

Adding to Torah?

BLOGCAST

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Why do we see a great number of Jewish traditions practiced in today's Messianic community. Would they not be in direct violation of Torah, and actually be seen to add to Torah?

Many in today's Messianic community—Messianic Jewish Believers *and* non-Jewish Believers—rightly look to the example of the Jewish people for insight into following God's Torah. This is good, because Judaism indeed has much valuable insight and understanding concerning God's commandments.¹ Yet, while not rejecting the validity of the Torah—unlike much of Christianity—the Jewish people have placed a fence around many of the commandments. The Mishnah asserts, for example, “Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah” (m.*Avot* 1:1).² The Pharisees, Sages, and other Rabbis have added customs and traditions that have enhanced the keeping of God's commandments, *but* then various others that have skewed or negated some. The most significant and grievous mistake is that most Jews, unfortunately, have rejected Yeshua the Messiah as the Eternal Savior.

When looking to Judaism for spiritual insight, *every Messianic Believer* must use some degree of discernment and caution. The Jewish people have accumulated over two millennia of study, obedience, and communal experience surrounding the Torah. **To reject all Jewish interpretations and insight is wrong.** Jewish perspectives on the Tanach Scriptures are surely considered and consulted in Biblical Studies, along with Christian perspectives, when a viable interpretation is needed. This is even more true of areas of Torah instruction that have been largely kept by Judaism, and largely ignored by Christianity, throughout the centuries.

While Jewish perspectives and traditions should not be considered authoritative *as Scripture*, recognizing that they have a **consultative authority** for the Messianic community is something that will do far more to bring God's people together than keep them apart. *Learning how to do this*, though, *is an absolute art and science*. Unfortunately, a significant number within today's widely independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement (especially in Two-House sub-movement!)³ are not at all up to this task, and lack the proper abilities, skills, and temperament to do so. And, a number of people in Messianic Judaism have been caught advocating that Rabbinical authority be pretty much blindly followed. **Extremes and fundamentalist approaches have to be steadfastly avoided!**

Why do many non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic community think that they can just widely cast aside the Pharisees, associated Jewish literature from the Biblical period,⁴ and flat reject a majority of Jewish interpretations and applications of the Torah?

Much of what one encounters in the rejection of the Pharisees and mainline Jewish tradition, in the independent sectors “out there,” is a great deal of significance given to a passage of the Torah like Deuteronomy 4:2. Within this verse, Moses told the Ancient Israelites, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (NASU). The primary emphasis of this commandment, more than anything else, is that God Himself was the only One who could tell the community of Israel what to do and not to do. This was most serious given the overall message of Deuteronomy opposing idolatry and sexual immorality in the Promised Land, which the people were preparing to enter.⁵ Yet, a noticeable number of individuals within the independent Messianic/Hebrew Roots movement, also think that Deuteronomy 4:2 quantitatively rules out *any* Jewish tradition from being recognized as a legitimate expression of Torah observance, to be followed by (any of) God's people.

However, if we were to hold to a strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:2, then this likely means that when situations arise which require the faith community to make judgments on various issues or circumstances which are not directly or indirectly addressed in the Torah, or any part of Scripture, that *any decision* could possibly be acceptable. In the

¹ It should be observed, in total fairness, that the two main Protestant strands of Calvinism and Wesleyanism, which have always viewed the so-called “moral law” of the Torah as valid instruction for Christians to follow—surely also have much to teach and guide today's Messianic Believers.

Consult the relevant sections of the editor's book *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

² Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and trans., *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press, 1993), 1.

³ Consult the chapter “Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement,” along with a number of specific examples, appearing in the book *Israel in Future Prophecy* by J.K. McKee.

⁴ For an excellent example of where contemporary Messianic people can certainly benefit from such extra-Biblical literature, be sure to consider *Sayings of the Fathers: A Messianic Perspective on Pirkei Avot* by William Mark Huey.

⁵ Consult the article “The Message of Deuteronomy” by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Fall Holiday Helper*.

Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement today, this has led to many interpretations of the Torah that are foreign to mainline Judaism, and can be quite offensive to Jewish people. It can lead to everyone doing what he or she feels is right (cf. Judges 17:6; 21:25), with confusion about what to do often abounding. (Even various evangelical Christians on the outside wonder about what they witness.)

It can be irresponsible to strongly assert that traditions are not at all commanded by God, when the Torah itself later says that if a matter arises within Israel, that His people are to follow the rulings of the priests and judges whom He has recognized as occupying positions of authority. **Deuteronomy 17:8-11** would have been a major place in the Torah that the ancient Pharisees of **Matthew 23:2-3** would have based their office of leadership:

“If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses. So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is *in office* in those days, and you shall inquire *of them* and they will declare to you the verdict in the case. You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the LORD chooses; **and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you. According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left**” (NASU).

The clause of interest is *al-pi ha'Torah*, “According to the tenor of the law” (YLT),⁶ which is given to those needing a definite judgment issued regarding a matter.

Some would make the argument that *every Rabbinical ruling* made, or *almost every ruling* made, in Orthodox Judaism today needs to be followed by the Messianic community at large—but this definitely goes too far. At the same time, though, Deuteronomy 17:11 does give a berth of authority to those in Jewish religious leadership which needs to be considered—with what could be regarded as a **consultative authority**. Many within today’s Messianic Judaism believe that its Torah observance should parallel the major *halachic* matters which bind the broad Jewish community together (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform). This would include those areas of when it celebrates the appointed times (including *Chanukah* and *Purim*), how people would generally dress in a congregational environment, how people generally eat kosher, and other traditions which are beneficial to the broad community at large. Of course, there is certainly internal variance witnessed in Messianic Judaism, just as there is variance among various Jewish sects today.

If a person in the Hebrew Roots movement has never been exposed to Messianic Judaism, or if someone is naturally predisposed to “do his own thing” (or even worse, “buck the {proverbial} system”) and not respect any established order, then it should not be surprising to see a strong impetus to develop applications of the Torah that are (absolutely) foreign to mainstream Judaism (or at least Reform and Conservative Judaism). For many complicated reasons, both psychological and spiritual, outward un-conformity is something easily discerned within much of the independent Messianic world “out there.”

The instruction in Deuteronomy 17:11 is that God’s people are to, “According to the teaching that they will teach you and according to the judgment that they will say to you, shall you do; you shall not deviate from the word that they will tell you, right or left” (ATS). We should not all believe that what is implied here is a blind obedience to the ancient rulings left by all of the Sages and Rabbis of Judaism. Messianic Believers have to ultimately evaluate their rulings against the canonical Word of God—and via the impetus of the Holy Spirit—to see if something aligns with the ethos or general tenor of Scripture, as most major rulings relate to ethical value judgments which the written Scriptures may not directly address. With all things, we have to see whether it parallels God’s written Word, and enhances our relationship and walk with Yeshua. There are clearly things that have come down through history that can deter our walk with Him, but then there are many things which can surely enhance it. ***Each of us must use proper discernment and consideration—in our appeal to God for His Divine will.***

What is perhaps most important more than anything else is that the rulings anticipated by Deuteronomy 17:8-11 have to often be made by recognized, qualified spiritual leaders of the community of faith at large. The Torah is designed to be lived out in a community, as opposed to an exclusive “one-on-one” basis between oneself and God. A prime example of this witnessed today is that when you see kosher-for-Passover food items, they often say “consult your rabbi” on the packaging. This indicates in some way that there is debate over whether or not an item is kosher for Passover, and that the ultimate determination should go to your local rabbi, who can evaluate what your personal or family circumstances are.

This can be a difficult concept for many non-Jewish Messianics, who come from evangelical Christian backgrounds, to accept, because many are often not used to their pastor making “rulings” on what Believers should do or not do concerning God’s commandments. Many non-Jewish Believers are taught in church that our relationship with God is just between us and Him. While this is *ultimately* true, each of us is also in corporate, covenant association with other members of the faith community. Just like many probably went to a pastor for spiritual guidance, prayer, counseling, or just help regarding an issue, and took his advice and followed it, so can the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis apply. Just as many of us would expect an evangelical Christian pastor to be anointed by the Lord, and for his words to carry authoritative weight, so can the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis.

Of course, as with all things, we should never follow the opinions of a Christian pastor blindly, nor should we ever follow the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis blindly, either. We have to test everything against God’s Word, to make sure that it

⁶ “according to the mouth of the law” (LITV); “According to the sentence of the law” (KJV).

aligns with the character of our Heavenly Father, and we have to see if it is something that enhances our walk with Him, rather than takes us away from Him. More than anything else, ***we have to deal with things on a case-by-case basis***, and recognize the fact that there is a great deal of “grey” when it comes to interpretation and application. In today’s emerging Messianic community, hopefully we can find a proper balance between Scripture and tradition, where neither is considered unimportant. We should also pray to have good local Messianic leaders be raised up by the Lord, who can issue sound decisions for their own communities and the issues they face (cf. Matthew 16:19). Per the issues surrounding Matthew 23:2-3, the Pharisees are deserving of a little more respect than they might have at present.