

Contemporary Options Concerning "Israel"

by J.K. McKee posted 28 January, 2009 www.tnnonline.net

Our theology as the emerging Messianic movement regarding Israel is often a series of assumptions, rather than a series of well thought out postulations with detailed Biblical support. We assume that all Believers are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel. We assume that all Believers are to keep the Torah. We assume that everyone knows about the prophesied restoration of Israel, something that involves Judah, scattered Israel/Ephraim, and the nations. We **assume that everyone knows what we are talking about.**

Assumptions are not always bad. When we read the Holy Scriptures, we often bring assumptions about God, His love, and His relationship to us to the Biblical text—all based on our experiences with Him. Some of these assumptions are confirmed in our reading, some of them are challenged and refined, and some of them are proven wrong. One of the biggest assumptions that can get challenged when reading the whole Bible is seeing that when the Messiah came, His intention was not to come and start a different "Church" as a second group of elect, but instead bring Israel into its fullness. Few, sadly, can make the connections between the following verses:

"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18).

"I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first" (Jeremiah 33:7).

In Matthew 16:18, the clause that is frequently translated "I will build My church" is *oikodomēsō mou tēn ekklēsian*. In Jeremiah 33:7, the Lord says of Israel, *u'benitim*, which was translated in the Septuagint as *kai oikodomēsō autous*. The Hebrew verb *banah* was rendered by the Greek verb *oikodomeō*, which can mean both "build" or "rebuild" (*HALOT*, 1:139; *BDAG*, 696), and it is frequently noted that *ekklēsia* or "church" has connections with Ancient Israel (K.L. Schmidt, in *TDNT*, pp 397, 399). It is unavoidable that the same exact verb, *oikodomēsō* (first person singular, future active), appears in both Matthew 16:18 and the LXX of Jeremiah 33:7. **It is not at all difficult to see that Matthew's Gospel makes a connection between Yeshua's declaration and the prophesied restoration of Israel.**

For a number of years now in the 2000s, many of us have known things like these, and they have confirmed convictions that the Lord has shown us, as He has led many people into the Messianic movement and our numbers have swelled considerably. But in our interactions with others, our assumptions often get in the way, and we often fail to consider that in the wider world of theology not everyone may share our convictions about God's people, Israel, and what appears to be happening in this hour. Even among those who share a great number of our convictions about the relevancy of the Torah, there is variance about the prophecies of Israel's restoration. And, even among those who share similar points of view about the prophecies of Israel's restoration, there is a variance of opinion about how the Messianic movement should look, function, and develop for the future.

I would like to take a moment and briefly summarize some of the options we have before us concerning "Israel." Knowing about these can affect how we interact with various theologians, pastors, and Messianic teachers today. Knowing about these can also affect how we need to refine our vision and mission as a Messianic community that possesses a great deal of potential to make a difference not only in seeing Jewish people come to faith in Yeshua, but also in seeing Christians return to a fuller understanding of the Bible:

Dispensationalism is the most common approach found today among evangelical Christians in their approach to Israel. It advocates that God has two groups of elect: Israel and the Church. Because the Jewish people largely rejected the Messiah in the First Century, God's plan was to put Israel on hold so He

could build a Christian Church that would be responsible for spreading the gospel to the far reaches of the Earth. Once the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:24), and all the Gentiles who are supposed to be saved are saved (Romans 11:25), the pre-tribulation rapture will come. The Church will be removed and God will immediately be concerned about Israel again.

Pros: Dispensationalists recognize that God's promises and covenants with Israel are eternal. Dispensationalists are some of the strongest Christian supporters of today's State of Israel.

Cons: Dispensationalists often advocate that the only Scriptures relevant to non-Jewish Believers today are those books of the Bible which solely concern the Gentiles, meaning at best the New Testament, but in many cases only the Pauline Epistles. This leaves the Old Testament largely unaddressed. Likewise, much of the Christian support of Israel by dispensationalists is only to accelerate the timing of end-time prophecies, intending to make the pre-tribulation rapture sooner rather than later.

Replacement Theology is a frequently advocated approach found today among some evangelical Christians, but is much more common with the historic churches that stem from the Reformation. Its approach is that because of the Jewish people's rejection of the Messiah in the First Century, God has transferred Israel's promises to the Church. Various Old Testament prophecies that would appear to concern an Israel blessed by Him and/or regathered back to a physical Promised Land, are often spiritualized or allegorized and applied to the Church as Israel as ceased to be a nation with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

Pros: This perspective actually tends to have a much higher view of the Old Testament than dispensationalism in a Christian's approach to God. Reformed theology has historically advocated that the moral law of the Pentateuch applies to Christians today, and are staunch critics of dispensationalists dividing up the Bible between Israel and the Church. Many accuse dispensationalists as being directly responsible for the low morality present in today's Christian Church, because of a wide dismissal of the Old Testament.

Cons: Advocates of replacement theology often spiritualize texts of the Old Testament that should be applied literally. Advocates of replacement theology see no Biblical support for the founding of the modern State of Israel (although they would often advocate that Israel does have a right to exist as a modern-day democracy and/or as an ally of the United States.)

Messianic Judaism largely advocates what can be designated as a ***Commonwealth of Israel-Beta*** perspective regarding Israel. It considers that God's promises toward Israel have remained in force in spite of how many Jewish people have rejected Yeshua as Messiah. This is evidenced in His preservation of the Jewish people in the Dispersion, and the terrible hardships that they have had to endure like the pogroms or the Holocaust, and how the State of Israel was miraculously founded in 1948. Messianic Jews often see themselves as the "middle

men" who sit between Israel and the Christian Church, being members of the Church because of their faith in Yeshua, but still retaining membership in Israel because of their Jewishness. Gentile Christians are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, meaning that the Church is connected to Israel, but this is to be seen as a commonwealth not unlike the British Commonwealth of Nations, where Canadians and Australians retain their political sovereignty and their own national identity.

Pros: The Commonwealth of Israel-Beta approach present in Messianic Judaism has helped expose many Christians to the Hebraic Roots of their faith, and the rich faith heritage they have in Judaism. It has rightly shown that Jewish Believers can still be Jewish, even if they profess a faith in Jesus, and has also rightly combated a great deal of Christian anti-Semitism. It has encouraged today's Church to support Israel and the Jewish people, and be interested in the message of things like the Passover.

Cons: The Commonwealth of Israel-Beta approach present in Messianic Judaism often operates a two-tiered system of Jewish Believers being superior to non-Jewish Believers. Equality between all Believers is often not something widely emphasized. Non-Jewish Believers who are a part of Messianic Jewish congregations are often limited in the amount of ministry they receive. In some extreme cases this has caused non-Jewish Believers to convert to Judaism, leaving Messiah Yeshua in the process.

Much of Messianic Judaism is lacking in its overall Biblical Studies for a movement that is now over forty years old.

The One Law sector of the independent Messianic movement advocates what can be designated as a *Commonwealth of Israel-Alpha* approach toward Israel. While Messianic Judaism has rightly emphasized that Jewish Believers can still be Jewish, and has done a significant degree of good, it is entirely wrong to insist that non-Jewish Believers cannot be their equals in the Messianic movement. All of God's Torah is for all of His people (Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 24:22, et. al.). Being a part of the Commonwealth of Israel is not like being a New Zealander whose monarch sits half way across the globe in Great Britain, but is rather like being a citizen of the Commonwealth of Virginia or the Commonwealth of Kentucky—a citizenship that is the same for all who reside in the Kingdom of God. The Commonwealth of Israel is the *ekklēsia*. The Jewish people are surely to be honored for their role as the leaders of Israel, but not at the exclusion of others.

Pros: The Commonwealth of Israel-Alpha approach present within the One Law sector of the independent Messianic movement has rightly emphasized that there are no two peoples of God. All of God's people are going to be held to the same Torah standard. The inequalities that often manifest in Messianic Judaism are non-Biblical and deter the mission of God in the world. No non-Jewish Believer should have to "convert" to partake of the richness of God's Torah.

Cons: The Commonwealth of Israel-Alpha approach, because of its emphasis on God's Torah, will sometimes not emphasize the gospel message of salvation

enough. This has most frequently manifested in calling itself the "Torah movement," perhaps over and against the "Messianic movement."

The One Law sub-movement, similar to Messianic Judaism, is lacking in its overall Biblical Studies. It also tends to attract a great deal of theological fundamentalism and/or harsh criticism toward the ills of the Christian Church. The One Law sub-movement often tends to take a very hyper-conservative approach toward issues of modernity and post-modernity, if not being somewhat reactionary and isolationist.

The *Two-House* movement has arisen over the past decade or so to answer more specific questions as to why many non-Jewish Believers have been led into the Messianic movement. Is this happening simply because Israel is supposed to be a light to the nations? While we are all a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, could more be going on? The Two-House movement advocates that a large number of non-Jewish Believers (if not all) in today's Messianic movement are a part of returning Ephraim, the scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel taken into Assyrian captivity 2,700 years ago. It advocates that we must look to the prophecies of Israel's restoration to fully understand what the Father is doing in this hour.

Pros: The Two-House movement rightly asks the larger Messianic world to address prophecies like Ezekiel 37:15-28, and others, which detail a greater restoration of Israel that involves more than just the Jewish people. It rightly asks the larger Messianic world to consider why many non-Jewish Believers are being led into Messianic congregations and live a Torah lifestyle.

Cons: The Two-House movement tends to place one's "Israelite identity" as being superior to one's salvation in Messiah Yeshua. Some advocates have fallen for pseudo-history that attempts to trace the ancestry of the Ten Lost Tribes. The Two-House movement is not as strong as it may think it is on exegeting various prophecies of Israel's restoration, being guided more by emotionalism and less by objectivity.

The Two-House movement has attracted a great deal of theological fundamentalism, as well as sensationalistic teachings that have nothing to do with what the Biblical text tells us of Israel's restoration. It often encourages a-traditional forms of Torah observance that unfairly deride much Jewish tradition. Because of these unfortunate occurrences, most of Messianic Judaism stay completely away from the subject matter.

What we are likely to see the emergence of in the next decade in the Messianic world is what could be termed *Egalitarian Messianic Judaism*, a synthesis of the strengths those who have preceded it. Its rallying cry will be verses such as Ephesians 2:11-12; Galatians 3:28; and Exodus 19:5-6. All Believers, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel. All Believers, regardless of ethnicity or gender, are equal members of the Body of Messiah with an unbelievable call upon their lives to serve Him. An egalitarian Messianic Judaism

will recognize the Jewish leadership of Israel (Matthew 23:2-3; Romans 3:2; 11:29), and appropriate the best of *halachah* that the Messianic movement's Jewish pioneers brought us, while not excluding non-Jewish Believers from teaching or leadership. It will not be fearful of addressing the Two-House issue, provided that it is done within the framework of unfulfilled prophecy and not some kind of lost "identity." It will also extend a much greater position to women than has been seen in any sector of the Messianic movement to date. It will have an engaged Biblical scholarship that respects the work of our Jewish and Christian forebearers. *It will represent the major characteristics of Chapter 2 in the development of the Messianic movement.*

Pros: Equality for all Believers within the Commonwealth of Israel will be emphasized. Traditional forms of Torah observance will be encouraged and balanced, avoiding the extremes of either Karaitism or ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Issues that have been avoided by Messianics in their Biblical Studies will no longer be avoided, and the good things brought forward by Christianity will not be disrespected with "Church bashing" strongly discouraged and spoken against. It will deal honestly with questions asked by verses like Romans 9:6.

Cons: An egalitarian Messianic Judaism will face a great deal of opposition in getting started. It will need to have a much more professional clergy and leadership than has been thusfar seen in the wider Messianic world. It will need to be engaged with both contemporary Biblical scholarship and society at large. It will need to stand in support of the Jewish people, but also encourage interfaith dialogue with the Church. It will be difficult for it to stand steadfast in moderating some of the extremism that has marked our larger faith community. It will also face some harassment for giving women a larger role within the assembly.

Having considered these contemporary options concerning "Israel," **where might you fit? Is what you believe even listed?** How might we refine where we find ourselves today, in an effort to be vastly improved tomorrow? Regardless of if you agree or disagree with any or all of the options available, we do have much on our plate to discuss in the days ahead—so rather than just assuming things about Israel, we can begin to substantiate them with Biblical evidence. I look forward to the discussions in the future, as many of us do all share the goal of improving ourselves in order to achieve God's objectives!

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