

The Two-House Teaching in Proper Perspective

by J.K. McKee posted 01 January, 2004 www.tnnonline.net

The Messianic community has reached an impasse with many Believers in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) coming to the realization that they are a part of Israel. Non-Jewish Believers, specifically, are realizing that there is something more to their faith than what mainstream Christianity has presented in recent years. They have sought out their Hebraic Roots and have been convicted by the Holy Spirit that the Hebrew Scriptures are *for them* as well. These Believers have been convicted that to truly follow the lifestyle of the Messiah, one must be Torah observant and follow God's teachings in the Law of Moses to the best of his or her ability. These Believers are now keeping the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, the Biblical holidays of Leviticus 23, and are eating kosher, among other things.

By changing their lifestyles, many non-Jewish Believers have received substantial criticism. Much of this criticism comes from the peer pressure of Christian family or friends who are not convicted concerning what "New Testament Christians" should and should not be doing—as opposed to what Bible Believers should be doing—those who believe that *all* of Scripture is for them. Criticism against non-Jewish Believers adopting a Torah observant lifestyle can also come from the Messianic Jewish arena, many of whom believe that the Torah is *exclusively* to be followed by Jews. Both groups who are criticizing, Christians and Messianic Jews, largely believe that God has two groups of elect: Israel and the Church, and believe that non-Jewish Believers, who are part of "the Church," are not called to (any form of) Torah obedience.

The Two-House community in recent years has grown to become a bulwark against the teaching that our Creator has two groups of elect. The Two-House teaching advocates that the Lord has only *one* group of chosen ones: the people of Israel. This Israel is divided into the House of Judah, the scattered House of Israel/Ephraim, and all those companions of the nations who might join in. As you can imagine, this teaching is controversial. It is not widely accepted by those in the theological milieu of either evangelical Christianity or Messianic Judaism. Furthermore, in recent days the message has been tainted by some dominant, sensationalistic personalities, who are attaching their own personal agendas to the Two-House teaching. Some advocating (a form of) Two-House theology have brought discredit to the message and have denied the Divinity and/or Messiahship of Yeshua, or at the very least have challenged the inspiration and authority of certain Scriptures.

The time has arrived for a balanced and proper look at the Two-House teaching. There are many out there who are Two-House advocates, but they have done *more damage* than they have done good to the message. In this article, I hope to present you with a fair and reasonable look at what the Two-House teaching really is, and sincerely pray that you will realize that not everyone who claims to be "Two-House" represents all in the Two-House Messianic community.

The Promises and Their Fulfillment

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he makes a very intriguing statement. In Ephesians 2:11-13, he admonishes the non-Jewish Believers, "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." The statement that Paul makes is that prior to their conversion of faith, these people were "alienated¹ from the commonwealth of Israel" (RSV). Now, having come to faith, they have been "brought near by the blood of Messiah."

When we review this Scripture quotation, what is Paul actually telling us? Is he writing that these non-Jewish Believers have become part of "the Church"? No. He is telling them that

¹ Grk. *apallotriō* (ἀπαλλοτριῶ), "to estrange, alienate" (H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 87).

they have become part of the community of Israel by their conversion of faith. This is clearly understood by the Greek word *politeia* (πολιτεία), rendered as “commonwealth,” which means “the right to be a member of a sociopolitical entity, citizenship” (BDAG).² Nowhere in Yeshua the Messiah’s mission did He ever come to establish “the Church” as a second group of elect. On the contrary, He came to restore and rebuild the people of Israel (Jeremiah 33:7; cf. Matthew 16:18).³ As we understand that all Believers are a part of Israel, it is imperative for us to recognize what the Hebrew Scriptures or Tanach tell us about Israel.

In Genesis 32:28-29, the Patriarch Jacob wrestles with the angel all night, and is renamed “Israel.” Part of his being renamed Israel has to do with the mission that the Lord had for both him and his descendants after him:

“He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him and said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name? And he blessed him there.’”

Prior to being renamed Israel, the Patriarch’s name was *Ya’akov* (יַעֲקֹב), which has been traditionally interpreted as meaning “supplanter,” although it more specifically means “heel holder,” as he grabbed his brother’s heel at the time of his birth (Genesis 25:26).⁴ The Biblical story of Jacob reveals that he was very much a trickster and a swindler prior to this time. By being renamed *Yisrael* (יִשְׂרָאֵל), Jacob experienced a status change. J.H. Hertz comments in *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, regarding the name Israel, that “The name is clearly a title of victory; probably ‘a champion of God’. The children of the Patriarch are *Israelites*, Champions of God, Contenders for the Divine, conquering by strength from Above.”⁵ Jacob was renamed Israel because he had remained steadfast in wrestling with the angel during the night. Jacob’s descendants, and those who consider themselves a part of Israel, are likewise called to endure and strive through the power of God. This call is reemphasized in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament):

“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua” (Philippians 3:14).

As Believers in the Messiah of Israel, we are all called to press forward in our faith and never give up, no matter what the cost. We are called to endure for our God.

When understanding oneself as a part of Israel, it is necessary that we examine the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob regarding their physical seed, as the issue of who comprises their offspring will undoubtedly arise. Their descendants would be used by the Lord to bless all in the world, so that all might come to the knowledge of the One True God and be redeemed. In Genesis 22:17-18, the Lord promises Abraham that He will multiply his descendants exponentially:

“[I]ndeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

The Hebrew term *zera* (זֵרָע) has a variety of meanings, including “sowing, seed, descendants, offspring, children, and posterity” (AMG).⁶ Its equivalent in the Greek Septuagint and in the Messianic Scriptures is *sperma* (σπέρμα), and the Latin Vulgate uses the word *semen*. These words make it absolutely clear that the text is speaking of *physical people*. It is not just speaking of some generic “spiritual seed” or “spiritual descendants.” Abraham’s *physical*

² Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 845.

³ Consult the editor’s article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?” for a further examination of how God has always had only *one* assembly of elect.

⁴ L. Hicks, “Jacob (Israel),” in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:782-783.

⁵ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 124.

⁶ Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 304.

descendants were to multiply themselves and spread out all over the world. This same promise of physical multiplicity is extended to the Patriarch Jacob/Israel:

“God also said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you’ (Genesis 35:11).

The Lord promised Jacob that “a nation and a congregation of nations” (ATS)⁷ or “an assembly of nations” (NJPS) would come forth from him. This promise experienced fulfillment in ancient times as Moses attests in Deuteronomy 1:10:

“The LORD your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day like the stars of heaven in number.”

Conservative Biblical scholars estimate that at the time of the Exodus the Ancient Israelites certainly numbered in the hundreds of thousands, shortly before Moses made this declaration. Moses’ next words are extremely perplexing:

“May the LORD, the God of your fathers, increase you a thousand-fold more than you are and bless you, just as He has promised you!” (Deuteronomy 1:11).

If we take Moses’ words at face value, then how many descendants of Israel are there on Planet Earth today? Is it fair to suggest that the number exceeds today’s Jewish population of 14-15 million?

The promise of physical multiplication is extended by Jacob/Israel to Ephraim, the younger son of Joseph, while his sons are in Egypt:

“But his father refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations’” (Genesis 48:19).

Jacob/Israel said that Ephraim’s descendants would become a *melo ha’goyim* (מְלֵאֵי הַגּוֹיִם) or “the fulness of the nations” (YLT). Genesis 48:16 says, “may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.” The Hebrew verb rendered as “grow” is *dagah* (דָּגָה), meaning “**multiply, increase**” (TWOT).⁸ It is related to the word *dag* (דָּג) or “fish.” The *ArtScroll Tanach* actually renders this promise as “may they proliferate abundantly like fish within the land.” The Rabbinical understanding behind this is that just as fish multiply underwater, so would the Israelites multiply on the face of Planet Earth. But just as fish multiply underwater, *unseen by man*, so would the Israelites multiply on the Earth *unseen by man*, but seen by God.⁹ In other words, this multiplication would be going on without anyone realizing it. Ephraim, as you are probably aware, is one of the names given to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which would break off from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, following the death of King Solomon. The descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim would somehow become this “fulness of nations.”

In Romans 11:25-26 the Apostle Paul speaks of the coming in of the “fulness of the nations” as a requirement for the salvation of all Israel:

“For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB.’”¹⁰

The “fulness of the nations” or “fulness of the Gentiles” coming back into the fold of Israel is most probably a reference to the descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim coming to faith and being acculturated into the Commonwealth of Israel. It is notable that the

⁷ Heb. *goy u’qahal goyim* (גּוֹי וְקַהֲלֵי גּוֹיִם).

⁸ Earl S. Kalland, “דָּגָה,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:182.

⁹ Cf. Scherman, 273.

¹⁰ While rendered as “Gentile(s)” in most Bibles, the Greek word *ethnos* (ἔθνος) literally means “nation(s).” As Newman indicates, *ethnos* has a variety of definitions, including “*nation, people...non-Jews, Gentiles; pagans, heathen, unbelievers*” (Barclay M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1971], 52). Two versions that render *ethnos* as “nation(s),” and not “Gentile(s),” include Young’s Literal Translation and the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green.

Greek word *plērōma* (πλήρωμα) means “completeness, reaching the intended goal” (AMG).¹¹ What this seemingly implies is that when the “fullness of the nations,” those of scattered Israel/Ephraim, come back into the fold of Israel, they will have reached a point of spiritual maturity. I believe that a critical aspect of the reunification of all of Israel is a return to the truths of God’s Torah. Could this “fullness of the nations” possibly be returning to the fold of Israel in our day?

The Division of Judah and Ephraim

Many of you have a basic understanding of the history of Ancient Israel. Ancient Israel was at its peak during the reigns of King David and King Solomon. Solomon was endowed with Divine wisdom from God, constructed the Temple, and expanded Israel’s influence. However, as a part of expanding Israel’s influence, Solomon married many foreign wives and was greatly affected by their religion. He built temples to pagan gods and participated in their worship, falling out of the favor of the Lord. As a consequence God decreed that the United Kingdom of Israel would be divided, and He promised to give Jeroboam, who was a servant of Solomon, the ten Northern Tribes:

“Then Ahijah took hold of the new cloak which was on him and tore it into twelve pieces. He said to Jeroboam, ‘Take for yourself ten pieces; for thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Behold, I will tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and give you ten tribes (but he will have one tribe, for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen from all the tribes of Israel), because they have forsaken Me, and have worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the sons of Ammon; and they have not walked in My ways, doing what is right in My sight and *observing* My statutes and My ordinances, as his father David *did*’” (1 Kings 11:30-33).

It is abundantly clear that the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim broke away from the Southern Kingdom of Judah because of idolatry and because of breaking the Torah or Law of Moses. After Solomon died and Rehoboam came to power in Judah, Jeroboam assumed power in the newly formed Northern Kingdom, and he established centers of worship for the Northern Kingdom Israelites (1 Kings 12:28). The Northern and Southern Kingdoms remained separate political entities for the next two hundred years. There was some intermingling between them, as there were Northern Kingdom Israelites *who remained faithful* to the God of Israel and integrated themselves into the Southern Kingdom. But in 722-721 B.C.E. the Assyrian Empire attacked and dispersed the majority of Northern Kingdom Israelites. Assyria would subdue conquered peoples by displacing them and intermarrying them with others. Since that time, the House of Israel/Ephraim was corporately lost among the nations.¹² The Southern Kingdom of Judah, the Jewish people, have been the only representatives of Israel since that time. While experiencing their own dispersions at the hands of Babylon and Rome, and even terrible events like the Inquisition and Holocaust, the Jewish people have remained faithful to their Israelite heritage.

In the end-times prior to the Messiah’s return, it is prophesied that the scattered House of Israel/Ephraim will return to its heritage in Israel and some will even return to the Land of Israel. All of Israel will have one King, Yeshua the Messiah, and they will all be observing the Torah or the Law of Moses.¹³ As one of the prophecies states,

“My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them. They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and

¹¹ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1178.

¹² The historian Josephus was forced to write in the First Century, “the ten tribes are beyond Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 11.133; Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987], 294).

¹³ An important listing of Scripture passages relating to the reunification of all Israel includes: Isaiah 11:12-16; Jeremiah 10:6-10; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Zechariah 10:6-10.

their sons and their sons' sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever” (Ezekiel 37:24-28).

What the Two-House Teaching Really Is

One of the statements that is made in the Ezekiel 37 account of the reunion of the two sticks, representing Judah and scattered Ephraim, is seen in v. 18: “Will you not show us what you mean by these?” (RSV). As many non-Jewish Believers begin to see the importance of their Hebraic Roots, and even the possibility that they may be a part of the returning House of Israel/Ephraim, they are asking questions concerning what all these things mean. It is not a surprise by any means that there are *multiple voices* answering the questions being posed, and at the present time there are various definitions of the Two-House teaching circulating around, **many of which are contradictory**. Part of this has to do with the fact that the Two-House teaching has only been popularized since the late 1990s, and even more so that the Messianic movement as a whole has only been around since the late 1960s. *We have a great deal of progress to make in our theology.*¹⁴

The Two-House teaching is a Messianic understanding of God's elect. It is an understanding of ecclesiology.¹⁵ Basically, what the Two-House teaching advocates is that our Creator has only one group of elect: the people of Israel, all of whom are Believers in the Messiah. This Israel is composed of the House of Judah, the scattered House of Israel/Ephraim, and those companions of the nations who join in to the restoration process.¹⁶ One's ecclesiology affects how a person views the Scriptures, it effects his lifestyle and his view of the end-times. What makes the Two-House teaching controversial is that it not only advocates that all Believers are a part of Israel, but it also advocates that all Believers should *live as Israel*. This is often not well received by those in either Messianic Judaism or mainstream Christianity—at least at present.

The Two-House Movement Today

Sadly, the Two-House community today seems divided and factional. Part of this has to do with the fact that the Two-House community is very young and by necessity the Two-House teaching **must be subject to further refinement**. This is a developing movement, and a developing theology. One serious problem that exists is that there are various “Two-House” ministries who teach about the unification of all Israel, but connect their own cardinal teachings along with it, so that outsiders get the false impression that the Two-House reunification is really the Two-House reunification *and this or that*, failing to understand what its prophecies are Biblically. Time will

¹⁴ Consult the author's article appearing in the November 2007 issue of OIM News, “The Journey Ahead.”

¹⁵ Ecclesiology is a technical term meaning “The area of theological study concerned with understanding the church...Ecclesiology seeks to set forth the nature and function of the church” (Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999], 42). For Messianics who believe that God has only one group of elect, Israel, it regards our understanding of how we as Believers are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, and how this affects our walk of faith and mission as His people.

¹⁶ One of the great confusions about the Two-House teaching is that it is a racial teaching which advocates that all non-Jewish Believers are physical Israelites. **This is not true**. While emphasizing that there is a scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim out in the world, and thus the actual numbers of physical Israel would be more than the 14-15 million Jewish people of today, those who are true “Gentiles” and of the nations are *included* within Israel. The prophecy of Ezekiel 37:16 indicates that this reunion is “For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his **companions**...For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his **companions**.” The “companions” or “comrades” (ATS) or “all who are joined with him” (CJB), represent those who are not physically Israel, but enjoin themselves to one of the Two Houses of Israel. Citizenship in Israel is *open to the foreigner or sojourner* who enjoins himself to the God of Israel, and it ultimately is determined by faith in Israel's Messiah.

have to work out the fringe elements, and those who are scholastic and fair-minded will be those who ultimately prevail.

Thankfully, there are those who have seen the errors that other people are making, and are endeavoring to present the message of the restoration of the whole House of Israel in a very Yeshua-focused, uplifting, and doctrinally sound manner. The challenge that exists for us who are trying to be balanced and fair-minded is that we must persevere. We must demonstrate that the message of reuniting Judah and Ephraim is not doctrinal error, as it would lead people away from faith in the Messiah—but that it brings greater maturity for Believers, and brings us into a better relationship with our Heavenly Father as we can grasp what His mission is for us in this hour.

May we truly bring unity to the Body of Messiah, and not seek to be divisive because of dominant personalities or agendas. May our goal be to be as Biblically sound as possible, and may we uplift Messiah Yeshua in all things. **Most importantly, we need to understand that the belief in the Two-House teaching will be determined more by the spiritual fruit of those who believe in it, than what we believe about Judah or Ephraim.**

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

revised or May, 2005

edited for spelling/grammar; minor theological fine tuning
16 November, 2006

19 November, 2007