

PaRDeS

Can you explain to me the four levels of Hebraic Scripture interpretation?

While it is quite commonplace in many sectors of the broad Messianic community, to hear about PaRDeS—also referred to as something like the “four levels of Hebraic Scripture interpretation”—few Messianic people are likely to know what the origins of the PaRDeS hermeneutic actually are. The term *pardes* (פַּרְדֵּיִס) itself is a loan word from Persian, meaning “*enclosure, park, pleasure garden*” (Jastrow).¹ When one encounters the term PaRDeS used as a method for interpreting the Tanach Scriptures, it represents an acronym for: *p’shat*, *drash*, *remez*, and *sod*.

Within many sectors of today’s Messianic movement, it is frequently thought that the PaRDeS hermeneutic of interpreting the Tanach Scriptures, is something which was present in the Jewish world of the First Century, making it something that was probably used by Yeshua and the Apostles.² When a minimum amount of investigation is conducted, one finds that the PaRDeS method of interpreting and applying the Tanach Scriptures is actually something that does not at all date from the broad Biblical period, or that of its secondary, tertiary, and quartary literature. The PaRDeS hermeneutic, in fact, originated directly out of Medieval Jewish mysticism, from the Thirteenth Century C.E.

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

Essential Judaism: “The medieval commentators recognized and practiced four principal methods of interpretation: *peshat*, the ‘plain sense’ meaning of a passage; *derash*, the homiletical meaning (from which the word *midrash*) is derived; *remez*, the allusive meaning; and *sod*, the hidden, mystical meaning. Taken together, they form the acronym *PaRDeS*, actually a word of Persian origin meaning an area surrounded by a fence, used in the Talmud to mean an orchard or garden...”³

Jewish Study Bible: “*pardes* a Late Biblical Hebrew word borrowed from Persian, meaning ‘park, garden, orchard.’ It was later employed as an acronym for the four levels of meaning in Scripture according to the *Zohar*: *peshat* (contextual sense), *remez* (allegorical sense), *derash* (homiletical sense), and *sod* (mystical sense).”⁴

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

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

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

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

¹ Jastrow, 1216.

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

³ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), 303.

⁴ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, NJPS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2136.

“*Sod* (secret, esoteric, or mystical interpretation, emphasized by the kabbalists).”⁵

Encyclopaedia Judaica: “[I]n the Middle Ages the word *pardes* was used as a mnemonic for the four types of biblical exegesis, an acronym of *peshat* (‘the literal meaning’), *remez* (‘hint,’ i.e., veiled allusions such as *gematria*, and *notarikon*), *derash* (‘homiletical interpretation’), and *sod* (‘mystery,’ i.e., the esoteric interpretation), the word being made up of the initial letters of these words. For the meaning of the word in mysticism, see *Kabbalah*.”⁶

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

PaRDeS was not present in the world of Second Temple Judaism, as is easily attested by history, and nor was it present in the formative centuries of Rabbinical Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. Jacob Neusner’s book, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbinic Midrash* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), summarizes how the midrashic style of Tanach interpretation was present within the Biblical world of Yeshua and in the centuries following, as evidenced in a wide array of Jewish literary sources, especially the Midrashim. Yet, nowhere in Neusner’s analysis is the PaRDeS hermeneutic referenced, and any entry on PaRDeS is also conspicuously absent from the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

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

“The *peshat*...which was taken to include the corpus of talmudic law as well, was only the Torah’s outermost aspect, the ‘husk’ that first met the eye of the reader. The other layers revealed themselves only to that more penetrating and latitudinous power of insight which was able to discover in the Torah general truths that were in no way dependent on their immediate literal context. Only on the level of *sod* did the Torah become a body of mystical symbols which unveiled the hidden life-processes of the Godhead and their connections with human life” (*EJ*).⁷

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

“There are four levels of interpretation of the Torah: the simple literal level [*peshat*], hints [*remez*], Midrashic interpretation [*derash*] and mystical secrets [*sod*]. The ‘simple literal level’ relates to the vital-soul [*nefesh*]; ‘hints’ relate to the spirit [*ruach*]; ‘Midrashic interpretation’ relates to the higher soul [*neshamah*]; and ‘mystical secrets’ relate to the soul of the soul [*neshamah* of the *neshamah*]. A person first of all needs to become involved with the simple literal level of the Torah, to keep and to establish this, so that he purifies his vital-soul and merits reaching the level of the spirit. The principal part and the foundation is the simple literal level of the Torah, for as long as a person has not purified his vital-soul in a fitting manner through the simple literal level of interpretation of the Torah, he is not able to become involved with the inner meaning of the Torah. For this would be dangerous for him.”⁸

It has to be recognized that the main issue of contention, regarding the PaRDeS hermeneutic, is not so much being aware that there are different vantage points of interpreting Scripture. Literal, allegorical, and homeletical methods of interpreting the Tanach Scriptures are actually present within the Bible itself. In Galatians 4:21-31, the Apostle Paul uses the example of Hagar and Isaac, and says, “This is allegorically speaking” (Galatians 4:24) or

⁵ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 495; cf. *JPS Guide: The Jewish Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 108.

⁶ Editorial Staff *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, “Pardes,” in *EJ*.

⁷ Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah [J. mysticism],” in *EJ*.

⁸ Alan Unterman, ed. and trans., *The Kabbalistic Tradition: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 39.

“These things may be taken figuratively” (NIV).⁹ The main problem with PaRDeS, aside from the fact that it originated in a much later time period—outside that of Yeshua and the Apostles—is its insistence that one must get to the so-called *sod* level to be “really spiritual.” Such a *sod* level, though, forms the basis of the Jewish Kabbalah.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Further the PaRDeS schema undermines all sound hermeneutics, and divests the text of its literary meaning. Since the Pashat is considered to be the ‘surface’ or plain sense, this is considered less than significant for the true *chagam* or Sage. It is only when one arrives at the *sod*, the mysterious and mystical sense found through subjective criteria, that the text gives up its treasures. Such an approach simply combines a full-blown mysticism with a kind of ‘sensus plenior,’ leaving the text entirely manipulated by the interpreter, and thus unable accurately to bear the author’s meaning. Such a hermeneutic should be avoided at all costs.”¹⁰

⁹ The Greek verb *allēgoreō* (ἀλληγορέω) is employed in Galatians 4:24. The CJB renders this with, “to make a *midrash* on these things.”

¹⁰ Tim Hegg, *Interpreting the Bible: An Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Tacoma: TorahResource, 2000), 90.

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

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