

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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Easter: Do you celebrate Easter?

Easter is a non-Biblical holiday that is not listed among the appointed times that God gave to His people in Leviticus 23. Because Easter is not listed as a holiday that has been ordained by the Lord, we do not celebrate it. The majority in the Messianic movement do not celebrate Easter because it is something that He has not commanded us to do.

Many sincere Christians today observe Easter because in their minds they believe they are commemorating the resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah. We believe that the resurrection of our Lord and Savior is something that is certainly worthy of commemoration, but is “Easter” the proper time to do it? The name “Easter,” for example, has absolutely no connection to the resurrection, and the customs and traditions that have become commonly associated with it, namely the Easter Bunny and egg hunts, have nothing to do with commemorating what the Lord has done for us by His atoning work at Golgotha (Calvary), and instead stem from Babylonian fertility rites. If we are to truly commemorate Yeshua’s sacrifice and resurrection for us, then we believe that it should be done as part of our celebrating the Spring festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread.

There are Messianics who unfairly criticize and condemn our Christian brethren who celebrate Easter in ignorance, who sincerely believe that they are honoring the Lord. We believe that this is inappropriate, and that it is our responsibility to show them the right way to do things from the Scriptures, yet while remembering that while many of us were still in mainstream Christianity we celebrated Easter with similar intentions. Believing in ignorance that we were celebrating Yeshua’s death, burial, and resurrection, the Lord in His mercy honored us for what we did. We have to extend that same mercy to our brothers and sisters who do not celebrate His appointed times, so that the Holy Spirit might convict them about what they should truly be doing from the Word.

Consult the editor’s article “[What is the Problem With Easter?](#)” for a further discussion of this issue.

updated 23 October, 2006

Ecclesiastes, Book of: What can you tell me about the composition of the Book of Ecclesiastes?

Approximate date: 900s B.C.E. (Right); 900s B.C.E. for composition of source material, 715-686 B.C.E. for redactions (conservative-moderate); 500s-300s B.C.E. (Left)

Author: Solomon (Right, some conservative-moderate); “Qohelet” (some conservative-moderate, Left)

Location of author(s): Land of Israel or Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel, Jerusalem, and/or Babylon (Left)

Target audience and their location: people of Israel, later people of Judah (Right, conservative-moderate); Southern Kingdom returning or returned from Babylon (Left)

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of several important wisdom texts in the Hebrew Tanach. Its Hebrew title, *Qohelet* (קֹהֵלֶת), is derived from the term *qahal* (קָהָל) or assembly, with its author understood as some kind of officer of an assembly. Its Greek Septuagint title is *Ekklesiastēs* (ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΗΣ), derived from the equivalent *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) for *qahal*. The designated speaker in Ecclesiastes is Qohelet, which some prefer to render as “Teacher” (NIV, NRSV) or “Preacher” (NASU), because they are unsure what else to render it as (*ABD*, 2:271-272). Jerome interpreted it in his Latin Vulgate as *concionator*, a speaker before the assembly (Harrison, 1072). Ecclesiastes is placed among the Wisdom books in Christian tradition, but in Jewish tradition is part of the five *Megillot* of the Writings.

Ecclesiastes is generally a text that is consulted when considering the frailties of human existence, and also the reality of death. There are mixed interpretations and views of Ecclesiastes from both Jewish and Christian readers. Some believe that it is an important text with an important message, and others consider it to be pessimistic and full of inconsistencies.

The text of Ecclesiastes is strictly anonymous from internal first person references, although there are several important propositions concerning its authorship—which notably conservatives are not agreed upon.

Jewish tradition widely espouses Solomonic authorship to Ecclesiastes (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1605), although some Talmudic tradition indicates that Ecclesiastes was preserved by the men of Hezekiah (b.*Bava Batra* 14b-15a). Many presume that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes based on some internal remarks (1:1, 12, 16; 2:4-9; 7:26-29; 12:9), notably making light of the author's wisdom, interest in proverbs, and building projects (*NIDB*, 290; *EXP*, 5:1140). It is believed that Solomon is reflecting on the negative actions of his life in his twilight years. Those who accept Solomonic authorship date the text to sometime in the 900s B.C.E., perhaps 940 B.C.E.

A significant number of conservatives (including the editor) seriously doubt Solomonic authorship. The writer is strictly known as Qohelet in Ecclesiastes (Harrison, 1074-1075; Dillard and Longman, 249) and Solomon is not at all mentioned by name. The same verses that are often used to point to Solomonic authorship are also used as being against it: “The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem...I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem” (1:1, 12). Must we assume that “son of David” means that Qohelet is the immediate son of David, or could he also be his descendant? Note that Qohelet later says, “I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me” (1:16). If Qohelet is Solomon, then the “all” who were ruling Jerusalem before him were just David, and not a plural line of kings from the Davidic line as is implied.

Conservatives who doubt Solomonic authorship often do so because “so much profound and godly wisdom originates with a man who eventually apostasized” (Dillard and Longman, 248), as Solomon is not often an example of great piety to consider in Scripture. Many conservatives instead advocate that a later monarch of the Southern Kingdom—yet of the Davidic line—was responsible for Ecclesiastes (*NIDB*, 290). Note that the time represented throughout Ecclesiastes does not conform well to Solomon's reign as it is replete with hardship and difficulty for Israel (Harrison, 1074). But this does not mean that much of Ecclesiastes' valid wisdom is not Solomonic in origin, having been passed down in the royal court of Judah (*ISBE*, 2:13). Some would suggest that the second wise man seen in Ecclesiastes is the actual author (Dillard and Longman, 250).

Those who doubt Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes also point to a later and more refined style of Hebrew that is used in its composition (Harrison, 1074-1075; *ISBE*, 2:13; *EXP*, 5:1141), one that is replete with Aramaisms (*ABD*, 2:274-275) and borrowed Persian words (*EDB*, 367). There is, however, renewed debate over whether or not the Hebrew style is really that late, with some proposing that Solomon employed a scribe with a unique style to write his treatise (*EXP*, 5:1142). Even though there are many conservatives who doubt Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes, they do not doubt the importance of the text.

Liberal theologians deny any Solomonic involvement whatsoever with Ecclesiastes. They propose that Ecclesiastes was written sometime around the Maccabean era of the 200s B.C.E., considering its author to be a Jewish sage “schooled in the wisdom tradition and affected by the spirit...of Greek philosophy” (*IDB*, 2:7; cf. Harrison, 1075-1076). Liberals assume that the author speaks as a pseudonym for Solomon, but nothing more. Some Jewish liberals are a little more reserved, preferring to date Ecclesiastes to the Sixth to Fourth Centuries B.C.E. (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1605), with a few conservatives concurring with this assessment (Harrison, 1077). Liberals are unsure as to whether Ecclesiastes is a single work, or is a product of several authors (*ABD*, 2:272). Some go as far as suggesting that Ecclesiastes was originally an Aramaic secular work religiously adopted and updated with a form of late Hebrew.

Comparison with Ancient Near Eastern literature supports an earlier dating of Ecclesiastes (*EXP*, 5:11476-11447; Dillard and Longman, 251-252), likewise realized by the fact that the author of

Ecclesiastes demonstrates no familiarity with Greek literature or composition. The default position of either conservatives or liberals is to refer to Ecclesiastes' author as simply Qohelet.

The Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes is in generally good condition, with its Greek Septuagint translation being quite formal (*EXP*, 5:1149).

The theological focus of Ecclesiastes is the usage of human wisdom. Some postulate that Solomon is reflecting on his wanton life and cannot see beyond the visible world. Others see a more general attitude in mind with the people of Israel being addressed by a court servant. The common themes seen in Ecclesiastes are that human life is "meaningless" (1:2, NIV) and that one must "fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13). However, many have considered Ecclesiastes to be hedonistic because of Qohelet's remark, "There is nothing better for a man *than* to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good" (2:24). "[T]he majority of interpreters judge him to be a consummate pessimist who despairs finding any good in life" (*New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 929; cf. *IDBSup*, 249), but some actually consider him to be an optimist because of his pessimism.

In Ecclesiastes we see that human wisdom has its limits (1:13, 16-18; 7:24; 8:16), and that human beings cannot achieve anything of endless endurance. One's experience often comes with disappointment. Much of Ecclesiastes has a negative tone, forcing the reader to turn to God and not his or her own strength for support (*IDBSup*, 250).

It should be noted that Ecclesiastes was a controversial text in the Jewish canon (*NBCR*, 570; *Jewish Study Bible*, 1605) and that its status was seriously questioned (*EXP*, 5:1137). The Pharisaical School of Hillel considered Ecclesiastes to be a text that soils the hands (*IDB*, 2:7). Likewise, "The book's relative skepticism made it an offense to some of the conservative school (Shammai) within Judaism" (*ISBE*, 3:14; cf. *EXP*, 5:1148-1149). The more progressive School of Hillel ultimately accepted it, but Jewish unhappiness toward Ecclesiastes continued well into the Fourth Century C.E. The controversy surrounding Ecclesiastes primarily concerned the Pharisees' thought that Ecclesiastes did not uphold the doctrine of resurrection. **Any Messianic interpretation of Ecclesiastes needs to be tempered by this same skepticism.**

The Christian theological tradition has likewise been suspect of Ecclesiastes, mostly because of its negative and soulish tone. But this has been changing in recent years, with some interpreters leaning toward the position that "Qoheleth is addressing the general public whose view is bounded by the horizons of this world; he meets them on their own ground, and proceeds to convict them of its inherent vanity" (*NBCR*, 570). This would require the author to speak in more secular terms, and for us to understand his Earth-bound perspective. "[A]lthough there is little developed sense of the hereafter, Qoheleth has no doubt that God, who rules over all, will some day or in some manner bring every act to judgment, whether good or evil (12:14)" (*ISBE*, 2:12). The inclusion of Ecclesiastes in the Christian canon also found some skepticism, but was assured given Paul's reference to the book in Romans 8:20.

Ecclesiastes is a common text from the Tanach read in today's Messianic community. It is commonly read during the season of *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles, a tradition going back to the Eleventh Century C.E. (*IDB*, 3:8). Most Messianic readers, however, are unfamiliar with the controversies surrounding it in both Jewish and Christian history. Few are aware that Solomon was probably not the author of Ecclesiastes. Likewise, a significant theological weakness among some Messianics is that Ecclesiastes is often given more weight than the Gospels or Apostolic letters in examining some issues. We have the strong responsibility to not treat Ecclesiastes in isolation from the rest of the Bible (*EXP*, 5:1137), while respecting its unique message and the presentation style of Qohelet.

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Elect, Two Groups of: Do you believe God has two groups of elect: Israel and the Church?

No, we do not believe that God has two groups of elect, Israel and the Church. We believe that God has only one group of elect, the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12; cf. Galatians 6:16). This Israel is composed of all Believers, be they Jewish or non-Jewish. This Israel is being fully restored in our day through the prophesied reunification of the Two Houses of Israel, Judah (the Jewish people), scattered Israel/Ephraim, and those of the nations who enjoin themselves to the God of Israel. This Israel is called to follow the Torah, *and* be a light to the nations.

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Elements of the World (Galatians 4:3, 9; Colossians 2:8, 20): I have heard that the Torah actually composes the "elemental things of the world"? Is there any truth to this claim?

The specific clause *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου)—"the elemental things/spirits of the world"—appears in full in Galatians 4:3 and Colossians 2:8, followed by the shorter *stoicheia* in Galatians 4:3, and *tōn stoicheiōn* (τῶν στοιχείων) in Colossians 2:20. There is no single interpretation as to what this encompasses, agreed upon by all interpreters, as such "principles" could involve: (1) the ABCs of one's religious observance, (2) what many of the ancients believed were the basic elements of the universe (i.e., earth, water, air, fire), or (3) cosmic spiritual powers like angels or demons. With these three major options alone to be considered, it should not be surprising as to why there is no full consensus when *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is read within the Pauline letters.

The second usage of "elemental principles of the world" in Colossians 2:8, 20 is much easier to consider, as more information is given to us within the context of Paul's writing. A fair number of Colossians interpreters are agreed that the issue confronted by Paul to his audience relates to a proto-Gnostic, mysticized Judaism, involving appeals (or even worship of!) made to angels (Colossians 2:18) and/or various spirit powers rather than Yeshua the Messiah (cf. F.F. Bruce, *NICNT: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, pp 97-98; Peter T. O'Brien, *WBC: Colossians, Philemon*, 44:110; Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, pp 187-193). The local Judaism infecting the Believers at Colossae, which in turn had been infected by the local mishmash of Hellenistic, foreign, and mystical religious and philosophical beliefs in Phrygia, was leading many of the Believers astray. Some have concluded that the errors present among the Colossian Believers may be appropriated as a warning for people today errantly influenced by horoscopes or fortune-telling, yet in the Colossians' case there may be more of a connection to mystery religions and cults. (Consult the FAQ entry on **Colossians** for more information.)

While it is not at all difficult to see what *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* can mean in regard to Colossians 2:9, 20—as there are concrete examples of religious asceticism stated in the text (Colossians 2:18, 20-23)—what *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* might mean in regard to Galatians 4:3, 9 is much more complicated.

Being subject to *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is a problem that Paul specifies can be Jewish (Galatians 4:3), while at the same time it can equally be pagan. Paul writes the non-Jewish Galatians, "now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be

enslaved all over again?” (Galatians 4:9). Various Galatians interpreters conclude that here Paul has just associated God’s commandments and paganism as basically being the same thing (cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *WBC: Galatians*, 41:180-181; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia*, pp 298-299). The foolish Galatians, being led astray by the Influencers/Judaizers, are returning to a style of life that they should have left behind in paganism, following rules and regulations that are nothing more than worldly principles. While it is likely that Paul used *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Colossians to refute errant, Gnostic/mystical practices, the first usage of *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is said to be employed in a much different way.

Is God’s Torah nothing more than “elementary principles of the world” to Paul? While it is not difficult to see how human beings approaching God’s Torah can turn it into something via their own observance (i.e., sectarian “works of law”) into just fleshly rudiments—**this is not the Torah’s fault!** Paul is the same apostle who would say “we know that the Law is spiritual” (Romans 7:14) and “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Timothy 1:8, NIV). In fact, he says “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Romans 8:7, NIV).

Is it at all possible that there is another explanation for what Paul means in Galatians 4:3, 9? While it may not be a popular one among today’s Galatians expositors, there is indeed another way we can look at this. Paul asks the Galatians, “how can you turn back again...?” (RSV) or return (Grk. *epistrephō*, ἐπιστρέφω) to the elementary principles of the world. **All should be agreed that the Galatians were going back to things they should have left behind in paganism.** But is Paul associating First Century Judaism and paganism as being quantitatively indifferent? God’s commandments in the Torah are no different than a pagan philosophy or superstition? Or, if some sects of First Century Judaism had been errantly affected by aspects of paganism (such as the Hellenistic concept of Fate; cf. Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 13.172)—could those errantly influencing the Galatians similarly be part of a sectarian Judaism that advocated rituals similar to those in paganism?

Consider how Paul previously has asked the Galatians “who has bewitched you...?” (Galatians 3:1). While it is easy for people in today’s West to consider such a question to only be a rhetorical device, the fact remains that in ancient times various religious sects really did use witchcraft to cast spells and hexes on people, and parts of Judaism were not immune to this. Likewise, Paul says of the Influencers/Judaizers that they “do not even keep the Law themselves” (Galatians 6:13). How could he say this if these people were just misguided legalists, only forcing ritual circumcision and proselyte conversion onto the non-Jews in Galatia? Given how *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is later used in Colossians to depict errant, syncretistic Jewish practices—is it so impossible that the Influencers in Galatia could have also brought in errant, syncretistic practices? These could be things able to “bewitch” them.

The idea that the Influencers/Judaizers in Galatia could have advocated some kind of proto-Gnostic or mystical Jewish errors is not one often seen in contemporary Galatians interpretation, but it cannot be totally taken off the table. In worrying about the Galatians observing “days and months and seasons and years” (Galatians 4:10), is Paul really up in arms about the Galatians remembering things like the Passover—which he actually instructed the Corinthians to observe (1 Corinthians 5:7-8)? Or would he be more concerned about the rituals and customs associated with the appointed times, brought in and practiced by the Influencers/Judaizers, effecting the Galatians? Samuel J. Mikolaski’s comments are well taken:

“Are these Jewish or pagan observances? In writing to the Galatians, Paul clearly has Judaizers in mind. Did these worship elemental spirits? Astrological elements were at times infused into Jewish as well as pagan practices” (*NBCR*, 1100).

An alternative to be considered to Paul associating God’s commandments with paganism—and that the Galatians should not be following God’s Torah—is that in being effected by the Influencers, **the Galatians were following errant religious rituals that saturated the Influencers’ style of Torah observance.** The problem would not be the Galatians remembering the Sabbath (especially since Paul met many of them at *Shabbat* services, per his visit to Galatia in

Acts 13:13-14:28) or the appointed times, but rather *how the Influencers observed them*, infused with ungodly pagan rituals that the Galatians should have easily recognized as originating from “those who by nature are not gods” (Galatians 4:8, NIV).

If this is to be considered, then it does not seem difficult as to why Paul would say that the Galatians break the very Torah they claim to uphold (Galatians 6:13). They have already merited the Torah’s curse upon them for failing to be a blessing to others per God’s promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:8, 10), but they deserve it further by encouraging the Galatians to follow ungodly rituals *actually opposed by the Torah* (i.e., Deuteronomy 18:10-14) that negatively affected their sectarian branch of Judaism, and considered by Paul to be works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19). (Consult the FAQ entry on **Galatians**, and the editor’s commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, for a further discussion.)

Realizing that there are First Century Judaisms, *plural*, that are depicted within the Apostolic Scriptures is a difficult step for many readers to make, as many prefer to over-simplify the circumstances within the New Testament. Some branches of Ancient Judaism were affected by paganism. Not only are we supposed to realize this, but we are also required to make closer observations in reading the text, and ask ourselves some critical questions like whether Paul does associate God’s commandments and paganism as being the same thing. *Messianics today do not believe that the good rabbi from Tarsus associates God’s commandments as being synonymous with paganism*. Yet, some Messianics today do not heed the warning given by Paul against *ta stoicheia tou kosmou*, sometimes failing to realize that they may have been affected by various Jewish errors, which in turn have been affected by paganism.

For a further evaluation of the options available, consult D.G. Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 229-233.

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End-Times Revival: Do you believe that there will be a massive end-times revival before the return of the Lord?

All that Yeshua tells us concerning the end-times is that “This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). Knowing that the gospel will be preached to all the world does not necessarily equate to there being a massive end-times revival. All it means is that all will somehow hear the message of salvation. On the contrary to there being some kind of an end-times revival, one of the prerequisites that Paul says must happen before the return of the Messiah is that there will be a massive apostasy, or departure from the faith:

“Let no one in any way deceive you, for *it will not come* unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

It is likely that in the end-times, many people will truly come to faith in the Lord and/or get themselves right with Him. At the same time, this will also be coupled with a massive apostasy of many people away from the Lord.

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Ephesians, Epistle of: What can you tell me about the composition of the Epistle of Ephesians?

Approximate date: 60-61 C.E.

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Rome

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Ephesus and the immediate vicinity of Asia Minor

The authorship of this letter is not challenged by many conservative theologians, in spite of the fact that there is a lack of personal greeting in it. The author plainly identifies himself as Paul (1:1; 3:1), and is of a series that has often been called the “Prison Epistles,” written by Paul

from prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20). While a sound case can be made for genuine Pauline authorship (Guthrie, pp 496-499, 509-528), there are many liberal theologians who deny that Paul wrote this letter, or that the audience of this letter was a group other than the Ephesians. But as it should be noted, “The structure of Ephesians is in line with the rest of Paul’s correspondence. We can trace the same sequence of salutation, thanksgiving, doctrinal exposition, moral appeal, final courtesies, and benediction...The language of Ephesians, while suited to its theme and drawing on resources of vocabulary not represented in other Epistles, is nevertheless sufficiently similar to that of the other Epistles to substantiate the traditional view of its authorship” (*EXP*, 11:4).

Historically, the city of Ephesus became the third most important city for the early Messianic community, after Jerusalem and Antioch. Ephesus was a major emporium and urban center in the Eastern Roman Empire, standing on the most direct sea and land route to the eastern provinces. It was a major center of Artemis (Diana) worship, boasting a huge temple. The early Messianic community established a major presence in Ephesus, so significant that it is one of the assemblies that Yeshua directs a word to in the Book of Revelation. Conservative theologians believe that a sound case can be made for genuine Ephesian readership (Guthrie, 503), but do not deny the possibility that Paul’s letter was written to the surrounding areas as well. “It is widely held that Ephesians, designated as a circular, was written at the same time as Colossians and Philemon and was probably taken to various churches in the province of Asia by Tychicus” (*Ibid.*, 530).

Liberals who deny that the Ephesians were the primary target audience of Paul’s letter believe so on the basis of the fact that “in Ephesus” (1:1) does not appear in all the oldest manuscripts of the letter. The RSV follows this point of view, rendering the verse as “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus.” This leads some to believe that Laodicea was actually the intended audience, as Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16 that he wrote an epistle to the Laodiceans. It is notable that both Laodicea and Ephesus are located in the same general area, and if this theory has any merit, it does not subtract from the theology of the letter at all. It would mean that the Ephesians were only one in a group of cities that Paul wrote to (Gundry, 398). This letter was one in a series carried by Tychicus along with Colossians and Philemon (Colossians 4:7-8; Philemon 9, 13, 17; cf. *NIDB*, 314). Some theologians actually believe that the omission of “in Ephesus” from some manuscripts is because there were multiple copies of the letter written by Paul to the assemblies of the region, and then Tychicus had the authority to write in the name of the city. Later on as Ephesus gained prominence among those cities, the Ephesian copies became preeminent. Conservative theologians agree that while the Ephesians were the primary audience, the letter is general enough to include an intended audience of the surrounding cities.

The traditional place of Ephesians’ composition is regarded as being Rome, likely between 60-61 C.E. A few believe that a fair case can be made for Paul actually being imprisoned in Ephesus itself (Guthrie, pp 498-490), but this would require an earlier dating. There are some similarities between the content of Ephesians and Colossians that indicate they were likely written at about the same time (Gundry, 397), even though Ephesians was likely written after Colossians. “Colossians has in it the intensity, rush, and roar of the battlefield, while Ephesians has a calm atmosphere suggestive of a survey of the field after the victory” (*NIDB*, 315).

No case for a Hebrew or Aramaic origin of this letter has ever been made by either conservative or liberal theologians. It is only a sentiment voiced by a few fundamentalists in the Messianic movement. Given the likely Roman origin of the letter, and a Greek-speaking audience encompassing the Ephesians and others in Asia Minor, a Greek composition of the letter is definite. However, simply because the letter was written in Greek does not mean that it should be separated from its Jewish-Pauline context.

Gundry describes Ephesians as having a “meditative quality” (p 397); Ephesians emphasizes the wholeness of the Messiah and His authority over the community of Believers. The letter has no specific heresy or false teaching in mind to address. Ephesians focuses on important themes such as the fulfilled life that Believers have in Yeshua (1:1), the mystery of God’s people

fully understood in Yeshua (3:1-6), and the different spiritual gifts that God has given to each one of us (4:1-16). Paul also discusses the proper balance of our personal lives and our relationships with others, specifically in the context of marriage (4:17-6:9). The overarching theme of Ephesians is our Savior Yeshua being the head of the assembly.

For Messianic Believers, Paul expresses the unity that Jewish and non-Jewish people have in Messiah Yeshua as part of the Commonwealth of Israel. Anything that separated these two distinct groups of human beings has been rendered inoperative in the Messiah. There is some usage from Ephesians by Christian theologians who wrongly believe that the Torah has been abolished, so this requires any Messianic person who reads it to place the letter in historical context, and consult the source text for what appears to be any inconsistency, as with any Scripture. Ephesians uplifts Yeshua as the one and only Redeemer, and should be a very encouraging letter for any one of us to learn from.

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Ephesians 2:14-15: If you say that the Law of Moses is still to be followed today, then what do you do about Ephesians 2:14-15, which says that the "Law of commandments contained in ordinances" has been abolished?

"For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into one* and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances*, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus establishing peace*" (Ephesians 2:14-15, NASU).

Ephesians 2:14-15 are challenging verses for many Messianics. The NIV translation says that the Messiah "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations." Many have taken Ephesians 2:14-15 as meaning that Yeshua abolished the Torah or the Law of Moses. It is asserted that the "enmity" or "hostility" is actually the Torah. But is this entirely accurate? Paul's words in Ephesians 2:14-15 are prefaced by his comments to the non-Jewish Believers here that they have been made a part of the Commonwealth of Israel:

"Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called 'Uncircumcision' by the so-called 'Circumcision,' *which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Messiah Yeshua you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah*" (Ephesians 2:11-13).

Speaking of the non-Jewish Believers in the assembly, Paul says that prior to faith in the Messiah, they had once been "excluded" (NASU) or "alienated" (RSV) from the Commonwealth of Israel. They had been strangers to the covenants, and they were without any hope of salvation. What could have separated these people from membership in Israel? Was it the Torah that separated them? If Paul is claiming in Ephesians 2:14-15 that the entire Torah or Law of Moses is what separated these non-Jewish Believers, it would be pretty embarrassing for Paul to then

make an actual appeal in the *same letter* to the Torah, later instructing his audience “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise), SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH” (Ephesians 6:1-3; cf. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).

It is an impossibility that it was the Torah which stood in the way of the non-Jews coming to faith in the First Century from becoming a part of the assembly of Israel. Deuteronomy 4:5-7 attests to the fact that it was Ancient Israel's obedience to the commandments that would enable them to be a testimony to the other nations surrounding them, and the awesomeness and power of Israel's God:

“See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him?”

The *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* remarks, “the laws which Moses taught were commandments of the Lord. Keeping and doing them were to be the wisdom and understanding of Israel in the eyes of the nations... History has confirmed this. Not only did the wisdom of a Solomon astonish the queen of Sheba (1Ki 10:4), but the divine truth which Israel possessed in the law of Moses attracted all the more earnest minds of the heathen world to seek the satisfaction of the inmost necessities of their heart and the salvation of their souls in Israel's knowledge of God.” **The Divine nature of the Torah was to attract outsiders to the God of Israel.**

It was never the Torah that separated those coming to faith in the Messiah from membership in Israel. The Torah itself provided very non-stringent citizenship requirements for the stranger or sojourner wanting to enter in. Exodus 12:48 says, “if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it.” A sojourner wanting to join into Israel had to be physically circumcised and proclaim faith in the God of Israel. If the stranger or *ger* (גֵר) were circumcised and celebrated Passover, he would then be considered to be an *ezrach ha'eretz* (אֶזְרַח הָאֶרֶץ) or “a native of the land.” Concerning this, the *ArtScroll Chumash* commentary says “Even though their ancestors did not emerge from Egypt, they have become full-fledged [Israelites]...provided they circumcise themselves and their children.” The Lord said that this ordinance was to be a *chuqat olam* (חֻקַּת עוֹלָם) or a “never-ending statute” (Numbers 15:15-16, LITV).

Citizenship in Israel for the outsider was considered to be so important that God says that the foreigner who has joined himself to Him should not be considered outcast: “Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from His people.’ Nor let the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree’” (Isaiah 56:3). God expected those who joined themselves to the people of Israel to live as native Israelites and not to be considered “excluded” by any means. How was citizenship in the community of Israel to be accomplished for those non-Jews coming to faith in the First Century? Were they to be circumcised and keep the Passover?

Note what Yeshua told the Disciples in Matthew 16:19: “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.” Binding and loosing is an Hebraic idiom meaning “to prohibit” and “to permit” (CJB). The Messiah gave the Disciples the ability to determine *halachah* or Torah application for the *ekklēsia*. We know that this happened at the Jerusalem Council when it was determined that circumcision and ritual conversion were unnecessary for the salvation of the non-Jews coming to faith. But that did not all of a sudden make circumcision important. According to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, Torah observance for the non-Jewish Believers was to come gradually as they grew in their walk of faith. Part of Torah observance is circumcision.

Concerning circumcision, the Apostle Paul writes, “Was any man called *when he was already* circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters* is the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called” (1 Corinthians 7:18-20). These verses speak of the condition in which one was called into covenant with the Lord. If we use Abraham as an example, he was called into covenant with God while uncircumcised (Genesis 12:2-3; 13:14-17; Romans 4:9-12). But as he progressed in the covenant that God promised him, he was circumcised at the appropriate time further on (Genesis 17:10-14).

I believe Paul is using the same analogy for new Believers, employing the verb *menō* (μένω) in v. 20, which can mean “to continue,” relating to one’s spiritual maturity. These same new Believers were expected to keep the Passover, as Paul admonished the assembly in Corinth to “Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are *in fact* unleavened. For Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

It should be clear to us that the Torah itself never stood in the way of those separate from Israel to join with Israel. But if the enmity or hostility was not the Torah, though, then what was it? What was “the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (NIV) that was torn down by the Messiah?

The Greek for “dividing wall” in Ephesians 2:14 is *mesotoichon* (μεσότοιχον), which AMG tells us “is probably an allusion to the wall between the inner and outer courts of the temple.” This wall would have divided the inner areas of the Temple complex in Jerusalem, where animal sacrifices were performed, from the outer areas. The predominant outer area that kept non-Jews from entering into the inner areas was called the Court of the Gentiles. F.F. Bruce notes in his book *The New Testament Documents*, “That none might plead ignorance of the rules, notices in Greek and Latin were fastened to the barricade separating the outer from the inner courts, warning Gentiles that death was the penalty for trespass” (p 94). The First Century historian Josephus describes the dividing wall in his books *The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Wars of the Jews*:

“Thus was the first enclosure. In the midst of which, and not far from it, was the second, to be gone up to by a few steps; this was encompassed by a stone wall for a partition, with an inscription, which forbade any foreigner to go in, under pain of death” (*Antiquities* 15.417).

“[T]here was a partition made of stone all round, whose height was three cubits: its construction was very elegant; upon it stood pillars at equal distances from one another, declaring the law of purity, some in Greek, and some in Roman letters, that ‘no foreigner should go within that sanctuary’” (*Jewish War* 5.194).

The *NIV Study Bible*, describing “the dividing wall,” says that this is “Possibly an allusion to the barricade in the Jerusalem temple area that marked the limit to which a Gentile might go. It is used here to describe the total religious isolation Jews and Gentiles experienced from each other” (p 1833). We have just discussed the fact that it was never the Torah that separated inclusion of outsiders from membership in Israel. In fact, the Torah does not prescribe the erecting of a wall outside the Tabernacle or Temple to keep people out. On the contrary, King Solomon declares in 2 Chronicles 6:32-33 that people from all over the world would hear of the majesty of God’s Temple and come to Him as a result:

“Also concerning the foreigner who is not from Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your great name's sake and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm, when they come and pray toward this house, then hear from heaven, from Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name, and fear You as *do* Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name.”

The *mesotoichon* or dividing wall was built to keep non-Jews from the Inner Court of the Temple, where animal sacrifices were performed, on the threat of death. Why was this wall erected, and who was responsible for its construction? Why does Paul use the allusion to this wall as being hostile to non-Jewish Believers? Consider the fact that Isaiah tells us that the Lord welcomes the outsider into His House, and wants the outsider to honor His Sabbath and serve in His Temple:

“Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples” (Isaiah 56:6-7).

The “dividing wall” is called the *ton nomon tōn entolōn en dogmasin* (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν) in the Greek of Ephesians 2:14. This is what the New American Standard Bible renders as “the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances.” Most Christians conclude that this is a reference to the Torah or Law of Moses, which Yeshua the Messiah supposedly abolished. (Do note how some theologians, holding to a higher view of the Old Testament, consider this to be a reference to the so-called “ceremonial law” of the Torah, and not the Torah as a whole or its moral commands.) But we have already seen that it was never the Torah that excluded citizenship for the outsider in Israel. And certainly, if this is a Biblical attestation that Yeshua abolished the Law, then what was Yeshua telling us when He said in Matthew 5:17-19 that He came to fulfill the Law, and *not abolish it*? Is Yeshua being inconsistent? Or have we missed something? Furthermore, why would Paul make a direct appeal to the Torah later in Ephesians 6:1-3?

In my previous commentary in this analysis, I have already stated how the Greek word *nomos*, most often translated as “law,” does not always refer to the Torah or Law of Moses in the Apostolic Scriptures. *Nomos* can refer to man-made laws, or more specifically the ordinances of the Jewish Rabbis. In Orthodox Judaism today, when one refers to “the Torah,” he is not just referring to Genesis—Deuteronomy, but is also referring to the Mishnah, Talmud, and rulings of the Rabbis. You are referring to extra-Biblical ordinances that have been added since Mount Sinai that often far exceed the 613 commandments of the Torah.

The Greek word most often rendered as either “ordinances” (NASU) or “regulations” (NIV) is *dogma* (δόγμα). *BDAG* notes that it is “**something that is taught as an established tenet or statement of belief, doctrine, dogma.**” *LS* indicates that in Ancient Greek Plato uses it to refer to “*that which seems to one, an opinion, dogma.*” *AMG* adds, “Used concerning Christianity, it means views, doctrinal statements, principles.” *Dogma* can be representative of man-made opinions and judgments, and so the “the law of the commands in ordinances” (YLT) does not necessarily have to be the Torah of Moses, but rather the extra-Biblical “religious Law” of the Rabbis of Judaism that was responsible for the wall of division. In this case, what Paul specifically refers to in Ephesians 2:14-15 is not the Torah of Moses, or even edifying traditions of Judaism, **but those things that caused the wall of division to be erected and Israel forget its mandate to be a light to the nations.**

Yeshua the Messiah never came and eliminated the Torah, as per His crucial admonition in Matthew 5:17-19. Rather, the wall that He broke down was that of Rabbinical addition and/or manipulation to the commandments that had separated the non-Jews coming to faith from inclusion in Israel. It was never the Torah that caused a wall of division to be erected not permitting the outsider from becoming a part of the Commonwealth of Israel. Certain Rabbinical ordinances or dogmas not found in the Torah ultimately led to a barrier wall being constructed on the Temple Mount, and caused this separation to take place.

(This entry includes adapted excerpts from the editor’s book *The New Testament Validates Torah*. Also consult his commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.)

updated 04 January, 2009

Ephesians 6:11-17: I heard a Messianic teacher say that the armor of God is not the armor of a Roman soldier, but really the garments of a Levitical priest serving in the Temple. Do you have an opinion about this? Is this a valid understanding?

When some allusion to priestly service is used in the Pauline Epistles, we often see the usage of the Greek term (λατρεία), “cultic usage *service/worship (of God)*” (BDAG, 587): Romans 9:4; 12:1; and the verb *latreuō* (λατρεύω), “be in servitude, render cultic service” (Ibid.): Romans 1:25; Philippians 3:3; 2 Timothy 1:3. These terms are used similarly in the Septuagint to describe the service of the priests, now applied by Paul to describe the service of the ministry of the gospel as we are to serve as intermediaries between God and fallen humanity in a priestly kind of service.

Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:11-17 do not describe this kind of service, but rather our reality as Believers in a war against the adversary:

“Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil *one*. And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (cf. Isaiah 11:5; 59:17; 52:7; 59:17; 49:2; Hosea 6:5).

Most interpreters have taken Paul’s references to be “the ‘whole armor’ of the Roman soldier...used by Paul as a figure for the defensive armor of the Christian in the world (Eph. 6)” (J.W. Wevers, “Weapons,” in *IDB*, 4:825). Conservatives are widely agreed that Ephesians was likely written from Paul’s first incarceration in Rome, and thus Paul making reference to Roman armor during his imprisonment as a metaphor for spiritual steadfastness would only make logical sense. A few teachers in the Messianic community today—capitalizing on some negative rhetoric against “Rome”—have doubted that this is the case. They have instead advocated that Paul was making reference to “priestly elements” or “priestly garments” of service. However, there is no sound basis for these conclusions.

Advocates of this view, clouded by negative ideas against the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, make the unfortunate conclusion that the armor elements of a breastplate, shield, helmet, and sword were things that were only Greco-Roman. Historical observations of ancient weapons of warfare are undoubtedly lacking as these basic elements of warfare were common *not only among the classical civilizations* but also Ancient Near Eastern civilizations contemporary to and pre-existent of Ancient Israel. “ANE civilizations developed [these] weapons long before the nation of Israel was formed; these were utilized in battles with enemies, never in isolation from other people” (Mark J. Fretz, “Weapons and Implements of Warfare,” in *ABD*, 6:893). While there was variance between the warfare elements of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians—and likewise the Ancient Israelites—there was also a great degree of commonality:

“Little is known of Hebrew armor. Saul and Jonathan both had armor, which must at least have consisted of a HELMET; a breastplate or coat of mail; GREAVES; and a shield. Probably a girdle belt...was used for tying down the breastplate” (Wevers, in *IDB*, 4:825).

The commonality among both ANE and classical weapons of war would have remained true up until the First Century. Paul’s references to a breastplate, shield, helmet, and sword could just as well have referred to a soldier in the army of King David than a soldier in Caesar’s legions. While it might tickle some ears that Paul is really talking about the garments of a priest in Ephesians 6:11-17, neither the vocabulary of the passage nor an examination of history confirms

this view. It trivializes the reality that we are presently engaged in a warfare against Satan for human souls and their redemption.

posted 23 April, 2007

Ephraimite Error: What is your response to “The Ephraimite Error” white paper produced by Messianic Jews about your movement?

“[The Ephraimite Error](#)” white paper was produced in 1999 by the MJAA and UMJC, under the auspices of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance. Surveying a then-growing sector of the independent Messianic community labeling itself as “Two-House,” the white paper refutes the teachings of the early proponents of the message. The white paper does have some valid criticisms of the Two-House teaching as it was first promoted and continues to be promoted by many people, including the emphasis on scattered “identity” and some of the sensationalism that has been commonly attached to the message. Yet, most people who read the IMJA “Ephraimite Error” paper will not seek another side to the story, much less a moderate form of the Two-House teaching that is guided by interpreting the prophecies of Israel’s restoration and not by hype. Most who read the white paper, or more likely its short summary, are content to not examine what is actually said about Judah, scattered Israel/Ephraim, and the nations from the Bible.

While our ministry has produced a response in “**The Ephraimite Error: Critical Errors**” (2002), and this has helped to demonstrate that not all advocates are the extremists as painted by the IMJA, *only time* is the ultimate answer to the dilemma we face. Since 2001, going a step farther, the major Messianic Jewish organizations have denounced any ministry which claims that non-Jewish Believers (Two-House advocates or not) should keep God’s Torah. And, this has not been helped by some of the things that have occurred in the independent Messianic community from 2002 to the present, which often serve to reinforce Messianic Jewish criticism. Those of us who will remain faithful to what the Bible says about all of this, will just have to wait out the polarization until reasonable people are willing to come together and honestly and constructively discuss the issues.

In the long term, God’s promises to restore Israel are going to come to pass. No matter how many white papers or theological analyses are produced, the prophecies of His Word stand true. In all honesty, none of us know for certain if we are Judah, scattered Israel/Ephraim, or truly of the nations. But if we are a part of God’s people—the Commonwealth of Israel—we will all surely be involved in the restoration of Israel. And, important questions no doubt need to be asked. It is from this perspective that our ministry chooses to promote a belief in the “Two Houses,” as opposed to what “The Ephraimite Error” refutes. (The white paper makes no attempt to address or analyze the actual prophecies of Israel’s restoration.)

For a further discussion, we recommend you consult our articles “[The Two-House Teaching in Proper Perspective](#)” and “[Revisiting the Two-House Teaching](#).”

posted 06 March, 2008

Ephraim, House of: What is this “House of Ephraim,” or just “Ephraim,” that you comment about in some of your teachings?

“Ephraim” or the “House of Ephraim” is a reference to the Northern Kingdom of Israel that split off from the Southern Kingdom of Judah following the death of King Solomon. It was taken into Assyrian Exile in 722-721 B.C.E. and corporately assimilated into the nations. Per the end-time prophecies of the restoration of Israel in the days prior to the Messiah’s return (i.e., Isaiah 11:14; Jeremiah 3:18, 30:3; and Zechariah 10:7, 10), those of the scattered Northern Kingdom will return to their Israelite heritage and many will be gathered back into the Land of Israel.

updated 22 October, 2006

Ephraim, references to: The Two-House teaching seems to rely very heavily on the significance of the Northern Kingdom. On what grounds do you call the Northern House of Israel “Ephraim”? This is just one of the twelve tribes.

In the two sticks prophecy of Ezekiel 37, the Prophet Ezekiel is clearly admonished, “And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, ‘For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions’; then take another stick and write on it, ‘For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions’” (v. 16). The Hebrew text says *l’Yosef etz Ephraim v’kol-beit Yisrael chaveru* (לְיוֹסֵף עֵץ אֶפְרַיִם וְכָל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲבֵרָו). This clearly relates the name “Ephraim” to the Northern Kingdom or House of Israel.

However, it is very true that there are those in the Two-House Messianic community who emphasize “Ephraim” to such an extent that they make you think that there is no Judah, meaning no Jewish people, at all involved in the Two-House reunion. What is ironic in this is that such people cannot allow the prophecies to just exist for themselves, and they assume that if you are non-Jewish that you are of “scattered Ephraim.” Ephraim is simply another term to refer to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which can be less confusing than using “Israel.” “Joseph” is obviously also used to refer to the Northern Kingdom in the prophecies of Israel’s restoration. To clarify, remember who composes “Judah,” and who composes “Ephraim”:

- Judah primarily consisted of the Israelite tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and some Levites.
- Ephraim summarily entailed the remaining ten tribes: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Mannaseh, and Ephraim (the last two represent “Joseph”).

It is likely that the term “Ephraim” (and certainly also the designation “Ephraimite”) has become a bit anachronistic today, and should be used more cautiously than it is. It should be employed more to refer to Ancient Israel—especially because only God knows a person’s bloodline—and entry into the Commonwealth of Israel is ultimately by faith in Yeshua. This is true if a person is Jewish, non-Jewish, or truly of the nations.

In the long-term, we must recognize everyone as part of Israel. We cannot make a major distinction between Judah and Ephraim because the Lord wants both Houses of Israel to “be one in My hand” (Ezekiel 37:19), one that also includes “companions” from the nations. The Lord wants *one people of Israel*. He ultimately wants an Israel of no divisions, but one where all are fellow citizens and who serve Him as their King. He wants this Israel to make a dynamic impact on the world so all can come to a saving knowledge of His Son.

updated 23 October, 2006

Ephraimite Onlyism: I have heard you talk about “Ephraimite Onlyism”? What is this?

In relationship to the Two Houses of Israel, we believe that in the end-times the Lord is going to unite the House of Judah, or Jewish people, with those of the scattered House of Israel/Ephraim that was dispersed into the nations in 722-721 B.C.E. with the defeat of the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. We believe that as a part of the restoration of all Israel that is to take place, Jewish people are now coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua, and non-Jewish Believers, perhaps many of them being of scattered Israel/Ephraim, are coming into a realization of the Hebraic Roots of their faith.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim established its own religious system independent of the Torah (1 Kings 12). As 1 Kings 12:27 attests, Jeroboam was concerned that if something were not done, that the people would go to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices according to the Torah and later advocate reunion with the South: “If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their lord, *even* to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah.” He “consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt’” (1 Kings

12:28), permanently severing the bond between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel. By establishing a separate religious system, Israel remained divided.

In a similar vein, what we might describe as “Ephraimite Onlyism” is evident in Messianic groups that (1) advocate a belief in the Two Houses of Israel, and (2) like Jeroboam try to instill practices that lack any regard whatsoever for the theology and traditions of Judaism. These Two-House groups primarily are dominated by non-Jews who deride extra-Biblical Jewish custom and tradition, and do more to keep Israel divided than united. They fail to recognize that the Jewish people have been given the oracles of God (Romans 3:2), which includes the traditions of how the Torah commandments are to be kept. Ephraimite Onlyists, while attempting to keep the Torah, often do not have any respect for Judaism. Sometimes this is in response to some Jewish Believers’ disrespect for Christianity, but if unity is ever to occur in the Body of Messiah over this issue, we have to have mutual respect for one another, and recognize the humanity of both of us.

For a further examination of this issue, consult the editor’s article “**Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement.**”

updated 23 October, 2006

Esther, Book of: What can you tell me about the composition of the Book of Esther?

Approximate date: 460 B.C.E. (Right, conservative-moderate); 330 B.C.E. (Left)

Author: anonymous (some Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

Location of author: Persia (Right, conservative-moderate); Land of Israel after the exile (most Left)

Target audience and their location: Jewish people in Persian Empire (Right, conservative-moderate); Jewish people having returned from the Babylonian Exile, probably during the time of the Maccabees (Left)

The Book of Esther is one of the most unique texts in the Tanach, with those who read it demonstrating a wide variety of opinions: from Maimonides who placed it second only to the Torah, Luther who thought it was gaudy and sensual, and the feminist theologian who places it at the center of her theology. In the Christian theological tradition, Esther is placed among the Historical books, whereas Jewish tradition places them among the Five Scrolls or *Megillot* to be read during holiday times. Esther tells the story of a Jewish girl who becomes the new queen of Persia, and is placed in a position to save the Jewish people from extinction.

The purpose of Esther’s composition was primarily to justify the celebration of *Purim* (*IDB*, 2:150) as a holiday for the Jewish people during and immediately following the reign of the Persian King Ahasuerus, known in Greek historical works as Xerxes (3:7; 9:26-32; cf. Harrison, pp 1087-1088). The young Jewess Esther becomes the queen of Persia, and her cousin Mordecai learns about the genocidal plans of the evil Haman toward the Jews. The location of these events is in the Persian city of Susa. The text may easily be described as a Jewish novella, with the term *Purim* derived from the lot or *pur* (פּוּר) Haman cast to determine the date of execution for the Jews (3:7; 9:24).

Conservative theologians regard the author of Esther as being anonymous (*ISBE*, 2:158; *EXP*, 4:776; Dillard and Longman, 191), but most certainly a Jew. Jewish tradition in the Talmud (*b.Bava Batra* 15a) attributes authorship of the book to the men of the Great Synagogue. The author of Esther was most probably a Persian Jew who was quite familiar with the inner workings and social structure of the Persian Empire, as he demonstrates no knowledge of events or circumstances going on in the Land of Israel. The text of Esther was likely composed before Ezra’s return to Jerusalem, and with that was probably written shortly after the events it depicts, sometime in the late Fifth Century B.C.E. Esther 9:22 suggests that the festival of *Purim* was celebrated for some time before Esther’s composition:

“[I]t was a month which was turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions of food to one another and gifts to the poor.”

Liberal scholars often advocate a later composition for Esther, as early as the late Fourth Century B.C.E. Various Greek “loan words” present in the text make some suggest that Esther is a composition of the early Hellenistic period (*IDBSup*, 280). Liberals will often consider the events portrayed in Esther to be pseudohistorical, and perhaps even to be read as a comedy (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1623). Many doubt that the events ever took place (*IDB*, 2:151), and conclude that they are only a “festal legend” (*IDBSup*, 279). The people in the Book of Esther are often viewed as only being caricatures of other figures that antagonized the Jewish people.

Doubting the historicity of Esther is not only a feature of modern higher criticism, but even some Jews of ancient times doubted its validity (*b.Megillah* 7a; cf. Harrison, 1090). Many try to connect the feast of *Purim* to the Maccabean period and their victory over the Greeks (*IDB*, 2:151; Harrison, 1088-1090; *NBCR*, 412), including Haman being modeled after Antiochus Epiphanes (*ISBE*, 2:158). Many liberals, however, do consider the story of Esther to have great value, particularly concerning Esther as a female protagonist in a male-dominated Persian society.

Conservatives and liberals all recognize that the Book of Esther is not to be taken as “sober history” (*NBCR*, 413; cf. Harrison, 1090-1092), as there are certainly elements in the story that are meant to guide the reader. But how far we take this has led to a diverse array of conclusions. Many liberals will claim that the Persian Empire was tolerant of minorities, thus casting doubt on Esther’s claim of genocide against the Persian Jews. Others will argue, “The writer displays a most intimate and accurate knowledge of the Persian court and customs, so much so that Esther is used to fill gaps in the accounts of classical historians” (*EDB*, 428; cf. *ISBE*, 2:159; Dillard and Longman, 191-192). Conservatives will commonly note that the Greek historian Herodotus writes that King Xerxes was ruthless and despotic (*NBCR*, 413), and that we cannot make broad generalizations of Persian culture.

Perhaps the most significant support for the historicity of Esther among external data is a reference to a certain *Marduka* (Mordecai) among Persian records (*NIDB*, 326; *ISBE*, 2:159), proving that the Biblical Mordecai could certainly have existed. Today there appears to be a trend in liberal scholarship toward accepting some historicity of the text, as some note that “nothing in the story seems improbable, let alone unbelievable” (*ABD*, 2:638), with some even dating the text (or at least a proto-text) in the late Persian period (*Ibid.*, 2:641).

The textual witness for Esther is immense. “[T]here are more MS copies of Esther than of any other book of the OT” (*NBCR*, 412), and there is extensive Rabbinic commentary on Esther in the Talmud. This high regard for Esther actually sees it placed second to the Torah among some manuscripts (*EXP*, 4:776). There exist three major editions of the text of Esther (Harrison, 1101-1102; *EXP*, 4:781-782; *ABD*, 2:641-642), notably the Hebrew Masoretic Text, Greek Septuagint, and a second Greek edition. There are additions to the Book of Esther found in the LXX that have a major religious character. These chapters are a part of the Apocrypha in Additions to the Book of Esther (*ISBE*, 2:158), and are considered canonical in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Anglican traditions.

A theme seen throughout Esther is an ongoing conflict between Israel and the Amalekites (2:5; 3:1-6; 9:5-10), something that originally occurred during the Exodus (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19) and continued throughout Israel’s history (1 Samuel 15; 1 Chronicles 4:43). The author of Esther views the Amalekites as the epitome and/or sum of Israel’s enemies, with Haman depicted as a descendant of King Agag (Harrison, 1085).

The Book of Esther also relies heavily upon the Jewish people being portrayed as God’s faithful remnant. Evangelical Christian theologians are very keen to note that the continued existence of the Jewish people demonstrated in Esther is imperative due to the promises of the coming Messiah (Dillard and Longman, 197). Some also suggest a reliance upon the themes seen in the story of Joseph regarding God’s preservation of the Jews in Susa (2:3-4; 9, 21-23; 3:4; 4:14; 6:1, 8, 14; 8:6).

It is undeniable that Esther confronts us with a major Tanach example of Israel interacting with other cultures. Our principal protagonist is actually named *Hadassah* (הַדַּסָּה) meaning “myrtle,” but is given the Persian name *Ester* (אֶסְתֵּר) meaning “star” (2:7; cf. Harrison, 1085; *EDB*, 427). Understanding Persian history and society is imperative to properly grasp the concepts in Esther, as great banquets are the focal points of much of the story. We also do see drunkenness and lewd sexuality in Esther (*ABD*, 2:633; *Jewish Study Bible*, 1623). A common misconception about the evil Haman “hanging” is that he was hanged on a gallows similar to today, when in the Persian context it was probably impalement followed by the public display or “hanging” of the corpse for the public to see. The writing style of Esther is undoubtedly affected by Persian techniques (Harrison, 1096; *EDB*, 428).

The major discussion of the validity of the Book of Esther often concerns the absence of any direct reference to “God” (*EXP*, 4:784-785). Many have considered the text to be entirely secular, and not religious at all. Esther had difficulty gaining canonical status in both the Jewish and Christian theological traditions (*IDB*, 2:151; *ISBE*, 2:158; *EXP*, 4:779; *ABD*, 2:635-638; *EDB*, 427-428; Dillard and Longman, 189), and the Qumran community did not consider it canonical at all. Some Jewish and Christian scholars have considered the book grossly immoral (*ABD*, 2:635). Neither Esther nor Mordecai make a reference to the Torah or Tanach, or demonstrate that they follow the “commandments,” per se.

In response to these claims against Esther, it is proposed that God not being mentioned directly is so that this book could circulate more freely among Jews in Persia (*NIDB*, 326). Many conclude that the anonymity of God is a literary device used to heighten the reader’s sensitivity to Him working through the life circumstances of human beings (*IDB*, 2:150). It is only by God’s faithfulness to His people that they are saved, as He moves on the hearts of the protagonists. The Book of Esther has offered Jews throughout history a great deal of hope during times of distress (*NBCR*, 412).

The Book of Esther is often very important for Messianics during the season of *Purim*. It causes all of us to consider the role of anti-Semitism in today’s world, and the role that we can play to combat it. It most certainly causes us to consider how God works through the human condition without us often seeing. Esther gives us a critical lesson of how God can use us to save and/or help His people during times of terrible distress. Esther is a great text that teaches us about the salvation history of God (Dillard and Longman, 197), and at the same time asks us questions about how He can use *both* men and women to accomplish it.

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Exodus, Book of: What can you tell me about the composition of the Book of Exodus?

Approximate date: 1440-1400 B.C.E. (Right); 1300-1200 B.C.E. (conservative-moderate); 500 B.C.E. (Left)

Author: Moses exclusively (Right); Moses, Joshua, and later editors (conservative-moderate); compiled traditions and mythologies (Left)

Location of author: wilderness journey after the Exodus (Right, conservative-moderate); Babylon and/or Land of Israel (Left)

Target audience and their location: people of Israel wandering in the desert (Right, conservative-moderate); Jewish exiles returning from Babylon (Left)

The Hebrew title of the second book of the Bible is *Shemot* (שְׁמוֹת, pronounced *Shemos* in the Ashkenazic tradition), meaning “Names,” derived from its first sentence, “Now these are the names of the sons of Israel” (1:1a). The term “Exodus” used in our English Bibles is derived from the Greek Septuagint, which designates this text *Exodos* (ἜΞΟΔΟΣ). A transliterated form of *Shemot*, *Oualesmoth*, is used in some ancient Greek Bibles (Sarna, xi; *ABD*, 2:690), and others may use the form *Exagogue* (Sarna, xi). The terms *Exodos* and *Exagogue* both convey the idea of a departure or going out, which are obviously major themes of the book.

In its opening lines, the Book of Exodus calls us to consider the family that has grown exponentially from the characters Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (Harrison, 566; *ISBE*, 2:222; *NIDB*, 334; *ABD*, 2:690), and immediately records how God has been faithful to them to multiply their descendants. The text of Exodus, though, transitions us from the promises given by God to the fulfillment of those promises. Exodus is a profoundly important text for anyone wanting to understand the work of God throughout history. Regardless of one’s theological orientation, “The Exodus from Egypt provides a focus for the OT, and has influenced its entire understanding of God” (*IDBSup*, 312). As the departure of the Ancient Israelites from Egyptian bondage is the major theme of Exodus, it is not surprising that it has influenced a great number of “theologies of liberation” movements” (Sarna, xi).

Anyone who reads the Bible will notice that the Book of Exodus records some of its greatest and most profound events (*EXP*, 2:292-293; Dillard and Longman, 64-65). The deliverance of an Israel enslaved by Egypt by God Himself, and God’s judgment on the ancient world’s major superpower, feature prominently in the opening chapters. We see the beginning of Israel being called out and consecrated as God’s special nation for His service. We also see the gift of the Law given by God to Israel to help them accomplish the task of testifying of His might and power to the world.

The Jewish theological tradition primarily views the Book of Exodus as the key text concerning the giving of the Torah to Israel. This Torah is to make Israel special among all the nations of the world. While not denying the importance of the giving of the Law, the Christian theological tradition generally extends the meaning of Exodus’ events as prefiguring Yeshua and His sacrifice for humanity (*IDB*, 2:188). From both perspectives, Exodus is a critically important text. Without the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, it is valid to say that you have no Judaism (Sarna, xiv). Without the Exodus and Passover Lamb, what prophetic typology does Yeshua the Messiah come to fulfill (Dillard and Longman, 66-67)?

The Book of Exodus opens with the birth of Moses and his being separated out by God (chs. 1-4). After being spared from certain death and being raised in the Egyptian court, Moses discovers that he is an Israelite and is forced out into the wilderness. God first reveals His Divine Name YHWH to him (6:3), indicating that as the “I AM” that He is the God of Abraham who continues to be real and faithful to his descendants (*NIDB*, 334). Moses is used by God as His vessel against the Egyptians (chs. 5-14), as God issues extreme judgments upon Egypt that culminate in the radical removal of His people via the Red Sea crossing. This is very unique for the Ancient Near East, because we see God actively intervening on behalf of His people (Sarna, xiii; *ABD*, 2:699), and furthermore in total control of the very elements that judge those who are oppressing them. A major feature of this judgment includes the death of the firstborn and the establishment of Passover (12:43-49).

A sizeable part of Exodus includes the covenant that God establishes with His people while in the desert (chs. 15-34). Arguably, the most significant segment of this is the giving of the Ten Commandments (20:2-17). In these sections of Exodus, we see that Israel agrees to stipulations consistent with Ancient Near Eastern covenants involving blood sacrifice (*NBCR*,

118). While this is all being finalized, though, the Israelites rebel and worship the golden calf, thinking that Moses is dead on Mount Sinai (32:4). In spite of this, God forgives Israel and gives them instructions concerning the Tabernacle (35-40:33). This is a strong indication that God desires to be among and dwell with His people (40:34-38; Dillard and Longman, 68-70), something that was very unique for the time and region, because in other beliefs humans were almost always seen as being the slaves of the deity, not those the deity wants to have a relationship with.

As with the rest of the Torah, the authorship of Exodus is vigorously debated in modern theology. The authorship of Exodus cannot be divorced from the overall authorship of the rest of the Pentateuch, notably including Genesis (*ISBE*, 2:222). The two general positions asserted among theologians are: (1) conservatives that adhere to some kind of Mosaic involvement in Exodus' composition, and (2) liberals who deny any kind of Mosaic involvement in Exodus' composition.

On the whole, conservative theologians hold to Moses being the principal author of Exodus. Walter C. Kasier, Jr. notes that "There are several internal claims in Exodus that directly ascribe authorship to Moses. He is told to record on a scroll the episode of Israel's victory over Amalek (17:14). He is instructed to write down the Ten Commandments (34:4, 27-29). He 'wrote down everything the LORD said' (24:4), which included at least the Book of the Covenant (20:22-23:33)" (*EXP*, 2:287-288; cf. Harrison, 569; Dillard and Longman, 58). Mosaic authorship of Exodus in association with its events is asserted all throughout the Tanach (Joshua 1:7; 8:31-32; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; Ezra 6:18; Nehemiah 13:1; Daniel 9:1-13; Malachi 4:4). The testimony of the Apocrypha ascribes authorship to Moses (Sirach 45:5), and most notably so does the Apostolic testimony of the New Testament (Luke 16:29; John 7:19).

Conservatives often assert that "a great many Near Eastern literary sources such as annals and court histories show that events of any significance were recorded at the time they occurred or shortly thereafter" (*ISBE*, 2:223-224), which would require that the events of the Exodus be recorded at a time adjacent to them having taken place. It is notable, though, that conservative theologians, while asserting primary Mosaic composition of Exodus, do not deny additional editing of the text by others, notably Ezra the Scribe at the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon (*b.Sanhedrin* 21b; *ISBE*, 2:224, 226). This may also include the involvement of scribes employed by Moses himself in composing the text in a more final form (*ISBE*, 2:226-227). The non-liberal Jewish tradition affirms the giving of both the Written and Oral Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai (*m.Avot* 1:1).

Harrison indicates, "Those who [support] the Mosaicity of Exodus [are] generally ready to admit that it was not by any means written as a continuous narrative; that there may well be indications of editorial activity, some perhaps emerging from the post-Mosaic era, and that quite probably the earliest portion of the book to be committed to writing after the Decalogue and the Covenant Code was the Song of Moses and Miriam" (Harrison, 568). Some things that could have been clarified by redactors after Moses include the explanation of the manna phenomenon (16:33-36), as well as the description of Moses as "greatly esteemed in the land of Egypt" (11:3). "Moses could hardly be expected to have described himself as being of impressive stature in Egyptian society. But even here little prevents this from being a typical marginal gloss that was incorporated into the text at a later stage" (*ISBE*, 2:227). Some assert that there may also have been modifications made to the Book of the Covenant section after Moses' death (Harrison, 570-572; *ISBE*, 2:229). As with Genesis, the idea of sole Mosaic authorship of Exodus, without any post-Mosaic changes, is present in the vast majority of today's Messianic community, often with no room for an engaged interpreter to maneuver.

It is notable that conservative theologians are not agreed on the exact timing of the Exodus. While most will agree that the entry of Jacob and his family into Lower Egypt is probably connected somehow with the Semitic Hyksos invasion (*ISBE*, 2:227), the timing of the Exodus is often divided into two camps: (1) those who advocate it having occurred in the Fifteenth Century B.C.E. (*NBCR*, 115-116), and (2) those who advocate it having occurred in the Thirteenth Century B.C.E.

Those who advocate that the Exodus occurred in the Fifteenth Century B.C.E. (1400s) do so based on a strict literal reading of 1 Kings 6:1, which says that the reign of Solomon commenced “in the four hundred and eightieth year after the sons of Israel came out of the land of Egypt,” calculated in conjunction with Exodus 12:40-41 (Sarna, xiv-xv; Dillard and Longman, 59). Notable advocates of this view include Merrill F. Unger (*NBCR*, 115-116) and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. It is probably safe to say that most in today’s Messianic community would hold to a Fifteenth Century view for the Exodus.

Those who advocate a Thirteenth Century B.C.E. (1200s) dating for the Exodus usually place it as having taken place during the reign of Ramses II (1290-1224 B.C.E.). Concurrent with this is an appeal made to the Merneptah stela, which refers to “Israel” living as a group in Canaan by 1230 B.C.E. (*New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 86). Advocates of a Thirteenth Century B.C.E. view consider the contemporary Egyptian history as being most favorable to the Exodus (*ABD*, 2:696-669). They often consider the 480 years referenced between the Exodus and reign of Solomon to be a rounded number, assuming that it represents twelve generations of forty years, and believe that it should be reduced (*NBCR*, 116). In support of this position is the fact that the LXX rendering of 1 Kings 6:1 has the “four hundred and fortieth year” (LXE) mentioned, which indicates that the exact number could be less. Notable advocates of this view include K.A. Kitchen and R.K. Harrison. **This is also the view of the editor.**

Reaction against a Thirteenth Century dating of the Exodus often comes because it could imply that a rounded number was used for the participants in the Exodus from the 603,550 males recorded in Numbers 1:46. (Consult the FAQ entry for **Numbers** for a consideration of this issue.) Dillard and Longman, advocates of a Fifteenth Century Exodus, do note however, “There are arguments for a late date for the Exodus...and in favor of a smaller number of Israelite participants...that treat the text with integrity” (p 62).

Another debate among conservative theologians is the route of the Exodus from the Northern Route to the Southern Route to the relatively new Arabian Route theories (*Archaeological Study Bible*, 108-112; cf. *EXP*, 2:291-292). A consensus forum on these, and other postulations, has not been held due to the lack of research as a result of the volatile politics in the region today. This largely prevents Biblical archaeologists from researching the possible sites that the Ancient Israelites traversed. In all honesty, it is difficult to determine with total accuracy the actual route of the Exodus.

Most liberal theologians doubt the historicity of the Exodus, often because of the lack of external evidence from texts outside the Biblical narrative (*IDB*, 2:190-192; *IDBSup*, 312; *ABD* 2:696-698; *Jewish Study Bible*, 103-104; cf. *EXP*, 2:288-290). There is a large tendency among liberals to view the Exodus as a symbolic account of God’s deliverance of His people, not to be taken literally, but as a metaphor that God is interested in justice upon evil. Oftentimes liberal scholars will try to provide more of a “natural explanation” for the events of the Exodus, and conclude that even if any such events did remotely take place, the author(s) of Exodus certainly exaggerated them for either affect or certain theological ends.

When it comes to the composition of Exodus, liberals generally assert it to primarily be a composition of the so-called J and E sources, the Yahwist and the Elohist, with possibly some P additions from the Priestly source. (See **Genesis** FAQ entry for a summarization of the JEDP documentary hypothesis.) This is a view adhered to by both liberal Christians and Jews (*IDB*, 2:192-194; *Jewish Study Bible*, 104-105), who date Exodus’ composition to the Sixth Century B.C.E. with the Jews having returned from Babylon. A few classical liberals date Exodus’ composition no earlier than the Ninth Century B.C.E. (*ISBE*, 2:225).

In the liberal theological schema, the position of Moses as an important figure used by God is widely disparaged. Moses in extreme cases is sometimes asserted as being “only a minor tribal sheik, whose grave was encountered by some group on its way into the land, and was only gradually drawn into the traditions” (*IDB*, 2:195; cf. Harrison, 568, 574). In this construct, the Exodus is a total fabrication of myth, with a deceased “Moses” lending his name to a story composed by a nomadic group of travelers in Canaan. While this view is not adhered to by all

liberals, many liberals doubt the historicity of all of the events ascribed as involving Moses. Even when affirming the existence of some kind of Moses, liberals still must say, “it appears that we can know very little about the part originally played by Moses in the events described” (*IDBSup*, 311).

Liberal Christian theologians are often in a very uneasy situation as Yeshua and the Disciples, as well as the Church Fathers, all treat Moses as being a real person (*IDB*, 2:195), and the Exodus being an actual event.

There are four major textual traditions attesting for the existence of the Book of Exodus: the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), Greek Septuagint (LXX), Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), and the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is notable that “The Hebrew behind the Greek Exodus seems to have differed from MT more than the other books of the Pentateuch” (*ABD*, 2:691), and the Samaritan Pentateuch likewise has some significant additions (*Ibid.*). The Dead Sea Scrolls also have some significant variants that often correspond to the Greek LXX and SP (*Ibid.*). In our theology today, we have to weigh the usage of the LXX by the Apostles in their writings as carrying some kind of authority, and cannot ignore it in our exegesis of Exodus, as they might be employing some of those textual variants in their quotations.

Anyone who surveys the Book of Exodus should easily see that the overarching themes of the text are the deliverance of Israel from bondage and the deliverance of God’s constitution to them (*NBCR*, 115). The major places of the events are Egypt and Sinai (*Ibid.*) How we consider these things in our understanding as Messianic Believers today can be a bit challenging, as some are just now beginning to examine Exodus in greater detail. However, Exodus forms a major basis for us seeing how God interacts with others in the Bible, so its message can by no means be ignored—especially in a world today that largely asserts that if there is a God, he/she/it must take a “hands off” position in running the universe. When one reads Exodus, one clearly sees that the Lord God of Israel is One who directly gets involved in the affairs of mankind.

Four major themes that we see present in Exodus are: (1) God directly intervening in the lives of His people, (2) He provides for His people’s needs, (3) God wants His people to succeed, and (4) God makes plans to live among His people with the Tabernacle. In the backdrop of the Ancient Near East, these were all concepts that were widely foreign and make the God of Israel quite unique.

Other major themes that we see in Exodus are the figure of Moses acting as a mediator between Israel and God. Understanding Moses’ work will help us to better understand the work of Yeshua presently mediating between humanity and God. Furthermore, the idea of God’s covenant with Israel continues on throughout most of the Bible. Entry into a covenant relationship with God is not significantly altered until Yeshua the Messiah enters the scene, and this entry is clearly transferred from being “circumcision” to faith in Him. On the whole, though, the concept of having a covenant relationship with God is very similar.

There are some significant Messianic weaknesses of Exodus that need to be remedied. On the whole, most Messianic congregational leaders and teachers are ignorant of liberal theories surrounding Moses and the Exodus. When someone watches a television program on the Discovery Channel or History Channel about the Exodus, and then asks questions in a Bible study, they often cannot get a valid conservative response. Furthermore, Messianics who study the Torah on a consistent basis need to understand the Book of Exodus in the context of Ancient Egypt (*ABD* 2:697-698), a suzerain-vassal treaty/covenant of the Ancient Near East (*ISBE*, 2:229), and the giving of the Torah against the backdrop of other ancient codes of law (*IDB*, 2:192; *NBCR*, 118-119). Unfortunately just like Genesis, some Messianics have an “overly mythical” view of Exodus that largely comes from consulting ultra Orthodox and Chassidic Jewish sources. This needs to change in the future, and we need to engage with more conservative, historically conscious scholarship.

As Believers in Yeshua the Messiah, the Book of Exodus shows us many things that must be understood if we are to more fully understand His entry into the world as the culmination of what the Exodus represents. Furthermore, we need not fall prey to liberal theologians who deny the Exodus, because the testimony of Yeshua and the Apostles confirms the existence of Moses

and its historicity (Dillard and Longman, 66-67). Unfortunately, this is a safety net that liberal Jews do not have.

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Exodus, date of: Can you summarize for me the debate over when the Exodus took place? Did it occur in the Fifteenth or Thirteenth Century B.C.E?

There is a long standing debate among conservative Biblical scholars—those who believe that a legitimate Exodus did take place in real history—as to whether or not the Israelites left Egypt in the Fifteenth Century or Thirteenth Century B.C.E. This is notably not a debate among those of the critical tradition, where the Exodus is often viewed as being some kind of historical fiction for a group of nomadic Semites (who became the Israelites) that steadily made their way into Canaan. As J.H. Walton is quite keen to note,

"In this day and age of biblical scholarship the debate no longer rages whether or not there was any exodus of biblical proportions. In fact, the consensus that there was not has become firmly entrenched in critical circles. In such a climate, the question concerning the date of the exodus might be lightly dismissed in some quarters as naive, presumptuous or quaint. Nevertheless, for those who take the biblical record seriously, debate continues concerning the most appropriate historical setting for this pivotal event in Israel's theology and self-understanding."^a

Even though not all conservatives are agreed on the timing of the Exodus, **all are agreed that a large group of Israelites was freed from Egyptian servitude at some point in real live history.**

Both Fifteenth and Thirteenth Century B.C.E. advocates of the Exodus have to recognize that by 1209 B.C.E., the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah, successor to Ramses II, was responsible for subduing "four entities...in Canaan: Ascalon, Gezer, Yenoam, and Israel" (*ABD*).^b The Merneptah Stela includes a victory poem, remarking how "Israel is laid waste; its seed is not."^c So, sometime by the late Thirteenth Century B.C.E., the Israelites had established themselves to some degree or another in the Promised Land—numerous enough to have been attacked and defeated in battle by an invading Egyptian force.

The **Fifteenth Century B.C.E.** timing of the Exodus comes from a straightforward reading of the Biblical text. 1 Kings 6:1 states, "Now it came about in the four hundred and eightieth year after the sons of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD." The Exodus is placed 480 years before Solomon's fourth year as king, which was 967 B.C.E. Counting 480 years back, then, yields a date of 1447 B.C.E. Even if some rounding off of numbers is considered, it is still thought that the Exodus occurred in the mid-to-early Fifteenth

^a J.H. Walton, "Exodus, Date of," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 258.

^b K.A. Kitchen, "Exodus, the," in *ABD*, 2:702.

^c Walton, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 262.

Century B.C.E.^d This would mean that among the candidates of the Pharaoh for the Exodus would include either Thutmose III or Amenhotep I.^e Around two centuries would have transpired to allow the Israelites time to settle in the Promised Land and establish themselves to a considerable degree, so much so that the later Pharaoh Merneptah would be able to attack an entrenched resident of Canaan.

Advocates of the **Thirteenth Century B.C.E.** timing of the Exodus consider it a bit lackadaisical to just take the 480 years of 1 Kings 6:1 at face value (K.A. Kitchen actually considers it the “lazy man’s solution”),^f and that it instead needs to be interpreted as a representative number, such as a holder for 12 generations of 40 years or something. Looking at events within Ancient Egypt, Exodus 1:11 records how the Israelites “built for Pharaoh storage cities, Pithom and Raamses.” It is noted how the city of Pi-Ramesse (presumably named for the Pharaoh) was an east-delta city built by Ramses II (1272-1213 B.C.E.), and as Kitchen concludes, “the end of the oppression and the start of the Exodus could not precede the accession of this king at the earliest, i.e., not before 1279 B.C...That is only a little more than 300 years before Solomon” (*ABD*).^g He also details how the Book of Judges probably also includes overlapping terms of various judges, which are not to be viewed in strict sequence.^h From a theological perspective, Kitchen also thinks, “it must be emphasized that the formation of the Sinai/Moab covenant (Exodus-Leviticus; Deuteronomy) in its basic framework belongs squarely within the period 1380-1200 B.C.” (*ABD*).ⁱ

In response to the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. Exodus view, Fifteenth Century Exodus B.C.E. advocates like to present a series of archaeological sites from Canaan, conquered by Joshua, that they feel date to a much earlier period than the 1200s B.C.E.^j Of particular note is what city of Jericho was destroyed by Joshua during the Conquest, as there are various Jerichos to choose from. Walton indicates, “If Jericho city IV is the city conquered by Joshua...the exodus must have been in the fifteenth century,” but then goes on to point out, “There is still much to be done before this perennial controversy can begin to find resolution.”^k Fifteenth Century B.C.E. advocates point to the presumed dates of archaeological locations in Israel, and move backward to the Exodus. Contrary to this, Thirteenth Century B.C.E. advocates try to place the Exodus within the history of Ancient Egypt, and then they move forward. There is no doubting that one’s starting point is what determines what date of the Exodus is favored.

Even if conservative interpreters are not entirely agreed on the timing of the Exodus, this does not mean that they treat the Book of Exodus as an historical fiction. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III note in their work *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, “it appears that the archaeological evidence may be harmonized with the most natural reading of biblical texts that describe a fifteenth-century Exodus and conquest. The text, however, does not permit certainty on the subject. There are arguments for a late date for the Exodus...that treat the text with integrity.”^l One will encounter conservative resources on Exodus, and the whole of the Pentateuch today, that include edifying and relevant commentary for Believers in Messiah compiled from both a Fifteenth and Thirteenth B.C.E. Exodus viewpoint.

Most of today’s Messianics probably hold to a Fifteenth Century B.C.E. Exodus, thus making the Torah approximately 3,500 years old. There are various Messianic teachers, including TNN Online editor J.K. McKee, who lean toward a Thirteenth Century B.C.E. Exodus, making the Torah approximately 3,300 years old. He feels that it is best that we consider the role of the Ancient Israelites living under Egyptian servitude *first*, and that it is probably best for us to

^d Cf. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 59.

^e Cf. Walton, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 267.

^f Kitchen, in *ABD*, 2:702.

^g *Ibid.*

^h *Ibid.*

ⁱ *Ibid.*, 2:703.

^j Cf. Walton, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 264-266.

^k *Ibid.*, 270.

^l Dillard and Longman, 62.

recognize that the later chronology of the Judges and Israelite monarchs is not at clear-cut as some may want it to be. However, the most important point is that we treat the Book of Exodus with integrity, affirming how God acted miraculously in delivering Ancient Israel out of bondage and into freedom, humiliating the Egyptian Empire. No Messianic teacher today, even those with some liberal theological leanings quite thankfully, has ever promoted that the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt was total fiction.^m

posted 22 February, 2010

Exodus, numbers of: What can you tell me about the controversy surrounding the numbers of the Exodus?

Whether one is aware of it or not, there has been considerable discussion over the past century regarding the numbers of the Exodus, and hence the population of Ancient Israel in the wilderness. This is not a liberal discussion or a conservative discussion, exclusively. Both liberals and conservatives, Jewish and Christian scholars, have expressed various opinions about the meanings of the population of Israel as seen in both Exodus 12 in Numbers 1. *NIDB* offers a summation of the traditional view:

“The Bible states that 600,000 men took part in the Exodus (Exod 12:37). A year later the number of male Israelites over the age of twenty was 603,550 (Num 1:46).”^m

The Rabbinic tradition as seen in the Talmud likewise seems to confirm this:

“R. Simeon b. Judah of Kefar Akko says in the name of R. Simeon, ‘You have nothing whatsoever in the Torah for which six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty covenants were not made, equivalent to the number of people who went forth from Egypt.’ Said Rabbi, ‘If matters are in accord with the view of R. Simeon of Judah of Kefar Akko which he said in the name of R. Simeon, then you have nothing whatsoever in the Torah on account of which sixteen covenants were not made, and there is with each one of them six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty’” (b.*Sotah* 37b).^o

This discusses the opinion that 603,550 individual “covenants” were made at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 12:37 in most English versions appears: “the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children.” This number is then often extrapolated as meaning that plus women, children, and others of the “mixed multitude” (Exodus 12:38), the total number of the Ancient Israelites must have been in the range of 2-3 million. Numbers 1:46 will later say, “all the numbered men were 603,550.” Many in Orthodox Judaism and evangelical Christianity accept this without any further engagement, and almost no Messianics as of today (at least to our ministry’s knowledge) have really engaged this subject further.

Doubts over the total numbers of the Exodus reaching 2-3 million have always existed in both liberal *and* conservative circles. As K.A. Kitchen summarizes, “For the last century or more, commentators have fought shy of the statement that ‘about 600,000 went on foot, plus women and children’ (Exod. 12:37), with its seeming implication of an exodus of two million people or so.”^p Far from this being only an academic discussion, untenable to your average layperson, the venerable *NIV Study Bible* notes (commenting on Numbers 1), “[V]arious speculations have arisen regarding the meaning of the Hebrew word for ‘thousand.’”^q The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* goes a step further, indicating:

“The census total of 603,550...is extremely high...It has been suggested that the Hebrew word translated ‘thousand’...is an old term for a subsection of a tribe..., based on the procedures

^m For further consideration, consult Kitchen’s full article, in *ABD*, 2:700-708, and Walton’s full article, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 258-272.

ⁿ Charles F. Pfeiffer, “Exodus,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 334.

^o *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

^p K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 264.

^q Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 189.

for military muster employed by other ancient peoples, and that the original number follows ‘thousand’ in each case, e.g. Reuben had forty-six tribal subsections with a total of five hundred men (v. 21). This reduces the total [of Reuben] to 5,550.”^r

Bible translations, whether produced by conservatives or liberals, generally do sit on the overly conservative side (often for market reasons). Thus, no Bible translation to date has really broken out of rendering “thousand” as something otherwise, even though there are plenty of commentaries on the Pentateuch that will discuss this issue.

There are good textual reasons to suggest that the total numbers of the Exodus were less than 2-3 million, and even less than 600,000. When one thinks that 2-3 million people were leaving Egypt, heading toward the Red Sea, he or she should be somewhat perplexed at how easily the Israelites were disturbed when only 600 Egyptian chariots chase them down (Exodus 14:7). As the people cry to Moses, “Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14:11). More than a few people wonder if 2-3 million people could have been severely threatened by a mere 600 chariots. (These were not armored tanks!) Either the Ancient Israelites were even more foolish than we commonly give them credit, or there is something that we might have missed.

The issue in question in both Exodus 12 and Numbers 1 concerns the Hebrew term *elef* (אֶלֶף), and what it might mean against its Semitic cognates. Nahum M. Sarna comments, “the logistics involved in moving two million people together with their cattle and herds across the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptian chariots in hot pursuit” begs many questions. “In response to these problems, it has been suggested that the Hebrew ‘*elef*, usually rendered ‘thousand,’ here means a ‘clan’ or that it signifies a small military unit—the number of fighting men levied from each tribe.”^s Kitchen goes on to explain,

“In the Biblical texts, the actual words for ‘ten(s)’ and ‘hundred(s)’ are not ambiguous, and present no problem on that score; the only question (usually) is whether they have been correctly recopied down the centuries. With ‘*eleph*, ‘thousand,’ the matter is very different, as is universally accepted. In Hebrew, as in English (and elsewhere), words that look alike can be confused when found without a clear context. On its own, ‘bark’ in English can mean the skin of a tree, the sound of a dog, and an early ship or an ancient ceremonial boat. Only the content tells us which meaning is intended. The same applies to the word(s) ‘*lp* in Hebrew. (1) We have ‘*eleph*, ‘thousand,’ which has clear contexts like Gen. 20:16 (price) or Num. 3:50 (amount). But (2) there is ‘*eleph* for a group—be it a clan/family, a (military) squad, a rota of Levites or priests, etc....It is plain that in other passages of the Hebrew Bible there are clear examples where ‘*eleph* makes no sense if translated ‘thousand’ but good sense if rendered otherwise, e.g., as ‘leader’ or the like.”^t

When this information is all considered, one is presented with a number of possibilities concerning the total numbers of the Exodus, which does reduce it from 603,500. Scholars have proposed various sums, ranging anywhere from 20,000-22,000 to often as high at 140,000.”^u When offering any alternatives to the traditional view of 2-3 million in both Exodus and Numbers, one has to ask whether 603 *elef* 550 are the total numbers of fighting men, or the total numbers of men. What about the priests, shepherds, and other men in Israel who formed the infrastructure of the camp? What about the women and children, and the average size of families? What about the men under twenty who could not fight? What about any others? When these factors are considered, one can certainly say *in general terms*, that several hundred thousand could very well have been involved in the Exodus.

In the future as Messianic Biblical scholarship becomes more engaged with contemporary opinion, there are likely to be more discussions regarding this issue. Many will still hold to the

^r Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, RSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 161.

^s Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 62.

^t Kitchen, 264.

^u Cf. *Ibid.*, 265.

traditional view of 2-3 million in the Exodus. But many others are likely to just say that several hundred thousand were involved. Either way, both positions rightly advocate that there were scores of people involved, and to hold to only several hundred thousand being in the Exodus is by no means a liberal position. A liberal position would be suggesting that the Exodus and God's judgments on Egypt are only important *myths* that formed the basis of a group of nomads called "Israel," and at the very most, 600 people were involved in some kind of wandering with the numbers exaggerated.

updated 21 February, 2010

Exodus, Pharaoh who did not know Joseph: Exodus 1:8 says that a Pharaoh came to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph. How is this possible when the final part of Genesis says that Joseph was made second only to Pharaoh? How did the Israelites find themselves enslaved by Egypt?

Genesis 41:40-43 neatly summarizes the position that the Pharaoh of Egypt gave to Joseph: "You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you." Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, 'Bow the knee!' And he set him over all the land of Egypt."

With Joseph being made viceroy of Egypt and saving Egypt from the terrible famine, one would expect that some kind of record would have been made about him. We would assume that successive Pharaohs would have at least known about Joseph, but this does not seem to be the case in the opening verses of Exodus, where a new Pharaoh comes to power and the Israelites in Egypt are enslaved:

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land'" (Exodus 1:8-10).

There are a variety of views as to why a Pharaoh came to power "who did not know about Joseph" (NIV). A proper view of this can allude many interpreters who are not equipped with an historical understanding of the Scriptures, which can generally be nursed by employing good commentaries. The *ArtScroll Chumash*, commonly used in today's Messianic community, indicates that "Either it was literally a new king, or an existing monarch with 'new' policies, who found it convenient to 'ignore' Joseph's monumental contributions to the country (*Sotah* 11a)."^v While this gives us an important clue, and is indeed very possible, there are some more specific things that we need to consider.

Nahum Sarna indicates that "The most reasonable explanation for the change in fortune lies in the policies adopted by the pharaohs of the Nineteenth Dynasty (ca. 1306-1200 B.C.E.), and especially by Ramses II (ca. 1290-1224 B.C.E.), who shifted Egypt's administrative and strategic center of gravity to the eastern Delta of the Nile."^w He gives a further clue on his commentary for vs. 9-10 as to why the Egyptians may have been fearful of the Ancient Hebrews:

"The eastern Delta of the Nile was vulnerable to penetration from Asia. In the middle of the eighteenth century B.C.E. it had been infiltrated by the Hyksos, an Egyptian term meaning 'rulers of foreign lands.' The Hyksos were a conglomeration of ethnic tribes among whom Semites predominated. They gradually took over Lower Egypt and ruled it until their expulsion in the second half of the sixteenth century B.C.E."^x

^v Nosson Scherman, ed., et. al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 293.

^w Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 4.

^x *Ibid.*, 5.

When we consider some of these factors in our reading of Exodus 1, what is most likely to have happened is that the Ancient Israelites found themselves embroiled in a political conflict beyond their control. This would have been the general time that Jacob and his family migrated into Egypt to avoid the famine, if we accept the prophecy that Israel would be in Egypt four hundred years (Genesis 15:13). This would have occurred at about the same time of the Hyksos invasion of Egypt, who later took over Northern Egypt where the Israelites lived. The Egyptians, not making any distinctions between the Hyksos and the Hebrews—both being Semitic peoples, coupled with the possibility of a new dynasty coming to power, would have easily enslaved them as they took back control of their land.

A new Pharaoh of Egypt from a new dynasty could have easily not known of Joseph because the Israelites settled in Goshen, in the Nile Delta region of Lower Egypt, and as Pharaoh he would have been from Upper Egypt or Southern Egypt, moving back into previously conquered territories. Wanting to rebuild an empire that had been lost, the Israelites having multiplied would make a convenient workforce. Politically it would have been easy to enslave them, because as Semites they would remind many Egyptians of the Hyksos invasion.

updated 19 February, 2010

Exodus, route of: What do you think is the correct route of the Exodus taken by the Ancient Israelites?

The challenge that Biblical scholars have had regarding the route of the Exodus has varied facets to it. While there are certainly some specific details given to us in the Torah of Ancient Israel's trek from Egypt to Mount Sinai (Exodus chs. 14-19; Numbers 33), too frequently this is more of a list of obscure place names that no longer exist than anything else. While everyone can be agreed that the Israelites moved in territory that today composes the countries of Egypt, Israel, and possibly also Jordan and Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to tell for certain what the exact route was that the Israelites took. Sadly, modern day politics and the volatility of the region, frequently prevent archaeologists from examining the different sites relevant to the Ancient Israelites' journeys.

There are three main views of the route of the Exodus, which Biblical scholars and students, do have available to them to consider, in their evaluations of the Israelites' journeys:

1. The **Northern Route Theory** argues that the Israelites crossed Lake Sirbonis, adjacent to the Mediterranean, and that Mount Sinai was located in the northern Sinai Peninsula. This view does not have a wide amount of support today. Notably against it is how God prohibited the Israelites from traveling via a route that would take them into Philistia (Exodus 13:17).
2. The **Southern Route Theory** is the most widely espoused today. It advocates that the Israelites probably crossed between the many marshy, water boundaries (now dry) in the isthmus between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, which moved northward from the Gulf of Suez. The Israelites headed south to a site in the Sinai Peninsula, the traditional location of Mount Sinai being Jebel Musa. While there are variations of this viewpoint, one of the main criticisms of it is that the Sinai Peninsula (or at least some of it) was controlled by the Egyptian Empire, and an escape from Egypt would surely have to constitute being completely removed from Pharaoh's jurisdiction.
3. The **Arabian Route Theory** is something that has only been recently suggested. It postulates that the traditional location of Mount Sinai is wrong, and that the Red Sea that the Israelites crossed is today's Gulf of Aqaba, sitting to the east of the modern-day Sinai Peninsula. Since the Sinai Peninsula was still controlled by Egypt, the Israelites could have escaped via the Darb el-Hajj, or a trade route connecting Egypt to Arabia. The volcanic Mount Bedr is proposed as a possible site for Mount Sinai. While there are

compelling reasons in favor of this theory, not enough work or investigation has been undertaken at present to confirm it.

Given the three options proposed for the route of the Exodus, there are some good reasons for us to consider the suggestions made by the Arabian Route Theory. It does advocate that the Israelites would be completely out of Egyptian territory before arriving at Mount Sinai. What it lacks is enough scholarly research and support at present. But, given the great appreciation that evangelical Christians have for the Exodus, as well as the interests of Jewish academia, we can be guaranteed that more investigation into this third proposal will be available in the future.^y

posted 21 February, 2010

Extra-Biblical Literature: Could you summarize what the major bodies of extra-Biblical literature are for me? How much credence do you give them in your teachings?

Our article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation” addresses the issue of extra-Biblical literature in our theology in great detail. These are secondary and tertiary sources that can be employed in one’s examination of Scripture that will often give light to the historical background of a passage, or how it has been interpreted among ancient communities. The key in knowing what to give credence to and not give credence to rests in one’s critical reasoning of a Biblical text and employing spiritual discernment.

posted 26 September, 2006

Ezekiel, Book of: What can you tell me about the composition of the Book of Ezekiel?

Approximate date: 593-573 B.C.E. (Right, some conservative-moderate); 500s B.C.E. (some conservative-moderate); 500s-300s B.C.E. (Left)

Author(s): Ezekiel (Right; some conservative-moderate); Ezekiel and/or additional editors (some conservative-moderate); Ezekiel and/or anonymous writers and editors (Left)

Location of prophet/author(s): Land of Israel, Jerusalem, and/or Babylon (Right, conservative-moderate) Babylon and/or Land of Israel (Left)

Target audience and their location: Southern Kingdom Israelites at the beginning of the Babylonian exile (Right, some conservative-moderate, Left); Southern Kingdom Israelites during the Babylonian exile (some conservative-moderate, some Left); Southern Kingdom Israelites after the Babylonian exile (some Left)

The Book of Ezekiel (Heb. *Yechezkel*, יְחֶזְקֵאל) can be one of the most difficult to interpret among the prophetic texts of the Tanach. Ezekiel is one of the most involved Biblical books in regard to ancient history, as Ezekiel’s prophecies are given against the backdrop of the Southern Kingdom’s judgment and exile to Babylon. Ezekiel himself, from a priestly family (1:1), was an exile to Babylon taken there along with King Jehoiachin (cf. 2 Kings 24:8-17), and while in Babylon was commissioned to be a prophet (1:1-3). Ezekiel’s prophetic ministry overlapped that of Jeremiah. Being from a priestly line, his prophecies included an emphasis on the Temple and its rituals (chs. 8-11; 40-48). Deeply entwined in Ezekiel’s words are an innate knowledge, on his part, of the affairs of his contemporary world (*EXP*, 6:737-739; *ABD*, 2:713-714). Ezekiel was a person who directly involved himself in the importance of his prophecies, sometimes speaking as though his audience is right there as is the case when he addresses God’s judgment on foreign powers (*NBCR*, 665). While in Babylon, Ezekiel had a large degree of freedom.

Many of Ezekiel’s prophecies include stated dates as to when they are delivered, allowing interpreters to approximate the time that Ezekiel served as a prophet. Some commentators have devised elaborate charts attempting to calculate the exact dates that certain prophecies were delivered (*EXP*, 6:740-741; *ABD*, 2:713; Dillard and Longman, 315). Ezekiel prophesied both before

^y The information summarized here has been largely adapted from Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 108-109, 112.

and after the exiles were taken to Babylon, over a period of about 25 years. The principal audience of Ezekiel was exilic.

Ezekiel is very clearly named in the text as the one delivering the prophecies (1:3). Whether Ezekiel actually wrote down these prophecies, or had a scribe or a group surrounding him write them down, is another issue (Harrison, 839). Jewish tradition in the Talmud holds that the men of the Great Synagogue composed the Book of Ezekiel in the early post-exilic period (b.*Bava Batra* 15a; Harrison, 823). The Book of Ezekiel is very autobiographical (*NIDB*, 336), and most conservatives lean toward some form of literary unity. Literary unity does not mean that Ezekiel could not have edited his own prophecies, or for that matter have had a disciple of his edit and compile them (*ISBE*, 2:258). “[T]he book of Ezekiel is not a collection of oracles strung together by an editor, but manifests all the signs of having a thorough plan behind its composition” (*ABD*, 2:719). It is also not impossible that some additional editing of Ezekiel took place after the exile to add historical statements giving the book some context (*ISBE*, 2:258-259).

Severe criticism of the Book of Ezekiel did not begin until the second quarter of the Twentieth Century (Harrison, 823-832; *EXP*, 6:739), as liberal scholarship had actually held to some form of unity for the text (Dillard and Longman, 316). Liberals who make note of Ezekiel’s priestly status will place significant importance on Ezekiel being influenced by the so-called Priestly materials or P source of the Pentateuch (*ABD*, 2:717). Liberals today generally argue that Ezekiel is an edited book, based on perceived inconsistencies in chronology, perhaps indicating multiple sources for its composition (*IDB*, 2:206-207; *ABD*, 2:715-716). Some of the first liberal positions regarding Ezekiel afforded no more than one-seventh of the Ezekiel’s material to Ezekiel himself (*NBCR*, 664; *ISBE*, 2:251). Most liberals have become more moderate in their criticism, holding that Ezekiel prophesied in multiple locations, Jerusalem and Babylon (*NBCR*, 664), a position also held by many conservatives (*ISBE*, 2:252).

Past liberal scholarship thought that the Book of Ezekiel was a post-exilic work, perhaps composed as late as the Third Century B.C.E. (*ISBE*, 2:251). C.C. Torrey perhaps held to the most extreme view: “the prophecy was a literary creation, and Ezekiel was not an historical individual” (Dillard and Longman, 317). While other liberals considered Ezekiel historical, they nevertheless considered the prophet himself to be a mentally disturbed individual (Harrison, 849-852; Dillard and Longman, 319).

The Book of Ezekiel does contain some Aramaisms, which would be expected considering a likely Babylonian location for its composition (Harrison, 847). Ezekiel does demonstrate some words that are difficult to translate into English, which may be on account of copyist errors (*ABD*, 2:716). Conservatives such as Harrison feel “The text of Ezekiel has been poorly preserved, due partly to the fact that obscurities in the language, as well as technical expressions...led copyists into frequent error” (Harrison, 854). Some have noted that the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Ezekiel is corrupt in places, and needs to be amended by its Septuagint and Syriac translations (*IDB*, 2:213; Harrison, 854-855; Dillard and Longman, 320). There are other conservatives who believe that Ezekiel in the MT as it stands is relatively intact, with no significant need to augment one’s study with ancient sources (*EXP*, 6:746).

Ezekiel’s prophecies begin with him delivering some stern words of God’s judgment against his fellow Jews regarding the fall of Jerusalem (chs. 1-24). Some theologians believe these prophecies were delivered while in Babylon, re-examining why the Jewish exiles were there, whereas many others believe that these prophecies were delivered circa 593-587 B.C.E. by Ezekiel in Jerusalem (*NIDB*, 336), with the remainder of his prophecies being delivered while in Babylon. The circumstances of the exile were not easy for the Jews in Babylon. The exiles needed to live at peace with themselves in their new environment because God’s punishment was not going to be shortened or lifted. Much of Ezekiel’s prophecies are judgments levied against Ancient Israel’s neighbors of Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt (chs. 25-32). The remainder of Ezekiel’s prophecies concern the restoration and revival of Israel and its prominence (chs. 33-48).

A major theme seen in the Book of Ezekiel is God's sovereignty over the affairs of history. God reveals Himself through His direct interjection into human events, and uses various powers to accomplish His tasks. God is able to respond to His people without Jerusalem standing, and can respond to their needs while in exile. Ezekiel follows a basic pattern of delivering his prophecies, pronouncing (1) judgment against Israel, (2) judgment against the world, and (3) consolation of Israel. Ezekiel balances words of judgment with the promise of restoration. In chs. 8-11 Ezekiel prophesies the destruction of Solomon's Temple, but promises a restored and renewed temple in chs. 40-48. "The Lord has determined, for the sake of the divine reputation in the world, to restore and to transform Israel so that all might come to recognize the Lord as the only God" (*New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1153).

There is a great amount of debate among interpreters as to how much or how little of Ezekiel is futuristic (*ISBE*, 2:262-263). It is very safe to say that much of Ezekiel uses bizarre imagery (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1042), which is widely given a great deal of significance in the Jewish mystical tradition (*ISBE*, 2:260; *Jewish Study Bible*, 1043), particularly as it concerns God's throne (ch. 1). Many Jewish interpreters today tend to see Ezekiel's Messianic Age as fulfilled somewhat in the return of the exiles and the reconstruction of Jerusalem. The Book of Ezekiel certainly does give a reader a picture of the transition that took place before and after the exile (*IDB*, 2:211).

Christian interpreters tend to see much future fulfillment ahead to be accomplished via the Second Coming of Yeshua the Messiah. In this framework, however, it is easy to see that too many prophecy teachers make things out of Ezekiel that are not implied by the original context of various passages (Dillard and Longman, 322), mostly to force current events to fit some of kind of sensational teaching. Likewise, there is a great deal of Christian variance on how to interpret Ezekiel's Temple vision (chs. 40-48), with some opting for a literal fulfillment and others for a symbolic fulfillment (Dillard and Longman, 323).

The Book of Revelation in the Apostolic Scriptures is profoundly affected by the imagery and words of Ezekiel (*NBCR*, 665; Dillard and Longman, 326). The concepts of the holy city of New Jerusalem and the redeemed Earth are seen significantly in Ezekiel (*IDB*, 2:211). Some have even suggested some continuity between Ezekiel and themes seen in the Gospel of John (*IDB*, 2:212).

It does need to be noted that while Ezekiel was accepted into the Jewish canon of Scripture, "It was only after certain safeguards had been established" (*IDB*, 2:212; cf. Harrison, 823), so as to avoid some gross misinterpretation (*ISBE*, 2:260). Some Messianic examiners have attempted to study Ezekiel in detail, mostly as it concerns Ezekiel's emphasis on Israel's restoration. It is certainly good that Messianics today see the importance to examine the prophecies of Israel's restoration. However, most Messianic examination of Ezekiel is often devoid of any historical setting for his prophecies, and may likewise be too influenced by mystical Jewish views. These are certainly things to remedy in the future as a more comprehensive view of Ezekiel emerges.

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Ezra-Nehemiah, Book of: What can you tell me about the composition of the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah?

Approximate date: 440 B.C.E.-Ezra, 430 B.C.E.-Nehemiah (Right, some conservative-moderate); late 400s-early 300s (some conservative-moderate, some Left); 350-250 B.C.E. (some Left)

Author: Ezra (Right, some conservative-moderate); an anonymous Chronicler or historian (some conservative-moderate, some Left); unidentified redactors (some Left)

Location of author: Land of Israel, probably Jerusalem (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

Target audience and their location: Jewish exiles having returned from Babylonian captivity (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

The story of Ezra and Nehemiah begins where Chronicles ends, detailing the religious and social developments of the Second Temple Jewish community having returned from Babylonian exile. Ancient tradition regards these texts as a single book (Dillard and Longman, 179) from two distinct perspectives: Ezra dealing with the reestablishment of the Temple, and Nehemiah focusing on the reconstruction and restoration of Jerusalem. The text is named for its two principal protagonists: Ezra and Nehemiah. The material covers events from the Fifth to Fourth Centuries B.C.E. Its history closes the events of the Tanach or Old Testament canon.

Both Josephus and the Talmud refer to Ezra, but not to Nehemiah as a separate book, indicating that they were unified as one book sometime by the First Century B.C.E. The oldest copies of the Greek Septuagint considered it a single book (Harrison, 1135; *IDBSup*, 318), with the division between Ezra and Nehemiah not occurring in printed Hebrew Bibles until the Fifteenth Century (*EXP*, 4:572-573).

Christian tradition started separating the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Second-Third Centuries C.E. It places Ezra and Nehemiah among the histories, after Chronicles. The Jewish book order of the Tanach places Ezra-Nehemiah as the second to last book of the Tanach, before Chronicles, likely because it was canonized prior to Chronicles (*IDB*, 1:216; Harrison, 1136). Some printed Hebrew Bibles from the Thirteenth Century do actually place it after Chronicles (*IDBSup*, 318). Ezra-Nehemiah exists in two Greek forms: 1 Esdras and 2 Esdras (*NBCR*, 395; *ABD*, 2:732) appearing in the Apocrypha, which can be confusing for many if these texts are not referred to as the “Greek Ezra.”

Many conservatives agree that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah is the same author as Chronicles (*NBCR*, 395), but others do not (Dillard and Longman, 181). Jewish tradition in the Talmud ascribes authorship to Ezra (*b.Bava Batra* 15a), and this is adhered to by some Christian conservatives (Dillard and Longman, 180). Conservatives are not unified on whether or not Ezra-Nehemiah was fully written by Ezra the priest, or an unidentified Chronicler/historian. Ezra may have been the author of the personal narrations we see in the text (*NIDB*, 339). Likewise, Nehemiah may have been the author of his memoirs, later being brought together by a Chronicler or historian in the late Fifth or early Fourth Centuries B.C.E. (Harrison, 1150).

All conservatives recognize that the author of Ezra-Nehemiah surely had to use sources in his composition, including genealogies, censuses of returnees, and varied historical records and correspondence (*NIDB*, 701; *NBCR*, 397-398; *ISBE*, 2:264-265; 3:515; *EXP*, 4:574-575; *ABD*, 2:732-734; Dillard and Longman, 184-185; *EDB*, 956). Oral sources were probably also used in the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, the organization of this data in the text is not without debate, particularly in regard to the return of Nehemiah and Ezra to Jerusalem (*NBCR*, 396).

Many liberals today consider Ezra-Nehemiah to be a separate work from Chronicles because of differing theological themes, notably that “Chronicles’ pervasive use of immediate retribution as a theological lodestone is absent in Ezra-Nehemiah” (*EDB*, 956). Earlier liberals considered both Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles to be products of the Chronicler (*IDB*, 2:215; *ABD*, 2:734-735). Liberals generally argue for a mixing of sources between Ezra and Nehemiah, with parts of Nehemiah appearing in the middle of Ezra and vice versa. They doubt some of the historical claims of Ezra-Nehemiah (*IDB*, 2:217; *IDBSup*, 319-321), and many liberals have taken it

upon themselves to reconstruct its “fragments” (*IDBSup*, 322-327; *ABD*, 2:735, 738-739). In response, conservatives do not deny that there are some structuring problems in Ezra (Harrison, 1138-1139; *ISBE*, 2:265; *EXP*, 4:571-572), but not as many in Nehemiah (*ISBE*, 3:515), and certainly not enough to doubt the veracity of the text.

While many liberals severely doubt the historicity of Ezra-Nehemiah (*EXP*, 4:576-577), current trends among critical scholars indicate that this is changing. Problems with historicity may have to do with the names of contemporary leaders being repeated among several generations, and them actually being different people. Some scholars have not known who to associate with the text of Ezra-Nehemiah (*ISBE*, 3:515; *EXP*, 4:570), based on an interpretation of extant external data available. “[T]he overall perspective of the book and the general contours of its report have gained credence in recent years” (*EDB*, 449), based on an interpretation of available outside information that agrees with Biblical sources (Harrison, 1141-1143; *EXP*, 4:566-570). This effects the dating of Ezra-Nehemiah anywhere from the Fifth to Fourth Centuries B.C.E., with most conservatives and liberals now favoring some date in the 400s (*EXP*, 4:579-580; *EDB*, 956), even though some liberals favor a dating as late as the 200s (*ECB*, 314).

Nehemiah 1:1 indicates that Nehemiah may have been a separate composition, later redacted into Ezra, but this is strongly debated. “The book of Nehemiah can be read in one of two ways, on its own or as a single unit with Ezra. If we read it with Ezra, it forms a single story beginning with the initial return under Cyrus and leading on to a time about a century later when the new community is threatened in various ways” (*ECB*, 320). If we read the texts separately, then the protagonists Ezra and Nehemiah had nothing to do with one another, each performing entirely independent works. The editor would prefer that we maintain some kind of unity between Ezra and Nehemiah and its characters, and would also concede possible unity between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Lists feature predominantly in Ezra-Nehemiah, somehow linking it to what is seen in Chronicles (*IDBSup*, 321). Parts of Ezra-Nehemiah are written in first person, and other sections are written in third person. The final author or redactor of Ezra-Nehemiah is still probably the same person.

A common liberal argument concerning Ezra-Nehemiah is that Ezra presents himself as the “new Moses” (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1669; *ABD*, 2:737-738), and this view is commonly given as support for the JEDP documentary hypothesis of the Torah. Even if one accepts principal Mosaic authorship/composition of the Pentateuch, the Talmud accredits Ezra with placing the Torah in its final form (*b.Sanhedrin* 21b). Some “scholars also [consider] the possibility that Ezra was a major, perhaps *the* major redactor of the Pentateuch” (*EDB*, 450), meaning that Ezra played a role in the text that we possess today adding some additional information. Any conservative study of the Torah cannot disregard this factor and the role of Ezra in critically examining the data in the Torah.

The language of Ezra-Nehemiah is a mix of Hebrew and Aramaic (*NIDB*, 339; *ISBE*, 2:265). The Masoretic Text of Ezra-Nehemiah is relatively well preserved with no major textual difficulties (*EXP*, 4:586). There are two major witnesses to Ezra-Nehemiah in Greek: 1 Esdras is a paraphrase of the Hebrew and 2 Esdras is the relatively literal translation. 1 Esdras appears to reflect an older Hebrew version (*ABD*, 2:732). The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are firmly rooted within Persian history (*IDBSup*, 318-319), with Aramaic parts of this work largely relating to the decree of Cyrus and other interactions between the Jews and the Persians (*EXP*, 4:587).

The major theme seen in Ezra-Nehemiah is the restoration of God’s people from Babylonian exile. While political independence was not achieved, the Jewish exiles who returned are able to rebuild the Temple and resume its sacrificial cultus, getting the people to return to the instruction of the Torah (*EDB*, 450). God used pagan powers to judge Israel, but now He uses pagan powers to restore the Jews to their homeland. The repatriation of the exiles to the Promised Land was opposed by their Samaritan neighbors, and we see a major problem of mixed marriages. The restored community still needed help in trying to figure out its identity. There is no longer an emphasis on just the monarchy or the Temple as seen in previous works, but now on the holiness of the people themselves (Dillard and Longman, 186). The prophetic Books of Haggai

and Zechariah provide supplementary details on the social picture of post-exilic Judah (*IDB*, 2:217; *NBCR*, 395).

Ezra-Nehemiah gives us the first picture of post-exilic Judah, and the beginnings of Second Temple Judaism (*IDBSup*, 317). Ezra encourages the Jewish exiles who returned to reclaim and reidentify with their heritage, with some considering him to be “the father of Judaism” (*NBCR*, 398). Ezra serves a major role as “an authoritative scribe and priest, as well as a kind of proto-Rabbi who also has the authority of a prophet. His legal innovations are not seen as such, but are depicted as proper interpretation of eternally binding Mosaic law... This principle is at the heart of rabbinic interpretation, and his authenticity is never called into question within rabbinic Judaism” (*Jewish Study Bible*, 1670). In Ezra, we see the role of scribe largely taking over from the prophet (*NIDB*, 340), and a focus on publicly teaching the Torah to the people (Nehemiah 10:29; *NIDB*, 701).

What can Ezra-Nehemiah teach Messianic Believers today? Ezra and Nehemiah are two great figures of faith that we need not disregard as men to emulate. In our Tanach studies, is it possible that we have given too much attention to Moses at the expense of other important figures? Ezra-Nehemiah is notably not a text commonly discussed in Messianic circles, even though it has a message that is profoundly important for contemporary culture and Believers who are living in a world hostile to the gospel. Ezra-Nehemiah is a text that we must take more seriously to understand the salvation-history of Israel.

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