

# An Identity Crisis

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In today's Messianic world, if you ask anyone who he or she is you will undoubtedly get a wide variety of answers. Some will say that they are completed Jews who know Yeshua as their Messiah. Others will say that they are Torah observant followers of the God of Israel. Still, some you may encounter may say that they are "Israelites"—whatever that means to them. There are those who want a strong connection to Orthodox Judaism. There are those who want no connection to any kind of Judaism. There are likewise those who want no connection to any kind of Christianity.

Just who are we? The modern Messianic movement has reached a point in its development where this question needs to be answered. Do we have any connection to Judaism? Do we have any connection to Christianity? Who are we as individuals? Who are we corporately? What are we to become? What is our mission?

There are some who believe that the mission of the Messianic movement was to only create a venue by which Jewish people could more easily be presented with the gospel message—beyond some of the standard "Christian" trappings that have deterred Jewish evangelism for centuries. With a generation of Jews having received Yeshua as their Savior, some have started to think that the Messianic movement has fulfilled its mission. Thus, many of us—particularly non-Jewish Believers—who have spent any time involved in Messianic congregations, Torah studies, and the like should probably "hang up our cleats" now and go find an Israel-friendly evangelical church. The goal of saving a generation of Jewish people via the power of Jesus has been fulfilled—so these might say.

But what if we are to say that *only part* of the mission of the Messianic movement has been accomplished? It is certainly a good thing that a generation of Jewish people have been presented with the gospel—but is there more to be done? Certainly, in investigating the lifestyle practices and theology of the First Century Believers each one of us has been stimulated to reconsider how various passages of Scripture have been interpreted. We have gained access to literature such as the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrashim, and Dead Sea Scrolls that previous generations of scholars and theologians did not have access to. We have entered into new discussions on what Yeshua was teaching to His Disciples, and what Paul was communicating to fledgling pockets of early Believers. We have embraced a somewhat "new perspective"—as various theologians have termed it—in our approach to the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament.

The question of our identity is of paramount importance, particularly for the next ten years of Messianic Biblical Studies (2007-2017). In the eyes of some, we are either looking at the twilight years of the Messianic movement where we have fulfilled our goals. *Or*, we may start seeing the Messianic movement enter into its own. I mention ten years not to make any predictions about the end-times as some might, but only because of some trends I have witnessed in the past ten years (1997-2007)—and things that have been allowed to go on—will not be allowed in the next ten years. The "market," as it were, will simply not allow for it.

If we intend to be prepared for the changes that are ahead in the next decade, **it is urgent that we know who we are in the Lord** so we can fulfill the tasks that He has in store for us.

## Do we have any connection to Judaism?

While this may seem to be a very easy question to answer, in recent years it has become more and more difficult to gauge the kind of relationship today's Messianic movement has to Judaism. If we were to assume that the Messianic movement is only to be an evangelistic outreach to Jewish Believers, then it clearly does have a connection to Judaism, albeit in a cultural context. If the Messianic movement is solely to be a grouping of congregations and fellowships that worship the Lord in a Jewish-oriented manner, then obviously it has a connection to Judaism.

The challenge that has arisen in the past decade among Messianic congregations was unforeseen in the early days of Messianic Judaism: non-Jewish Believers have been informed and educated about their Hebraic Roots. They have learned about the significance between Passover and Yeshua's sacrifice. They have learned about the Divine rest that the weekly Sabbath is to

entail. They have learned what it means to study the Torah on a consistent basis, similar to how our Lord and His Apostles would reason from the Scriptures. They have had a Tanach or Old Testament opened to them that largely stayed closed in their previous church experience.

Because of the large influx of non-Jewish Believers into the Messianic movement, the dynamics of how we are supposed to identify ourselves have changed. It would not be irregular for a Jewish Believer in Yeshua to attend a *Shabbat* service with liturgy, wear a *kippah* and *tallit* (or *yarmulke* and *tallis*), and embrace a style of associating oneself to God that is truly consistent with his unique cultural heritage. But when a non-Jewish Believer enters into this arena, things get more complicated. Questions often get asked that would normally not be asked by the Jewish Believer.

On the one hand, the non-Jewish Believer recognizes some serious spiritual value in the Torah and in keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, appointed times, and kosher dietary laws. Many of these non-Jewish Believers have been welcomed into the fold by their fellow Jewish Believers, being encouraged that they are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12) and that these things are a part of their spiritual heritage as well. They are by no means discouraged from partaking of their faith heritage in Judaism. But then, others feel that “Judaism” is nothing more than a dead religion and that tradition has no place in the Kingdom of God.

Non-Jewish Believers who were not raised in Judaism or around a Jewish community are often those who ask questions about *why* things are done a certain way. These questions often start innocently, as these people are reading their Bibles and interpreting what they believe the text is communicating. They wonder where the *yarmulke* is in Scripture. They wonder why the New Moon is not really commemorated in Judaism. They wonder why the Divine Name of God is not spoken by Jews. They wonder why the Civil New Year begins at *Rosh HaShanah* in the Fall. They wonder why Jews separate meat and dairy. They wonder why Messianic Jews do not see things the way that they do when it comes to “Scripture Only.”

This view of “Scripture Only,” surprisingly, is not birthed out of the Protestant Reformation—but actually a misunderstanding of the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther or John Calvin, and later John Wesley, were not men who would simply read their Bibles and make assumptions about what the text was saying. They would read the text in its original languages, consult extant history and secondary literature, and make conclusions drawn on the evidence that they could accumulate. The difference between them and us today is that *we have access to substantially more information* that they did not have. Whereas Wesley as an Oxford scholar would have only been trained in the classics and Church history—we can be trained in the classics, Church history, *and* Rabbinical literature.

When we do this, what we witness in the Gospels is that Yeshua and His Disciples were not “radicals” who taught against the mainline cultural traditions of their day. In fact, there are a great many parallels between Yeshua’s teaching style and His Rabbinical contemporaries. They all taught about love for one’s fellow man, respect for others, and the need to be concerned with social justice. The difference between Yeshua and the Rabbis of His day was the fact that while the Rabbis could *only teach* about forgiving others—Yeshua could actually *enact that forgiveness* in His Person being the Son of God.

When we objectively examine the history of Second Temple Judaism and compare it to the Gospels, we do not see Yeshua “bucking the system” that much. He is obviously concerned with the abuses of those in power and makes a strong emphasis on social justice and the plight of the oppressed. But we never see Yeshua observing the festivals on a calendar different from the masses. We never see Yeshua using the Divine Name of God, something that was considered blasphemous in His day. And, we never see Yeshua disagreeing with the basic theological tenets of the Pharisees. If He were living today, Yeshua would fit well within the milieu of mainline Judaism.

Those who are content with only reading the Biblical text, as they see it—without any connection to the larger historical and theological world in which it was composed—will more easily make assumptions about Second Temple Judaism and its traditions that are faulty. This

trend has led to some embracing the Torah interpretations of the Karaites, a fringe sect of Judaism that rejects all of the Oral Law and only accepts a strict, literal reading of Scripture as being legitimate. Independent Messianics who embrace Karaite interpretations of the Torah widely follow a *halachah* that is not recognizably “Jewish,” by either the Jewish community, Messianic Jews, or even Christians. Even more significant, it has led to a great deal of strife and division in a Messianic community in desperate need of direction and more cohesion.

Many of us see the errors in throwing tradition totally out the window, because when we do this we may run the risk of misinterpreting Scripture—forgetting the original context in which a passage was delivered. The biggest tradition we have at our disposal is history. Likewise, when the Jewish community establishes a consistent way of following the Torah’s commandments, it helps bind people together and keep them as a more unified social unit.

For those of us—particularly non-Jewish Messianics—who recognize that we do have a connection to traditional Judaism, the question of “which Judaism” often does not get answered. This is because even when we orient ourselves toward a mainline Judaism we are confronted with the fact that there are three major branches today: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Which one of these branches would Yeshua or Paul be a part of, were they living today?

The Karaite extreme present in sectors of the independent Messianic community has not helped our theological or spiritual maturation. It effectively severs Messianics who embrace it from the larger Jewish world, to say nothing about the world at large.

But if our style of *halachah* should mirror a recognizable “Judaism,” which one should it be? The default position of many—perhaps in response to the Karaite extreme—is that following a style of Torah submission similar to Orthodox Judaism is best. Perhaps there are some Messianic Believers who feel a distinct call to minister and witness to the Orthodox community. These people should follow an Orthodox style of *halachah*. However, we need to consider that less than twelve percent of Jews today are Orthodox. What about the other eighty-eight percent? Who is going to reach out to them? Is all of the Messianic movement called to embrace an Orthodox Jewish style of *halachah*?

Part of our identity crisis today is focused around this very issue. Many feel it incumbent upon themselves—partially to respond to the Karaite extreme among us—to embrace a style of Torah observance consistent with Orthodox Judaism. Ironically, this frequently takes place with people who have never seen or interacted with an Orthodox Jew. Perhaps this is because Orthodox Jews do not often interact with others outside of their communities. Even more so, this may be because Orthodox Jews are largely not engaged with society around them or contemporary issues. When it comes to their Biblical scholarship, while Orthodox Judaism has a great appreciation for tradition, it notably does not consider any historical or textual criticism of the Scriptures. It just assumes things like the Torah being preserved perfectly from Sinai, which we *should not* automatically assume.

Some Messianics who embrace an Orthodox style of *halachah* cut themselves off from others around them. This starts slowly. Your friends can no longer come to *Shabbat* services because they may have to drive a car. Their clothing and dress seem like something out of Seventeenth Century Europe. Your friends are having money problems because all of the food and toiletries they buy have to have a Rabbinical seal of approval, and cost four times the average price. The young married couple seems overwhelmed as they have had four children in the past five years. That nice invitation you gave them to dinner—*just forget it*. And, did Bob just change his name to Shlomo? What would his Uncle Robert—whom he was named after—think about that?

Perhaps a few are legitimately called to do this. But more often than not, these trends create more problems than they are worth. When people are more concerned on *Shabbat* at making sure that their toilet paper has been pre-torn—than whether or not they are truly communing with the Lord—this is a problem. When people look down on others’ spirituality because Jim has not changed his name to Ya’akov, or Bill trims his beard, or Charlie has no beard—this is a problem. When people forget the major ethical and moral dilemmas of daily

living—this is a problem. And the biggest problem with people like this is that they often cut themselves off from society at large and live in their own closed-off communities.

The Jewish Apostles of Yeshua demonstrated a different approach. Two of the Disciples themselves, Andrew and Philip, notably had names that were not Hebrew—but of Greek origin. The Apostles went to diverse places in the Mediterranean to proclaim the gospel of salvation not only to their fellow Jews, but also non-Jews of the nations. They ministered to people who may not have only had pork for breakfast, but may have visited a brothel the night before. They reached out to pagan societies and cultures that were spiritually bankrupt and desperately needed change. The Apostle Paul himself debated with Epicureans and Stoics at the Areopagus in Athens using their own methods of debate. While they maintained a high level of obedience to the Torah, they were able to go out of their comfort zones and interact with the heathen. They did not close themselves off from the world around them.

When we consider this, would Yeshua and His Apostles be Orthodox Jews were they living today? I would *cautiously* say that they would **not** be Orthodox Jews. I would not affirm the opposite extreme of them being Karaites, either—but instead would place them among the more Centrist branches of modern Judaism. They would be among those today that hold a high regard for the Torah, see the value in Jewish tradition, but also interact with the world at large. They would directly counter criticism against the Bible, and not casually dismiss or ignore it. They would maintain a modern style of *halachah* that would set them apart as Jews, but would still allow them to look like ordinary people in a crowd. They would allow the goodness of their character and ethics draw people to them—rather than what they were wearing. I believe they would encourage their non-Jewish followers to likewise emulate them so that they too could enact a change and positive difference in their communities.

Is it wise for us to place our style of doing things outside the bounds of mainline Judaism? No. When someone attends a Messianic congregation, there needs to be some things that are recognizably Jewish. There needs to be Hebrew liturgy. There needs to be a Torah teaching. Men can be wearing *kippahs*. There needs to be a respect for established protocol.

But, not all liturgy needs to be in Hebrew, as some can remain in English. There can certainly be Bible teaching independent of the Torah. No one need look down on those dressed or groomed differently. Personal freedom and choice need to be respected, and if people want to see others change—then they should lead by a positive example. I believe if we can do this then today's Messianic community will avoid most of the problems of having an identity crisis in regard to our Jewish heritage.

### **Do we have any connection to Christianity?**

The question of whether or not today's Messianic movement has any connection to Christianity is much more difficult than whether it has any connection to Judaism. Even those who believe that embracing an *halachic* style consistent with a Centrist branch of Judaism is best for modern Messianics, still often have difficulty when it comes to the subject of “the Church.” Even Messianics who are engaged with society will still make errors when it comes to mainstream Christianity—and even more so, Church history. Is this just having a lack of information, or is it because our position on the Christian Church needs to be improved? What must we consider—or reconsider?

It is not uncommon to hear claims in today's Messianic movement like: “All Christians believe that salvation is permanent.” But this is only speaking of Calvinists, who believe that salvation is permanent—whereas Arminians and Wesleyans believe that salvation can be lost. “All Christians worship the Virgin Mary.” But this is only speaking of some Roman Catholics; Protestants do not worship Mary the mother of Yeshua. “All Christians hate Jews.” Certainly there have been many people throughout Church history who have hated Jews; but there have also been many people throughout Church history who have loved the Jewish people and supported them through trials.

While many of us are Messianic today because modern Christianity has some doctrinal errors, namely its wide dismissal of the Torah and Tanach as relevant instruction, we need not totally cast aside our Christian heritage. In fact, we have to see much of what we are doing as continuing the actions of the Reformers who first protested against the obvious errors of Catholicism. We have to remind ourselves that Christianity's widespread view of the Law and its commandments one-hundred years ago was much more positive than it is today in an age of moral relativism and intense criticism against Scripture. The same protests that we issue as Messianics against antinomianism were more widely issued from Christian pulpits a century ago. Can we afford to casually disregard our Christian theological heritage?

While we as Messianic Believers are not attending Sunday Church services, celebrating Christmas or Easter, and eating anything we want any more—we do have to wonder if our Christian forbearers would see the things that we see today. I have to ask myself as a Messianic whether or not my great-grandfather, Bishop Marvin A. Franklin, would see value in today's Messianic movement. Would he see it as a Biblically sound, life-changing movement that would make a difference in people's lives? I have to consider my own Methodist background and wonder if John Wesley—were he living today—would see some of these things. What if Oxford had a Judaic studies department in the Eighteenth Century? Would his view of the Scriptures have been a little different? Would he see the Messianic movement as a holy move of God designed to have people live separated lives unto Him? Would he see us emphasizing the transforming love of God that warmed his heart?

In some ways, recognizing that we have a connection to Christianity is rather easy. There have been scores of godly men and women, who were they living today, would probably be convicted about many of the same things that you and I are convicted about. But I would also dare say that they might scold us about our attitude toward others who have gone before us. They might tell us that each individual is accountable before God for his or her own actions, and that we must check ourselves before we “blast” anyone else. They would take great offense at how our Christian theological heritage is widely cast aside as not having any value by many of today's Messianic Believers. They would wonder about what we think of the men and women who first presented us with the gospel—who were likely Christians—and whether or not their spiritual investment in our lives was pointless. They might ask where the love, grace, and mercy are. They would ask how Torah observance has made us men and women who are functioning in greater wisdom and discernment from the Almighty.

This is not to say that the Christian Church does not have its dark moments. There is much that the Church as a whole must answer for—and it has. Jewish-Christian relations are better than they have ever been since the First Century. Modern Germany has unbelievably good relations with the State of Israel, and has done its best to rectify its mistakes. But we need not think that all Christians for all time have been anti-Semitic. We need to begin to recognize that just as there are various “Judaisms,” so are there various “Christianities.” If we can do this, and not paint the Christian Church with a large brush, then we should be able to overcome our identity crisis in regard to our Christian heritage.

### Who are we as individuals?

When we can recognize the shared spiritual and theological heritage that we as Messianic Believers have from both Judaism and Christianity, we should then be in the proper position to consider who we are as individuals. We do sit between two great religions that both offer us a great deal to consider in our relationship with God and with society at large. We have not one—but two—traditions to consider in our approach and application of Scripture. As Messianic Believers, I think it is important that we incorporate elements of both into our faith. However, *neither one* should be the center of our faith. **The center of our faith and identity should be found in Yeshua the Messiah and His work for us.**

When one reads the letters of Paul, we are confronted with a man who knew who he was in the Lord. He tells the Philippians he was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of

the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee,” but then also must say “as to zeal, a persecutor of the [assembly]; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah” (3:5,6-7). Paul tells these people what his ethnic and social credentials were, and then how they led to him doing things that he should not have done—namely persecute the community of faith prior to his conversion.

Some interpreters have taken Paul’s words as meaning that he has turned his back on Judaism, the Torah, and his heritage. It is all “dung” (KJV) they say—and likewise we should consider these things as well. But what is all of this being compared to? Paul clarifies this in v. 8: “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Messiah.” He says, “I count everything sheer loss” (NEB) compared to Yeshua the Messiah in his life.

When we set these statements against a likely Philippian audience of retired Roman soldiers, their families, and their associates, the text can be properly applied. Paul recognizes that compared to Yeshua his human achievements and abilities are nothing—as a Jew who knew the God of Israel and followed His commands. And to the Philippians he might be saying: “And you fought in Caesar’s legions? If my background means nothing compared to our Lord—how much more does yours?” Human achievements are truly nothing in light of Him!

Paul is not telling any of us to turn our backs on our unique ethnic backgrounds, nor is he telling us to shun the faith heritage that we share in Judaism. However, **he does place the work of Yeshua as central in his life.** Compared to the everlasting atonement of the Son of God, whatever Paul has done, or whatever the Philippians did—and by extension whatever we have done or where we come from—all mean nothing. The source of our righteousness is to be found in Yeshua and His accomplishment for us (Philippians 3:9). A mature Believer who can be used by the Lord is one who has come to the point where he or she recognizes Yeshua as the epicenter of faith, with everything else branching out from there.

The critical role that each of us must fulfill as Believers in Yeshua is to be men and women filled with the love of God and treating others as the Messiah Himself would treat them. People who are secure in their identity in Messiah recognize fellow Believers when they see them—because the Holy Spirit bears witness to those other people. There is a godly attraction among comrades in the faith.

Likewise, people who are *continually operating* in the love of God should be striving to see other human beings the way that He sees them. God has created each person on Earth in His own image (Genesis 1:26) and looks at people differently than those of us who have inherited a fallen sin nature in Adam. As the Psalmist so aptly declares, “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (Psalm 103:8). We have the responsibility to do the same, and recognize that as men and women who have received Yeshua in our lives—being empowered by the Holy Spirit—we must demonstrate that same mercy toward others, whether they are Jewish or Christian. God does not sit on His throne in Heaven ready to pounce on anyone at a moment’s notice. Our Father is gracious and compassionate, and wants all to come to a knowledge of the truth. He has chosen us as vessels who should be used to accomplish this task, assuming that *we are secure* in who we are to do so.

## What is our mission?

We are to be representatives of the God of Creation in a fallen world. As Paul states, we are to be making the appeal “be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). In order to do this properly as a Messianic movement, we need to be more secure in who we are. We need to know that the work of Yeshua in our lives is central to our identity. We need to have a style of *halachah* that respects Jewish tradition, but does not close one off from the rest of society. We need to respect our Christian brethren and the godly scholars and theologians who have come before us, continuing their work. We need to come to a point where we can be mature adults in the faith

and strive to see our fellow human beings from God's perspective—as One who is more merciful and patient than we will ever be *on our best day*.

Is the Messianic movement in its twilight years? *Or*, are we closing one chapter of our development and preparing to enter into another? Are we at the point where we are getting ready to examine commonly avoided and controversial issues not only in the Apostolic Scriptures—but also in the Tanach? Are we being prepared to enter into age-old discussions and debates from a well-informed, reasonable, constructive, and above all *unique Messianic point of view*? Do we have great things to look forward to in the next decade—or more of the same discord, division, and nonsense?

The answers to these questions are not easy, but they begin by us becoming secure in who we are as individual Believers who make up the collective whole. When we can learn to place Yeshua and His love at the center of our lives, proper respect for Judaism, Christianity, and all people will come. Our motives will be sound and pure. We will be men and women offering godly solutions to the world's problems that will aid others in the challenges that they face. We will be a movement that is able to help people become more like the Lord, **where our identity is fully rooted in Him and His accomplishments for us!**

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