant of history—or that they do not want to be fair?

In the 1930s a group of German Protestants formed a party known as the “German Christians,” which Justo L. González indicates joined “traditional Christian beliefs, usually as they had been reinterpreted by liberalism, with notions of racial superiority and German nationalism. Part of their program was to reinterpret Christianity in terms of opposition to Judaism, thus contributing to the anti-Semitic policies of the Reich. In 1933, following the directions of the government, a united German Evangelical Church was formed.”¹⁹

It is very important that we consider what took place immediately after this. González continues, “When its presiding bishop showed himself unwilling to obey the Reich in all matters, he was deposed, and another named in his place. In 1934, several professors of theology, including [Karl] Barth and [Rudolf] Bultmann, signed a protest against the direction the united church was taking. Then a few days later, Christian leaders from all over Germany, both Lutheran and Reformed, gathered at Barmen for what they called a ‘witnessing synod,’ and issued the ‘Barmen Declaration,’ which became the foundational document for the ‘Confessing Church,’ **a body that opposed Hitler’s policies in the name of the gospel**” (emphasis mine).²⁰

The words of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 were partially compiled in response to “The persecution of Jews who had converted to become Christian pastors.”²¹ I ask you to carefully

¹⁹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 2* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), 365.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bettenson and Maunder, 373.

Confronting Critical Issues

consider this short excerpt from the Barmen Declaration and wonder why we do not hear more about things like this in our Messianic examinations of Church history and the Holocaust:

....We, assembled representatives of Lutheran, Reformed and United churches, independent synods, *Kirchentage* and local church groups, hereby declare that we stand together on the foundation of the German Evangelical Church as a federal union of German confessional churches. We are held together by confession of the one Lord of the one, holy, universal and apostolic church.

We declare, before the public view of all the Evangelical Churches of Germany, that the unity of this confession and thereby also the unity of the German Evangelical Church is severely threatened. In this year of the existence of the German Evangelical Church it is endangered by the more and more clearly evident style of teaching and action of the ruling ecclesiastical party of the German Christians and the church government which they run....

Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, which we are to hear, which we are to trust and obey in life and in death."²²

Many of the supporters of this statement, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paid for their resistance against Nazism with their lives. Likewise, theologians such as Karl Barth spent a considerable degree of their time after World War II helping to repair the broken relationship between the Church and Synagogue, something which still has not changed. The greater implications of the Holocaust have shown the need for reasoned Jewish-Christian dialogue and a complete reevaluation of much of Judaism on the part of Christianity. British theologian James D.G. Dunn summarizes this need quite well:

"Already before the Second World War individual voices had been raised in protest on the non-Jewish side. But the horror of the Holocaust forced a much wider circle of Christians to re-examine the nature and roots of anti-Semitism and to face up to the stark issue of whether, and if so to what extent, anti-Semitism is endemic to Christianity and rooted in its own sacred Scriptures."²³

Ironically, Dunn notes that Christian reevaluation of Judaism by recent scholars has led to more positive views of the Pharisees based in Christian studies of primary Jewish literature.²⁴ To hold to a position that all of the Christian Church today is engaged in a concentrated effort against things Hebraic and Judaism cannot be sustained. But, in spite of positive developments in Jewish-Christian relations too many Messianic teachers and leaders will make comments that cannot be supported by facts. Not enough attention is given to understanding the *dual involvement* of both Church and Synagogue in past animosity, the additional factors that probably led to Luther's anti-Semitism, or documents such as the Barmen Declaration that many in the German church clearly composed against Hitler and the Nazis. In the future, our understanding of Christian anti-Semitism needs to be far more tempered and fair-minded. More attention needs to be given to those who have stood against it and have tried to make amends.

²² Ibid.

²³ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 61.

²⁴ Ibid, 62; cf. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977).

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

Myth #3

The Hebrew Tanach has been preserved 100% perfectly, whereas the transmission of the Greek Scriptures is in serious doubt.

While this is yet another subject that time and space does not afford us a detailed examination, it is important that you have some basic background knowledge in the beliefs and opinions regarding the transmission of the Hebrew Tanach. The reason that it is important is because it is widely believed in the Messianic movement that the Hebrew Scriptures have remained perfectly preserved for us, especially with the Torah as Moses was given it at Mount Sinai. It is widely believed that since that time to the present, the Hebrew Tanach has remained perfectly preserved and intact, while in contrast, perhaps, the Greek Scriptures are nothing more than an amalgamation of manuscripts and manuscript fragments that have not been perfectly preserved or agree with one another. Suffice it to say, to believe that the Hebrew Tanach has remained perfectly preserved and intact, while the Greek Scriptures are nothing more than a proverbial mess, is not examining this with a fair scale.

If you have been exposed to textual criticism of the Bible, which involves not only dating manuscripts, but also dating when documents were composed, who their original author or authors were, where the documents were composed, and various literary factors—then you should know that the further we go back in time, **the less and less we know about the composition of a Biblical text.** While it is not uncommon to hear people criticize the Greek Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) in today's Messianic community, if the truth be known we cannot conclude—at least with accuracy—some things about the composition of the Hebrew Tanach itself. We do not know, for example, who compiled the prophecies of Isaiah or Ezekiel. While we accept these writings as canonical, Isaiah and Ezekiel certainly did not sit down and write out these prophecies in the form of a narrative. We do not know who wrote Judges, although we can probably assume that Israel's historians wrote it—but who were they? When it comes to the Torah itself, the author of Genesis never identifies himself. While the authorship is attributed to Moses via tradition, Moses does not say that he wrote it.

While this article is not intended to discuss the subject of textual criticism of the Bible, it is nevertheless important that you know a few things about the composition of the Tanach. First of all, even though the Hebrew Bible has been eloquently preserved by the Jewish scribes or *soferim* (סופרים)—it is exactly that—they have been preserved in a relatively homogenous and closed environment, whereas the Greek Scriptures have not. Secondly, to assume that the Hebrew Scriptures are without error or variance is simply not true. Emanuel Tov, textual critic at Hebrew University and author of the book *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, writes that “all editions of the Hebrew Bible, which actually are editions of א, go back to different medieval manuscripts of that tradition, or combinations of such manuscripts...there does not exist any one edition which agrees in all of its details with another, except for photographically reproduced editions based on the same electronic (computer encoded) text.”²⁵ If we cannot understand the fact that the current Hebrew text used in the Jewish community today originates from the Middle Ages, then one is bound to make **some poorly supported assumptions.**

This is not to say that this is a major problem. Tov is keen to note, “It should be remembered that the number of differences between the various editions is very small. Moreover, all of them concern minimal, often minute details of the text, and most affect the meaning of the text in only a very limited way.”²⁶ In spite of there being some differences in the

²⁵ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

Confronting Critical Issues

Hebrew texts of the Scriptures, most of them are minute and do not affect one's theology in any major ways. The same is actually true of the Greek texts of Scripture as well, as most of the textual variants deal with spelling or grammar, and a scribe wanting to add words like *Christos* or *Kurios* to a text, where only *Iēsous* (Jesus/Yeshua) is used.²⁷ Where variants do crop up in the Hebrew text of the Tanach, it is necessary for us to consult ancient translations like the Greek Septuagint (LXX), the canonical Scriptures of Hellenistic Jewry, or the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). While most Jewish Bible versions today only employ the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) for its English translation, Christian Bibles, on the other hand, do consider the witnesses of the LXX, DSS, Latin Vulgate, and other ancient versions in their English translations.

Many in the Messianic community are unaware of the fact that the Hebrew text used for the Tanach today is largely Medieval in origin. In fact, even fewer are aware of the fact that prior to the Babylonian exile of the Southern Kingdom, the Hebrew alphabet used was nothing like the block script that was used after the exile, and consequently also today. Tov indicates, "Originally, the biblical books were written in the 'early' Hebrew script which developed from proto-Canaanite script in the tenth or ninth centuries B.C.E....At some stage during the Second Temple period, a gradual transition occurred from the Hebrew to the Aramaic script, from which a script developed which is exclusive to the Jews and which could thus be called the 'Jewish script' (thus many scholars) or the 'square script' (according to the form of the letters). However, in many ancient texts (e.g., *b. Sanh.* 21b) it is called the 'Assyrian script' due to the fact that its ancestor, the Aramaic script, was in use in the Assyrian Empire. According to Talmudic tradition this script was introduced by Ezra."²⁸

The Talmud attests that during the time of Ezra the Jewish people began using the present Hebrew alphabet that is generally the same that we see used in Biblical documents today:

"And even though the Torah was not given through [Ezra], the script was changed through him" (*b.Sanhedrin* 21b-22a).²⁹

Sometime during the time of Ezra, the more "final" Hebrew text that was used during the time of Yeshua was compiled. Prior to the Babylonian exile, Hebrew texts were composed in a different script that is commonly referred to as "paleo-Hebrew" or the "Phoenician script" or the "Canaanite script." After this time, the Assyrian script, also commonly called the "Babylonian script" or "block script," was used. Ezra and his company of priests and scribes got the final "edit," if you will, on the authorized Hebrew Scriptures after the exile.

This begs many questions that often go unaddressed in the Messianic community, but frequent discussions among conservative Jewish and Christian theologians with liberal Jewish and Christian theologians. These questions often regard the authorship of the Torah or Pentateuch, and whether or not a single author put it together, or it was composed by multiple authors over many different centuries. To give you an idea about the wide variance of beliefs among theologians, on the extreme Right there are fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox and Chassidic Jews who believe that Moses wrote every single letter, if not every "jot and tittle" of the Torah. On the extreme Left there are liberal Jews and Christians who believe that Moses would have been uneducated and incapable of writing any of the Torah—that is, if Moses even existed. In the middle are conservative examiners who believe that the bulk of the Torah is Mosaic in origin, but that there have been some authoritative edits and redactions made since

²⁷ For a brief, yet adequate explanation of how manuscript differences appear in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, consult Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), pp 137-149.

²⁸ Tov, 218, 219.

²⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

Mount Sinai. Let us briefly review the two major positions that are adhered to surrounding the Torah's composition.

There are two points of view which are often espoused relating to the written origins of the Torah. Among fundamentalist Jews and Christians, it is believed that the written Torah that exists, Genesis-Deuteronomy, was entirely written by Moses himself, and has been preserved perfectly since the Ancient Israelites were in the wilderness. The exact opposite of this is that the Torah was compiled after the Babylonian exile, composed of the Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P) sources that had their own version of Israel's religion. This theory, commonly called the JEDP documentary hypothesis, advocates that Moses did not write the Torah, but rather that these writings are attributed to Moses and that the Torah as it exists today is entirely a product of the post-Babylonian exile and compiling these sources together. The majority in the Messianic movement believe that Moses wrote the entire Torah, whereas most in liberal Judaism and Christianity believe that Moses did not write it.

For the most part, conservatives believe that Moses wrote or compiled the first five books of Scripture, the Chumash or Pentateuch, himself. There are parenthetical phrases that were likely written at another date. Genesis 14:14 is a glaring example of this, however, appearing very early in the text, where Abraham pursues Lot's kidnappers "as far as Dan." This appears long before the Israelites enter into the Promised Land and ascribed geographical place names to where they settled. Some would say that since Moses was a prophet, he prophesied this into being. But that is doubtful given the fact that this is a place name, not an event, and is in no way given as a predictive prophecy. This was obviously a textual addition added at a later date to clarify for readers where Abraham actually pursued. It does not subtract from the value of the text, nor the event that occurred.

Another example is Numbers 12:3, which says, "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." In the NASB and NIV, the text actually appears in parenthesis (). Truly, if Moses did live as the most humble man on the face of the Earth, at least at the time of writing this, then Moses' being so humble would have prevented him from ever having written this. This likewise appears to be a textual addition to the Torah at a later date. In a similar vein, the final chapter of Deuteronomy details the death of Moses and how the Lord buried him. This is something that Moses could not have written about in such detail, but it does not immediately mean that it was many written centuries later, as liberal critics of the Bible often claim. The *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* details,

"Such scholars as R.D. Wilson, Merrill Unger, Douglas Young, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and R.K. Harrison easily accept that the final chapter of Deuteronomy was likely appended by Joshua or someone else in Moses' inner circle. This, in fact, supports the view of the continuity of the writing prophets, a theory that each successor prophet writes the last chapter of his predecessor's book. The addition of a chapter on Moses' funeral by another prophet is in accordance with the custom of the day in no sense takes away from the belief that Moses was the author of everything up to that final chapter."³⁰

There have been parenthetical additions to the Hebrew text of the Torah since the time of Moses. This does not subtract from the value of the text, the events that took place, and certainly not the message of the text. It also does not mean that Moses did not write or oversee the writing of a majority of the Torah, but it is to say that the Torah is not exclusively Mosaic in origin. The following is a summary of the standard conservative theological view regarding the Torah's composition, as provided by the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (or *ISBE*):

³⁰ "Pentateuch, Mosaic Authorship of," in Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 587.

Confronting Critical Issues

“Very few, if any, modern conservative scholars see the Pentateuch as a composition whose every word, oral and written, came from Moses. Such a position is hardly viable based upon the inner-biblical witnesses (e.g., Genesis, post-Mosaica) or upon ancient Near Eastern concepts of authorship...The pentateuchal issues to a great extent do center upon Moses, but his ‘authorship’ activity must be correctly defined...According to what we know about ancient Near Eastern literary composition, Moses could have written much of the material himself, but just as likely could have dictated much of it to scribes or he could have supervised the compositional process as numerous hands utilized various materials.”³¹

Conservative expositors do not believe that Moses wrote that he was the humblest man on Earth, or about his own death. These were statements added by either someone in his inner circle, perhaps one of the seventy elders, or Joshua who succeeded him.

With all of this understood, conservatives do widely believe that God in His sovereignty directed the Jewish scribes or *soferim* to preserve the Hebrew Scriptures to the best of their ability. But to say that they have preserved it 100% accurately would be to say that human beings cannot make any mistakes. Furthermore, it is notable that one of the significant reasons why we do not see substantial variances among Hebrew texts of the Tanach, versus Greek texts of the Apostolic Scriptures, is because scrolls of Scripture were often considered to be as “living beings” to members of the Jewish community. When Biblical documents and parchments decayed, they were often given a funeral, like any person, and buried. Because of this, older Torah scrolls and Biblical texts in Hebrew are no longer extant. This is sizably different than what would happen in Christian circles, where decaying Biblical texts would simply be deposited in a library or archive and kept for posterity.

One of the significant reasons why we do not see great variance among the Jewish sources of the Tanach is because older texts were removed from circulation. That is why the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 was so significant. And, while there is much continuity between the DSS and MT, there are differences between them as well. **Do not to fall into the trap of believing that the Hebrew Tanach has been perfectly preserved.** There are differences among Hebrew texts, and there have been changes to the Torah since the time of Moses. When it comes to the composition of the books of the Hebrew Tanach, there are too many questions that today’s Messianic community, at least at present, is unable or unprepared to answer.³² We will have to answer these questions in the days ahead, and hopefully such examination will make us theologically and spiritually stronger.

Myth #2

The entire New Testament was written in Hebrew.

The urban myth that the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) were entirely written in Hebrew has caused extreme damage to the theological credibility of the (broad) Messianic movement for any number of reasons—primarily that if this were true, these manuscripts are not extant.³³ Many people who contact our ministry have been exposed to this opinion in some form or another by a Messianic teacher, and/or someone talking loudly in their local congregation or fellowship. Some of these people want to know why our ministry *does not* believe that the New Testament was written in Hebrew, and others want to know where they can find material from a Messianic perspective that upholds the validity of the Scriptures as we

³¹ E.E. Carpenter, “Pentateuch,” in *ISBE*, 3:753.

³² This section includes embedded quotations from the author’s article “The Hebrew New Testament Misunderstanding.”

³³ Consult Chapter 1, “The Quest for Credibility.”

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

have them. Consequently, this is often not an easy issue to examine, and once again time and space prohibit us from examining this subject in detail. I will however, touch on the major points that are often not considered by "Hebrew New Testament" advocates in our ranks.

There are some serious historical factors working against advocates of a so-called "Hebrew New Testament" that many either do not take into consideration, choose to ignore, or choose not to report to those hearing their teachings. One of the major misunderstandings circulating is thinking that all Jews in the First Century lived in the Land of Israel and spoke Hebrew. *This is absolutely not true.* While it is true that many Jews did indeed live in Israel, and spoke either Hebrew or Aramaic as their primary language, the latter being a Semitic relative of Hebrew, we cannot separate the province of Judea from the Roman Empire it was part of. Likewise, we cannot forget the fact that many more Jews were living in the Diaspora and were Greek-speaking. These Jews are often identified in the Apostolic Scriptures as being "Hellenists" (Grk. sing *Hellēnistēs*, Ἑλληνιστής). F.F. Bruce describes them in greater detail in his book *New Testament History*, and how many of them became followers of Yeshua:

"This division between Hebrews and Hellenists was primarily linguistic and cultural, but probably it had theological implications too. The Hebrews were evidently Jews who habitually spoke Aramaic, whose homeland was [Israel] (or any other area where Aramaic-speaking Jews lived). The Hellenists, on the other hand, were Jews who spoke Greek...Many of them would belong to the Greek-speaking Diaspora, even if they resided in [Israel] for longer or shorter periods; but [Israel] had its native Greek-speaking Jews. If we ask when and how so many of these Hellenists were enrolled as disciples of Jesus, we may find the answer in Luke's narrative of the day of Pentecost, according to which Jews of the Diaspora formed a large, if not the main, part of Peter's audience."³⁴

No honest theologian is going to argue against the fact that Yeshua the Messiah spoke Hebrew and Aramaic in His daily affairs. No honest theologian is going to argue against the fact that He primarily spoke these languages when He gave His teachings recorded in the Gospels. However, we cannot automatically make broad assumptions such as Yeshua *only speaking Hebrew* when addressing individuals, or even groups of people. This idea simply does not align with history and what we know about First Century Judea or Galilee. There are instances in the Gospels, such as when He encounters the Roman centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, and especially Pontius Pilate, when the Lord would have spoken in Greek. S.E. Porter summarizes the widely encountered position in Biblical Studies regarding the spoken language of the Messiah:

"The vast majority of scholars rightly contend that Jesus' primary and first language was probably Aramaic...Many scholars also entertain the possibility that, at least in a religious context...Jesus may have spoken Hebrew as well...Jesus was also involved in a trade where it is reasonable to assume that he would have had contact with others than his townspeople, possibly including Romans or others who spoke Greek. In the course of his itinerant ministry, Jesus also traveled to various parts of [Israel] where he may have had contact with Greek speakers."³⁵

Many in the Messianic community, perhaps because much of the dialogue one encounters in the Gospels was originally spoken in Hebrew or Aramaic, conclude that the written Greek of the Gospels does not accurately reflect the "true sayings" of Yeshua. But before making hasty judgments, there are several factors that are not often considered. First of all, the Gospels were

³⁴ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), pp 217-218.

³⁵ S.E. Porter, "Greek of the New Testament," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 433.

Confronting Critical Issues

not composed during the ministry time of Yeshua. The events were not “written down” as they occurred. Secondly, the target audiences of the Gospels were in the Greek-speaking Diaspora. And third, we have to remember that a thoroughly Jewish style of Greek existed with the production of the Septuagint. The same kind of grammar and sentence construction that we see in the Gospels, mirrors much of that of the LXX. Furthermore, to assume that Yeshua *exclusively spoke Hebrew or Aramaic* in His recorded interactions is simply not historically viable.

One of the major claims that Hebrew New Testament advocates make is that the Apostolic Scriptures, particularly the Gospels, are full of First Century Hebrew idioms. It is claimed that these idioms cannot be accurately translated, and thus they reflect that the Gospels were originally written in Hebrew. **Many Christian scholars agree that there are colloquial expressions or Hebraisms (also called Semitisms) unique to the First Century present in the Gospels.** These include terms like “good eye” or “bad eye” and what they meant to their Jewish audience. However, many Hebrew New Testament advocates will say that these terms and expressions are unknown to the world of Christian scholasticism, and that God has perhaps only now revealed these things *to them*. This is likewise false. One almost universally recognized Hebraism among theologians appears in Matthew 16:19, where Yeshua speaks about “binding” and “loosing”:

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, **and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.**”

This expression actually has its own entry under “Binding and Loosing” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (or *ABD*). Raymond F. Collins states the following, reflecting a strong grasp on the unique Jewish character of this phrase:

“Matthew introduces ‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ in his gospel without further explanation, thereby suggesting that the practice to which these expression refer was known to his community. Since Josephus writes of the Pharisees’ power to loose and bind (*luein kai desmein*; JW 1 § 111), it is likely that the primary interpretive analogue is to be sought within contemporary rabbinic practice. Within Matthew’s community the Scriptures were midrashically interpreted (e.g., Matt 1:22) and appropriate *halakah* was established (e.g., Matt 5:21-48). Thus it is probable that the practice to which the Matthean ‘binding and loosing’ refers is the interpretation of the Scriptures and the determination of an appropriate Christian way of life.”³⁶

Of course, in order to properly understand what is written in Matthew’s Gospel as “bind” (Grk. verb *deō*, δέω) and “loose” (Grk. verb *luō*, λύω), one must be familiar with First Century Jewish history. Josephus, specifically referenced here, writes about the reign of Alexandra, a queen who ruled over the Jewish people several generations before Yeshua, and her involvement with the Pharisees:

“Now, Alexandra hearkened to them to an extraordinary degree, as being herself a woman of great piety towards God. But these Pharisees artfully insinuated themselves into her favor little by little, and became themselves the real administrators of the public affairs; they banished and reduced whom they pleased; they bound and loosed [men] at their pleasure” (*Wars of the Jews* 1.111).³⁷

³⁶ Raymond F. Collins, “Binding and Loosing,” in David Noel Freedman, ed. et. al., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:744.

³⁷ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 551.

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

Interestingly enough, William Whiston, translator of this edition of Josephus' works, indicates in a footnote that "Here we have the oldest and most authentic Jewish exposition of binding and loosing, for punishing or absolving men; not for declaring actions lawful or unlawful, as some more modern Jews and Christians vainly pretend,"³⁸ referencing Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. More might be in play in terms of what "binding and loosing" meant in an ancient context, beyond how Yeshua applied it. What is important for our purposes here that Whiston identifies it as an Hebraism that is used in later works, namely the Gospel of Matthew.

In the Greek text of Matthew, this phrase was obviously written literally as "binding and loosing," and should have been understood by Matthew's target audience as relating to determining the *halachah* or religious orthopraxy of a community. The only way that this phrase can be possibly understood—that is if one is unfamiliar with the terminology "binding and loosing"—is knowing the history behind it. Translation *into any language* will not help too much.

There are many more widely recognized Hebraisms in the Gospels by Christian scholars today, and they are discussed in many technical commentaries of Biblical books. However, simply because there are Hebraisms in the Gospels or the Apostolic Scriptures does not prove that these texts were originally written in Hebrew. **It proves that they have an Hebraic background, and that one must be familiar with the history of Biblical times in examining the text.** Likewise, some things that appear to be Hebraisms may not be. R. Timothy McLay explains, "what might be explained as a *Semitism* in the NT, whether an *Aramaism* or a *Hebraism*, might just as easily be due to the prior influence of the Greek Jewish Scriptures on the style and language of the writer (*Septuagintism*)." ³⁹ He further states, "An appreciation for the ways in which the LXX translators rendered the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language is also necessary for our exegesis of the NT because of the NT writers' use of the Scriptures."⁴⁰ This only intensifies the need for Messianic Bible teachers and students to be familiar with the Septuagint.

David Allan Black adds to this, "it is possible that the New Testament writers incorporated oral or written sources that were translations of Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek that contained Semitisms in proportion to the literalness of the translation. Thus, it would be surprising if speakers whose linguistic background was Semitic did not betray some Semitic influence in their use of Greek."⁴¹ Of course, the principal Hebrew and Aramaic resources employed by the Apostolic writers were the Tanach Scriptures.

In examining the origin of the Apostolic Scriptures, there are many factors that have to be taken into consideration that are often *never discussed* by proponents of an original "Hebrew New Testament." Can we prove on a book-by-book basis that the whole of the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew? While there may be a substantial amount of rhetoric that brazenly assumes "The *B'rit Chadashah* was written in Hebrew!" floating around the Messianic community, is it borne out in the historical record? One advocate of an original "Hebrew New Testament" confidently states,

"Many Biblical scholars now agree that many of the New Testament books were originally written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek. This means that our English copies of the New Testament are really translations of translations..."⁴²

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 551-552.

³⁹ R. Timothy McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴¹ David Allan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 151.

⁴² Dean and Susan Wheelock, *The Quiet Revival* (Hebrew Roots Press: Lakewood, WI, 2001), 12.

Confronting Critical Issues

Of course, any critical thinker has to ask: *What books?* and *Which scholars?* This advocate of an original “Hebrew New Testament” provides no such evidence, and has likely not done any book-by-book analysis of the Apostolic Scriptures to see if such an assessment is truly valid. On the contrary to what anyone advocating a Hebrew New Testament might believe, the majority of the scholastic community—especially those involved in Jewish New Testament studies—does not believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew. At the very most, what is advocated is that the Apostolic writers incorporated Hebrew and Aramaic sources into their Greek compositions. The foremost of these sources was the Hebrew Tanach. Another possible source was Q, an abbreviation for the German word *Quelle* or “source.” This is a theoretical Hebrew or Aramaic document that was believed to have existed and had a basic compilation of some of the original sayings of Yeshua the Messiah, and/or notes of what went on during His ministry with the Disciples. Beyond this, it is agreed that much of the dialogue present in the Gospels was orally communicated in Hebrew or Aramaic, but was later transcribed in Greek.

As a conservative Messianic ministry, Outreach Israel and Messianic Apologetics have had to field the question “Do you believe the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew?” many, many times. Each time we have been asked this question we have answered a resounding: “No!” The principal reason we believe this has not necessarily been because we believe that God can inspire His Word in languages other than Hebrew—even though that is an important reason—but because it is not historically valid. **We primarily believe this because we have examined the composition data of each book of the Apostolic Scriptures to determine whether or not an individual text could have been written in Hebrew.** Every time we have examined a text, a written Greek origin seems inevitable. This is not to say that Hebrew sources or Hebraic understandings are not employed in a text, but the written language of a text cannot be Hebrew.

There are four critical factors that must be considered when examining the origin of the Apostolic Scriptures, to determine in what language a text was originally composed:

- **Date:** When was the text written?
- **Author:** Who was the author of the text?
- **Author’s location:** Where was the author when composing the text?
- **Audience and audience’s location:** Who was the target or recipient audience of a text? Where were they geographically located?

We have never been able to find anyone in the Messianic movement advocating an original “Hebrew New Testament,” who examines texts of the Apostolic Scriptures on these ever-critical, historical factors. The reason we have likely never seen this is that these factors will prove time and time again that the written language of the Apostolic Scriptures was Greek.⁴³ This is one urban myth that is going to seriously cripple the growth and maturation of the Messianic movement if it is not discarded in the forthcoming future.

Myth #1

Keeping the Torah will bring me eternal salvation.

Our last and most substantial urban myth to be contended with is unfortunately not one that can be easily dealt with theologically, as it largely pertains to one’s relationship with God and his or her spirituality. Yet, there are some serious theological considerations that need to be made in regard to the widely unspoken statement, “Keeping the Torah will bring me eternal salvation.” These concern our initial coming to faith in Yeshua and how we are to be

⁴³ This section includes embedded quotations from the author’s article “The Hebrew New Testament Misunderstanding.”

The Top Ten Urban Myths of Today's Messianic Movement

progressing in that faith. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the righteousness that we are to have present in our lives is to originate with God via His Son Yeshua, and that it does not originate from the Torah:

“But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Yeshua the Messiah [*or, the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah*]⁴⁴ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Messiah Yeshua; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say,* of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Yeshua” (Romans 3:21-26).

The righteousness that is brought to Believers via their faith in Yeshua is “quite apart from *Torah*” (CJB), “although the law and the prophets bear witness to it” (RSV). As Paul also stated, he desired to have a righteousness “which is through faith in Messiah [*or, the faithfulness of Messiah*]⁴⁵, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9).

The concept of “righteousness” or “justification” has many important facets, ranging from one’s right status with God, God’s vindication of justice in the sinful world, the high standard of God as evidenced in His Word, and even inclusion and membership among God’s covenant people. In these passages, though, it primarily concerns one’s right status with God—something that is to only be accomplished through faith in Yeshua *and* a recognition of what He has accomplished for sinful humanity via His sacrifice. This does not mean that the Torah does not testify to this righteousness, nor that the ethos of the Torah does not play a role in this righteousness—just that the source of the righteousness is not the Torah. The Source of our right standing before our Heavenly Father **must be Yeshua the Messiah**. Only faith in Him and what He has done for us, can justify us and remit us of our sins.

A life of faithful obedience to God *should follow* a true salvation experience as He transforms us via the power of His Holy Spirit. The Torah, having revealed our sinful nature and taking us to the feet of the cross, should then have its commandments written on our hearts as the Lord enacts the New Covenant in our lives (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27; cf. Hebrews 8:7-13; 10:14-18).⁴⁶ A true Torah observance comes as we are continually oriented toward God in all our behavior, and should empower us to be men and women who are able to serve Him in a sinful world.

In too many Messianic environs, these concepts are not emphasized. All too often, Torah observance for the sake of Torah observance is what is emphasized—with sometimes Yeshua the Messiah and His transforming power being a distant afterthought. Some are admittedly confused about the relationship of our justification before God, and the relationship of good works to salvation. Good works are imperative for salvation—but they are not the cause of salvation. Good works are to come as the result of salvation, and are embodied in the Torah’s commandments. Furthermore, the Torah’s commandments do not just contain important

⁴⁴ Grk. *pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

⁴⁵ Grk. *pisteōs Christou* (πίστεως Χριστοῦ).

The language issues regarding whether the genitive (case indicating possession) clauses in Romans 3:22 and Philippians 3:9 are objective or subjective, are considered in the author’s article “The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah” (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

⁴⁶ Consult the author’s article “What Is the New Covenant?” for a further discussion on these, and related passages (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

Confronting Critical Issues

precepts about *Shabbat*, the appointed times, or kosher dietary laws—they also contain important precepts about our ethics and morality.

How we will gain a proper perspective of the Torah in relationship to our salvation is not an easy subject at the present time. The witness of the Apostolic Scriptures is decidedly against anyone thinking that keeping its commandments will result in eternal salvation.⁴⁷ Likewise, the Apostolic Scriptures are clear on our need to be manifesting spiritual fruit and to live responsibly—according to a righteousness plainly testified by the Torah and Prophets. How we maintain a proper balance between faith in Yeshua and Torah obedience is something that each one of us must strive to do in our lives. With the power of God’s Holy Spirit I believe we can do this, and disprove the claim—whether spoken internally or made externally—that Messianics are trying to keep the Torah to earn their salvation.⁴⁸

What are we to do?

Having just examined some of the urban myths present in today’s Messianic movement, what are we to do? *There are surely other urban myths and legends that I could have talked about, but this article should give you enough to think on and contemplate (and perhaps even reevaluate).*

Are there answers to the problems that we are experiencing as a faith community? I believe that there are answers to these problems, and that as men and women empowered by the Lord we can offer not just solutions—***but solutions that will enable the Messianic movement to make a difference in our world!*** As Paul says, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained” (Philippians 3:14-16). We are to continue to press forward in our journey of faith—recognizing the high calling that God has given us—and live faithfully in obedience to Him.

The perfection of a Believer is a major theme of the Holy Scriptures. It is something that is to take place following our salvation, as we submit ourselves daily to prayer, to Bible study, and to concentration on the will of God in our lives. Perfection is enacted when we grow in our faith, becoming more mature, and we are able to deal with the complex issues of life, the Bible, and even theology in a better way. I believe that in spite of the problems I have just discussed, the Lord will use our reexamination of these things to fine tune us and make the emerging Messianic movement stronger and more able to be used by Him in the days ahead.

We have some opportunities ahead of us to move beyond the error in our midst and move toward greater maturity. We have the opportunity to present ourselves as spiritually mature people who recognize that things are not as simplistic as we might want them to be. We will hopefully have the opportunity to come into our own and be those who respond to the challenges of the day.

These things will not be accomplished easily. There will be conflict and tension along the way. There will be uneasiness. Some will back away from the Messianic movement, and others will be drawn toward it. But the responsibility rests with us. Are we going to enter into this next period of our development eager to be transformed by God, and able to implement any necessary changes? I hope that regardless of what happens corporately, individually our faith in Yeshua will be strengthened and enhanced. I pray that we will be able to reflect who He is in a world that has largely rejected Him, and that we will be able to make a difference.

⁴⁷ Consult the FAQ, “Leviticus 18:5.”

⁴⁸ Consult the author’s book *Torah In the Balance, Volume I* for a discussion on this, and other related issues.