

Is There a Messianic Reading of the Bible?



MISHKAN

A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People

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Introduction

Dear readers,

We are happy to bring to you the first online issue of *Mishkan* for 2016.

In this issue of *Mishkan* you will find articles about the Bible and Bible reading. As believers in Jesus the Messiah we all read the same Scriptures, but our understanding and interpretation might differ. The questions raised in this issue of *Mishkan* are: “Is there a special Messianic reading of the Scriptures?” and, as Gershon Nerel asks, “Are theology schools necessary for Jewish Yeshua-Believers in Israel?”

About 70% of the Bible consists of stories. According to Elie Wiesel, God created man because he loves stories. In this issue, Bill Bjoraker presents us with ten different narratives of the Bible. And as always, you will find book reviews and “From the Israeli Scene.”

We wish you a blessed summer and “happy reading” from Jerusalem.

Caspari Center Staff
Jerusalem, June 2016

Messianic Jews and a Historical Reading of Biblical Texts

Torleif Elgvin

During the last two generations, Israeli biblical scholars have found their place in biblical scholarship worldwide. Scholars from Israeli universities give important contributions to the understanding of the books of the Hebrew Bible, and to some degree to the New Testament as well. Israeli archaeologists are ranked among the best in the world and publish important finds and analyses in their research of the land of the Bible. These academic disciplines follow basic presuppositions of historical research.

At the same time (as far as I know), preaching and teaching within the Messianic movement hardly reflect contact with or knowledge of such contributions by Israeli scholars. A few decades ago, Messianic pastors did the opposite of encouraging our young people to seek academic education. This is luckily not the case today. Youngsters from the Messianic movement seek higher education, and ministry among believing students has been going on since 1990. I would encourage young people in our midst to go for graduate degrees in biblical studies, early Jewish history, and archaeology. We need the testimony to Israel's Messiah to be heard also in this arena. (And I could point to the late Vassilios Tzaferis as an example of a skilled Israeli archaeologist with a Greek Orthodox background and faith.)

However, I wonder if teaching and preaching in our circles have been framed to a large degree by American Reformed theology, oftentimes with a skepticism toward biblical research in academic institutions. Students formed by teaching on the Bible in Messianic congregations may get a shock when they encounter BA and MA studies in these fields at Israeli universities: a shock that could lead to a crisis of faith and identity (the same could happen students who come from an Orthodox background). If it is held and taught that faith in the Messiah must include an acceptance of a "biblicistic" theology and skepticism toward academic scholarship on the Bible, we put a burden upon believers that restricts the freedom of the gospel. And we are in danger of keeping believers in a "bubble" that avoids challenges from historical and natural sciences.¹

Wise messianic leaders should make congregants aware that different views of the biblical text are possible while keeping faith in God and trusting the authority of Scripture. At the same time, Israeli academic institutions and their scholars should receive students who come from either Orthodox Jewish or Messianic backgrounds—with views on the Bible that may differ from current academic trends—with respect and open minds (which has not always been the case).

I have my PhD from the department of Bible at the Hebrew University, and still work closely with Israeli scholars in archaeology, the Bible, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. And I have never felt my studies or academic work to be a threat to my faith in the Messiah and trust in the Bible as the Word of God. I could add: fellow scholars have always shown respect for my Christian faith and my

¹ The challenges I put before Messianic teachers and preachers would not be less valid in many evangelical settings in other countries.

involvement with the Messianic movement. In this paper I suggest how one can outline a historically sound view of the Tanakh that is informed by textual and archaeological research.

As believers we encounter biblical texts in (at least) two different ways: 1) meditative listening-in to a text framed by a praying attitude, open to the possibility that the Spirit will illuminate the Word and touch our hearts; 2) reading texts in a larger context, with an eye to historical setting and links to the wider biblical material. In the latter perspective we may give attention to the historical background of the text, its author(s), later editors, or supplementing authors. From my perspective, a reflection on the historical setting of a biblical text does not make it less authoritative as the Word of God. As an example, Isaiah 40–55 is not less inspired if we attribute it to an anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile (Deutero-Isaiah). A more precise understanding of the historical setting of the author and audience of a specific text will give us sharper hermeneutical tools to apply the text in our preaching today.

Hermeneutical Presuppositions

All of us go to the biblical texts with our own presuppositions, our personal “luggage.” We can encounter the texts with our own questions, and meet them with readily framed answers—answers that may be formatted by milieus, teachers, or congregations that have influenced us. There is a risk that we view the texts through the lenses of modernistic views of the Bible, views that do not accord with the worldview, thought, and faith of the authors of the texts, so that we are not tuned in to the “wavelength” of these ancient texts. We need to listen to the authors and their intention with the texts,² and then understand how these texts were transmitted, recycled, and reinterpreted throughout biblical times and subsequently in the New Testament.³

What is the “meaning” in the text? Postmodern ideology may make any subjective approach to ancient texts authentic and valid. But a Christian view of the Bible should not be taken captive by postmodernism and deconstructionism.⁴ The Creator has given man language and the ability to communicate verbally and in writing; we are able to communicate with each other within and about the created world, about the visible and the invisible. He who is Lord over life and thought used as his tools the early Israelites he had fashioned and equipped. He communicated with them through media such as audition, vision, visualizing, meditative prayer, learning from peers, and theological reasoning—tools that found their succession in theological discourse, exegesis, and editorial work.

A number of biblical texts open windows into these processes, texts such as Amos 1:1; Isaiah 1:1; 8:16–18; 50:4–5; 1 Kings 22:13–19; Jeremiah 1:4–9; 18:1–6; 18:18; Deuteronomy 33:10; Nehemiah 8:7–8; Psalms 1; 17:15; 45:1; 75:2; 77:12–13; 78:1–4.⁵ Among the originators and

² Cf. John Stott’s comment: “This is my major quarrel with the existentialists, who say that the text means what it means to me—the reader—independent of what the author meant. We must say ‘no’ to that. A text means primarily what its author meant.” “Between Two Worlds: An Interview with John R. W. Stott,” albertmohler.com/2011/08/08/between-two-worlds-an-interview-with-john-r-w-stott/ [accessed December 18, 2014].

³ B. Childs read the books of the Tanakh in the literary and canonical context given to them by the biblical editors and thereafter by the church. He did not support an “archaeology of texts” into earlier stages of the books; see *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), in particular pp. 39–45, 69–106. I follow J. A. Sanders, who advocated both looking on the books as whole literary units and the historical situation reflected in the texts; see *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text: Canon as Paradigm* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), especially pp. 77–84, 155–72.

⁴ See K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Readers, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 201–80.

⁵ On “the modus of revelation,” see C. Fletcher-Louis, “Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity,” in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* ed. A. D. DeConick (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 41–56; K. van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 75–141 (pp. 97–98 on Isa 50:4–5 and “the modus of revelation”). Thomas Aquinas held that prophets (both ancient and

transmitters of the texts we encounter priests, Levites, prophets, wise men, scribes, kings such as David, Solomon and Hezekiah, and Gentiles such as Agur and Lemuel (Prov 30:1; 31:1).

He who let the Word become flesh communicates today through words these mediators gave shape. As readers and interpreters we confirm the authors of Scripture as communicative agents who speak a language we can understand. The hermeneutical circle (the circle of interpretation) begins with the text they gave us, a text that is meaningful and possible to understand.

The Divine and Human Nature of Scripture

Muslim tradition (not the Qur'an itself) sees the Qur'an as the earthly copy of a preexistent, heavenly book, the infallible word of Allah. Therefore historical-critical research of the Qur'an is not allowed.

A Christian view of the Bible is radically different. Our God is an incarnate God who meets humankind in flesh and blood, in human and earthly shape. Also in the Scriptures the divine and human dimensions are intertwined. The word is "incarnated": divine revelation meets us in human clothing, mediated and written down by Israelites of flesh and blood. These agents wrote texts that gave meaning for themselves and could be understood by their audience.

There are modern interpreters who stress the divine dimension ("the infallible Word") in a way somewhat similar to the Muslim view. Others would stress the human dimension and see the Hebrew Bible as a collection of texts from the history of religions. Both sides struggle to be reconciled with the testimony of the Scriptures themselves.

We are created in God's image. The Creator gave us an exploring mind to use in science and reflection. We are called to explore all aspects of God's creation and man's small creations, and the words of the Bible are no exception. Every religious tradition should be open to critical reflection with regard to its history and sacred writings. Without such openness, oppressive behavior and problematic use of sacred writings will continue uncensored.⁶

Historical-critical research on the biblical texts has given new insights, but should not escape critical review and testing.⁷ We should "test everything and keep what is good" (1 Thess 5:21). What I myself write as a biblical scholar should also be reviewed, scrutinized, and tested. We should be aware that biblical scholars may disagree with each other and arrive at greatly different conclusions on the historical background of a specific text or group of texts, as well as on the question of a historical core behind certain texts.

An understanding of the historical background of the texts and their literary growth throughout biblical times need not compromise our understanding of the revelatory character of Scripture and its authority. Israelite scribes and theologians wrote these texts in faith, accompanied by prayer and sharing with their peers—texts that over the centuries were accepted as "Israel's heritage" by spiritual leaders in Judea.

A modern interpreter with faith in the divine and experience with prayer and meditation is closer to the worldview and presuppositions of the originators of these texts than a secular scholar who is working solely with rational, historical-critical tools and, e.g., excludes the option of miracles

contemporary) have a spiritual sensitivity that enables them to "lift up their mind" for what God will disclose. The Holy Spirit touches and moves the mind and thought of the prophet so that he understands, speaks, and acts accordingly. See C. M. Robeck, Jr., "Prophecy, Gift of," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. S. M. Burgess and G. G. McGee (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 6th ed., 1993), 728–40.

⁶ An example: I discussed the exploitation of girls and women in Jordanian society with a Christian leader there, and asked, "Are there no imams who protest against such terrible behavior?" He answered, "When there is no criticism on one's own religious tradition, there will never be a critical attitude towards such behavior."

⁷ K. L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Ada, MI: Baker, 2008).

or the resurrection of Jesus. Such scholars may miss important elements in the texts, while scholars who are open to the idea that God may give humans mystical and charismatic experiences can more easily understand visionary and auditive texts, both within and outside the prophetic books. Many modern exegetes struggle to relate to such “mystical” texts,⁸ and may explain away the genuine personal experiences behind them—experiences I would define as revelatory.

The Breadth and Gradual Growth of the Tanakh

In the Tanakh collection we find different voices side by side, voices that on occasion seem to contradict each other or present clearly different perspectives.⁹ The editors consciously chose to keep and transmit a breadth of texts and perspectives from different Israelite theologians. Did they think, like Augustine, *Deus semper major*—“God is always more” (i.e., he exceeds the limitations of our words and experiences)?

The recognition of a plurality of perspectives in the Bible can be used to fragment the biblical testimony. Modern interpreters may use this insight to release themselves from central theological lines that permeate both the Tanakh and the New Testament. In this context it may be important to discern between central books that were given authority early on, and others (more peripheral voices) that were added to the growing collection of Scriptures only after the mid-second century BCE. The Pentateuch and the Early and Later Prophets are the core of the collection. These were the first to be recognized as authoritative writings of the fathers, as Ben Sira testifies around 190 BCE (Sir 24:23–28; 46–49). These books give us hermeneutical keys to interpret the other writings that subsequently were added,¹⁰ with the Psalms in a central role. This recognition gives us perspectives on more peripheral books such as Ruth, Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), Esther, and the Song of Songs, books that were included in the collection between 100 BCE and 150 CE.¹¹

The translation of Psalms 1–151 into Greek around 100 BCE,¹² two generations after the translation of the major prophetic books, shows that the Psalms were recognized as *Scripture*, not only scrolls for liturgical use. Psalm 1 was consciously framed as the opening text, a sign of such an understanding of the Psalms. The authorizing of “David” (the Book of Psalms) would make possible the inclusion of “Solomon” in the collection of authoritative books (first Proverbs, later Qohelet and the Song of Songs), and soon also the David-related Book of Ruth.

⁸ D. J. Halperin speaks about “distinguishing consciously created fantasy from unconsciously created hallucination. . . . To the degree to which the symbols of the vision are outside the writer’s conscious control, we may assume that the vision itself is outside his conscious control”; “Heavenly Ascension in Judaism: The Nature of the Experience,” *SBLSP* 26 (1987): 218–32, esp. 226. For P. Schäfer, who has written a major work on early Jewish and Christian mysticism, it remains inaccessible whether the originators of the texts he analyzes did have real mystical experiences. He reads and interprets them as scribal and exegetical creations; *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 337–47. I have criticized this trend in a Norwegian article, “Mystiske tekster i tidlig jødisk og kristen tradisjon,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 76 (2011): 193–210; cf. T. Elgvin, “Temple Mysticism and the Temple of Men,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Text and Context*, ed. C. Hempel (STDJ 90, Leiden: Brill: 2010), 227–42, esp. 227–30, 241–42.

⁹ W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 63–64, 88–89, 421–30; E. Gerstenberger, “Theologies in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. P. Flint and P. D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 603–26.

¹⁰ A parallel dynamic can be found in the development of the New Testament collection, where the test was whether “prospective candidates” concurred with the apostolic writings that already were commonly received in the churches.

¹¹ On the late inclusion of the Song of Songs and the other *Megillot* in the collection, see T. Elgvin, *The Literary Growth of Canticles in the Hasmonean Period* (forthcoming from Leuven: Peeters), ch. 11.

¹² A. van der Kooij (1983) goes for the early first century: “On the place of Origin of the Old Greek of Psalms,” *VT* 33 (1983): 67–74. J. Schaper traces a Hasmonean spirit in the mention of Moab in LXX Ps 59(60):9–10 and 107(108):9–10, and suggests the second half of the second century; *Eschatology in the Greek Psalter*, WUNT II.76 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 42–45.

Israel's theologians and the church of the Messiah have transmitted to us the books of the Tanakh as revelatory writings from God. This church made us partake in the mysteries of the kingdom. A Christian/Messianic reading of the Tanakh recognizes the self-understanding and the revelatory character of the Scriptures: they give God's people guidance for faith and life; these Scriptures were given us by our mother, the church. At the same time, these words are truly incarnate and shaped as words of men—if they were not, we would not be able to understand them. The Scriptures show us God's way and wandering with his people, and testify to different responses by Israelites during these wanderings.

Divine revelation is progressive. More and more is revealed to God's people, culminating in the New Testament's testimony to the Messiah of Israel. Lutheran theology—more than the Reformed/Calvinistic tradition—has stressed that the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the New: the center and periphery in the Old Testament are defined by how a book or text pushes us toward Christ (*was zum Christum treibt*). The death and resurrection of Jesus are the central spine of the Scriptures—a historical reading of Tanakh texts does not abolish or undermine this foundation of our faith. Luke's introduction to his gospel shows that he sees the core of the Jesus story as historically verifiable (cf. 1 Cor 15:1–8). However, if we were able to arrange an encounter between him and the other evangelists, I am sure he would admit that each of the four, as preachers and history-tellers, had liberty to transmit the Jesus story according to his own style, personality, and likings.

The Intention of the Author, the Genre of the Text

To interpret a text we need to relate to the intention of the author—the signals he sends—in order to be tuned in to the right “wavelength.” What genre or blending of genres are found in the text? Is it a symbolic story, a novelistic short story, or a historical narrative such as 1–2 Kings? If Israelite sages wrote Jonah and Esther as novelistic short stories with a didactic purpose, then we are faithful to the Bible if we interpret them accordingly. As I see it, a reading of these two books as historical narratives removes them from the intention and scope of the authors.

The Book of Ruth is an instructive case. A linguistic analysis suggests that Ruth was written in the fifth century BCE.¹³ David's family tree (Ruth 4:18–22) and the tradition that David's great grandmother was Moabite are earlier: in post-exilic times one would not create a story of a non-Israelite ancestress for David; texts edited in this time period idealize David. If we recognize that the Book of Ruth is intended as a didactic short story in early post-exilic times, we may perceive that the book advocates a softer and more open attitude to other nations than the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (see, not least, Ezra 9–10). Ezra's *mitzvah* to send away foreign wives—a text that is difficult to read for many of us—does not remain the only voice on these issues.¹⁴ The Book of Ruth becomes an important voice within the choir of the Tanakh, a voice arguing for open relations to other nations and for the importance of the role of women in Israelite history. Insight into the book's time of origin and genre provides keys to a more precise and dynamic understanding of the book. The Book of Jonah is another post-exilic voice that shows God's way with other nations.

The biblical authors did not think as we do about authorship and copyright. Anonymous prophets, Levites, priests, and scribes added their words to older texts, in the tradition of Moses, Aaron, David, and great prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. When a text is recycled and reinterpreted, within the Tanakh as well as in the New Testament, a modern Christian interpreter may relate to different literary strata and editorial voices. And when we recognize how biblical

¹³ Noam Misrahi, Tel Aviv University (personal communication).

¹⁴ Ruth remains an authentic voice from the fifth century, while the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were finalized much later. The final redaction of Nehemiah was probably done in early Hasmonean times.

mediators interpret and actualize a text for their own generation, we can trust that the spirit of God still can actualize ancient texts into our lives and congregations.

A dilemma may arise where New Testament authors relate to sages or books from the Tanakh in a way that seems to deviate from a modern historical reading. Do words like “as Moses said/commanded” mean that Moses wrote every word in the last four books of the Pentateuch? If we read similar formulas in the literature from Qumran, we see that formulations such as “Moses said” primarily mean “it is written in the books of Moses.” What about statements such as “Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster”? Can they be read as references to the Book of Jonah as a literary construction, while I as a biblical exegete uphold that Jonah is a didactic short story partly inspired by the reference to Jonah the prophet in 2 Kings 14:25? The New Testament refers to David as the Spirit-filled originator of psalms that scholars unanimously say are later texts written “to David” or “for David” (cf. Mark 12:35–36; Acts 2:25.34; 4:25). Again, in Qumran literature references to “David” are primarily a reference to the Book of Psalms as a literary unit and authoritative writing. One can uphold the Psalms of David as inspired and spirit-filled texts, even though psalms carrying the name of David were attributed to him, or written in his honor/in the tradition stemming from him, by later psalmists.

Texts from Israel and Neighboring Peoples

The biblical texts were not written in a historic vacuum. Oftentimes they were written in contact, dialogue, or polemic in the encounter with the faith and culture of neighboring nations. Israelite scribes worked intensely to “take every thought captive to obey the Lord” (2 Cor 10:5) when they integrated elements from the heritage of other nations into their writings. Modern interpreters who advocate a literal reading of the Tanakh may look upon related texts from neighboring peoples as a threat. But we can also see them as a gift that may sharpen and enrich our understanding of biblical texts. Some examples:

- Qumran texts related to the Book of Esther (4Q550Jews at the Persian Court) indicate that Esther is intended to be read as a novelistic short story within a well-known genre: the wise Jew at the foreign court (inspired by the Joseph cycle in Genesis). The Book of Esther and its “cousins” from Qumran show us challenges that Israelites in exile encountered around the third century BCE.
- Stories related to Daniel in themes and genre are found in apocalyptic texts such as *1 Enoch* (a collection where most texts are from the second century), the Enoch-related *Book of Giants*, and a variety of other writings from Qumran. These parallels as well as textual links to third-century history and the Maccabean revolt suggest that the texts of the Book of Daniel were formatted in the period 250–60 BCE. The Hebrew language of Daniel 2–6 has its closest parallels in Qumran writings from the second century such as 4QInstruction.¹⁵ An old tradition about Daniel the sage (cf. Ezek 14:14; 14:20; 28:3) is sewn together with new texts that admonish Israelites to cling to YHWH when they encounter war, persecution and suffering, holding fast to their hope of the Lord’s intervention in the time to come. In the

¹⁵ T. Elgvin, *An Analysis of 4QInstruction* (PhD diss, Hebrew University, 1997), 183–85. Defenders of a Danielic authorship of the full book need to explain why chapter 11 is so radically different from all other prophecies in the Tanakh: Would God really provide a detailed war history of the third century, so that a Seleucid or Ptolemaic general would know in advance what his opponent would do?

extended version of Daniel preserved in the Septuagint, a translation of a slightly later recension, chapters 9–10 clearly mirror early Hasmonean history.¹⁶

- Inscriptions from Deir 'Alla east of Jordan (vis-à-vis Bet Shean) about the prophet Balaam son of Beor, who saw what the gods (among them Shaddai) showed him, have word-to-word parallels with Numbers 22–24.¹⁷ The inscriptions probably date to the late ninth century, a few decades after the Israelite Omride dynasty ruled Gilead.¹⁸ The closeness of these texts indicates that the Balaam cycle was shaped in the northern kingdom between 830 and 722, and gives us some “hooks” into the hermeneutics of the scribes: in light of the faith in YHWH, every prophet should be subordinated to the faith of Israel. Since these theologians see their Israel as descendants from the generation of Moses, they backdate Balaam’s prophecies to the time their nation was shaped. There was no state with a king in Moab in the twelfth century; a Moabite state developed only in the ninth century, so this story is backdated to the first generation of the nation. The Balaam cycle is one of many texts that are recycled in Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom in 722, and subordinated to a Jerusalem-centered Judean theology.¹⁹ The promise of a new king for the northern kingdom, “the House of Israel” (Num 24:17–19), will now be read about a future son of David.

- In 2011 a Babylonian cuneiform inscription from the Norway-based Schøyen Collection was published. It is Nebuchadnezzar’s foundation inscription for the tower-temple in Babylon, with architectural sketches of the temple’s ground plan and profile:

Etemenanki, the Babylonian *ziggurat*—the House, the foundation of heaven and earth, the *ziggurat* in Babylon. I am Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon: in order to complete Etemenanki and Eurmeiminanki I mobilized all countries everywhere, each and every ruler who had been raised to prominence over all the people of the world. The base I filled in to make a high terrace. I built their structures with bitumen and baked brick throughout. I completed it, raising its top to the heaven, making it gleam bright as the sun.²⁰

There were temple towers in Mesopotamia—towers stretching toward the heavens in a double sense—for over 2,000 years. But this inscription and the pun on the name “Babel” (Gen 11:9) may indicate that Genesis 11 had a more specific agenda around 600 BCE: Genesis 11:1–9 is a story loaded with symbolism, a Yahwistic protest against the hubris of Nebuchadnezzar, who thinks his temple reaches the heavens and that his god Marduk has made him ruler over every nation. In this light we may read Genesis 11 as one of many biblical texts that polemicize against the polytheism of

¹⁶ Y. M. Gillihan, “Apocalyptic Elements in Hasmonean Propaganda: Civic Ideology and the Struggle for Political Legitimation,” in *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview*, ed. L. L. Grabbe, G. Boccacini, and J. M. Zurawski (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 213–23, esp. 215–19; cf. E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Septuagint. Collected Essays, Volume 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 11–13.

¹⁷ “Deir 'Alla,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2:126–30; C. A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel. Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010), 61–62.

¹⁸ I. Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom. The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 83–117.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 1–5, 47–54, 135, 141–64; D. E. Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible. History, Politics, and the Reinscribing of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁰ A. George, ed., *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2011), 153–69, plates LVIII–LXVII. See schoyencollection.com/history-collection-introduction/babylonian-history-collection/tower-babel-stele-ms-2063 [accessed October 24, 2014].

Assyrian and Babylonian overlords in the period 734–540.²¹ Other texts contain polemic against Egyptian religion.²² Parallels between biblical texts and texts from the superpowers of those days help us to see the polemical edge in these Yahwistic texts.

There are close parallels between Genesis 6–9 and the much older flood stories from Mesopotamia. But the differences between these stories indicate that Genesis 6–9 should be read as a polemical monotheistic counter-version to the polytheistic Mesopotamian stories, written by Yahwistic theologians in a Judaic kingdom in the shadow of Assyria. The flood the ancients wrote about is now understood as a story on sin and retaliation, the evil potential of man, and a righteous God who judges evil and plans a new future for mankind—none of which is found in the Mesopotamian texts. The contrast to the stories from the superpower of the north opens for a more dynamic understanding of the Noah story.

Reading the texts of Genesis 1–11 as historical reports will not do justice to these stories loaded with symbolism. To read the Noah story as a precise report on historical and geological events is not faithfulness to the Bible, it is a misinterpretation of the text. Those who use their energy to defend the “historicity” of the text are in danger of missing the central messages of the story.

The examples I have presented should make a literal (“biblicistic”) reading of these biblical texts problematic. Such a reading may isolate the Bible from the world of those days. The way Genesis 1–11 places the people of Israel among the nations should encourage us to interpret the texts of Israel in light of contemporary history and culture.

Archaeological Finds and Old Testament History

Archaeological finds may give us important “pegs” when we research the history of Israel and try to understand the intention behind the historical books of the Tanakh.²³ Many stories are written generations after the events they describe; they have an edifying, idealizing edge and convey “preached history.” We need to acknowledge their edifying nature and ask about the function and intention of the texts. Every text does not intend to give us detailed information about events of the past. Archaeological finds also indicate that biblical authors present history as seen through a theological interpretative lens.

There are archaeological finds that concur quite well with the story line of the Bible but others are more difficult to align with a literal reading of the texts. Certainly there are remnants from biblical times that have not yet been unearthed by archaeologists. But this insight should not be used to run away from a serious encounter with archaeological finds in the lands of the Bible. Here are some examples:

²¹ Isaiah 7:1–17 and 2 Kings 16:1–9 show that the kingdom of Judah became subordinate to the superpower Assyria from the war in 734 and onward.

²² Bernd Schipper has shown close parallels between the Joseph cycle and two post-exilic Egyptian texts that describe seven years of famine and an interpreter who reveals the will of the gods to the ruler, in “The Motif of ‘Seven Years of Famine’ in an Egyptian Text from the Persian Period: Papyrus Berlin 23071 VSO and the Joseph Story” (paper presented at SBL Annual Meeting, San Diego, November 23, 2014). Joshua Berman has made us aware of Egyptian texts with close parallels to Exodus 14, in “The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramses II and the Song of the Sea” (ibid.).

²³ Cf. the comment of the archaeologist Aren M. Maeir (Bar Ilan Univ.): “Too many of today’s biblical scholars are paying insufficient attention to the relevance of the archaeological remains for biblical research. . . . I firmly believe that there is much utility, and in fact necessity, in sustaining and developing the scholarly interface between archaeology and the Bible. . . . While the multi-layered and multi-sourced character of the biblical text is a given, and any attempts to relate the archaeological evidence to the biblical texts in a simplistic manner is wrought with problems, the importance of trying to find archaeological evidence of *Quellen* [sources] within the biblical texts cannot be underestimated. While this is not always possible and/or clearly provable, the utility of such interface between text and artifact is of utmost importance”; *Tell es-Safi/Gath I: The 1996–2005 Seasons*, vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 2012), 61, 65.

The victory stela of Pharaoh Merneptah demonstrated that a tribe called “Israel” lived in Canaan in 1207 BCE.

Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe:
 Ashkelon has been overcome;
 Gezer has been captured;
 Yano’am is made non-existent.
 Israel is laid waste and his seed is not.²⁴

Pharaoh’s list of those conquered includes the cities Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yano’am, as well as the people group “Israel.” Another fragmentary Egyptian inscription that is 60 years earlier probably mentions the same three cities and parts of the word “Israel.”²⁵ These two texts show that a tribe named Israel is already present in Canaan in the 13th century, the time in Egyptian history to which the Exodus possibly could be dated. The group that according to the Book of Exodus came from Egypt—did they already have relatives in the land? The destruction of Hazor, the largest city kingdom in the land, may point in the same direction. Joshua 11 reports that Joshua conquered the city, burned it, and put it under ban (חרם). According to Yigael Yadin and Amnon Ben-Tor, the excavators of Hazor, the city was conquered slightly after the mid-13th century. After the fire the victors decapitated idols they found in the ruins. Already Yadin noted that such iconoclasm can be most easily connected to Joshua’s Israelites with their prohibition against worshipping idols, and Ben-Tor has argued the same.²⁶ The largest building in Hazor (the “ceremonial palace”) was destroyed by an intense fire—a fire remembered until the writing of Joshua 11:11.

Recent excavations in the city of Rehov, south of Bet Shean, have revealed simple inscriptions from the ninth century with links to biblical texts.²⁷ We find references to Nimshi, possibly identical with the father of King Jehu (1 Kgs 19:16). One text connects Nimshi with “the prophet,” another says “for Elisha.” The latter was unearthed in a separate section of a house, with a vestibule with cultic artifacts leading to a room with a bench. The parallel to Elisha’s apartment in the house of the woman in Shunem (1 Kgs 4:18–37) is remarkable. Did Elisha have access to one house in Shunem and another in Rehov? Or could a possibly original Rehov later have been changed to Shunem during the transmission of the text?

Archaeologists have identified more than 200 early Israelite settlements from around 1200 BCE in the highlands of Judea and Samaria.²⁸ The houses (the type is designated “the four-room house” and includes a small open courtyard) are usually set in an oval with space for livestock in the center, similar to a nomadic camp. These settlers did not eat pork; in contrast to neighboring cultures, no pig bones have been found. From these simple villages there is a cultural and archaeological continuity all the way until the fall of the First Temple in 587. But pottery and architecture also reveal some links to earlier Canaanite city culture. These finds may indicate that nomads and homeless people from the cities became part of early Israel when it crystallized before 1200 BCE, in a time when city states broke down all over the Middle East. Ezekiel 16:3 points to a

²⁴ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele [accessed October 26, 2014].

²⁵ P. van der Veen, “Israel in Canaan Long Before Pharaoh Merneptah?” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 2:4 (2010): 15–25.

²⁶ A. Ben-Tor, “Who Destroyed Canaanite Hazor?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 39/4 (2013): 26–36, 58–60.

²⁷ A. Mazar, S. Ahituv, “The Inscriptions from Tel Rehov and Their Contribution to Research on Script and Writing in the Iron Age 2a,” *Eretz Israel 30: Amnon Ben-Tor Volume* (Israel Exploration Society, 2011), 300–316 (in Hebrew).

²⁸ I. Finkelstein, N.A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed. Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchdown, 2002), 107–120; R. D. Nelson, *Historical Roots of the Old Testament (1200–63 BCE)* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 12–37.

mixed origin for the Israelites: “Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites, your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.”

As of today, a massive migration from the east, as told in the Book of Joshua, is difficult to demonstrate.²⁹ The growth of the new Israelite entity in the highlands seems to have been a peaceful process. Only in a few cases do archaeologists find traces of the violent destruction of Canaanite cities (Hazor, Megiddo, Taanakh, Gibeon). Thus we find both compliance and discrepancy vis-à-vis the testimony of the books of Joshua and Judges. Judges 1 keeps the memory of a process similar to what is observed by the archaeologists: the settlement of early Israelites was a gradual process, starting in the highlands of Judea and Samaria. The Book of Joshua gives us a later, stylized interpretation, a version that remembers how large the two kingdoms together were in the ninth century, and preaches that the Lord gave the Israelites all the land.

Emergence of Scribal Culture

Knowledge of when the texts of the Tanakh were written down sets the books on Israel’s early history in profile, and leads to questions on the relation between oral and written tradition. Early inscriptions, on stone or ostraca, show that the first alphabet—the West-Semitic one—slowly developed from 1800 BCE onward. From Ugarit (on Syria’s Mediterranean coast) we have a Phoenician library from 1250–1230 BCE. But the earliest inscriptions from the land of Israel are later.

From around 1000 BCE there is one ostraca inscription with remnants of five lines (and three one-line inscriptions) from the Judean fortress town Khirbet el-Qeiyafa in the Shefelah, written in either Phoenician or early Hebrew.³⁰ There is still no developed literary Hebrew language—in the tenth century, Phoenician script was most used in Canaan. From the ninth century we have the short inscriptions from Rehov (see above) and another short one from the City of David. The Moabite victory stela (the Mesha inscription) from around 830 uses a language derived from Hebrew, and the Aramaic Tel Dan inscription is slightly earlier.³¹ Only with the texts from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud in Sinai (800–750 BCE) and ostraca from Samaria do we find texts written in biblical Hebrew.³²

As of today there is no inscriptional evidence that can confirm the existence of a literary Hebrew milieu as early as the time of Solomon (around 950), although biblical texts list administrative scribes under David and Solomon (1 Kgs 4:1–6; 2 Sam 8:17; 20:23–26). High-ranking scholars argue that a literary tradition developed in both the northern kingdom and Judah in the ninth century. The newly formed literary language was essential for defining a national Israelite identity.³³

²⁹ Anson Rainey argues for an Israelite immigration from the east: “Where did the Early Israelites Come From?” *BAR* 6 (2008): 45–50. He points to linguistic affinities between Hebrew and languages located in the east: Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Aramea. At least one early Israelite settlement has been identified east of the Jordan: Tell el-‘Umeiri, north-east of the Dead Sea; L. G. Herr and D. R. Clark, “Excavating the Tribe of Reuben,” *BAR* 2 (2001): 36–47, 64–66. There might be a few more.

³⁰ These excavations were led by Yossi Garfinkel, who argues that el-Qeiyafa testifies to a Judean state around 1000 BCE. Israel Finkelstein has suggested that the town belonged to Saul’s kingdom, centered among the northern tribes; *Forgotten Kingdom*, 55–61.

³¹ H. Hagelia, *The Dan Debate: The Tel Dan Inscription in Recent Research* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009); Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 50–55.

³² Z. Meshel, ed., *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (Horvat Teman): an Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2012), 73–142; *To YHWH of Teman and His Ashera. The Inscriptions and Drawings from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (‘Horvat Teman’) in Sinai*, ed. S. Ahituv and E. Eshel (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Yad Ben-Zvi, 2015), 71–143 (in Hebrew); Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 66–79.

³³ Israel Finkelstein finds a literary tradition only around 800 BCE in both kingdoms, in two well-established states with bureaucracy and professional scribes; *Forgotten Kingdom*, 113–15; cf. W. Schniedewind, *How The Bible Became a Book*.

We should allow for a long time of oral transmission before the texts about early Israelite history were written down. This insight gives perspectives on Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and 1–2 Samuel. Voices who argue for written transmission of biblical texts before the time of Solomon would need to turn to two other languages, Egyptian hieroglyphs or Akkadian, the cuneiform script from Mesopotamia.

Biblical Scrolls from the Judean Desert

If one holds to a theory of verbal inspiration of the Bible (“every word is inspired”), one needs to ask, “Which biblical text?” (2 Timothy 3:16 says that the *books* of the Tanakh are “breathed by God.”) Today it is difficult to regard the medieval Masoretic text as the only authoritative one. Up to the fall of the temple, widely different biblical scrolls existed side by side. The 200+ biblical scrolls from Qumran date from 250 BCE to 60 CE. Among them we find “grandfathers” of the Masoretic text, scrolls close to the Septuagint and its Hebrew parent text, pentateuchal scrolls close to the Samaritan recension, and a large number of independent scrolls, not related to any of these three textual families.

The differences between the texts can be primarily orthographic, reflect different readings of specific words that lead to a change in meaning, or reflect differences on a literary level. There are both scribal errors and full lines that fell out in the Masoretic text (cf. Ps 145:13; 1 Sam 1:24).³⁴

One and the same Hebrew book can appear in two different literary shapes until the fall of the temple. The Book of Jeremiah was transmitted in two recensions, the earlier and shorter edition preserved in the Septuagint; and the extended Masoretic edition, probably made by scribes in Egypt in the early third century,³⁵ which is 15% longer and rearranges the sequence of the second half of the scroll. Both editions were used in parallel at Qumran, where two copies of each recension were found (plus another non-aligned scroll). We should not discard the Septuagint versions as “not real Bible texts.” The Septuagint was the Bible of the early church (it still is for the Orthodox Church), and it preserves earlier and shorter versions of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and 1–2 Samuel; its Samuel text is clearly superior to the Masoretic.

The only scroll that preserves Judges 6 lacks 6:7–10, a concluding paragraph that probably was added relatively late.³⁶ Josephus and the best-preserved Samuel scroll (4QSam^a from around 30 BCE) contain a probably original paragraph in 1 Samuel 10–11, which is found in neither the Septuagint nor the Masoretic text. And a reconstruction of the 1QSamuel scroll shows that this

The Textualization of Ancient Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 56–81. Christopher Rollston argues that the Hebrew alphabet developed from the Phoenician in the ninth century, and that literary Hebrew must be older than the Mesha stele since its Moabite language represents a development of Hebrew; *Writing and Literacy*, 24–46. According to Karel van der Toorn the standardized script that can be identified around 850 reflects one central institution of education, most likely located in the stronger northern kingdom, a tradition later continued by scribes connected to the Jerusalem temple; *Scribal Culture*, 89. A dissenting voice is Baruch Halpern, who dates a few archaic biblical poems to 1070–1000 BCE, based on linguistic evidence; “Eyewitness Testimony. Parts of Exodus Written Within Living Memory of the Event,” *BAR* 5 (2003): 50–57 (I am not at all convinced by his argument).

³⁴ The *nun*-verse in the acrostic Psalm 145 is extant in the Septuagint and a Qumran scroll. A longer and more original text of 1 Samuel 1:24 is preserved in the Septuagint and partly in Qumran. The full text runs: “The boy / was with them and they brought him before the Lord. His father slaughtered the sacrifice, as he did every year before the Lord. He brought forth / the boy and slaughtered the ox. . . .”

³⁵ Masoretic Jeremiah shows knowledge of political developments in Egypt in the period 320–290 BCE; A. Lange, “The Textual Plurality of Jewish Scriptures in the Second Temple Period in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls” in *Qumran and the Bible: Studying the Jewish and Christian Scriptures in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. N. Dávid and A. Lange (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 43–96, esp. 77–82.

³⁶ E. Ulrich and P. Flint, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible. The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 208–209.

scroll only contained five of the eight appendices to 1–2 Samuel in 2 Samuel 20–24, probably preserving an early stage in the literary growth of this book.³⁷

The two well-preserved scrolls of the Song of Songs, written slightly before and slightly after the turn of the era, show us two different shorter editions of this book.³⁸ These two scrolls are easiest understood as stages in the literary growth of a collection of love songs toward its full “Solomonic” shape, evidenced by the Septuagint translation in the second half of the first century CE. In a forthcoming book I argue that the collection grew during the first century BCE, and that the editors of these original secular love songs also read them symbolically, as love songs between the Lord and his people.

A biblical book could be considered an authoritative book of the fathers while its text was still fluid and open for scribal changes. Judean scribes demonstrate a dynamic relation to the text they copied, all through to the time of Paul. Quotations from the Tanakh in the New Testament confirm the textual plurality I have described here. Van der Toorn notes that in Judea, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, a scribe is at the same time a “scholar of scripture.”³⁹

With one exception (a Joel scroll from the Norwegian-based Schøyen Collection), the biblical texts we find in the scrolls from the two Jewish revolts (66–73 and 132–136) are close to identical with the later Masoretic text. This observation suggests that proto-Masoretic scrolls of individual biblical books were given authority in the Jerusalem temple in the first century CE.⁴⁰

The scrolls from the Judean Desert cast new light on the long process of gathering important scriptures and attributing authority to these texts. This process only came to an end in the mid-second century CE. Insight into this process and the manifold faces of Scripture until the fall of the temple help us understand both these texts and the scholarly scribes who transmitted them.

Conclusions

Preachers and teachers in the Messianic movement should not equate faithfulness to the Bible with traditional dating and ascription of biblical books to certain Israelite sages.⁴¹ Believers who mobilize a lot of energy to fight “liberal” views of authorship and date may overlook central messages in the texts themselves. Pastors will need humility to meet congregants who may know more than they do about a biblical book or advocate a different understanding of it.

Residing in Israel, Messianic believers have a unique opportunity to be in dialogue with high-ranking scholars in Bible and archaeology of the biblical lands. Perhaps Bar Ilan University could be a good venue for Messianic Jews who want to pursue academic studies in these fields, since Bar Ilan intends to bridge academic scholarship and traditional Jewish faith.

Literal (biblicistic) readings of biblical texts struggle to take their human side seriously. The Creator has given us reason and the ability to develop natural and philological sciences. Being aware of our limitations, we should use these resources to understand God’s world—including the revelatory Word he has given us through human mediators.

³⁷ T. Elgvin, “1QSamuel—A Variant Literary Edition of 2 Samuel” (paper presented at SBL Annual Meeting, San Diego, November 25, 2014).

³⁸ 4QCant^b, the earliest witness to the book, opened with 2:9b and ended in 5:1. Chapters 3:2b–5 and 4:4–7 were not included, and the scroll contained a shorter and highly variant text of 3:2.6–4:1. 4QCant^a jumps from 4:7 to 6:11, and probably opened with a shorter version of chapters 1–2. See Elgvin, *The Literary Growth of Canticles*.

³⁹ Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 75–141, here 79–81.

⁴⁰ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 27–34, 108–11; idem, *Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible, and Qumran: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 135, 140–54, 175–76.

⁴¹ I have heard teaching denouncing “liberal” scholars who deny that the Book of Daniel was written by the sage Daniel during the Babylonian exile, and have recently been asked, “How can you as a believer say that Solomon did not write the Song of Songs?”

Scripture warns us against hubris. Our towers can never reach the heavens; we can never attain a full understanding, for “God is always more.” This should be a critical reminder to Christians who pull an “infallibility matrix” over the texts and only see the divine, heavenly side of Scripture—they may be in danger of forcing a modernistic worldview upon the texts and overlooking the intentions of the authors and the *scopus* of the texts. But it should also be a reminder to textual scholars who reduce Scripture to human testimonies from the religious history of Israel. A “history of religions” reading does not do justice to the revelatory side of the Scriptures. In the encounter with postmodernism and linguistic deconstructionism we uphold that we have valid access to what the authors meant—and their meaning should remain the starting point for interpretation today. God and his church have given us the Word—in accessible words—as our guide for life and faith.

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Messianic Jewish Exposition of Scripture

Joseph Shulam

Is there a specific Messianic Jewish way of dealing with Scripture, between the traditions of church and synagogue? If so, it ought to be used in basic hermeneutics and in preaching. Has the Messianic Jewish movement something to contribute to the Christian church at large in these areas?

Jewish tradition has become popularized in the West with such Broadway shows as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Yentl*, which opened a window into Jewish life in pre–World War I Eastern Europe. In the Christian West, and at times in Messianic Jewish circles, Jewish tradition has been identified merely with wearing a *kippa* or eating gefilte fish. If this was all that Jewish tradition had contributed to the world, it would not have been very beneficial. The largest contribution of Jewish tradition to the world, however, is as the apostle Paul said, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the Scriptures of God . . .” (Rom 3:1–2).

The Jewish Heritage

The contribution of Jewish tradition to the Scriptures can be divided into two major areas: the biblical text and its direct exegesis; and what the rabbis call *davar Torah* (regulation of the Torah)—all the interpretation deduced from the Scripture by logical conclusions or hermeneutical rules. In order to make this point much clearer, let me expand it a little. We should never forget that we were handed the Bible by the rabbis. Let us remember with gratitude the labors of the innumerable Jewish scholars who, as far back as the pre-Maccabean period, dedicated themselves to the *Masorah*, the fixation of the biblical text with critical notes. Words, letters, dots, marginal readings—all these were religiously weighed and fixed by the rabbis. The full story of what fixing the scriptural tradition entails can be read in the Talmudic treatise *Soferim* (“Scribes”). It deals with such details as the space between letters, the width and height of the scrolls, the capital and final letters. It speaks of the qualifications for preparing the books, of their respectful handling and of their sanctity. We must realize that Yeshua and the apostles would not have had the books of Moses if it were not for the rabbis who preserved them and protected them from corruption. All this, of course, was done with the oversight and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Rabbinic tradition gave the Old Testament the vowel signs that made it possible to read the Bible thousands of years after it was written. Can you imagine a text in your own language that is made up of only consonants, a text without vowels? It is the Jewish tradition of the rabbis which has determined the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and made it readable and understandable for the whole world.

The Christian church received from the synagogue not only the text of the Bible, but also its methods of interpretation. The four methods of exegesis recommended by Bahya ben Asher—literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical—are the same as those which Bede developed in the

eighth century AD for the church. In Hebrew, the rabbis called these four methods by the acronym *Pardes*: *Peshat* (literal), *Remez* (moral), *Drash* (allegorical), and *Sod* (allegorical/mystical).¹

This concept, that the Scriptures can be interpreted on different levels, was developed by the Jewish rabbis before Yeshua, and gave rise to many New Testament doctrines and expositions. The understanding of the snake in the Garden of Eden as the devil (Rev 12) is one of many New Testament examples of expositions which have their origins in the rabbinic traditions of interpretation based on the above four exegetical methods.

Gematria, a cipher method that enables one to interpret the meaning behind letters of the alphabet and numbers, was also well-known by the writers of the New Testament. Here is an example of *Gematria*: Genesis 14:14 mentions the 318 “trained men” of Abraham; 318 is the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of the name Eliezer, Abraham’s servant mentioned in Genesis 15:2. It seems hard to believe that this is pure coincidence. The rabbis therefore connected the story of Genesis 14:14 with Eliezer, and concluded that Eliezer was the person who trained the servants of Abraham and made them like himself.

Rabbinical exegesis is often the key to understanding Paul. Only Paul’s dependence on rabbinic tradition can explain the view that the Torah was given not by God himself, but by the angels (Gal 3:19), or the mention of the rock that followed the Israelites and gave them water in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4).

The rabbinic tradition of biblical exegesis not only contributed to the understanding of the Bible in the past; it is my firm conviction that when Christianity is healed in the future, its return to a biblical faith will be aided by rabbinical principles and attitudes toward the text. The Jewish tradition of the rabbis and their love for God’s Word is a heroic and constant song of devotion and fidelity, in which both Jews and Christians can have fellowship and experience the fullness of God’s revelation. Only around the Word of God can Jews and Christians find fellowship and communion that some day might bring salvation to both camps.

Hermeneutics for Messianic Jews

Biblical Hermeneutics

This paper does not deal with traditional Christian hermeneutics. Consequently, I will not discuss second-century developments and their implications for us today. Rather, I shall attempt to propose some basic guidelines for a hermeneutic for Messianic Jews, and for those people who would like to discover biblical truth.

- The Bible is the word of God and ought to be treated as such.
- The Bible is an ancient document, reflecting a historical reality, and must be understood within that historical reality.
- The Bible is a Jewish document, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It is important for us to remember that what we usually study is a translation which already represents an interpretation.
- The Bible contains different types of literature. Each genre needs to be discerned and treated with the appropriate tools of language and style.
- The Bible as God’s Word communicates God’s will, and has a spiritual dimension which is more than just words and sentences. One needs the guidance of the Spirit of God to be able to penetrate the words and get into the Spirit of the Word.

¹ *Pardes* is an acronym in the Hebrew context, but it is also a Persian word that means the Garden of Delight. It is used for heaven in most Western languages, as “Paradise.”

For me personally, these guidelines are axiomatic. They ought to be rules of thumb not only for Messianic Jews, but for everyone who would like to know and understand the Book of Books, or in fact any ancient literature. In the modern West, some people have treated the Bible as an existential book of God, totally disregarding its historical or linguistic boundaries. On the other hand, there are people who use the rabbinic method to justify the wildest interpretations of Scripture.

Not everything that is Jewish or everything which is ancient is automatically good or right. Both rabbis and church leaders have been known to be wrong at times, and any use of rabbinic methods should be made critically with consideration to the time and culture of the people who wrote them. But when we study the New Testament, which is a first-century Jewish document, we cannot ignore the traditions of interpretation and exegesis that were used at the time.

The guidelines listed above are important for the development of a Messianic Jewish hermeneutic because:

- They put the New Testament back into the context in which it was written. This understanding will bring people back to the realization that they are dealing with a Jewish book and with a Jewish Savior. It will also cause the student to seek the solution of textual problems in the world of Yeshua and not in some medieval monastery.
- Biblical scholarship often has a historical and philological approach, but lacks respect for the inspiration of the text. A Messianic Jewish approach ought to incorporate a solid historical and philological approach to understanding the Bible *and* a firm faith in the integrity and inerrancy of the biblical text.
- A Messianic Jewish approach to hermeneutics ought to deal with the biblical text according to the genre in which it was written. One does not deal with poetry in the same way as with prose. Especially in apocalyptic literature, Christian interpreters often overlook the type and special rules for understanding this kind of literature. Without a comprehensive knowledge of the Jewish world of both intertestamental and first-century Judaism, it is impossible to correctly understand the intention of the text.
- The study of the Bible ought not only to be an intellectual or even a “spiritual” process. It ought to lead a person to “all good works.” In Jewish terms, our effort to understand the Bible must bring us to “doing the will of our father, who is in heaven.” Hermeneutics must be a tool not only for understanding but also for doing the work of God among men. The people of God are called to obey his commandments² and to imitate the good examples of holy people in biblical history. If we want to be close to God’s will, we have to take seriously the examples of the first-century church. What the church of the apostles did ought to have direct bearing on what we do and how we do it. If they took communion every week on the “first day of the week,” we ought to seek both the reasons and meaning of their action, and imitate them as much as possible. If they baptized by immersion for the remission of sins, we ought to do the same.

Messianic Jewish hermeneutics faces a great challenge. The challenge is to deal with the biblical text in an objective and authentic way in order to understand it, and at the same time to remove

² It might sound very simplistic to state that we have to obey God’s commandments. However, this area of hermeneutics is probably going to be the most controversial in the future development of a Messianic Jewish hermeneutic. The commandments of God’s Word can be divided into three different categories: (a) eternal commandments; (b) commandments for the hour—that is, those commandments which apply to a very specific time and place, or to a specific person only; (c) commandments which are given only for one gender, like circumcision.

the encrusted tradition of two thousand years of interpretation of both Judaism and Christianity. The Bible has been used in traditional religious circles to substantiate the party line of religious establishments. Some traditions that have come from the Graeco-Roman world have inculcated themselves in both the Jewish and Christian traditions of hermeneutics. Messianic Jews have to deal with, and possibly even recognize, these imported traditions. And in my opinion, Messianic Jews ought to work the hardest in order to return to a more original and historic approach to understanding the text of the Bible.

This is a difficult challenge, not least because the level of education and biblical expertise within the Messianic Jewish community is not, at this point, sufficient to meet this challenge. However, as Jews who believe in Yeshua, we have no excuse for not starting to think about the distinctives of biblical interpretation.

In the final outcome, both Jews and non-Jews will have to deal with the same hermeneutic principles and approach the New Testament as a Jewish book from the first century AD. When this happens, I believe that a degree of unity and understanding will arise between the Jewish and the Christian worlds.

Pluralistic and Contextualized Hermeneutics

The world has changed, at least outwardly, with the advent of the modern lifestyle of the West. We no longer live in an agrarian society. For this reason, we must learn, from the principles of both missiology and plain reason, how to apply the biblical situation and principles to our own times. This will no doubt require necessary inferences, arrived at through strict logical analysis of biblical teachings, examples, and principle; all this without breaking or annulling any of the direct commands of God's word.³

Hermeneutics in the 21st century is going to be much more pluralistic, by allowing a broader cultural expression of the biblical faith. In practical terms, this means that Messianic Jews must put Romans 14 into practice in a much more visible way. There will be congregations whose interpretations of inferences will be different from those of the church among the Gentiles, and even other Messianic Jewish congregations. These different interpretations must appreciate the universal nature of the Messiah's body and the cultural diversity among his children. At the same time, such a hermeneutic should seek to break down the walls of "tradition" that Satan has built up to divide and diminish the effectiveness of the message of salvation in Yeshua the Messiah.

The challenge facing a Messianic Jewish hermeneutic is to rediscover the spirit and the practices of a New Testament church on the eve of the 21st century. The future of the church in the world will depend on its ability to overcome the shackles of both Catholic and Protestant traditions, and to return to a more biblical faith and to a greater unity among those who claim faith in Yeshua the Messiah. That unity and spirit will be greatly enhanced by the development of a more Jewish and more biblical hermeneutic, in both Messianic Jewish and Christian circles.

Preaching the Good News

Preaching in the early church was no different from preaching in the synagogue. In the early synagogue, preaching was the function of the Torah reading. The object of preaching was to explain the text and make it relevant to the worshippers. In modern Western churches, preaching is an instrument of the leadership to motivate and move the crowds to action or a change of attitude. In the Jewish context, preaching has the function of exegesis, entertainment, and arousing interest in

³ One of the prime examples of this would be the role of women in the life and administration of the church. We cannot ignore the direct commands of Paul in 1 Timothy 2:10ff or 1 Corinthians 14; but on the other hand, we must find venues and means by which the modern woman can find herself active and fulfilled in God's kingdom.

the message of God's word. The above statement is a generalization which is generally true, although there are exceptions. Let me, in the rest of this article, deal with greater details in both the differences and the similarities.

The object of Jewish preaching is to deal with the Word of God. The convicting and motivating power is the Word. The objective of the preaching is to make the Word clear and more interesting to the people who hear the message. The motivating power is considered to be in the message, not in the preacher.

Jewish preaching must include at least some of the following elements:

- Exegesis of the biblical text.
- *Hidud*—a sharp and detailed look into problematic aspects of the text. Jewish preachers look for the problems in the text and find there interesting material for their sermons. This point is important because it is unusual in Christian preaching. A Christian preacher normally wants to make the message as simple and clear for the hearer as he can. In rabbinical preaching, the preacher does not want to make things so simple that people would be bored. The use of parables and stories in the sermons of the rabbis served as instruments when dealing with difficult topics.
- Jewish preaching has to have some intellectual stimuli. These stimuli come either from problems in the text, a story, a parable, or at times *Gematria* (numerology).
- Each sermon in Judaism ought to have a moral point that will motivate people to be more moral, loving, and better behaved.

Jewish Sermons in the New Testament

If we examine some of the main sermons in the New Testament from the perspective of Jewish preaching, we can see how these points are appropriated by both Yeshua and the apostles. Can you imagine a preacher in a Christian church today getting up and preaching a message with some parables, and stating that he used a parable so some people would not understand what he really wants to say? Jesus did exactly that (Matt 13).

The Qumran commentaries demonstrate a specific way of giving the biblical text a modern application, called *peshet*. In Acts 4:25–27 we find a parallel in the way the first church expounds Psalm 2. Note how the ancient text is made relevant to the situation.

Psalm 2

Why do the nations rage
and the people plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take
their stand and the rulers gather
together against the Lord and
against His Messiah.

Peter's Interpretation

Herod and Pontius Pilate met
together with the Gentiles and
the people of Israel in this city
to conspire against your holy
servant Yeshua, whom you
have anointed . . .

We see here a typical use of Scripture that does not seem logical to people of today, because our attitude toward the Word is different. For the Jews, the Word of God is a living organism, not just a historical document. Therefore, both in Qumran and in the New Testament, ancient texts can be used in this dynamic way without compromising the historic integrity of the text.

Messianic Jewish Preaching Today and Tomorrow

The Messianic Jewish preacher needs to bring the worshippers to action, or at least to a change of attitude. The Word of God is powerful and dynamic. It has to bring a person to some change.

In the Messianic Jewish movement, most of the style and substance of preaching has not been adapted from the Jewish heritage, but from the Baptist heritage of many of the early missionaries. At times, the preaching that is heard in Messianic congregations is peppered with a few quotations from Jewish sources. Preaching is still an instrument in the hands of the leadership to accomplish the agenda of the church, and less of a study and application of the Word of God.

What is needed to make Messianic Jewish preaching more effective in the Jewish community and in the local congregations of Messianic Jews? The preacher ought to study the Bible in a systematic way. He ought not only read it, or use it for sermon preparation, but the preacher ought to study. Sermons ought to be prepared well—at least ten hours need to be spent by the preacher in preparing each sermon. The Jewish people appreciate if the preacher does not think that they are unintelligent. Jews like to be challenged intellectually. A little humor in every message is good on the basis that “a little sugar helps the medicine go down.” The congregation does not need to be bullied into action, but the Word of God, with halakhic thinking, should motivate people to move into action. The use of Jewish material should be made only when it is relevant to the biblical passage.

As the body of the Messiah grows in Israel and molds its own character, it will rediscover the Jewish style and substance of preaching. It might even develop a much better synthesis between the Jewish and the Western heritage in preaching. The most important thing in the future of Messianic Jewish preaching is that we look at preaching as the modern accommodation of the tradition of the classical prophets. It is a holy privilege and calling to speak to people from God’s Word. Let us not take it lightly.

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Theology Schools: Are They Necessary for Jewish Yeshua-Believers in Israel?

Gershon Nerel

“Most congregational leaders in Israel lack formal theological and ministry training beyond basic discipleship. While many are educated in other fields of study, few have the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree in biblical studies. And while a number of immigrants and expatriates possess advanced theological degrees, I don’t know of any Israeli pastor who holds a master of divinity degree—the standard ministry degree for pastors in North America. Further, there is little provided in the way of continuing education for Israeli pastors, and sadly, some simply do not see the need for it when it is provided.”

These words, written by Timothy Sigler, a Baptist professor at Moody Bible Institute (MBI) in Chicago,¹ portray the common and typical view of many established Western Christians, mainly North Americans, about Messianic pastors and teachers in Israel.

Here, however, I would like to present an opposite perspective. My experience and conclusion, after living in Israel as a believer in the Lord Yeshua for more than four decades, is completely different. I have routinely seen expatriate missionaries and/or other preachers, called “theologians,” who only repeated, almost blindly, what they were taught in various historical churches and denominations. Sometimes they came with degrees and agendas connected to names of impressive theological institutions. In too many cases, sadly, such theological schools imported to the land needless discussions and polemics, resulting in painful confusion and divisions. Almost always they have attempted, using many pretentious arguments, to impose their odd unbiblical dogmas and unnecessary priorities.

To me, this always stood in sharp contrast to the powerful and penetrating teachings of the Lord Yeshua. For me the simple, but not simplistic, and profound teaching of the Lord was always sufficient. Only his words and his spirit (Phil 2:5) have strongly transformed me. During more than four decades I have listened to speeches by many people called teachers, preachers, pastors, etc., and have always looked for the link between their words and behavior and the words and example of the Lord Yeshua. Whether those “theologians” held a formal religious title or degree, or were eloquent speakers seasoning their sermons with impressive models and funny jokes, was not an issue for me.

A Brief Personal Testimony

I accepted the Lord Yeshua as my personal Savior, my master and my teacher in Beer-Sheva in the late 1960s, just before beginning my military service in the IDF as a combat medic. This was not a sudden revelation, like the Lord’s appearance to Shaul on his way to Damascus, but rather a slow

¹ Tim M. Sigler, “A Fresh Perspective on the Messianic Movement in Israel,” *Mishkan* 61 (2009): 91. See also charismanews.com/world/46304-messianic-judaism-gaining-momentum-in-israel.

process of searching and comparing. What really impacted me very deeply then, and still does now, was the tremendous divine teaching of the Son of God. Only in his words could I discover the absolute truth which I was looking for so eagerly. The Holy Spirit convinced me that the Lord Yeshua is indeed the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). The Sermon on the Mount, for example, was far beyond all other literature I liked to read. Occasionally I did raise theological questions and discussed various interpretations, but these usually provoked more questions than answers. Eventually I found authoritative and convincing teaching only in the marvelous words of the Savior Yeshua, sealed with the unseen stamp of the Holy Spirit.

In particular I well remember the striking testimony of two American missionaries, the late Warren and Linda Graham, who lived in Beer-Sheva and in Jerusalem for over 40 years. Their strong personal faith in the Lord Yeshua and their dedicated daily life made me jealous. I wanted to have the same inner light and spiritual confidence which they possessed. For example, I remember how in May and June 1967 they decided, only by faith, to stay in Beer-Sheva with the locals and not evacuate themselves to Cyprus with their small children, although their insurance lost validity because of the situation. This firm step of total trust and belief in the Lord I cannot forget. This spoke to me much more than the many long theological discussions we had in those days.²

Furthermore, I should also mention that throughout the following decades until the Grahams' return to the US in 1996, they never suggested to me, or, as far as I know, to any other Israeli believer, to attend a theological training institution, locally or abroad. Following their own experience, they constantly pointed to the daily personal study of Scripture, accompanied by asking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Indeed "when he, the Spirit of truth has come, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own [authority], but whatever he hears he will speak" (John 16:13). The Spirit opens our eyes to understand the Lord's holy message and instructs us how to practically do his will.

The Grahams never tried intentionally, or as a matter of doctrinal policy, to clone the Israeli believers according to their own Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA) background. They could have done so easily while conducting numerous children's camps and other youth activities. While volunteering with them for many years in this work, I always greatly appreciated this attitude. The paradigm of a theology school, within our local reality, is far from being a "must."

Theological Bombardment

Since the 19th century, modern Jewish believers in Yeshua (JBY) in Eretz Israel, the land of Israel, have been subject to heavy theological pressure and persuasion, even some coercion, by various expatriate churches, denominations, and missionary schools. In most cases the approach of the "guests" was to re-create the metaphysical DNA of the "natives" according to the theological creeds of their own mother churches. Even song books in Hebrew, translated from English and German and published by missionaries—for example those of the American C&MA³ and the British Church Mission to the Jews (CMJ)⁴—became a platform for promulgating specific doctrinal formulas relating, among other topics, to Christology and the Trinity.⁵

² Gershon Nerel, "Faith and Deed in the Street of Patriarchs and in the Street of Prophets," *Zot Habrit*, Organ of the Messianic Jewish Alliance in Eretz Israel, 21 (2007): 1–3 (in Hebrew). Downloadable at iseeisrael.com, publication #33 [accessed April 6, 2016].

³ Most of the editing work of the *Shir Chadash* (New Song) hymnal was done by Bernice Cox Gibson. See William F. Smalley, *Alliance Missions in Palestine, Arab Lands and Israel (1890–1970)* (New York: C&MA documentation, 1971), esp. 516.

⁴ Ruth Laurence (Lori) started her missionary work in 1927 during the British Mandatory period, and later also assisted the small local congregation in Beer-Sheva until the late 1960s. She then retired in Oxfordshire.

⁵ *Shir Hadash* (New Song) (hardcover, 1957).

More than in any other country in the world, it is in Israel that churches, denominations, and missionaries endeavor to convert the locals to their own theological doctrines. They are not satisfied with making JBY “only” simple disciples of the Lord Yeshua who follow his teachings in the New Testament. Rather, most of these missionaries constantly bombard the Israelis with their opinionated theologies coming from East and West, North and South. Normally, they don’t object to keeping Jewish folkloristic traditions like Purim costumes and parties, but strongly insist on disseminating their particular articles of faith.

Almost each and every branch of Christendom is represented in Israel, especially in Jerusalem. Directly or indirectly each and every one continually attempts to bring Jews under its specific theological wings. Among them we find Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists, Adventists, Mennonites, Brethren, Charismatics, Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Russian Pravoslav, and even Mormons. They actually have not only vested interests to Christianize the Jew, but also to shape him later according to their own dogmatic platform.

I well remember, for example, that as a very young believer, shortly after the shocking Yom Kippur War in 1973, I was offered a very tempting invitation to attend a renowned theological seminary in Texas for several years and to receive their esteemed degree of theology. This was really most attractive, because my only commitment was to promise not to remain in the US. Moreover, this was fascinating and almost irresistible because at that time I was recruited for reserve duty in the IDF for 90(!) days every year (two stints of 45 days each). I passionately prayed and asked the Lord to guide me on what to do so I could avoid mistakes. Praise to my Savior Yeshua that he saved me not only in battle near the Suez Canal in the Sinai Peninsula, but also from a theological brainwashing in the US.

American Values in Israel

Since the 1980s and 1990s, when new waves of Americans, both Messianic Jews and others, settled and missionized in Israel, many more diverse American theologies were imported into the land. Nowadays their doctrines and statements of faith are easily found on Internet websites. Ironically, these messages are presented widely as “Fresh Teaching from Zion.” Yet in fact they are nothing but traditional church creeds, dating back to the Reformation period and even to the church fathers and ecumenical councils of the early centuries AD. Most of these institutions and individuals have no small financial resources, and those locals who choose to work with them have no choice but to cling to their official creeds.

It is obvious therefore that those American theologians and missionaries recycle in Israel what they learned in evangelical circles in North America. They hardly bring with them any original or substantial biblical thinking. They are still trapped in the old theologies they learned in the seminary, etc. Furthermore, they are afraid of new ideas lest they be accused of heretical tendencies. They are also very reluctant to profoundly discuss controversial issues with the locals for fear that they will be ostracized by their supporters. As a result, it is unlikely that fresh spiritual insights and innovative approaches will come forth from them.

In other words, it is a unique advantage and even a great bonus for Israeli JBY not to be born into institutional theological frameworks. It is a privilege not to be bound and captive inside boundaries which in many cases are not biblical and merely repeat slogans which are falsely presented as holy and axiomatic. Therefore the “lack of a theological tradition” is in fact an excellent opportunity to think freely through the Hebrew Bible and to allow the Holy Spirit to guide.

If in America it is standard for a pastor or congregational leader to have a master of divinity degree, does this mean that Israeli believers must follow the same pattern?! In this context it is interesting to mention, for example, the testimony of Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, a well known

Messianic Jewish pioneer in the land who studied at MBI in Chicago in the late 1920s. After describing his difficulties at MBI, among others the lack of kosher food and the attempts to Americanize him there, he wrote as follows: “I am thankful to have two degrees that no earthly institution can bestow. I have a B.A. (Born Again) and an S.S.B.G. (Sinner Saved By Grace), Hallelujah.”⁶

Strangely, even sadly, not a few Israeli JBY place American beliefs and values on a pedestal. They admire the American lifestyle, colloquialisms, and slang. They adopt, almost automatically, new American teachings and ecclesiastical trends, such as “hyper grace” and musical/worship theology. In many congregations different kinds of musical performances have become the cardinal activity. Often the choir singing and robes, the solo songs, the instrumental praise, and the dancing with or without flags and banners eclipse the time of teaching and admonition. More than once the words in the book of Amos need to be remembered: “Take away from me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:23–24). In too many cases Israelis subject themselves and “assimilate” very quickly into American culture and theology without any deep study or critical approach.

Sadly, North American theological standards, and North American style and manners, have become the litmus paper for measuring good and legitimate service for the Lord Yeshua among various Israeli JBY. Just to mention one salient factor: the nonstop dealing with the topic of training local “heads” and raising “next generation leaders.” Instead of focusing on raising servants and slaves for the Lord, the constantly promoted ideal is the pattern which borders on the mentality of mundane leaders and sophisticated leadership. How can this trend be compared with the Lord’s words: “Neither be called leaders (*kathegetai*), for one is your leader the Messiah” (Matt 23:10)?⁷

Another American value which not a few Israeli JBY admire revolves around big numbers—the passion to have “mega congregations.” Of course, within Israeli dimensions the numbers are relatively much smaller, but the same principle is attractive and the value/target itself is desired. Often, so it seems, local assemblies prefer to increase the number of participants in meetings by offering exciting social, cultural, and musical activities. Less attention is given to teaching about the many commandments of the Lord himself; admonition and warnings about issues such as sin, hell (*gehenna*), and the lake of fire are barely even shared. The danger is to appreciate a “broad/large surface” yet become used to a depth of merely a few centimeters.

Biblical vs. Theological

Practically speaking, Bible learning is not the same as theological study, and the heading “Bible school” is often misleading. In many cases an institution called a Bible school is nothing but an instrument in the service of indoctrinating a specific theology and/or a denominational creed. Historically, the American Bible college movement has developed since the late 19th century in reaction to the secularization of US and Canadian education.⁸

Therefore, when an institution is called a Bible school, it does not automatically mean that in reality it systematically focuses on Scripture alone, verse by verse. Sometimes parents and others think that Bible school is the solution to neglected personal and congregational biblical study. Yet

⁶ Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, ed. B. Broadway (Jerusalem: Netivah Ministry, 2006), 90.

⁷ The literal meaning of the Greek word *kathegetai* is *leaders*, as it also appears in the Phillips Modern English translation and in Today’s English Version. See also Jay P. Green Sr., ed., *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 78. However, the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version have translated the word as *masters*.

⁸ About the development of Bible colleges see for example en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_college [accessed April 6, 2016].

the curriculum of established Bible colleges cannot—and should not—replace either individual or congregational long term study.

The basic guidelines for proper biblical study should be found in the local congregation, where there is true stability as it is not a “train station” for itinerant teachers. Needless to mention are situations when congregational teachers are not free to refer to unpleasant and hard topics from a biblical perspective, just because of material restrictions. The older local pastor(s), for example, will do much of the teaching and focus on the prioritization of the biblical text. In a long process, step by step and year after year, the pastor(s) will deal with central issues and questions. For example: How to begin the study—with the OT or the NT? Will the teaching place the words of the Lord Yeshua above the words of the apostles? Are all the biblical books on the same level of authority and importance?⁹

“Planting Churches” in Israel

I have met Christian/Messianic missionaries and teachers who proudly declare that they came to “plant churches” in Israel. Some of them were expatriates, mainly from North America, who stayed in the land for a certain period of time or even became permanent residents. Others were *olim*, new immigrants, who came to settle and live in Israel either fully or partly. More often than not, they too assumed that they possessed a sacred authority to enforce their dogmas upon local believers. All this just because a religious institution abroad had dressed them in hilarious garb and/or placed a solemn piece of paper in their hands.

Some agents of specific doctrines and theologies, even when originating from eccentric and/or marginal educational institutions, probably would have behaved differently if they did not hold formal degrees. Usually they have no serious spiritual background or credibility, even though they openly claim so and/or present an “impressive” list of endorsers, etc. Anyhow, now and then even the work of so-called non-denominational theology schools in Israel serves to a great extent to continue their own survival and to raise funds for their existence both locally and abroad. Almost as a rule, the “church planters” actually transplant their own theology schools, even when they employ local teachers who speak Hebrew or send guest lecturers from the parent institution.

Theological Literature

Another relevant issue on the Israeli scene is the massive import of sectarian theological literature translated into Hebrew. In many cases these are lousy translations with very limited editorial input. Huge financial resources are invested in activities such as translating and printing “spiritual materials” in Hebrew. The main difficulty is the nearly automatic acceptance of Christian literature which originates, de facto, from various Protestant denominations and sects, some of them mentioned above.

One big temptation, for example, is to publish/print antiquated theological books, booklets, and pamphlets which are copyright free, namely texts that are found in public libraries or in private archives and have reached the status of public domain. In some cases this means a wait of at least 70 years after the death of the author. For example, one may collect 19th-century volumes written by renowned Hebrew Christians who have graduated from denominational theology schools in Christian countries. Such older or “classical” theologies are dressed in contemporary Israel with modern Hebraic garb, and are presented almost as sacrosanct texts.

However, it should also be said that if such writings had been presented merely as study texts for comparative purposes and *not* as canonical orthodoxy, this would have been very helpful

⁹ See, for example, Gershon Nerel, “Christological Observations within Yeshua Judaism,” *Mishkan* 59 (2009): 51–62.

and even enlightening. The problem arises when authoritative and dogmatic status is attributed to manmade doctrines. One-sided selection of dogmatic literature and its free dissemination in Hebrew in Israel opens the door for easy spiritual disorientation and even distraction from basic biblical teachings.

How to Mature Spiritually?

Consequently, then, one may naturally ask where, how, and from whom to learn the Scriptures and how to know the truth. In which way can one mature spiritually and biblically? To me it is obvious that the first and utmost responsibility lies in the routine life of the believer himself/herself. Everyone must read and study the Bible individually and systematically, on a daily basis, with the constant counseling of the *Paraclete*, the Holy Spirit. There is no replacement for that. Such a daily devotional mindset, accompanied by daily prayers not only before meals, is a personal commitment for a lifetime. This is not just a matter of graduating from an educational institution after completing one or several courses during a very limited period of time.

Additionally, it is the local congregation which plays a most significant role in the spiritual life of the believer. It is imperative that believers and disciples of the Lord faithfully attend a local congregation. There is no perfect congregation, just as there is no perfect human being. And yet the Lord himself mentioned the *kehila*, the assembly or the congregation (Matt 16:18; Rev 2–3), and one must be committed to regularly participate, and so to grow and to mature spiritually. There is no replacement for this congregational dedication.

In addition to personal devotion, both families and congregations function as two sides of the same “coin” of spiritual growth and maturing. Daily family devotions with children create the needed spiritual infrastructure for biblical values. This was, for example, the spiritual legacy of the late Haim (Haimoff) Bar David (1905–1991), who not only taught these principles theoretically, but also implemented them during his lifetime. Moreover, Haim Haimoff strongly and constantly objected to sending his own children (six sons and a daughter) to Christian theological schools, particularly outside of Israel. This was his advice also to others who talked with him.¹⁰ He was convinced, as am I, that by keeping the commandments of the Lord Yeshua and by doing his will, one gradually becomes his loyal disciple. Then the Lord also provides spiritual gifts, callings, etc.

An important “key” in this process is to follow the Savior like small children—to be childlike, not childish. As the Lord clearly said: “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3). Likewise, unless one is born from above, said the Lord, one cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3); and, additionally, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). These are the Lord’s clear conditions: to first to see the kingdom, and only then also to enter into it.

Epilogue

A reality in which most Israeli JBY lack theological schooling, and where Christian traditions—both Catholic and Protestant—are absent from their lives, is in fact a big advantage and not a problem. JBY greatly benefit from being free from heavy, even troublesome, denominational heritages. Such spiritual freedom from the burden of misleading interpretations and theologies opens the door for fresh understandings. With the biblical text in Hebrew and the instruction of the Holy Spirit, new spiritual horizons are being opened.

¹⁰ Gershon Nerel, “Haim (Haimoff) Bar David: Apostolic Authority among Jewish Yeshua-Believers,” *Mishkan* 37 (2002): 70–72.

Furthermore, this development holds the potential to lead toward a great Jewish reformation in the State of Israel, introducing a genuine renewal. Such an Israeli reformation will actually deepen, polish, and, to a certain degree, even complete the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Israeli JBY can find the one who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) without the dogmatic indoctrination of sectarian theology schools. Evidently this maturing process will have to take place without financial pressures, etc.

Interestingly, during the past two centuries numerous churches and missionary societies from the four corners of the earth occupied the land of Israel and succeeded, with their theologies, to clone many locals, mainly Arabs, into their exact theological image. Many JBY, although probably fewer than Arabs, have also de facto converted and adopted the creedal patterns of the historical churches. All this happened by the instrumentality of theological schools and doctrinal literature translated into Arabic and Hebrew. Nevertheless, at the same time one cannot escape the impression that many non-Jews within the historical churches feel challenged, and sometimes even threatened, when JBY introduce a new hegemony of Jewish exegesis and Jewish theology, especially when they introduce nonconventional views.¹¹

In summary, one must admit that too many believers find themselves needing to *de-theologize* themselves from many unbiblical teachings originating within doctrinal institutions. Therefore the real challenge is to individually and congregationally obey the Holy Spirit and to become simple—surely *not* simplistic—disciples of the Son of God, studying his Word and willing to become faithful slaves who follow him “wherever he goes” (Rev 14:4). Lord, please save us from those who are “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7).

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¹¹ See, for example, Gershon Nerel, *Messianic Jews in Eretz Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity* (PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996), 188–197.

The Place of Story and Storytelling in Messianic Jewish Theology and Ministry: Rediscovering the Lost Treasures of Hebraic Narrative Epistemology

Bill Bjoraker

“God made man because He loves stories.” —Elie Wiesel¹

Why is the theme of story and storytelling critically important in Messianic Jewish theology and ministry, and especially so in our time? The fact that about 70% of the canonical Scriptures are in story form (the narrative genre) makes quite a statement in itself. Scholars like theology, yet virtually all the concepts of the categories of systematic theology are embedded in the stories of Scripture. The theology of Israel is story-based. The Jewish people, “People of the Book,” are the people of the story. The Holy Scriptures tell the master story of the universe by which all other smaller stories are given their meaning. This master story provides the necessary hermeneutical key for interpreting the other genres of the Scriptures by evoking the question, *How does this passage or story follow the thread of God’s master story?*

Yeshua the Messiah used stories as his primary teaching method. He used stories to teach both the *am ha’aretz* (common folk) in Galilee and also for the most highly literate and erudite Torah scholars of his day in Jerusalem. He is the Master Teacher and our exemplar for our teaching vocations. The influence of the Western conceptual and analytic approach to theologizing, homiletics, and teaching has been strong and prevalent in modern Christianity as well as in the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement. This approach is not to be disregarded or devalued. However, we need to retrieve some lost treasures to restore balance and depth of impact on hearts and lives to our ministry of the Word.

In modernity, the focus has been on the following: the rational, scientific, analytic, logical, linear, and technological. There is an ancient and continuous biblical and Jewish storytelling tradition—the *aggadic/haggadic* and *midrashic* tradition—whose focus is on the literary-artistic, the aesthetic, the emotionally and relationally expressive, the big-picture, the holistic, and on metaphor, imagery, and story. Yeshua said, “Every Torah scholar disciplined for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure both new things and old” (Matt 13:52, TLV). Toward retrieving these lost treasures, toward re-digging the wells of story, this essay shall consider ten “narratives”:

Narrative 1: Hebraic Theology Is Based on Story

Narrative 2: The Hebraic and Jewish Roots of Story and Storytelling

Narrative 3: “Hear O Israel”: Orality Is Fundamental to Human Communication

Narrative 4: European Enlightenment Epistemology

¹ Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 208.

- Narrative 5: Hebraic Epistemology
- Narrative 6: Jewish Midrash and Story
- Narrative 7: The Power of Story
- Narrative 8: Yeshua the Messiah and Story
- Narrative 9: The Postmodern Moment and Its Prospects for Story
- Narrative 10: Storytelling in Contemporary Jewish Ministry

Overview

The “Ten Narratives” in this essay cohere as follows: The first eight narratives give the theoretical grounding for the subject. The last two narratives make application for contemporary practice. Israel’s theology was formed by Israel’s re-telling the stories of the acts of God, together with their meaning, in community, and in that way transmitting Israel’s identity and mission from generation to generation. The literature of Israel and Judaism has always comprised both *halakhah* (law) and *aggadah* (story), and they are interdependent. Oral speech is the fundamental nature of human language. God created human beings by his spoken word. Thus humans, reflecting the imago Dei, are endowed with the gift of language and capable of “I-Thou” relationships (Buber). Israel was a hearing-dominant society in harmony with the way humans are made and most authentically communicate. The medium and technology of reading and writing detaches verbal discourse from its personal source.

There are three forms of the Word of God: 1) Yeshua the Messiah is the living Word, who became flesh. 2) The inspired canonical written Word, which is the authoritative standard for the testing of truth in teaching. 3) The oralized Word, “Hear O Israel!,” existed before the written Word and completes its purpose. The purpose of the book of the Lord is to know the Lord of the book. The origin and study of rabbinic literature was oral. Yeshua delivered his teaching orally and it was transmitted orally (he said his words are “spirit and life”); he did not write a book.

In contrast to the European Enlightenment epistemology of disengaged reason, Hebraic epistemology is receptive of divine revelation and is a narrative epistemology that embraces story as a way of knowing, and is testimony to the fact that “reason is the organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning” (C. S. Lewis). There are lost treasures to recover in the Jewish hermeneutical tradition of midrash aggadah and the imaginative reconstruction of gaps in biblical stories. Story/storytelling is a more effective way to bring truth home to human hearts than the “naked truth” of propositional statements. Stories and songs, told and sung in a manner or medium well-oriented to its audience and under the right conditions, most effectively mobilize groups to catalyze culture-change.

Yeshua is the master teacher and was not a conceptual theologian; he was a metaphorical theologian and a storyteller. Yeshua’s parables are like a house, into which people are invited and from which they can look out at the world from several different windows. Humans are *homo narrans*, and so story will always and everywhere be relevant, though styles of discourse and media may change. Our postmodern moment of history has created a search for new meta-narratives and provides an auspicious context to re-tell the master story of Scripture and for ministry of the Word through storytelling.

Jewish people have always been at the vortex of history-making and culture-making movements. In this “Digital Era,” a major way the Christian and Messianic Jewish movements will advance the kingdom of God and be a “light to the nations” is through creatively re-telling the biblical story and stories to the current and succeeding generations.

Narrative 1: Hebraic Theology Is Based on Story

How did Israel come to know the Creator as *Adonai Elohim*, as *Avinu Malkeinu*, and how did Israel develop its theology? The Creator called Avram in Ur of the Chaldees. Avram listened to the voice of God and began the journey. God continued to speak to the other patriarchs, revealing himself and his purposes. But contrary to the religions of the ancient Far East, inner subjective experience was not the major means of revelation. God's objective outward acts in space-time history determined the content of inner revelation. Mystical experience was not the focus, but rather the very earthy, participatory, messy, and concrete events that included Abraham's journeying to a place and a destiny as yet undisclosed to him, his learning by struggle and trial how to respect his wife, and the significance of an heir. Jacob's wrestling with God to be transformed into *Yis-ra'El*, and later Joseph's suffering at the hands of his brothers and his moral testing in Egypt, all in God's providence prepared Jacob's clan to be forged by blood, sweat, and tears into a nation. This is revelation in and through the real, the tangible, and the actual.

After the patriarchal period, God began to reveal himself on a larger scale to the nation of Egypt and to the people of Israel, forming Israel into a nation by his mighty acts among them and for them. The powerful saving acts of God in the events surrounding the exodus from Egypt constitute the foundational narrative of Israel. History was the primary arena in which God revealed himself. History is never a bare record of neutral facts. It always includes the meaning of those facts. The telling of those revelatory events and their God-given meaning produced Israel's theology. As the saying goes, history is "HisStory."

G. Ernest Wright, who studied under the great archaeologist W. F. Albright and participated in excavations in Israel (then Palestine) in the 1930s and later was professor of Old Testament at Harvard University, has fully researched and explained this theological formation process. He states,

[Theology] is fundamentally an interpretation of history, a confessional recital of historical events as the acts of God, events which lead backward to the beginning of history and forward to its end. Inferences are constantly made from the acts and are interpreted as integral parts of the acts themselves which furnish the clue to understanding not only contemporary happenings, but those which subsequently occurred. The being and attributes of God are nowhere systematically presented but are inferences from events.²

An example of this process of theologizing from history and story is Moshe Rabbeinu, who taught the people of Israel that when they came into the land promised to them, they were to bring a tithe of the firstfruits of their produce in a basket to the place God designated. They were to offer it to the priest, who would set it before the altar. But then this striking practice is commanded,

Then you are to *respond before the Adonai your God*, and say, "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there as an outsider, few in number there, few in number. But there he became a nation—mighty and numerous. And the Egyptians treated *us* badly, afflicted *us* and imposed hard labor on *us*. Then *we* cried to Adonai, God of *our* fathers, and Adonai listened to our voice heard *our* voice and saw *our* affliction, *our* toil, and *our* oppression. Then Adonai brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great

² Ernest G. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology (London: SCM Press, 1952), 57.

terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought *us* into this place and gave *us* this land—a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deut. 26:5–9, TLV; italics added)

Note that this was an oral-aural community event, not an isolated individual reading a text in a study carrel. The people are commanded to annually recite, to tell the story of their father Jacob, of his family’s descent into Egypt, and then the story of their great deliverance from slavery to Pharaoh which forged the Israelite peoplehood. The telling— or the *storying*—of the acts of God in their history formed the theology of Israel.

The stories of Genesis are archetypal and prismatic, but the identity of Israel is grounded in this bedrock story, this root story of the exodus from Egypt. This is Israel’s master story. And as Michael Goldberg says, “master stories not only *inform* us, they *form* us.”³ This story runs through Jewish tradition like a river. Recall how the liturgy for Shabbat Eve Kiddush in the Siddur retells it, “Blessed are You, HASHEM, our God, King of the Universe, Who . . . gave us His holy Sabbath . . . a memorial of the exodus from Egypt.” This master story of historical events gives meaning and direction to the people in the present and hope for the future. Because God acted thus before, we trust he will so act again.

To the present time, each year at Passover, the Jewish people are commanded to tell their children the story of the nation’s founding, of God’s awesome deliverance from Egypt. “And you shall *tell* your son on that day . . .” (Exod 13:8). The Hebrew verb is “*vehiggadta*”—to “tell.” Hence the Passover event and the “Haggadah” is the oral “telling” and annual retelling of the story that reinforces the Jewish people’s identity. And each Jewish feast or holiday provides an opportunity to recite and retell another story of God’s gracious acts on behalf of his people. This was the rationale for the pilgrimage festivals. This retelling and reenacting through ritual and liturgy is how theology was created and how it is transmitted from generation to generation.

Psalm 78 is a retelling of the story of Israel. This is a model liturgy for Israel, and is what is done in most Jewish feasts—telling and retelling the story and stories of Israel.

Psalm 78: A *maskil* of Asaf:

Listen, my people, to my teaching;

turn your ears to the words from my mouth.

I will speak to you in *parables* [Hebrew: *mashal*, a wisdom saying, poem, or story]
and explain mysteries from days of old.

The things which we have heard and known,

and which our fathers told us

we will not hide from their descendants;

we will tell the generation to come. (Verses 1–4, CJB)

The contemporary New Living Translation translates the Hebrew “the things we have heard and knew from our ancestors” as “stories”:

O my people, listen to my instructions.

Open your ears to what I am saying,

for I will speak to you *in a parable*.

I will teach you hidden lessons from our past—

³ Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight: The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 13.

*stories we have heard and known,
stories our ancestors handed down to us.
We will not hide these truths from our children;
we will tell the next generation
about the glorious deeds of the LORD,
about his power and his mighty wonders. (Verses 1–4, NLT)*

Doctrinal formulation and a systematization of theology as propositional dogmatics was alien to the Hebrews /Israelites of the biblical period. They favored the concrete and shunned the abstract. The theologians of Israel were narrative theologians. The modern habit of mind that reasons from axioms, principles, or universals to the concrete was foreign to them. So the Jewish systemization of doctrine during the talmudic periods was due to the influence set by the Athenian philosophical schools.⁴

Likewise the theology of the earliest apostolic church (the early Messianic Jewish movement) grew out of the experience of practical ministry. Ministry preceded and produced theology (not vice-versa as is so often assumed in the modern West). As we read in the Book of Acts, Luke records the practicing before the preaching, the doing before the teaching. “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Yeshua began both *to do and to teach* . . .” (Acts 1:1). The New Covenant epistles were written (theology was codified) ten or more years after the spiritual renewal movement and the launching of obedient efforts to fulfill Messiah’s Great Commission.

Hebraism and Hellenism

There has long been dissension between Hellenism and Hebraism and between “Athens and Jerusalem.” Though there are clear differences, and Hellenism must be critiqued, these counterpoints have often been wrongly framed as a black and white matter: Hebraism is good; Hellenism is bad. However, a reflective caveat is needed here: there was surely a providential encounter between biblical faith and Greek thought. The pivotal story of when the apostle Paul was barred from going further into Asia and was instead led through a vision to Macedonia—“Come over to Macedonia and help us!” (Acts 16:6–10)—is perhaps symbolic. Paul’s Jewish apostolic band entered the Greek world, and the developing Christian faith was shaped for all time. We may identify this encounter as the beginnings of the synthesis between Christianity and Hellenism, which, though there are negatives, was not all bad. Jewish communities had encountered Greek thought two or three centuries earlier. Philo of Alexandria and others absorbed the Greek spirit.

Because the Greeks were created in the image of God, and because of general revelation (Rom 1:19–20), the Greek thinkers were able to achieve a discipline of rationality or use of reason that, when used under the authority of biblical revelation, was enriching to theological understanding. As is said, “All truth is God’s truth,” and rigorous use of reason to explore, investigate, hypothesize, and learn as much as possible about creation and about reality was an enrichment to people of faith.

The fact that we write and read systematic theologies is due to the Greek heritage. So as we seek to recover and embrace more of the Hebraic epistemology, it is not rejection of the rigorous intellectual disciplines of learning, but a matter of bringing them under the authority of the Hebraic revelation and integrating them in practice with the “Ten Narratives” in this essay.

⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 67.

Narrative 2: The Hebraic and Jewish Roots of Story and Storytelling

The Hebraic roots of storytelling pre-date the written Torah by many centuries. The archetypal stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, the stories of the families of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, were transmitted orally over generations by good storytellers before they were written down in the form we have them in the Torah.

As the literature of Israel and Judaism developed, two broad genres of writings emerged—halakhah and aggadah. Chaim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), by all accounts modern Israel's most celebrated national poet, wrote in 1917 a now classic essay entitled "Halakhah and Aggadah." He observed how often the two genres are considered antithetical—law and story—as if they are irreconcilable opposites.⁵ Bialik writes,

Halakhah wears a frown, aggadah a smile. The one pedantic, severe unbending—all justice; the other is accommodating, lenient, pliable—all mercy. The one commands and knows no half-way house; her yea is yea and her nay is nay. The other advises and takes account of human limitations; she admits something between yea and nay. The one is concerned with the shell, with the body, with actions; the other with the kernel, with the soul, with intentions. On one side there is petrified observance, duty, subjection; on the other perpetual rejuvenation, liberty, free volition. Turn from the sphere of life to that of literature, and there are further points of contrast. On the one side is the dryness of prose, a formal and heavy style, and gray and monochrome diction: reason is sovereign. On the other side is the sap of poetry, a style full of life and variety, a diction all ablaze with color: emotion is sovereign.⁶

Quite a colorful, expressive, lyrical description! You can tell Bialik is a consummate poet. And often we in the modern West have been taught to think in the dichotomy between reason (law, prose, philosophy, logic) and imagination (metaphor, poetry, story, drama). But Bialik insists that the two—halakhah and aggadah—are interdependent and in dialectic relationship. He continues,

Halakhah is the crystallization, the ultimate and inevitable quintessence of aggadah; aggadah is the content of halakhah. Aggadah is the plaintive voice of the heart's yearning as it wings its way to its haven; halakhah is the resting place, where for a moment the yearning is satisfied and stilled. As a dream seeks its fulfillment in interpretation, as will in action, as thought in speech, as flower in fruit—so aggadah in halakhah.⁷

⁵ Aggadah or haggadah (Heb. אֲגָדָה, הֲגָדָה; "telling," "narrative") is one of the two primary components of rabbinic tradition, the other being halakhah, usually translated as "Jewish law." The halakhah (literally "walking," so "how to walk") contains the legal rulings of the rabbis, law codes, customs, and ethical rulings of the Talmud. Though the categories are broad with fuzzy boundaries, aggadah is generally the non-legal literature of the Talmudic body of literature, the "Sea of the Talmud." Broadly, "The aggadah comprehends a great variety of forms and content. It includes narrative, legends. Its forms and modes of expression are as rich and colorful as its content. Parables and allegories, metaphors and terse maxims; lyrics, dirges, and prayers, biting satire and fierce polemic, idyllic tales and tense dramatic dialogues, hyperboles and plays on words . . ." "Aggadah or Haggadah," Jewish Virtual Library, jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0001_0_00525.html [accessed April 13, 2016].

⁶ Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays*, trans. Zali Gurevitch (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 45.

⁷ Ibid., 46.

Bialik demonstrates, as only a poet could, that both of these major genres of literature, both of these ways of teaching and knowing, are in Scripture and life; both are needed and need each other. He observes how in the collections of laws and manuals of instruction in the Torah (Leviticus) and Talmud, we actually have “a kaleidoscope of pictures, large and small, of actual Hebrew life over a period of a thousand years or more.” He notes,

Do not open the Mishnah [the first major redaction of rabbinic oral law traditions, six tractates, mostly halakhah] with puckered brow. Tread leisurely among its chapters, like one exploring the *ruins* of ancient cities; ramble amid its rows of statutory enactments, set side by side as in a piece of masonry, flint-like in their compressed rigidity; look with a discerning eye at all the pictures, some small and some tiny, which lie scattered about promiscuously in their in their thousands: and ask yourselves whether you are not beholding the actual life of a whole people, ceased in its very progress and petrified in all the multiplicity of its detail.⁸

Bialik asserts that behind every law or statute or instruction is a story. The laws are “bits of crystallized life.” If you look for the bit of life, the story, behind the law, it will be anything but boring. Will you ever look at a law or a precept the same way again?

Theology is embedded in the stories. Stories can be found in Scripture, wherein are embedded concepts that will address any given category of systematic theology such as soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, eschatology, etc. Recalling the stories undergirding these more abstract concepts provides an anchor in the Hebraic narrative epistemology. Stories provide the grounded roots of the realities that are referred to or interpreted in the propositional statements. Story is always primary and primal; analytic propositions and deductions are derivative.

Narrative 3: Hear O Israel! Orality Is Fundamental to Human Communication

At the conclusion of the fall feasts, the Jewish High Holy Days, is the feast of Simchat Torah. Traditional and Orthodox Jews passionately celebrate the gift of God’s Word. To witness the exuberant dancing and singing while carrying the adorned Torah scroll at the Western Wall in Jerusalem shames the paltry expression of devotion to the Word that characterizes most of us late moderns. This is exemplary affirmation of the written Word of God. Yet it is clear that the Word of God is in three forms:

- 1) The living Word (the *Memra* in Aramaic [similar to Hebrew], comparable to the *Logos* in Greek), who became flesh (John 1:1–14).
- 2) The written Word (in this age, the final authority for faith and life).
- 3) The oralized Word (Scripture brought to life through human communicators).

Oral language always embodies a personal address, the “I-Thou” dimension of personal relationship. God spoke into being all he created during the six days of Creation, including humans, thus humans came into existence by God’s oralized Word. An aspect of the image of God in humans, intrinsic to our personhood, is our capacity for speech. This embodies the essence of the intrinsic social nature of humans made in the image of God—humans are a bi-unity of two genders, reflecting the tri-unity of the three persons of the Godhead.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

Anthropologists and cultural historians have clarified that oral speech is the fundamental and essential nature of human language. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) developed the study of phonemics, showing the way language is nested in sound, made up not of letters but of functional sound units or phonemes.⁹ Oralized, spoken language preceded writing by many millennia.

In the last decades of the 20th century, the academic world was newly awakened to the oral character of language and the deeper implications of the effects on human consciousness of orality and writing.¹⁰ Non-literate people, who are oral learners, think and process information differently than people who are highly literate. Oral speech is primary; writing and reading are derivative. Oral expression can and has mostly existed without any writing; writing has never existed without orality.

Though it carries huge benefits, a downside of writing is that written discourse is detached from its author, the personal source of the message. The advantage of a book is that it provides the means for a speaker to be linked with a listener without being in the same room or the same century; the disadvantage is the loss of the personal dimension of communication.

Modern Western society is a literacy and text-dominant society. Israel was a hearing-dominant society. Though written or printed texts became very important later in Jewish history, the Hebraic tradition involves the hearing ear more than the distancing eye. Biblically, we see God always speaking personally to his people, not writing to them. The Shema reads “Hear, O Israel!,” not “Read, O Israel!” That Israel was a hearing-dominant society is in harmony with the way humans are made and how they most authentically communicate. There are very few times in Scripture where God or Yeshua wrote anything: the Ten Commandments, the handwriting on the wall in Daniel, and Yeshua writing in the sand in front of the woman caught in adultery. Yet the phrase “Thus says the Lord” is repeated over 400 times.

The God of Israel modeled for us how to embed something in the memory of a group or people. When God instructed Moses in matters pertaining to the ongoing tutelage of Israel, he gave Moses the reason for the great “Song of Moses” which follows in Deuteronomy 32. This song proclaimed God’s ways, his honor, his judgment, and his salvation. God wanted Israel to take this to heart, to internalize it. So he says, “I want you *to write down* this song and teach it to the children of Israel. Teach them *to sing it*, so it can be a witness for me against them” (Deut 31:19).

They were to learn it by heart. So the “Song of Moses” is in memorable poetry, and was to be formally articulated in ways to facilitate memorization by the community. It was to be sung, oralized. But we note also that it was to be written down. The textual version of the poem was necessary for maintaining its permanence from generation to generation, to check its accuracy. Here we see the dynamic dialectic between the written Word and the oralized Word—the oralized Word can be ephemeral, so must be preserved in writing. The written Word is enduring, but must be oralized.

The Pauline epistles were circulated and read aloud in the churches. When the apostle John sent the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, he included the instructions, “Blessed is he who *reads aloud* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who *hear*” (Rev 1:3). Reading the Scriptures is not exactly equal to listening to God. To do the former is not *necessarily* to do the latter. Atheists can read Scripture.

The rhetorical and homiletical arts are always central to ministry. The oralizing of the Word is described through the cluster of word gifts—teaching, exhortation, prophecy—that are endowed by the Holy Spirit to equip the church for ministry (Rom 12:6, 7; 1 Cor 12:8, 10; Eph 4:11). Bible

⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1982), 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

storytelling is an expression of the gifts of teaching and exhortation, but in a form often not recognized as real teaching due to our Western orientation to use primarily the lecture and monologue method.

Why is orality (the oral-aural process) so singularly valuable? One reason is because of the interpersonal-relational contrasts highlighted by the following table.

TABLE 1: CONTRAST BETWEEN READING AND LISTENING

Reading	Listening
Eyes	Ears
Read marks on a page.	Attend to the sound of a voice.
A lone person with a book, written by someone miles away, or dead, or both.	An interpersonal, relational act.
The book is at the reader's mercy. The book does not know if I am paying attention or not.	Listener is required to be attentive to the speaker, at speaker's mercy. The speaker knows if I am paying attention or not.
The reader initiates the process; the reader is in charge.	The speaker initiates the process; the speaker is in charge.
<i>Images in life:</i> The stereotype of the husband buried in the morning newspaper at breakfast, preferring to read scores of yesterday's sports events, and opinions of columnists he will never meet, than to listen to the voice of the person who has just shared his bed, poured his coffee, and fried his eggs, even though listening to that live voice promises love and hope, emotional depth and intellectual exploration far in excess of what he can gather informationally from <i>The New York Times</i> .	<i>Images in life:</i> All Israel assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai as Moses addresses them; a first-century Pauline congregation gathered to hear the oral reading of a letter from the apostle Paul; a soldier standing at attention, listening to the commands of his drill sergeant; Boy Scouts around a campfire listening in rapt attention to a storyteller tell a ghost story; a family Passover Seder dinner, in which the father animatedly tells, once again, the great story of our freedom, the children ask questions, the symbolic foods are eaten, and the songs are sung.

(Created by Bjoraker, drawing from Eugene Peterson's *Working the Angles*.¹¹)

Why is a joke always better told orally than when read from a page? Why is it that I can hear a song on the radio that I have not heard in 30 years, or an advertising jingle I heard in childhood on television, and still sing along word for word, never having written out the words or read them? There are regions of the human brain that have neurons that light up and retain memory of story and song longer and deeper than most of the printed propositional prose that a person reads. God "wired" us as humans to connect at a deeper level than merely the cognitive.

We cannot reduce the Word of God to paper and ink in a book. The Messiah said to his contemporaries who revered the book, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40). The written Word is the means to an end; making it an end in

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 88, 89.

itself misses the point or even becomes bibliolatry. The purpose of the book of the Lord is to know the Lord of the book. The written Word begs for oralizing and points beyond itself to the living Word.

The Rabbis and Oral Learning and Teaching

The existence of the rabbinic tradition of Oral Torah (*Torah she b'al peh*), with its expansions and explanations of the written Torah, is testimony to Jewish awareness of the need for texts to be oralized and for the Word of God to reach into and speak to the ongoing human situations that arise in the complexities of life in succeeding time periods. The oral origins of rabbinic literature and its study are quite clear:

Even when put into writing, [there] remained a record of oral discussions going on among multiple personalities. . . . In a *rabbinic* work, each contribution quoted comes originally from an oral context . . . and even if there are intermediate written sources, none of these sources has lost its oral atmosphere or its character as a record of oral discussions.¹²

Yeshua's Oral Forms of Teaching

"In the beginning was the *Logos*" (John 1:1). In the Greek lexicon of the New Testament, the Greek word *logos* is denoted as an "utterance, chiefly oral."¹³ In the modern West, we tend to think of it as a written word on a page. "The evidence from the Gospels is unanimous about the word *word*. When the context was the ministry of Jesus, *logos* (or *rhema*) denoted speech."¹⁴

The oral origins of the four gospels are evident within them. It was not until at least 20 years after Yeshua's public ministry that the first written accounts were inscribed. Yeshua's teachings were delivered orally and transmitted orally. His delivery system as a teacher was face-to-face and oral. His teaching methods were non-formal, mostly among the *am ha'aretz* in the villages and countryside. But it was also highly intensive, 24-hours per day, life-on-life, an apprenticeship model with much coaching and personal mentoring, and therefore highly oral and without the aid of books or classroom lectures. Yeshua did not write a book; he did not need to. He stated, "The words I speak to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63b). It was sufficient for his oral texts to remain oral.

He taught using many questions and stories, with a cohort of 12 adult learners for discussion learning. His method was effective, such that at the end of the three short years of training, he was able to report to his Father that, "I gave them the words you gave me and they have accepted them" (John 17:8). The young leaders he trained went on to change the world. A simple application for us today is that we need to recover the lost treasures of storytelling and the oral and relational teaching methods of Yeshua.

Narrative 4: European Enlightenment Epistemology

In order to compare and contrast the dominant modern Western epistemology (the study of how we know what we know, or the ways of knowing) with Hebraic epistemology, I will first describe

¹² Hyam Maccoby, *Early Rabbinic Writings*, Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World 200 BC to AD 200, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8.

¹³ Walter Bauer and Arndt Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "Logos."

¹⁴ John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 127.

Enlightenment epistemology. A major epistemological shift from medieval knowledge and learning to modern science (empiricism and rationalism) as the major way of knowing occurred during the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. It was a shift from reliance on authority as moral sources (Scripture, religious tradition, established venerated philosophers), to empirical observation (and application of the new rational scientific method of inquiry to interpret the data of experience) as the primary source of knowledge. The results of the new science then became the new dominant public source of authority in the West for several centuries, weakened only somewhat with the postmodern shift. The moral sources, in this case epistemological, become “disengaged reason [the concept of reason or rationality disengaged from external, objective and transcendent verities and/or moral absolutes that had served as guideposts (touchstones, anchors, tethers) for the practice of rationality and the ascertaining knowledge] . . . and the deliverances of such reason via the highly acclaimed modern scientific method.”¹⁵

Disengaged reason became supreme in Enlightenment thought such that all knowledge and any alleged authority had to pass the bar of this now presumed omni-competent reason. Starting from itself, this rationality was assumed to be able to ascertain certain, universally true, and objective knowledge. Reason was presumed to be unconditioned and to operate from a totally neutral vantage point, as a sort of “epistemological Switzerland,” as Paul Weston put it.¹⁶ Reason could be applied instrumentally, but of course also amorally. Rationality thus becomes rationalism; science becomes scientism—both are reductionist. Paradoxically, exalting reason too highly, or making it the be-all-and-end-all, reduces the scope of reason and knowledge, rather than expands it. As modernity progressed, a dichotomy developed between *public facts* (viewed as the objective and neutral deliverances of pure reason via the scientific method), and *private values* (viewed as the subjective and relative beliefs based on religious texts or experiences, viewed pluralistically). This became the standard modern view.¹⁷

C. S. Lewis’s Epistemology and Apologetics

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) was a modern Western thinker who was able to critically detach himself from the dominant Enlightenment epistemology. Lewis is well known for his great imaginative gift for storytelling, but many recognize his strength was his ability to present the Christian faith both conceptually and imaginatively. He was a master of both reason and imagination. Michael Ward, a Lewis scholar, writes,

His rational approach is seen in *The Abolition of Man*, *Miracles*, and . . . *Mere Christianity*. These works show Lewis’s ability to argue: to set forth a propositional case, proceeding by logical steps from defined premises to carefully drawn conclusions, everything clear, orderly, and connected. And his imaginative side, so the argument goes, is seen in *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and, at a more accessible level, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. These works show his ability to dramatize: to set forth an attractive vision of Christian life, proceeding by means of character and plot to narrate an engaging story, everything colorful, vibrant, and active.¹⁸

¹⁵ William D. Bjoraker, “Faith, Freedom and Radical Individualism in Late Modern America: A Missiological Evaluation” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2007), 365–66.

¹⁶ Paul Weston, “The Making of Christendom,” Zotero, [zotero.org/groups/westminstercam/items/itemKey/WGKTDRUI](https://www.zotero.org/groups/westminstercam/items/itemKey/WGKTDRUI) [accessed April 13, 2016].

¹⁷ Bjoraker, 355–56.

¹⁸ Michael Ward, “How Lewis Lit the Way to Better Apologetics,” *Christianity Today* 57, no. 9 (October 2013): 38.

Many scholars consider Lewis's conceptual works and imaginative works to be dissimilar and distinct. They are two discrete modes in which he presented the faith. Often the imaginative works, the stories, are considered *theology lite*, or for children only. It is understandable that we would think this way. Ward continues, "The dichotomy between reason and imagination is how we have been taught to think ever since the so-called Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Reasonable people don't need imagination. Imaginative people don't need reasons."¹⁹

This is far from Lewis's views, for Lewis was far from being an Enlightenment thinker. In fact, Lewis is quoted as saying, "A children's story that can only be enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest."

When I (Bjoraker) personally developed storytelling as ministry several years ago, someone remarked to me, "Oh, how do you like doing children's ministry?" I said, "I don't do children's ministry. I do Bible storying with adults. The Bible is for adults. It takes a lot of contextualization to bring it down to children's level."

Ward writes of Lewis's *Selected Literary Essays*,

"All our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor," Lewis wrote in his essay "Bluspels and Flalansferes." Similitudes, seeing one thing in terms of another, finding meanings here which correspond with what we want to say there, are for Lewis the essence of meaningful thought. "For me, reason is the natural organ of truth," Lewis wrote, "but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination . . . is not the cause of truth, but its condition." In other words, we don't grasp the meaning of a word or concept until we have a clear image to connect it with.

For Lewis, this is what the imagination is about: not just the ability to dream up fanciful fables, but the ability to identify meaning, to know when we have come upon something truly meaningful.²⁰

Lewis was closer to Hebraic man than to modern secular man. Lewis is an exemplar for us today, as we seek to retrieve the lost treasures of story, as we re-dig the wells of the aggadic tradition and as we develop the arts of orality and right brain proficiencies for teaching and ministry today.

Narrative 5: Hebraic Epistemology

"Language is the house of being," said philosopher Martin Heidegger.²¹ If Heidegger is correct, then we can learn about the "being" of Israel from the nature of the Hebrew language. We learn about how the Israelites knew what they knew, and how they knew the world. Language is both the means for things to materialize in historical time, as well as a testimony to their entry into being. So the language of a people and their worldview and culture are integrally related.

The Hebrew language has at least these three characteristics relevant to story and storytelling: 1) it is concrete; 2) it is relational; and 3) it reflects experiential knowledge.

Hebrew is concrete. From the very beginning, in the account of Creation, God pronounced the created physical world "very good" (Gen 1:31). This has echoed down through Jewish history in the Jewish affirmation of life, *L'Chaim!* Marvin Wilson quotes George Adam Smith as saying, "Hebrew may be called primarily a language of the senses. The words originally expressed concrete

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1977), 213–66.

or material things and movements or actions which struck the senses or started the emotions. Only secondarily and *in metaphor* could they be used to denote abstract or metaphysical ideas.”²²

Examples of graphic, vivid use of concrete language to communicate abstract concepts include the following: to look is to “lift up the eyes” (Gen 22:4); to be angry is to “burn in one’s nostrils” (Exod 4:14); to have no compassion is “hard-heartedness” (1 Sam 6:6); to be stubborn is to be “stiff-necked” (2 Chron 30:8); to be determined is “to set one’s face” (Jer 42:15; Luke 9:51). There are also the anthropomorphisms of the living God of the Hebrews. He is not a distant, ethereal deity, but “surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear” (Isa 59:1). Also, “the eyes of the LORD are everywhere” (Prov 15:3). These concrete images are common in Hebrew.²³ Stories tell real events and actions relayed by the sensory experience of the storyteller. Often metaphors and similes from the vernacular are the most expressive terms at hand.

Hebrew is relational in terms and perceptions. German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), in his classic work *I and Thou*, explains that “I-Thou” encounters with persons are fundamentally different than “I-It” relationships with things.²⁴ Persons know other persons by encounter. A major theme of Buber’s book is that human life finds its greatest meaning in relationships with other persons. Storytelling is inherently relational. A story is told *by* someone *to* someone. The hearers of the story vicariously encounter the characters in the story, identify with them, and have emotional and moral responses to them (positive or negative), sometimes in life-changing ways.

Hebrew reflects experiential knowledge. When thinking about God, Israelites don’t ask, “What is divinity?” (the philosophical essence of divine being). Rather they ask, “Who is God?” . . . “Who is Yahweh?” The Hebrew word *yada* refers to an experiential knowing, more than to mere cerebral cognition. Genesis says, “Adam knew (*yada*) his wife Eve, and she conceived” (Gen 4:1). “This is eternal life that you might know (experientially) God and Yeshua the Messiah whom he has sent” (John 17:3). Stories relay real life experiences, encounters, first hand experiences, and often the accounts of eyewitnesses.

Narrative Epistemology: Story as a Way of Knowing

A story, in its telling and hearing, in its wholeness, imparts a quality of knowledge that is greater, thicker in description, comprehending more of reality, and fuller than all the sum of lists (or bullet points) of the summary phrases, or abstracted statements, propositions, or theses that could be derived from it. As someone has said, “We dream in story, not bullet points.”

American Protestant scholar Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933), widely considered one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the last few decades, recognized the importance of narrative as a way of knowing. He is known for his advocacy and practice of “rhetorical criticism” which studies how the elements of oral speech—in oral performances, texts, films, and discourse in general—work to affect and influence people through their imagery, symbols, body language, and other rhetorical elements.

This, of course, has everything to do with orality and storytelling. Brueggemann’s emphasis on the importance of knowing through oral methods brought into question the categories of modernity and the Enlightenment, and how the Enlightenment epistemology has become a “tyranny of positivism,” generating “models of knowledge” which are thought to be objective and neutral but are actually dominating. He has championed that aspect of the postmodern critique and

²² Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 137.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone Books, 1970).

postmodern epistemological shift that allows for a loosening from the oppression and reductionism of the scientific method of modern rationalism (or positivism).

Psychotherapist and Brueggemann scholar Kevin M. Bradt has researched and written on story as a way of knowing. Much of his research focused on Brueggemann's work on Israel's storying. Bradt observes that when Enlightenment thought became dominant,

Debates raged about the historical facticity behind the biblical texts while the study of Israel's rhetorical practices, her long traditions of alternative speech, orality, and storying went into eclipse. Now all the wonderful, messy, contradictory narrative particularities of the biblical stories were seen only as intellectual embarrassments.²⁵

Brueggemann discovered how a narrative epistemology could sustain a community's sense of hope and history in the face of systemic repression and violence. Through Israel's tradition of storying, a defiant, shared imagination powerful enough to activate an alternative future reality had been born.²⁶

He is referring to Israel's sojourn as slaves in Egypt and how their alternative story transmitted from their patriarchs of God's relationship to them was able to defy the dominant mythic and ideological story propounded by the Pharaohs and legitimated and absolutized by their imperial state power. That mythopoetic ideology was the official sociology of knowledge that dominated all others in Egypt; there was no alternative story to that of the Pharaohs. But Israel had another story! It empowered their dissent. They defied an empire and changed the world. Out of their story, the story of the Exodus was able to occur, the story of the birth of the nation that would impact human civilization more than any other in history. It was the story—or more accurately, the true and living God of Israel's story—that not only liberated and transformed Israel but defeated imperial Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth.

Furthermore, Bradt goes on to say,

The story of Israel and the land could not be reduced to a thesis. Only the narrative tension of the stories could hold together the complexity of the revelation of God's relationship with Israel.²⁷

For Brueggemann, the stories of the Bible reveal a relationship between Israel and her God that is so complex, inexhaustible, and fraught with all kinds of confusion, dark mystery, and shocking tensions that to try to reconcile what must ultimately remain irreconcilable can only be an exercise in futility and madness. . . . It is only narrative modes of knowing and relationship that can embrace and tolerate such ambiguity, wonder, paradox, pain, grief and surprise; it is only an alternative imagination called into existence through storying that can help us understand Israel's situation as a model of our own in this postmodern age.²⁸

²⁵ Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 127.

²⁶ Ibid., 129.

²⁷ Ibid., 131.

²⁸ Ibid., 131–32.

Brueggemann calls story “Israel’s primal mode of knowing,” for it is the foundation from which come all other knowledge claims we have. . . . “[T]he story can be told as a base line.”²⁹

The Hebrew slaves lived out of an alternative worldview, an alternative consciousness that enabled them to defy a totalitarian state power through faith in the God of their story. Their story has since empowered other oppressed people throughout history, e.g. the African American slaves in the antebellum South of the United States. Recall the “Negro Spirituals” which tell of that overcoming faith. Think of “We shall Overcome,” a protest song that became a key anthem of the African American Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968).

What Israel knows is that if the story is not believed, nothing added to it will make any difference—not more commandments, rituals, or laws. . . . Israel knows that pain, like story, can never be abstract or universal, so she trusts the details of both. Israel knows that long after all the dissertations have been read, defended, and forgotten, her stories will remain. It is her mission.³⁰

Story in Israel is the bottom line. It is told and left, and not hedged about by other evidences. . . . Israel understands them not as instruments of something else, but as castings of reality.³¹

In this vein, Michael Goldberg states, “there is no issue of theological substance detachable from the stories’ substance. That is, these recountings of the Exodus and the Christ are not fables, such that once their point or moral has been gleaned, the actual narratives can then be discarded.”³² We cannot cash in the stories for some abstracted universal timeless truth that leaves the story behind.

Narrative 6: Jewish Midrash and Story

The Jewish hermeneutical tradition that goes by the acronym PaRDeS (*peshat*, *remez*, *darash*, and *sod*) has relevance to story.³³ The Hebrew word for orchard is *pardes*, which offers the helpful image of the Bible as a fruitful orchard, with truths to be picked from the trees. I will focus here on *peshat* and *darash* methods (or levels) of biblical interpretation. In that Jewish parlance, in Hebrew, the practitioner of *peshat* was called a *pashtan*. The practitioner of *darash* was called a *darshan*. The interpretive product of the *darshan* is a *midrash*. *Midrash* is from the Hebrew root *drsh*, meaning “to search, to seek, to examine, to investigate.”

Pashtan and Darshan

The *pashtan* and *peshat* exegesis, like the modern evangelical “historical-grammatical” exegete, aims to uncover and elucidate only what he believes to be the authorial intent and original meaning of the passage, what it meant to the first generation of its hearers. This meaning is usually thought

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Ibid., 157.

³¹ Ibid., 162.

³² Goldberg, 15.

³³ *Peshat* (פְּשָׁט)—“plain” (“simple”), literal, direct meaning; the historical-grammatical interpretation. *Remez* (רֵמֵז)—“hints” at a deeper (allegoric, symbolic, or typological) meaning beyond just the literal sense; type and anti-type. *Darash* (דָּרַשׁ)—“inquire” (“seek”), the interpretation, applicational teaching, midrashic meaning (a “*darasha*” is a homily or sermon). *Sod* (סוֹד)—“secret” (“mystery”) or the mystical, esoteric meaning. Proceed with caution at this level. The Kabbalah is rife with this approach and needs tethers, controls, and discernment.

to be a one-and-only true, authentic meaning. The tools of the pashtan are technical and objective—philology, grammars, and lexicons of the original languages and historical, cultural, and archeological studies. The goal of the pashtan approach is to arrive at the accurate and final, best reading of the text.³⁴

The tools of the darshan tend to be more subjective—he applies creative imagination to the text in order to squeeze out more meaning. As he deals with the narrative genre, he will not be limited by the strict rules of the pashtan. He knows that every Bible story has large holes—there are things that are not told in a sparse 10-, 20-, or even 100-verse story. To use the anthropological term for detailed cultural description, the biblical stories are not “thick description,” they are often thin-on-the-ground. What are the features, the motives or goals of this or that character? How does he view his fellow characters? What psychological, cultural, or other factors in the biography of each character are influencing him or her in the story situation? As Israeli literary scholar Meir Sternberg, a master of the literary art of the biblical narrative, states,

From the viewpoint of what is directly given in the language, the literary work consists of bits and fragments to be linked together in the process of reading: it establishes a system of gaps to be filled in. This gap-filling ranges from simple linkages, which the reader performs automatically, to intricate networks that are figured out consciously, laboriously, hesitantly, and with constant modifications in the light of additional information disclosed in the later stages of reading.³⁵

The darshan aims to bring the real people and events in the story to life for the present generation or audience. He believes it to be the right and obligation of every generation of Scripture interpreters to uncover meaning that is relevant to the hearers of any generation. He believes the threat of misinterpretation (which the pashtan fears) is less dangerous than the threat of irrelevance. He believes Scripture has a dynamism that is translatable to the needs of people of all ages and situations in life. The needs of God’s people call for the manna of fresh midrash, applicable to present needs of hearts and lives. A good example of the kind of existential pressures of life that provoke new meanings and answers is when the matriarch Rebecca was bewildered by her unusual pregnancy (the battling fetuses) and sought the Lord—“*v’ tilech lidrosh et Adonai*”; her need moved her to inquire, search out, seek the Lord (Gen 25:22, note the same root, *drsh*, as for midrash). Adonai answered her and gave her meaning.³⁶

Midrash Aggadah, Broadly Considered

For an example of this gap-filling, consider the story of Noah and the Great Flood. The story comprises 85 verses (Gen 6:1–9:17). So 85 verses cover decades of tumultuous life as Noah is commissioned to oversee the humanly overwhelming and daunting task of God’s near genocide of the human race, the destruction of the world. For this story, as for all the others, the darshan seeks to fill in the gaps, through imaginative reconstruction of the gaps in the text. Another way to describe a midrash is as a narrative commentary (as opposed to a critical, analytic commentary, with lexical studies, etc.). Such imaginative reconstruction, with drawing out of applications and

³⁴ Noam Zion, “The Origins of Human Violence and the Crisis of the Biblical First Family: Cain and Abel in Torah, Commentary, Midrash, Art, Poetry, Movies, and Thought.” Notes from a class taught at the Shalom Hartman Institute (Jerusalem, 2014), 22.

³⁵ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 186.

³⁶ Zion, 22.

relevance to today, is called midrash, or a midrash aggadah. Midrash halakhah is a different style, which this essay will not address.³⁷

Jewish writers and producers Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel put an example of a midrash on the Noah story on the big screen in 2014. Simply called *Noah*, and starring Russell Crowe in the lead role, the movie is a visual midrash. The Noah story is an epic, archetypal story and begs for midrash. In the movie, after Noah has heard from God, his wife asks him, “Noah, what did he say?” Noah says, “He is going to destroy the world.” What kind of man was this, entrusted by the Creator with overseeing such a daunting, overwhelming venture? The human drama of this for Noah and his family, their relatives and neighbors, would have included times of high anxiety, tension, and emotion. These were real flesh and blood people, like you and me. That Noah got drunk and lay naked in his tent after it was all over is surely human realism. After years of high stress, Noah unwound and released his inhibitions; his inner moral restraints had collapsed. Compare this with the Sunday school sanitized version of saintly old Noah with his long white beard, with all the gentle animals, represented by this children’s song:

The Lord told Noah to build him an arky, arky
The Lord told Noah to build him an arky, arky
Build it out of gopher barky, barky
Children of the Lord.

These are surely crafted and edited versions of the story, more distant from the way it most likely was than is Aronofsky and Handel’s visual midrash. Brad Jersak commented on the “evangelical panic” caused by the movie after *Noah* was released:

I don’t think anyone should be surprised at the usual course of Evangelical reactions decrying the movie for its “biblical inaccuracies.” . . . Of course, citing inaccuracies implies that the measure of faithfulness to Scripture is somehow photocopying Genesis 6–9 into the screenplay in a sort of word for word depiction. It’s this paint-by-numbers mentality that keeps many an Evangelical trapped within the lines of their own assumptions—as if taking the text literally was remotely akin to taking it seriously. Not so!³⁸

Those who love Scripture and want to see its stories reach the broadest possible audience have cause to applaud this visual midrash, the *Noah* movie. The *Christian Post* reported in the days following the release of the movie, “Two of the most popular online destinations for Bible readers reported robust increases in traffic in the first book of the Old Testament following the release of *Noah* last week.”³⁹ YouVersion reported that “in the days after *Noah* hit theaters, people opening the Noah story in Genesis 6 increased about 300% in US & 245% globally on @YouVersion.”⁴⁰ Bible

³⁷ Other archetypal Genesis stories which have been treated in the form we may call a literary midrashic genre, broadly considered, are Genesis 3, the Fall of Man in Eden, by John Milton in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667); Genesis 4, Cain and Abel, by John Steinbeck in his novel *East of Eden* (1952); and Genesis 27–50, the Joseph Story, by Thomas Mann in his massive *Joseph and His Brothers* (1943).

³⁸ Brad Jersak, “Noah: Who Are the Watchers and Why the Panic?,” *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice* (March 31, 2014), clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/03/noah-who-are-the-watchers-and-why-the-panic-by-brad-jersak.html [this and following URLs accessed April 13, 2016].

³⁹ christianpost.com/news/noah-movie-sparks-massive-spike-in-global-reading-of-bible-book-of-genesis-117334/.

⁴⁰ twitter.com/YouVersion/status/451415236675764224.

Gateway reported that “visits to the Noah story in Genesis 6–9 at Bible Gateway saw a 223% increase over the previous weekend.”⁴¹

The *Christian Post* reported that “in addition to YouVersion, an app of the Scriptures which hit 100 million downloads last summer, and the website BibleGateway, Google trends also showed a spike in . . . search queries for the Old Testament text” as a result of the *Noah* movie.⁴² “Film analysts believe that *Noah* attracted a wider audience, and not just the religious, due to Hollywood touches given to the film by Aronofsky.”⁴³ “It certainly feels like the ‘biggest’ film of 2014,” Tim Briody, analyst for Box Office Prophets, told *USA Today*.⁴⁴

The movie stimulated public interest in the story of Noah, making people wonder what the real original story is about and why it is so compelling. It stirs people to go home and look it up in the Bible. Because this was a mainstream Hollywood film, the number and diversity of people reached by this movie was far greater than would have been reached by a Christian movie about Noah. This gives Bible-believers an opportunity to tell the more accurate story to those with awakened interest whom they encounter in the home and work places of social life. The producer of *Noah*, Aronofsky, is not a follower of Messiah Yeshua. This raises the question, *What if Messianic Jews produced movies that were even more accurate to the biblical text than Aronofsky’s production, but that would have as large a public impact?*

Noah was controversial and featured much imaginative reconstruction, some of which piqued some people’s sensibilities.⁴⁵ In the Jewish style of midrashic discussion, if one does not like someone else’s picturing of events to fill in the gaps, they can offer their own in synergistic conversation, milking the story for all its true worth. This, while always avoiding notions that flatly contradict the text of the story, or the kind of fanciful allegorizations such as those spun out from the parables by many church fathers.⁴⁶ (See Narrative 8 below.)

⁴¹ biblegateway.com/blog/2014/04/noah-generates-a-flood-of-bible-readers-over-the-weekend/.

⁴² christianpost.com/news/noah-movie-sparks-massive-spike-in-global-reading-of-bible-book-of-genesis-117334/.

⁴³ christianpost.com/news/hollywoods-noah-tops-box-office-with-44m-debut-117091/.

⁴⁴ christianpost.com/news/noah-movie-sparks-massive-spike-in-global-reading-of-bible-book-of-genesis-117334/.

⁴⁵ The “watchers” in the film were shocking to some. They were sort of sci-fi creatures, having fallen from heaven into molten lava. When the lava hardened to stone, they were lumbering rocky creatures. The angelic “watchers” are mentioned in canonical Scripture in Daniel 4:13, 17, 23. They are featured in the apocryphal books of I Enoch and Jubilees. The New Testament epistles of Peter allude to angels who were disobedient in the days of Noah and who had fallen (1 Pet 3:19–20; 2 Pet 2:4–5; Jude 6). The epistles state they are kept “in prison” and “Tartarus” (in 2 Pet 2:4, a term borrowed from Greek mythology, for a place lower than Hades), whereas Aronofsky and Handel’s movie has them wandering the earth, helping men, and some return to heaven in light form, escaping their stony condition. Jude cites 1 Enoch in Jude 14–15 directly (probably 1 Enoch 1:9), stating that Enoch (the great-grandfather of Noah) himself had uttered these prophecies. If Peter and Jude can allude to them, surely a visual midrashic version of the Noah story can legitimately do so and imaginatively depict what they were like. There is enough mystery here to allow speculation. No one owns or has copyright to the biblical stories; they are surely in the public domain. And if they were thought to have ownership, they belonged to the Jewish people before ever they did to evangelical Christians.

⁴⁶ The teacher-storyteller is responsible to clarify and correct when a midrash or interpretation of a story is offered that does clearly contradict the authoritative inspired written text of a Bible story. In the case of the *Noah* movie, the most glaring dissonance with the biblical story was the way the character of Noah was portrayed as having so badly misunderstood the Creator that he believed he and his family were also to be destroyed and only the animals were to be saved, this to the extreme point of planning to kill his two granddaughters to help the Creator exterminate every last human being. These notions clearly reach the zone of “Phiction” and the “Deniable” and the tethers apply (see alliterative “Four Ps” and “Four Ds” below). This confusion in *Noah* was perhaps because, in the movie, God never speaks audibly or in clear language to Noah. This contradicts the authoritative biblical story that states in Genesis 6:9b, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God” (ESV). And it states God spoke clear and intelligible instructions to Noah, quoting the words of God, which included the promise of a covenant with Noah (Gen 6:13; 7:1; 8:15; 9:1, 8, 12). However, considering the possible choices by the characters in the story, choices they could have made but did not make (such possible, hypothetical ones as portrayed in the movie), illumines the choices

Known among some in the broader guild of Bible teachers are two helpful alliterative rules-of-thumb that provide hermeneutical tethers to restrain midrashic exploration, if we want to still consider a midrash within the pale of an application of the inspired Scripture. A tether is a rope or a leash that restrains, usually an animal. An interpretation, application, or imaginative reconstruction of story may be tested by these “Four Ps” and “Four Ds”:

<i>Provable</i>		<i>Dogma</i>
<i>Probable</i>	OR	<i>Debatable</i>
<i>Possible</i>		<i>Doubtful</i>
<i>Phiction (Fiction)</i>		<i>Deniable</i>

When the midrashic exploration reaches the “Phiction” and “Deniable” zone, that is to say it clearly contradicts the biblical text, then the storyteller-teacher must state unambiguously that this is no longer the biblical story; it is outside the pale of the biblical account. One is free to write fiction, but such should no longer be considered an application of the Word of God.

We will always need careful pashtans, the strict exegetes and their technical tools to stay loyal to the historical meaning of texts, especially for the non-narrative genres. However, Messianic Jews and evangelicals today need to recover and ply the approach of the darshan—imaginative reconstruction of the Bible stories, using good questions to search out and squeeze out more and relevant meaning from the inexhaustible treasures of the Word of God. We need to fear less a misinterpretation of the historical-grammatical one-and-only true meaning (if there is such in stories) and fear more the relegation of Scripture to irrelevance. The stories are rich and deep, having multiple applications; they should not be reduced to or frozen by one exegete’s one-and-only true best rendering.⁴⁷

A good storyteller-teacher (darshan) will be able to guide a group’s discussion if it gets way out of hand. We can trust the story itself and the work of the Holy Spirit to attend to his Word, applying it to the needs of the hearts and lives of any group who hears it, across cultures and generations, in multiple and various applications. Such formative work is divine and out of the pashtan’s or the darshan’s hands.⁴⁸

they did make (as told in the Bible). Noah *could have* acted as confused as he was in this movie version, but did not. God *could have* been as silent as he was in this movie, but he was not. What light does this midrash then throw upon the way they did speak and act in the biblical story?

⁴⁷ In Jewish tradition there is the notion of *Shiv'im Panim l'Torah* (שבעים פנים לתורה)—“The Torah has 70 faces.” This phrase is sometimes used to indicate different “levels” of interpretation of the Torah. “There are 70 faces to the Torah: Turn it around and around, for everything is in it” (Bamidbar Rabba 13:15). “The Torah is a work of literary art, written by the Lord himself, and therefore shares characteristics with all other works of art” (John J. Parsons, “Hebrew for Christians,” hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Seventy_Faces/seventy_faces.html [accessed April 13, 2016]). This should be interpreted as hyperbole for those accepting the authority of the New Covenant Scriptures. Controls and tethers must be applied so as not to fall into a kabbalistic, esoteric mode. However, the notion of the “70 faces of the Torah” jars us away from the only-one-true-meaning literalist mode when dealing with stories, and is a reminder of the depth and riches of the inspired Word of God. When interpreting the non-narrative genre, like the law codes of Deuteronomy or Pauline epistles, careful historical-grammatical exegesis must be used; but stories have multiple, many-faceted interpretations and applications.

⁴⁸ A missionary to Africa tells of the African bush lady who heard the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. She heard the story and then said, “I’ve never seen a man turn down such an opportunity. I want to know the God behind this man. This God must be very powerful to help Joseph turn down such a temptation.” The storyteller reminded her that this story was not evangelistic, but God used it to bring her to faith in Yeshua. The authorial intent of the Genesis story was to show God’s power to preserve Joseph through the testing of Joseph’s character to by resisting temptation, but the nature of story allows it to be used evangelistically. (Personal correspondence with Larry Dinkins, as told him by African indigenous Christian leaders in a “Simply the Story” summit meeting; Hemet, California, September 2014.)

Narrative 7: The Power of Story

Victor E. Frankl (1905–1997), an Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, is well known for reporting that concentration camp inmates who maintained hope and meaning were likely to survive longer. Those who lost hope and meaning were likely to die sooner. A story is often what gives a person meaning and hope. So there is truth to the saying,

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.⁴⁹

Stories are innate and primal in human nature and experience. All human civilizations ever studied have had their bards and storytellers, persons who were repositories of the stories that gave meaning and identity to a people. Everyone loves a story. Every person's life is a story, with plot twists and a parade of interesting characters. Sharing stories brings people intimately together. When we hear stories, we identify with characters in the story who dealt with situations like those we face. We learn vicariously through the truths we draw from the story. A story features real life, concrete situations like our own. A story touches us at deeper levels than abstract propositions or stated principles can. A story can penetrate our imagination, conscience, and emotions, touching us at a deep personal level. Someone has observed, "If a picture is worth a thousand words; a good story's worth a million pictures."⁵⁰

Insights from Rabbis about Story

According to a well-received Jewish tradition, it was King Solomon who, if not invented, popularized the parable, at least in Israel. "The Torah until Solomon's time," commented Rabbi Nachman in the Aggada, "was comparable to a labyrinth with a bewildering number of rooms. Once one entered there, one lost his way out. Then along came Solomon and invented the parable that has served as a ball of thread. When tied at the entrance to this labyrinth it serves as a secure guide through all the winding, bewildering passages."⁵¹

Taking up the thought, Rabbi Nachman's colleague, Rabbi Hanina, said:

Until the time of Solomon the Torah could have been compared to a well full of refreshing water, but because of its extraordinary depth no one could get to the bottom. What was necessary was to find a rope long enough to tie to the bucket in order to bring up the water. Solomon made up this rope with his parables and thus enables everyone to reach to the profoundest depths of the well.⁵²

Indeed, story gives us "a rope long enough" to reach the depths. So actually, re-digging the wells of story may actually mean simply reaching the bottom of the already existing wells of salvation. Poet Emily Dickinson put it well in saying, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." Often, modern Western preachers and teachers think of stories as mere illustrations or "icing on the cake" of a lecture type

⁴⁹ Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*; illustrations by Tom Pohrt (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 48.

⁵⁰ clickz.com/clickz/column/2216868/if-a-pictures-worth-a-thousand-words-a-good-storys-worth-a-million-pictures [accessed April 13, 2016].

⁵¹ Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York: Crown Inc., 1948), 56.

⁵² Ibid.

sermon. The real cake, the substance they think, is the more abstract, propositional truth, told in logical, bald statement-of-fact form. Rabbi Hanina knew that stories were the rope that reaches to the profoundest depths of the well.

Rabbi Jacob ben Wolf Kranz of Dubno, known as the “Dubner Maggid,” was a Lithuanian-born preacher who lived from 1740 to 1804. *Maggid* is Hebrew for storyteller (from the same Hebrew root as “aggadah” and “Haggadah”). A contemporary of the Vilna Gaon, the Maggid was famous for explaining Torah concepts by using a *mashal* or parable. Moses Mendelssohn nicknamed Kranz “the Jewish Aesop.”⁵³ The Dubner Maggid was once asked, “Why do you always tell stories? Why are stories so powerful?” Kranz’s legendary reply was to answer by telling the following story. It is a story about the power of stories:

There was once a poor old woman. She was, well . . . ugly . . . very ugly. She had a bent back and hooked nose. Her chin was covered with warts and pimples. Her eyes bugged out. Her mouth was crooked and her teeth broken. She dressed in old rags that smelled. No one would listen to what she said or even look at her. If they saw her they would run away . . . slam doors in her face. So she was very sad because all she wished for was some company, some companionship. But no one would pay attention to her or talk to her. So she wandered from place to place looking for friends.

She crossed a great desert and came to a city in the middle of the desert. She thought to herself, “Surely I’ll find friends in this city. People in the desert know how hard life is and will take pity on me, and I’ll find a friend.” But, alas, this city was like all the rest. People ran away and slammed doors or closed their shutters. No one would talk to her or listen to her. She became very upset. “Why go on? What’s the point? Life is too hard. I think I should just give up on life.” So she wandered out of the city and sat down on the dusty road just outside the city. She waited, watching life pass her by.

Before long a good-looking young man dressed in beautiful clothes arrived in the city and received a great reception. The people came out to shake his hand. Some even hugged him. They brought him food and drink and lavished him with gifts. The old woman said, “Life is so unfair. When you are young and good looking, everyone loves you, but when you are old, ugly, and sick, they forget you and ignore you. It is so unfair!” After a while the young man gathered up his gifts, said “Good-bye,” and headed out of the city. He stopped on the dusty road and sat down opposite the old woman to pack up his gifts.

The old woman could keep her tongue no longer, “What is going on? What’s with you? Is it like this everywhere you go? Do you always get treated so well?”

The young man blushed and said, “Well . . . yes . . . I guess. Everywhere I go they treat me well.”

“Well, why? Why?! You must be someone special! Someone extraordinary,” said the old woman.

The young man said, “Oh, no, ma’am! Actually, I am quite ordinary.”

“I don’t believe it. You must be an emperor, a king in disguise, or a prince or a general,” she said.

“Oh no . . . I am not like that . . . I am very common. You find me everywhere—me and my type,” he said.

⁵³ Eliezer Steinberg, ed., *The Jewish Book of Fables* (Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, 2003), xii.

“Well then, what are you?” said the old woman. “Who are you that people are so happy to see you when you come along?”

“Well, I am a story, and I think I am a pretty good story at that. Because people like a good story they are happy to see me. But, old woman, what are you? Who are you? Why don’t people like to see you?” asked the young man.

“Ah, that is the problem. It’s what I am. I am truth, and nobody likes to hear the truth.”

(*Narrator*: This may seem a bit strange to some of you, but when you think about it what the old woman said is really true, isn’t it? If someone said to you, “I’m going to tell you what your friends really say behind your back,” would you really want to hear it? If you are destined to die a horrible death, or to die early, do you really want to know the truth about that? No, some truth is ugly, especially truth about ourselves. We avoid it, we resist it, we don’t want to know it.)

The young man said, “I’m sorry about that.” He then began to think how he could help the old woman. “I’ve got an idea, old woman,” he said. “Let’s team up . . . let’s journey together! You and I can travel together and wherever I go, you’ll go. Anything I am given, I’ll share with you.”

“That won’t work,” she said. “They’ll see me. They’ll take one look and run away from both of us!”

“No, you don’t understand! You’ll hide behind me—behind my cloak. Whatever they give me I’ll share equally with you. Let’s try it.”

The woman agreed, and they partnered up and traveled together. Wherever they went, the old woman hid behind the young man’s cloak, and anything he was given he happily shared with the old woman.

This worked out so well that their arrangement lasts to this very day. That is why to this very day *the truth always hides behind a good story*.⁵⁴

This story has also been put nicely into verse by Heather Forest:

Naked Truth and Parable

Naked Truth walked down the street one day.
People turned their eyes the other way.
Parable arrived draped in decoration.
People greeted parable with celebration.
Naked Truth sat alone, sad and unattired.
“Why are you so miserable?” Parable inquired.
Naked Truth replied, “I’m not welcome anymore.
No one wants me. They chase me from their door.”
“It is hard to look at Naked Truth,” Parable explained.
“Let me dress you up a bit. Your welcome will be gained.”
Parable dressed Naked Truth in Story’s fine attire,
With metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire.
With laughter and tears and adventure to unveil,
Together they went forth to spin a tale.

⁵⁴ This is my retelling of the story, which has many variants, often titled “Truth and Parable.”

People opened their doors and served them their best.
Naked Truth dressed in Story was a welcome guest.⁵⁵

'Let Me Write the Songs of a Nation . . .'

"Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes their laws."

"Let me make the ballads of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws."

The above are two variations on a saying attributed to Andrew Fletcher (1653–1716), a Scottish writer, politician, and patriot. As a politician he was a keen observer of what it takes to start a movement of social change, even revolution, in a society. Songs are surely more effective than laws to change the hearts and minds of the masses.

A good story is powerful in itself. Put it to music and verse and it heightens the power to cast vision, to inspire, and to motivate social groups. If you want to know what people hold as valuable, look to the songs.

King Saul, Israel's first monarch, found this out as the increasingly storied David was celebrated in the streets, the women singing and dancing to,

Saul has slain his thousands,
David his ten of thousands.

The story became a ballad that permeated and mobilized the whole culture. King Saul correctly observed after this, "Now what more can he [David] have but the kingdom?" (1 Sam 18:6–8). Saul's "law" had been overtaken by the songs of the people.

For a culture-change phenomenon from our times, consider how powerfully the music of the 1960s (the debut of rock and roll to the masses) both expressed and shaped the culture then and until the present time. It is often underestimated just how powerfully that music shaped late modern culture. Award-winning British documentary filmmaker Leslie Woodhead produced a documentary titled *How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin*, aired by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).⁵⁶ In 2009, WNET produced a documentary showing how the Beatles' music was a strong factor contributing to the collapse of the USSR. The film argues persuasively that their music—banned in the USSR and bootlegged by teenagers—inspired dreams of hope and freedom of expression for a whole generation, which eventually led to the demise of communism. Little did the dour totalitarian rulers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics know that their iron laws would be brought down (at least in part) by songs.

The Psalms are Israel's song book. They have been profitably put to music ever since the days of King David, by both Jews and Christians. The Psalms express "an anatomy of all parts of the soul," according to John Calvin.⁵⁷ This feature of the Psalms is a major reason for their endurance and widespread popularity in every Jewish and Christian tradition. They help us express our souls *vertically*, to God. What if we could put the stories of Scripture into the contemporary and beloved and popular forms of music as inspired ballads, and into more dramatic visual and film media to express these stories (which reach all parts of the soul) *horizontally* to society today and to each generation?

⁵⁵ Heather Forest, *Wisdom Tales from Around the World* (Little Rock: August House, 1996), ii.

⁵⁶ thirteen.org/beatles/video/video-watch-how-the-beatles-rocked-the-kremlin/ [accessed April 13, 2016].

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *A Commentary On the Psalms of David* (Oxford: Talboys, 1840), 1: vi.

The Nathan Principle

What follows is a biblical example of truth hiding behind a good story. Imagine with me: Had Nathan the prophet approached King David, after his sin with Bathsheba, and told him the propositional truth—“You have committed adultery and murder, O King. You have broken four of the Ten Commandments”—would the king have readily received this truth? Likely not. He may have rid himself of this troublesome prophet. Off with his head! He did not want to hear the ugly, naked truth. But instead of presenting him with the naked truth, Nathan told him a story.

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him. (2 Sam 12:1–14, ESV)

This story brought David into a house and opened a window for him to see. He could see vividly the injustice done. David bought into the story. He was caught in the powerful rhetorical trap of the story. The king became enraged and said, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die! . . . and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity” (2 Sam 12:5–6). David thus judged himself. Nathan said, “You are the man!” Nathan opened a window, which became a mirror to David. Herein is the power of story to bring truth home to the heart and core of a person.

A story is an oblique way of coming at truth and helpful in getting past the defenses of a hearer or audience. Bible storyteller and trainer Dorothy Miller calls this “the Nathan principle,”⁵⁸ and adds this word as explicating its effect: “See, the Word of God is alive! It is at work and is sharper than any double-edged sword—it cuts right through to where soul meets spirit and joints meet marrow, and it is quick to judge the inner reflections and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12, CJB).⁵⁹ Direct route communication and processing uses argumentation; peripheral route processing circumvents argumentation to reach a deeper place in the heart. This is critically needed in Jewish evangelism because of the high resistance among Jewish people to direct communication of the gospel. This is the Nathan principle.

Narrative 8: Yeshua the Messiah—Master Teacher and Storyteller

In the Western tradition, especially following the Enlightenment, serious theology largely developed in the form of ideas held together by logic (linear, syllogistic logic) and reason. The more intelligent the theologian, the more abstract and difficult to understand his writing became—think of the German theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries. Whittaker Chambers commented on the deadening nature of much of this, “Theology is jawbreakingly abstract and its mood is widely felt to be about as embracing as an unaired vestry. . . . God has become, at best, a fairly furtive presence, a lurking luminosity, a cozy thought.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ simplythestory.org/oralbiblestories/index.php/practitioner-audio.html [accessed April 13, 2016].

⁵⁹ Dorothy A. Miller, *Simply the Story Handbook* (Hemet, CA: The God's Story Project, 2012).

⁶⁰ Os Guinness, *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image*, Trinity Forum Study Series (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2000), 208.

We can term these academic systematic theologians *conceptual theologians*. This is not to say that conceptual theologizing and writing is wrong or without value. But in the modern West, we have majored on the conceptual in theological education, to the neglect of the more Hebraic concrete and narrative approach. Yeshua, by contrast, was not a conceptual theologian.

Jesus was a *metaphorical* theologian. That is, his primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, simile, parable, and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than like philosopher.⁶¹

In fact, we are told, “He did not say a thing to them without using a parable; when he was alone with his own *talmidim* he explained everything to them” (Mark 4:34, CJB).

Was Yeshua then but a simple teller of folktales for fisherman and farmers? Hardly. Could Yeshua have given the most erudite, learned, scholarly lecture of any of his contemporaries . . . or ours? Of course he could have. When he was 12 years old he amazed the learned rabbis in the temple with the profundity of his knowledge and wisdom (Luke 2:47). He, of course, was the most profound of theologians. But his primary teaching method was through stories, word pictures, and metaphors.

A metaphor communicates in ways that a rational argument cannot. Recalling C. S. Lewis’s insight that “reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition,”⁶² a word or concept takes on meaning when we have a clear image with which to connect it. Recent studies in brain science confirm this—parts of the brain light up when meaning happens, when words stimulate images in the brain.

And when the listener or disciple discovers the meaning himself (the “Aha!” moment), then he or she retains that truth much better, “owning” that truth. If facts are spoon-fed by lecture or monologue to a more passive mind or a mind that cannot connect a concept to an image (imagine it), they may “go in one ear and out the other” as the saying goes.

Yeshua’s use of stories as his primary teaching method was not merely due to his cultural context; story is a more universal means of communicating. Stories are what stick in hearts and minds, because they address both right and left brain, both intellect and imagination. In short, stories grip the heart, and as the proverb says, “. . . out of the heart are the issues of life” (Prov 4:23).

Another major reason Yeshua’s method of choice for teaching is the story is that a lecture often only speaks to the mind; it provides data or information that may, or may not, affect that person’s heart or will. By contrast, a story with characters with which the story-hearers will identify, either positively or negatively, evokes response. The choices of the characters evoke a heart response (emotions and conscience). Thus the story stirs and stimulates moral responses that can lead to change and character growth in the listener. Yeshua was after moral decisions and character transformation in his followers.

If theology were only a matter of intellectual conceptualization, then unbelievers could be as good at teaching theology as are people of faith and devotion to God. All one would need would be a bright mind and a will to work. But Yeshua taught that there is a moral pre-condition or prerequisite to really understanding God and his ways. He taught this truth through the masterful parable of the sower:

When Yeshua was alone, the people around him with the Twelve asked him about the parables. He answered them, “To you the secret of the Kingdom of God has been

⁶¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 279.

⁶² Ward, 38.

given; but to those outside, everything is in parables, so that *‘they may be always looking but never seeing; always listening but never understanding. Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven!’*” [Quoted from Isa 6:9–10]. Then Yeshua said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How will you be able to understand any parable?” (Mark 4:10–13, CJB)

Yeshua taught that this moral condition—a truth-seeking heart—is the key to all theological understanding, light, and truth.

Yeshua did also make propositional statements and teach concepts, but he did so with those whose hearts were inclined to the truth. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” he said (Matt 5:8). Jesus gave an example of a very clear propositional concept, actually an axiom, when he stated to the seeker Nicodemus,

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever *does what is true comes to the light*, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. (John 3:19–21, emphasis added)

Only those who love the light and truth will come to see and understand it. As Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) deftly observed, “Things human must be known to be loved: things divine must be loved to be known.”⁶³ And “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. . . . We know the truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart.”⁶⁴

The Parable as a House

Often in the Western preaching tradition, preachers use stories as “illustrations” to exemplify or represent an abstract idea, principle, or proposition. But as Bailey points out,

A metaphor, however, is not an illustration of an idea, it is a mode of theological discourse. The metaphor does more than explain meaning, it creates meaning. A parable is an extended metaphor, and as such it is not a delivery system for an idea, but a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence.⁶⁵

Expanding upon Bailey’s metaphor of a parable as “a house in which the listener/reader is invited to take up residence,” that person is then urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of the residence. We could say that the parable creates a worldview of its own and that the listener is encouraged to examine the human predicament and the worldview created by the parable (with its cultural and historical context).

Among the audiences who listen to the story, there will be various needs, concerns, perspectives, and issues going on with and in each person. As the listener hears the story, he or she (with the aid of the Holy Spirit) will hear and apply aspects of the story that speak to his or her needs. There are rich moral and theological treasures in a Bible story or parable. Bailey calls this

⁶³ Philip S. Moxom, “The Insufficiency of Religious Toleration,” in *Addresses Before the New York Conference of Religion*, ed. James M. Whiton (New York: The New York State Conference of Religion, 1903), 93.

⁶⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensees* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1958), 282.

⁶⁵ Bailey, 280.

“the theological cluster” of themes in a given parable.⁶⁶ Each theme is in creative relation to the others. A hearer will latch on to the theme that resonates with his/her situation or need.

The content of the “cluster” (so as not to be wild allegorical fancy) must be controlled by: 1) what Jesus’ original hearers could have understood from the story; and 2) what is consistent with the content of the whole story. In digging out the treasures in the story we should not find things that are not there (like the church fathers did), or are contradictory to the story. We can ask, “Do you observe that in the story? Where do you see that in the story? Is the story really indicating that?” In application questions we can ask: “Are there situations today in which people say, do, and/or act the way the people in the story did? If so, what does that look like today?” And, “How does this story address that? What guidance, correction, or hope does this story offer for people in such situations today?” In the application, the Holy Spirit may apply an aspect of the story to hearts in ways the original hearers could not have anticipated.

It is said that “story invites you into the room, but does not tell you where to sit.” You will choose to sit near to, and to look out from, a window on the world from the direction or angle of your needs, concerns, interests, or situation in life. In this way the story, and the teacher through the story, gently respects the free will and dignity of the hearers. This is the genius of the story or parable as a teaching approach.

Narrative 9: The Postmodern Moment and Its Prospects for Story

The philosophical and cultural trends that began in the Enlightenment (rejection of religious authority, utilitarianism, disengaged reason issuing into rationalism, scientism, and secular liberalism) played out to a crisis in the 1960s with disillusionments, revolutions, and moral decline. The baby boom generation was the first to experience at the popular cultural level the consequences of what is called the “postmodern shift” or “late modernity” (because the postmodern is still also modern).⁶⁷

The consequences of the postmodern shift are mostly morally and spiritually negative from a biblical worldview perspective. But the cultural shift also proffers opportunities. Sociologists concerned with the postmodern shift describe our times as being characterized by “incredulity to metanarratives.”⁶⁸ The grand metanarratives that have driven modernity—progress and the perfectibility of man through science, industrialism, communism, fascism, and other “isms”—have largely become “wasms” at the turn of the 21st century; they have lost their compelling power, no longer holding the same credibility.

Thus, the Western world is searching for a new metanarrative. In the Middle East, Islamism—especially in the ISIS, or Islamic State (IS) movement—is advancing a powerfully renewed metanarrative of the 7th-century caliphate that shall rule the world by the sword. Angry young Western men are susceptible to being recruited to this story because of the loss of a vital story envisioning and energizing them in the late modern West. There is a receptive climate in the 21st century in which to communicate God’s master story.

Daniel Pink has argued that our postmodern moment in Western history is a time of “right brain rising.” To put very simply the argument of his book, “Left brain direction” (rational, scientific, analytic, text-oriented, logical, linear, sequential, detail-oriented) was dominant during modernity; and “Right brain direction” (artistic, aesthetic, emotional and relational expression, literary, synthesis, non-linear, context-oriented, big-picture, holistic, image, metaphor, and story-

⁶⁶ Ibid., 282.

⁶⁷ Bjoraker, 9–74.

⁶⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

orientation) is rising in postmodernity out of human hunger for its lack during modernity. Right brain aptitudes are increasingly desired and needed. Left brain direction remains necessary, but it is no longer sufficient. We need a “whole new mind,” a holistic mind.⁶⁹

The larger metanarrative is the coming of the kingdom of God, his glory among the nations, inaugurated by Messiah’s first coming and advancing now throughout this age, the restoration of Israel, and to be consummated as his second coming and into the age to come. A spiritual renewal of the Zionist story and the American founding story infused by the biblical master story can bring national revitalization to Israel and the United States. Thus, our moment in history is an auspicious one for a renewal and revival of storytelling in Messianic Jewish ministry and for reaching the world.

From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg

Another dimension of the momentous shift of our times is the communications revolution.

Our current digital revolution is certainly a cultural megashift. Communications theorists tell us that the world has experienced only three major communications eras. There have been only three inventions that have served as hinges of history: 1) writing and reading; 2) printing; and 3) electronic media. The printing press changed the world and marked the end of the Middle Ages, and opened a portal to the “Gutenberg Galaxy.”⁷⁰ The personal computer, made accessible to the masses, opened the portal to the “Digital Galaxy.”⁷¹ Note also that the “Digitortality Era” has more similarities to the Orality Era than it does to the Textuality Era. This led Thomas Pettit to describe the Textuality Era as more of a “Gutenberg Parenthesis,” a mere interruption in the broader arc of human communication. Our digital media culture has brought us back again to a more original orality. The new kinds of literacy needed for the digitortality era are in some ways closer to the orality era. The three communication eras are compared in the following table:

TABLE 2: THREE COMMUNICATION ERAS

Orality Era	Textuality Era	Digitortality Era
Invention of the alphabet & writing (circa 2,000 BC)	Invention of movable type printing (Gutenberg, 1437)	Invention of personal computers and the Internet (1980s)
Pre-literate	Print literacy	Digital literacy
Ancient	Modern	Post- or Late Modern
Events, stories	Words, ideas	Images, stories, ideas
Oral communication by all, storytellers, oral tradition	Books, newspapers, libraries, printed matter	Television, personal computers, plethora of electronic i-devices, etc.
Right brain dominant	Left brain dominant	Left & right brain needed
Oral Galaxy	Gutenberg Galaxy	Digital Galaxy

When media change, people are changed by those media. A question many observers are asking is, *Will our dependence on this new media rewire our brains?* Younger generations today, though they are literate, have been conditioned by the digital revolution to prefer to get their information not from reading print, but from electronic media. This mentality is termed “secondary orality” by

⁶⁹ Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

⁷⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

⁷¹ Charles Madinger, “A Literate’s Guide to the Oral Galaxy,” *Orality Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013).

orality and literacy theorist Walter Ong, a term he coined for the new electronically mediated culture of spoken, as contrasted with written, language.⁷² The new media advance secondary orality, and secondary orality in turn is decreasing print literacy. This is not an entirely happy development:

One thing seems clear and constant however. Humans are *homo narrans*. All humans are hard-wired for story, as part of the *Imago Dei* within us. Story and storytelling will always matter. And it matters more in the “Digital Galaxy” than it did in the “Gutenberg Galaxy.” Late modern people do not, will not read their printed Bibles as much as they read their smart phones. But they will engage with oral, face-to-face Bible storytelling, and through Facebook, YouTube, and Ning. Mark Zuckerberg invented Facebook, so Samuel Chiang of the “International Orality Network” deftly termed the transition we are experiencing as, “From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg.”⁷³

It is of interest that Zuckerberg is Jewish. Jewish people, especially gifted in communication, have always been at the vortex of history-making movements and part of intellectual and culture-change movements. From Israel’s prophets and the Messiah’s apostles, to journalist Theodore Herzl’s envisioning and writing “The Jewish State,” to the modern building of the Hollywood movie industry, Jewish people have been in the communications business, and in the storytelling business. May the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement be at the vanguard, at the vortex, leading the way in creatively re-telling God’s master story to the masses! The “People of the Book” are the “People of the Story.”

Narrative 10: Effective Use of Storytelling in Contemporary Jewish Ministry

Story and storytelling aren’t everything in the ministry of the Word. But, have we missed something in our homiletical and teaching approaches? If 70% of the Bible is in the story genre, a good rule of thumb may be to use storytelling in 70% of our teaching. The Hasidim were outstanding storytellers. Like Yeshua, they knew that stories can be life-changing. Storytelling constitutes a life-giving act in itself. Here is one retold by Martin Buber:

A rabbi, whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, was asked to tell a story. “A story,” he said, “must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself.” And he told this story: “My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher (the Baal Shem). And he told how the Holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather, though he was lame, rose as he spoke, and was so swept away by his story that he began to hop and dance to show how the master (the Baal Shem) had done it. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness.”⁷⁴

The above Hasidic story about the Baal Shem illustrates a point: stories can help us transcend our current condition or circumstance. It is important to distinguish between a story told with a moral, or to illustrate, like this story (or Aesop’s Fables). These stories have value, and can even effect inner change. But if it is a Bible story, it is the Word of God. The Word and the Holy Spirit conspire

⁷² Ong, 11.

⁷³ Samuel E. Chiang, “Learning from My Own Mistakes,” *Mission Frontiers* (May-June 2014): 1; missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/from-the-guest-editor [accessed April 13, 2016].

⁷⁴ Buber, xvii.

together to impart faith for healing and transformative life-change. “So then faith comes by hearing, hearing the Word of God” (Rom 10:17).

By “storying,” or Bible storytelling, I mean the entire process of the oral and visual communication of a Bible story (not folk tales) followed by group discussion—learning, interpretation, application, accountability to the truth in the story, drama, and/or song, and the retelling of the story such that the story is internalized by the group and can be retold to others. This approach can be called *oral inductive Bible study*. When there is continuity (through a weekly or regularly meeting group) such that there can be an accountability factor to the personal applications-to-life that are discovered in the small group discussion, storying is a very effective means of discipleship.

Oral inductive Bible study emphasizes that the story should be told, not read from a book. It should be told with the appropriate emotion, tone of voice, eye contact and eye movements, hand gestures, and body movements; all that best communicate the story. The story should be brought to life. When a story is read from a text (especially if in expressionless monologue) and then dissected and analyzed verse by verse, something is lost.

Miller uses this illustration in *Simply the Story* training workshops: Suppose you see a beautiful butterfly. You admire its beauty, so you decide to take it home and dissect it on a cork board. You pull out its wings, and put them together. You pull off its legs and put them in a pile to analyze them. You pull out its antennae—but what has happened in the process? You may learn more about the class of insects in the order Lepidoptera, and there is a place for that, but in the dissection, the butterfly dies. You can no longer enjoy its living beauty. Let the story fly in its living beauty or something is lost.

Storying is Jewish-friendly. No matter how religious or secular a Jewish person may be, virtually all, even if biblically illiterate, know intuitively that these stories of the Hebrew Bible are their stories, the stories of their people, the stories of Israel. They are thus non-threatening and find a welcome response.

Storying is seeker-friendly. People of any faith or none can participate and not feel preached-to, or lectured-at. Anyone can hear and discuss the story. Seekers feel on a more level playing field, because everyone in the group is discussing the story just told. All are looking for the treasures in the story together. And then the story does its work of speaking to hearts.

Conversational storytelling is a non-threatening, engaging means of Jewish evangelism.

Simply described, conversational evangelistic storytelling is done on the go, in the streets and marketplaces. You are standing in line at Starbucks, or waiting to collect your luggage at the airport baggage carousel, and you make small talk, looking for an opening to say, “Hey, that reminds me of a story, do you mind if I tell it to you?” Virtually everyone will agree to hear it. You tell a five-minute version of a Bible story, and ask a question about it—and listen for the person’s answer. Then you respond to that answer, and you will find yourself in a conversation about God. You let it go where it, or the Spirit, wills. Seeds are planted in that heart, and a person is moved closer to Truth, to Yeshua.

There is a proper place and role for honest intellectual and public debates when the conditions are right for a genuine searching for truth. However, the value of storying for evangelism is that it bypasses the pitfalls of apologetics and argumentation that often go nowhere. Jewish people, and especially those schooled in rabbinic thought, can argue and debate you to a standstill over who the Messiah is and theological issues. Head-to-head Messianic vs. rabbinic apologetics can be the “naked truth” approach. It can become a fencing match, with each debater thrusting and parrying and unwilling to lose the match. In contrast, reflecting upon a story, and keeping the group

focused on drawing out its treasures, shifts the matter to a whole different dimension. We let the story do the work of speaking to hearts, rather than us trying to convince a defensive rational mind.

We live in a moment of history that calls for a recovery of the lost treasures of story and storytelling in the ministry of the Word. We need to re-dig the wells of story, of Hebraic narrative epistemology, that have been plugged by modernity's forces and trends. In this "Digituality Era," a major way the Messianic Jewish movement will advance the kingdom of God and be a "light to the nations" is through creatively re-telling the biblical story and stories of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to these late modern and succeeding generations until Messiah returns.

In Conclusion: "A Rope Long Enough?"

Recall Rabbi Hanina's counsel that what is necessary to reach the depths of the well of Torah, of the Word of God, is "a rope long enough." He said that rope was parable and story. This essay has made clear in **Narrative 1**, sub-heading *Hebraism and Hellenism*, that rigorous intellectual scholarship, logic, and analysis, including systematic theology, has a proper place in loving God with all of our minds. Anti-intellectualism or obscurantism should have no place among followers of Messiah. We need both left brain and right brain, both reason and imagination. But as we read and write and teach the "ologies" (literally, from the Greek *logos*, "words about"), they are "words about" the thing, not the thing itself. Every systematic theology category is at least one step abstracted from its primary source in story, and to some degree is a product of its times.

This factor relativizes our theologizing, and moves us always to go back to the canonical texts and stories, which are not relative, but are the infallible written Word. Let us keep Bialik's counsel from **Narrative 2**, applied thus:

Halakhah is the crystallization, the ultimate and inevitable quintessence of aggadah. . . . Aggadah is the plaintive voice of the heart's yearning as it wings its way to its haven; halakhah [read: systematic theology] is the resting place, where for a moment the yearning is satisfied and stilled. As a dream seeks its fulfillment in interpretation, as will in action, as thought in speech, as flower in fruit—so aggadah in halakhah [read: systematic theology].

Taking a cue from Bialik where he says halakhah is a "resting place . . . for a moment," all systematic theology is the expression of a "moment" in history, a generation, or at most a century. It is a "crystallization" of a generation's, century's, cultural context's, or region's work of abstracting, deducing, summarizing, and systematizing their theological beliefs. If story is the "seed," then the abstracted rule, proposition, lesson, or application-to-life is the flower and "fruit." The flower wilts and the fruit decays relatively quickly, but the seed (under the right conditions) lasts a long, long time. These fruits of halakhah and practical theology will be expressed differently a century later, even if they are a Jewish expression. The Jewish experience changes over time and also changes from one country to another; one can note the differences between American Messianic Jewish theology and Israeli Messianic Jewish theology.

A 21st-century Messianic Jewish systematic theology is itself an expression of, and part of, the story of a 21st-century Jewish spiritual and social movement, in its historical context. In the same way, the Book of the Covenant (named in Exod 24:7 but comprising Exod 21–23, containing the social, civic, and religious laws of the first generation of Israel as a nation) is a "theology" which is embedded in and a part of the story told in Exodus of that generation of Israel. Of course the book of Exodus is inspired, authoritative Scripture, and our theologies today are not.

The canonical stories remain the “dream,” the “will,” the “thought,” and the “flower” underlying a movement’s systematic theologies’ “interpretation,” “action,” “speech,” and “fruit,” as Bialik so beautifully put it. The stories will remain. As Brueggemann said, “Story in Israel is the bottom line.” If we want to teach an “ology,” let us find a biblical story or stories in which the doctrine is embedded, with story as the baseline, and let our hearers, with our help as teacher-storytellers, discover those truths in their life situation.

Recall from **Narrative 3** that God said, “Hear O Israel!” not “Read O Israel!” The written Word must continually be accompanied by the oralized Word in order to complete its intended divine purpose to change and transform lives. Can we shake the still dominant (and presumed to be certain) Enlightenment way of knowing described in **Narrative 4** enough to go back to the future, to a Hebraic epistemology where, as is presented in **Narrative 5**, story truly is a way of knowing? **Narrative 6** sketches out what a contemporary expression of the oralized midrashic tradition might look like. Adonai told Moses, “Teach them to sing it . . .” (Deut 31:19). “Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes their laws.” Let us find speech-places, thousands of places, in the highways and byways, in venues like Starbucks, on YouTube and blogs, in churches, synagogues, and mosques, to oralize these stories— conversationally, as performance art, with or without media technology, in sermon and *drash* times, formally and informally.

Recalling that 60–70% of Scripture is in story form (and much of the remainder is full of metaphors and images), let us proportionately reserve 60–70% of our teaching and preaching ministry time and content for the stories of Scripture. Why do we usually invert that and devote about 70% of our time and content to the New Covenant epistles?

As **Narrative 7** suggests, in Jewish apologetics and Jewish evangelism, let us use the Nathan principle: story as an oblique way to skirt and subvert Jewish resistance to the gospel. From **Narrative 8** comes a challenge—can we do better than Yeshua, who was primarily a metaphorical theologian, and used stories extensively? As **Narrative 9** intimates, we can we transition from the “Gutenberg Galaxy” to the “Digital Galaxy,” from “Gutenberg to Zuckerberg,” in our postmodern moment by using media to oralize the ancient yet ever new stories of God. **Narrative 10** evokes promises of the life-giving, healing, and transformative power of Bible stories inspired by *Ruach haKodesh* (the Holy Spirit). Are our ropes long enough to extend the bucket to the depths of the well, and so bring up lost treasures and living water from the deepest springs?

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Book Reviews:

What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus: A New Way of Seeing the Most Influential Rabbi in History
by Evan Moffic (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015)

Meant to Be: A Memoir
by Marvin Hier (New Milford, CT; London: The Toby Press, 2015)

John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage
by Ze'ev Maghen (New Milford, CT; London: The Toby Press, 2014)

Rich Robinson

How do we keep a finger on the pulse of the contemporary Jewish community? One important way is through reading what the people of the book are writing. I have therefore chosen three books that reflect the disparate nature of this community and offer three varying perspectives on what it means to be Jewish and engaged in today's world. (Italics in all quotes are original.)

* * *

First off, we have Reform rabbi Evan Moffic's *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus: A New Way of Seeing the Most Influential Rabbi in History*. This is his second book, his first having been on the subject of Passover. Moffic is the 30-something rabbi of Congregation Solel in Highland Park, IL. On his web site at rabbimoffic.com, he provides us with a sort of mission statement: "I show the way Jewish wisdom makes our lives richer and happier. In particular, I help Jews appreciate their heritage and Christians uncover the Jewish roots of their faith." In addition to his duties as a pulpit rabbi, he has spoken to churches and Christian groups where he has found appreciative audiences. Judging from his latest book, that is because he is both a skilled communicator and has a genuine zeal for communicating the Jewishness of the New Testament.

Moffic covers the life of Jesus in roughly chronological order. One particular strength is that he does not focus on whether or not certain events recounted in the New Testament actually happened. Rather, he takes the text at face value and points to how the story of Jesus echoes the Hebrew Bible, linking the two together. Basing himself on the rabbinic interpretive maxim that there are no unnecessary details in the Bible, Moffic concludes that all the particulars surrounding Jesus' birth are intended to draw a parallel with the birth of Moses. These details further connect him with King David (in his birthplace of Bethlehem), as well as with the announcement to Abraham and Sarah concerning the birth of Isaac (which is likewise miraculous). Both Abraham as well as

Joseph and Mary actively invited God into their lives, reflecting the fact that Judaism is “an active faith.” All three showed hospitality, their way of opening themselves up to the miraculous births about to occur.

Moffic’s contribution here is not only in the textual parallels, but in the way he incorporates Jewish ethical lessons into the New Testament accounts. Some will find those lessons a bit abstracted from the text itself, though one could make the case that they are the kinds of midrashic conclusions widely found in Jewish sources: “The difference between [two new sets of parents that Moffic encountered] is not what they experienced. It is the way they experienced it. One saw fact. The other felt faith. The Bible—whether we see it as literal fact or metaphorical truth—urges us to embrace the second perspective. . . . Who are the angels we need to welcome into our tents [as Abraham did]? What are the gifts we need to give and receive?”

When it comes to Jesus’ circumcision, Moffic reads Paul in Romans 3:30–31 as redefining Jewishness—but thereby fitting into “Prophetic Judaism” as found in, say, Jeremiah 9:25–26. It’s true that Paul, according to Moffic, went further than Jeremiah, but he nevertheless fits a Jewish pattern.

Again, Moffic focuses on the text, not on the historical events behind the text. New Testament Joseph parallels the Joseph of Genesis; New Testament Mary shares affinities with Moses’ sister Miriam; Herod’s slaughter of the children parallels Pharaoh’s murder of the newborn Israelites. Moreover, Jesus and Moses form parallels, as do Jesus and the Joseph of Genesis (as to the latter, both begin their “life-saving work” at age 30; both initially face the disapprobation of their own peers; both use their gifts in the service of feeding others; both resist temptation). And Moffic draws lessons from the life of Joseph on reconciliation and living in two cultures at once.

According to Moffic, Jesus’ visit to the temple at age 12 may have been the time he became bar mitzvah. To be sure, this is an anachronism, and even more so when Moffic implies that the education “Jesus would likely have received” included Mishnah and Talmud! Of course Moffic knows his chronology, but these are for him useful pedagogical pegs to underscore the Jewish background of the New Testament. An interesting and related section notes that it is okay to call Jesus a “rabbi” as a cultural, not an official, position—even though the rabbinate did not actually come into being until later on. In occasionally conflating modern and ancient versions of Judaism, Moffic is looking for a way to build bridges—not unlike those who portray Jesus’ Last Supper in the context of the modern, and much more developed, Seder.

And so on: Jesus’ baptism is based in Jewish practice; Jesus’ sonship echoes Israel’s sonship in the book of Exodus; the divine voice at his baptism parallels God’s speaking at the Creation in Genesis; and key episodes of Jewish history have happened around water. Jesus’ temptations echo Jewish personages and history; his frequent quotes from Deuteronomy reflect a “more modern and universalist” kind of Judaism; Satan and angels find a home in first-century Judaism; the calling of the disciples was part and parcel of first-century Jewish culture. (He has a nice quote here: “A disciple is more than a student. *A disciple is a link between the past, present, and future.* Without disciples we do not live on.”)

Moffic moves on to Jesus’ teaching style, use of parables, and miracles. As to the latter, Moffic reflects his Reform perspective: “I think Jewish tradition and wisdom provide us a third authentic way. Miracles do not depend on either a blind leap of faith or a subjective change in perspective. They flow from what Abraham Joshua Heschel called a ‘leap of action.’ We demonstrate God’s power by behaving in godly ways.”

Jesus did not “depart significantly” from rabbinic views on kashrut, nor did he replace the Torah or the Talmud [*sic*!] with love and grace. He was more like Hillel than Shammai. In extended chapters, Moffic reflects on Jesus’ use of the Shema, finding it is consonant with Jewish views on

the Shema's meaning, going as far as to say that "Jesus fulfills the meaning of the Shema for Christians [but not for Jews]." The Lord's Prayer likewise comes in for an extended meditation and analysis.

Last but not least, Jesus' death was Jewish. His final words spoken as he was being crucified are "a Jewish affirmation of faith." The cry of dereliction, as "Why have you forsaken me?" is sometimes known, is "*a question emerging out of intimate love*. It fits squarely within the Jewish biblical tradition." Like David in Psalm 22, the cry affirms that God will answer. And the Resurrection reflects Jewish faith as well.

In response to the frequent question as to what Jews believe about Jesus, Moffic rounds out the book with a presentation of what five rabbis have said. We have Shmuley Boteach (Jesus as "a Jewish national hero"); Yitz Greenberg ("the first Messiah"); Zalman Schachter-Shalomi ("a righteous leader," a *tzaddik*); and Reform rabbi Emil Hirsch ("a liberal rabbi"). I wasn't clear on who the fifth rabbi is, but these perspectives, Moffic writes, "are five I find most persuasive and compelling."

What is unique about Moffic's book is his textual approach that highlights the intimate Old and New Testament connections both thematically and in his reading of the ethics that emerge out of both. As well, he seeks to be generous and open-minded even about Paul, on whom blame is often put by those who view Jesus in a far better light: "We can view Jesus as a Jewish national hero without descending into a biting critique of Paul and dismissal of the religion that emerged from his writings." Moffic seeks to build bridges and to affirm the texts of both faith traditions without pronouncing on "whether it really happened." One can perhaps guess at his views, as a Reform rabbi, on the latter; but perhaps not.

My sense is that Moffic is of a generation that is looking more to what unites than what divides. Compare the title of the 1943 treatise by Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, *Judaism and Christianity: The Differences*, or even Hebrew Union College's Michael Cook (also Reform), whose recent volume was titled, *Modern Jews Engage the New Testament: Enhancing Jewish Well-Being in a Christian Environment*. That book sought to show, as a great deal of modern scholarship has, why the New Testament reflects the beliefs of the later church rather than of Jesus himself; its protective subtitle suggests a Jewish community ill at ease among Christians. Moffic, from a different point of view, wants to open doors of understanding for Christians and Jews alike. When the dust has settled, the perennial question will remain: Who is Jesus? Here is one rabbi's answer.

* * *

From a young Reform rabbi at a suburban congregation, we move to an Orthodox Jewish rabbi of another generation: Marvin Hier, now 77 years old. Part warm memoir, part publicity piece, his *Meant to Be: A Memoir* can be engaging, especially in its first parts. Hier is dean of the world-famous Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, and his book offers a window onto the often fast and furious activities of an influential mainstream American Jewish organization.

The best parts come early on. With warmth and honesty, Hier recounts his Orthodox upbringing in New York's Lower East Side, often told via entertaining anecdotes—such as the time his mother was charged US\$21.00 for tea at a hotel, and amazed at the high price, decided it must include the teapot—which she then packed up and brought home!

As he relates his early days in yeshiva and his first appointment as rabbi of Congregation Schara Tzedek in Vancouver, Canada, Hier shows his chops as a savvy organizer (he raises funds for Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow Coretta and heads up a bit of political theater on behalf of Soviet Jewry) as well as a *heimische* guy with a good sense of humor. There is real humanity in this part as

we get to meet some real characters connected with his congregation, such as “the inimitable Abrash Wosk”—you’ll have to read about him for yourself.

It’s when Hier and his wife Malkie move to Los Angeles that his life work begins to take shape. He founds a yeshiva modeled on the “Torah u’*madda*” philosophy of Modern Orthodoxy—that is, Torah plus secular knowledge. With ambitious energy, he conceives the idea of an American Holocaust education center, and finds Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal to lend a prestigious name, with the Simon Wisenthal Center opening in 1977. More than just an education center, the SWC prioritizes finding and prosecuting former Nazi war criminals, including Josef Mengele (he died before the SWC could find him). Many of these accounts make for compelling and enlightening reading.

Broadening to the larger fight against anti-Semitism, the memoir spans the globe, including up-to-date material on the anti-Semitic French comedian Dieudonné, as well as recent events in Germany and Hungary. As for America, there is no love lost between Rabbi Hier and Jimmy Carter over the latter’s 2006 book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*; there is also a good accounting of the BDS movement, a kerfuffle with UNESCO, and Islamic extremism. It all makes for a good and informative read.

The scope of the SWC widens again to include “goodwill” visits to what was then the Soviet Union (and SWC’s involvement in freeing Soviet Jewry), King Hussein of Jordan (good relations ensue), as well as visits to China and the United Arab Emirates. A chapter is devoted to the attitudes of recent popes toward the Jews and contacts with the Vatican.

As if education, politics, and foreign relations were not enough, Hier embarks on the world of documentary filmmaking with his Moriah Films venture, working with celebrities to give heft to his films’ narrations and ensure crowd appeal. Some of the films, such as *Genocide*, garner a few Academy Awards along the way. This foray into filmmaking, allowing SWC to reach ordinary people as well as heads of state, would not have even happened had Hier not heard the advice to forget about using slide projectors and turn to film instead!

Yet again widening the scope of SWC’s activities, a Museum of Tolerance is established that is intended to go beyond the bounds of just the Jewish community. Unfortunately, by this point the book has left Hier the person behind; we hear very little about his hopes and struggles, or his inner life. The memoir, such as it is, increasingly becomes a chronicle of activities, almost as though the SWC has gone on autopilot with its numerous programs and institutions. By the end it has turned into a version of *People* magazine for Jews. Numerous celebrities appear in support of the SWC’s work or obliquely, as a foil to highlight that work. We meet up with Jerry Seinfeld, Tommy Lasorda, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Angelina Jolie, Marlon Brando (who knew Yiddish!), Will Smith, Mike Tyson, Michael Jackson, Mel Gibson, Steven Spielberg, Jane Fonda, and Tom Cruise. Memoir has given way to publicity. Finally, the last part of the book concerns plans for a Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem; apparently running out of anecdotes at this point, Hier recites a long list of acknowledgements as a dizzying list of people, contributors, and supporters parade before the reader.

Rabbi Hier has built an institution that has become an influential and respected voice on behalf of the worldwide Jewish community. Like any establishment organization, the SWC has not been without its critics, including those from within the Jewish community. One might have hoped that the memoir would at least mention some of these along with Hier’s response (e.g., criticism that the SWC overplays the Holocaust card to fundraise; concerns over Hier’s salary; questions surrounding Simon Wiesenthal himself. One 2011 article in *The Atlantic* by Jewish author Jeffrey Goldberg was memorably titled, “Oh, Cut the Crap, Simon Wiesenthal Center!”). However, *Meant to Be* is not intended as an evenhanded evaluation but as Hier’s own chronicle of his legacy, and for

all the criticism, that legacy is extensive. For those who do not know much about the SWC, this book serves as a useful and often engaging introduction, full of many insights into modern anti-Semitism. It is too bad that as the story progresses, we hear less and less about Rabbi Hier and more and more about programs and supporters.

Given the broad stated intentions of all of Hier's projects, what I found strangely missing in *Meant to Be* was a sense of depth or gravitas. The running line throughout the book, hence its title, is "*Alles in leben iz barshert*"—everything in life is meant to be. "From *yeshiva bocher* to rabbi, political activist, film producer and museum founder, I realize that I have always held firm to that deceptively simple idea." I take it that he means it was his destiny to found the SWC and the ensuing projects. Yet in the context of the Holocaust and Nazi atrocities, the high goals of the SWC and the sometimes breezy tone Rabbi Hier adopts don't easily mesh. Nevertheless, I ended up enjoying the book and learning much along the way; it's worth the read. A large selection of photos is included.

* * *

Finally, we have Ze'ev Maghen's idiosyncratic, always engaging and sometimes enraging *John Lennon and the Jews: A Philosophical Rampage*, in which the question is raised, "Why on earth be a Jew in the (post) Modern world?" Maghen teaches Arabic literature and Islamic history at Bar-Ilan University, where he chairs the Department of Middle East Studies.

It is almost impossible to describe this book. Sometimes it reads like an underground college newspaper written at 3 a.m., with both Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsburg on the staff. Throughout, it is a volcano of words, seriously angry and at other times incredibly funny.

In answering his stated question Maghen embarks on a three-part rant, using as a springboard the responses of three Israeli Jewish Hare Krishna devotees whom he encounters at the Los Angeles airport. Shira, Doron, and Ofer each advocate for their beliefs with different rationales, providing the framework for Maghen to explore his question.

The first section criticizes the ideal of universal love in favor of what Maghen calls "preferential love." John Lennon's song "Imagine" serves as the take-off point. Lennon's seemingly beautiful and hopeful lyrics are for Maghen a "death-march." He writes, "I don't want John's vision to be fulfilled speedily and in our days. I don't want it to be fulfilled . . . ever. My objection to his program is not that it is overly idealistic—but rather that *there is nothing at all ideal about it.*" This leads, via some vigorous prose over several chapters, into what Maghen objects to about Christianity: it is universalist, but you simply can't love everyone equally any more than you can tell your wife that you love other women just as much. "In short, 'universal love' isn't love at all. *Because love means preference.*" In this, Maghen places Rabbi Akiva and Judaism in stark contrast with "Peter, Paul, Mary, John, George, Ringo and Jesus." John Lennon's vision in "Imagine" of "no religions, no nations, no countries" was actually realized, according to Maghen, by Stalin and Mao.

To the contrary, the God of Israel loves "preferentially" (look no further than Deuteronomy), whereas the God of the New Testament is far more universal, though Maghen is willing to attribute Christianity's outlook to a focus on particular strands in Judaism. Nevertheless, he rants against love of one's enemy:

I don't know about you, dear reader, but my love is worth a whole *hell* of a lot—to me myself, and hopefully to whomever is on the receiving end. My love is *real*, and it's *valuable*, dammit, it is the single most valuable thing I have! Do you think I can afford to just throw it away indiscriminately and without reflection on every Tom,

Dick and Saddam Sonofabitch Hussein who happens across my path or tries to nerve-gas my family?

He ends this section:

The world of preferential love and distinct socio-cultural and political entities certainly need not, then, be one of hatred and interminable warfare. What is Isaiah's vision? "*Nation* shall not lift up sword against *nation*, neither shall they learn war anymore" (2:4). It may, in fact, be the *only* system available to the human race that will ever have a chance of breeding genuine global empathy and tolerance.

But having laid out the case for group-belonging and preferential love, one might still ask, why connect oneself with the Jews? "I'll tell you (in the immortal words of *Fiddler on the Roof's* Tevya the milkman): *I don't know*. Because here we stand on the threshold of things that are not really rational: they are emotional." An extended discourse describes the intangibles of being part of the Jewish experience, an advocacy based not on one's birth, the truth of Judaism, or the need to ensure Jewish survival but on something that is deep and visceral.

The second part of the "rampage" addresses the issue of rationalism—the objection that in the modern world, Judaism makes no sense. In fact, Maghen agrees: Judaism *is* nonsense, as borne out by an extended section, absolutely the funniest in the book, about his adventures in matzah baking in Israel. Fears of contamination, impurity, and who-knows-what-else lead to descriptions of manic activity and *reductios ad absurdum*: his hosts for Passover refuse to have matzah ball soup lest the matzah be contaminated by contact with liquid ("a particular Passover stringency that was all the rage of late in their neck of the woods. This supererogatory strictness is referred to in the professional literature as '*shruya*' or '*gebrochts*' "). This is among other oddities that he runs across. "That mighty and unsurpassed rabbinic rationality—in its various versions from the pre-talmudic period all the way down to the pilpulistic study methods in the yeshivas of today—has always been pressed, willy-nilly, into the service of the most incorrigible *irrationality*." Even the rational elements of Judaism (for instance, the morality) are not unique to Judaism; only the irrational is. And even if God said to do these things . . . what is the reason for obeying him? For one thing, even Moses challenged God's authority. And the fact that God *created* us—how does it follow that we are obligated to *obey* him?

In the end, being Jewish and Judaism are two different things. (He puts in a rampaging word here about Messianic Jews: "Which is why, by the way, the name of the worldwide missionary organization known as 'Jews for Jesus' is not, technically speaking, a contradiction in terms—a fact that should in no way discourage you from physically assaulting these devious sons-of-bitches if they ever get within a kilometer of your kids.") One cannot stop being Jewish. And being Jewish is even more irrational than Judaism—that is, continuing to identify with, to "be" Jewish—given the history of pogroms and persecution. And identifying with a group whose only commonality is a common ancestor—"now *that* is nuts." Yet we share a common history and destiny—we are a family. Kinship is a reason to care about some people more than others—and that's irrational. So why be Jewish? Maghen invokes "perhaps the single most poisonous and lethal lie ever told to anyone anywhere at any time. And that lie is *that making sense is the most important thing*." The modern historical period has rationalized human life, including religion. It has become axiomatic that we need to live rationally. Yet the freedom of the human self is not rational; we cannot relate to the world in a consistently rational way; nor does Truth tell us how to live and act

in the world. We act on knowledge because of emotional desires. Rules and organization are useful “when they coalesce over time *as a product* of demands made by genuine feelings.”

And that is really the end-all and be-all for Maghen. You could string a pearl necklace from Brooklyn to Jerusalem with quotes like these: “Almost everything about being Jewish today requires a conscious or subconscious *subjection of the head to the heart*. . . . Love is a better motivation than Truth (this book’s thesis in seven words). . . . These things I do, more than for any other reason, because *I love my people so incredibly damn much that I want them to be around forever*. . . . The Jewish phenomenon in history and today is not primarily a religion or an ideology, but an affection-based tribal affinity. . . . In this writer’s mind, at least, being a Jew is not so much an idealistic act as it is an emotional state: the state of loving your extended national clan like the dickens.”

Finally, part three is short and to the point. It deals with the challenge of “inertia,” that is, going with the flow. If divisions among people are disappearing, why not just accept it and move on? Here Maghen includes a discussion of entropy—and pegs both rationalism and universalism as the “twin children” of “Papa Entropy” who aid and abet the alleged inevitability of everything moving toward a state of uniformity. In the face of giving in to inertia, we must assert our agency and freedom. Nothing is inevitable, nothing is consigned to fate. It’s a call to activism regarding Jewishness, not passivity.

Maghen’s highly individual manifesto has to be experienced, not just summarized. If Evan Moffic represents a new generation of institutional Judaism and Marvin Hier an older one, then Ze’ev Maghen is an exemplar of a creative, individual expression of Jewishness that is nevertheless deeply connected to community.

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**Book Review: *The Church and Israel:
In Search of a New Model in Post-Holocaust Theology***
by István Tatai (originally published Budapest: Harmat-Kálvin-KMTI, 2010;
translated from the Hungarian by Éva Kriszt)

Rich Robinson

This book is a welcome evangelical voice from Eastern Europe on the subject of the relationship of the church and Israel. István Tatai is a pastor in the Reformed Church of Hungary as well as a teacher and theologian. His research, now available in English, offers a fresh view particularly for those who do not normally engage with European perspectives.

The Church and Israel comprises eight chapters tightly outlined and written in an academic style. Let me summarize. The introduction sets the stage by speaking of the Holocaust, the history of Israel in the thought of the church, and how the establishment of the State of Israel came as a sudden, surprising challenge to the doctrine of “*verus Israel*”—i.e., that the church is the new Israel. Post-Holocaust theology about Israel takes as its starting point the work of Karl Barth, but branches off in a variety of directions. The rise of the modern Messianic movement also has helped to stimulate theological thinking in this area.

Chapter 2 very clearly surveys post-Holocaust documents dealing with the church and Israel. Tatai evaluates statements from the World Council of Churches, the Synod of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church in Germany, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, Hungarian literature and documents (a welcome inclusion—as far as I can tell, most are not available in English), and finally the Jewish document *Dabru Emet*. Almost all these documents represent a sea change from the past: they affirm Israel’s ongoing election, the irrevocable nature of the Abrahamic covenant, and a repentance from the former “theology of contempt.”

Chapter 3 surveys “correlational models” of how the church and Israel relate. Karl Barth, Bertold Klappert, Franz Mussner, F. W. Marquardt, and Paul Van Buren come in for review—all of them theologians, mostly European, who have weighed in with substantial works on the subject at hand. Among the questions their work raises is the issue of how many covenants there are. Is a single divine covenant shared by the church and by Israel? Does the church even have a covenant with God? Are there two covenants, familiar to many as the dual-covenant theology? Tatai then analyzes the various approaches along four lines: ecclesiological, soteriological/Christological, missiological, and eschatological.

He tackles these correlational models beginning with the Replacement Model, then moving on to Classical Covenant-Oriented Theological Models, Karl Barth’s Model “universally extended,” then onto “controversial echoes of Barth,” and finally “Diastasis-Separation Theologies,” which include dispensationalism and the dual or two-ways approaches, as well as pluralist theologies. In other words, he begins with models in which Israel and the church are in the closest possible correlation and then moves on to those in which they stand far apart from one another. The simple

listing of general headings does not convey the detailed analysis and evaluation that Tatai brings to the table, all clearly communicated to give a broad picture of “what’s out there” in the world of theology on the church–Israel issue. Many evangelicals, and particularly those in North America, will learn a great deal from reading through this material.

Chapter 4 adds two other voices: Palestinian liberation theology and Messianic Judaism as they relate to the issue of the church and Israel (Naim Ateek’s view is a version of replacement theology; David Stern’s model is problematic; the Toward Jerusalem Council II movement has good aims but also has in the past stated some things in a problematic way).

In Chapter 5, we go through Roman 9–11 in some detail, showing that the epistle includes both negative (judgment) and positive (salvation) words about Israel. The epistle also has something to say about the church and its responsibility to the Jewish people.

Chapter 6 is the crux of the book. Here Tatai gives his own model of how the church and Israel relate biblically and theologically—a model he terms an “experiment.” To date, the models available picture the church on the one hand as replacing or fully identifying with Israel under a single covenant, while the “diastasis models,” including two-covenant theology and dispensationalism, too greatly separate the church and Israel. Tatai’s model seeks to bridge or perhaps balance both viewpoints under this rubric: Israel is currently living in paradox. This relates to the negative and positive presentations of Israel in Romans 9–11. Israel at present lacks salvation, yet the nation is holy. They are both enemies and beloved. Some were cut off, yet God has not rejected them. And so on. Nor is this a one-off in the New Testament, for the Abrahamic covenant also has its own paradoxes, as Tatai explains. When one or the other side of the paradox is overemphasized, the result is the disparate models he has previously discussed. And for the most part, the paradox of Israel will be resolved only when the Messiah returns. As to the church in relationship to Israel, both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus are a single entity within God’s olive tree, yet retain two identities.

Chapter 7 focuses on “open sensitive issues” such as mission to Jews, questions surrounding the land of Israel, and the issue of the millennium. Tatai affirms Jewish evangelism and the eschatological gathering of the Jewish people to the land, and is quite positive about the idea of a literal millennium on earth.

Finally, chapter 8 provides recommendations on moving forward in theology, biblical studies, missiology, and other areas in terms of recovering a positive place for Israel in all these disciplines vis-à-vis the church.

So much for a sketchy summary of a very substantial book. By way of evaluation: first, the author is a knowledgeable guide to the current as well as historical landscape of church–Israel theology. With clear descriptions as well as evaluations, a close reading of this book functions practically as a class in the theology of the church and Israel. Particularly, his taxonomy highlights the fact that the various models run the spectrum from close correlation/identification to complete separation—a helpful way to analyze the large number of voices that have entered the conversation.

Second, concerning the author’s own model, he very helpfully highlights the paradoxical elements in Romans 9–11 concerning Israel. Or at least, he highlights the fact that Romans speaks words of both judgment and salvation toward Israel. Some will demur on whether this is to be called *paradox*. I found the presentation of paradox within the Abrahamic covenant to be less convincing than the treatment of Romans. And if indeed Israel is living in paradox—and again, not all will be content to describe things that way—Tatai is happy to allow the resolution to await the parousia. In John 4:25, the woman at the well says, “I know that Messiah . . . is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.” In Jewish tradition, Elijah the prophet will explain all

apparent contradictions in the holy writings. Clearly for both the woman and for Jewish thinkers, in the present time, as the King James Version has it, we “see through a glass darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). Whether we can say things more or differently concerning the church and Israel at present is in the nature of the theological conversation.

Readers of *Mishkan*, and many others besides, will do themselves a great service by purchasing and reading *The Church and Israel*. The book is available on Amazon.com; having a name publisher take it on with a fresh cover treatment will ensure a wider distribution. But make no mistake: if you have any interest in the theology of the church and Israel, you need to make this required reading.

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From the Israeli Scene: The Vatican and Messianic Jews

Does the Vatican document “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable” pave the way for Jewish believers?

Sanna Erelä

On December 10, 2015, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews released a document titled “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” citing Romans 11. It is a continuation of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration of the Second Vatican Council and other declarations that have followed the original statement. Compared to *Nostra Aetate*, there is nothing radically new in this latest reflection.

The goals of the Catholic dialogue with Judaism are described in the last chapter of the document. The commission wishes to increase mutual understanding and that “the rich spiritual patrimony” would be further discovered step by step through biblical and theological studies. From the Christian perspective, “an important goal is the mining of the spiritual treasures concealed in Judaism for Christians.” The partners can each benefit from the exegesis practiced by their counterpart, and even work together in the field of research. The commission also sees important areas of cooperation in combating anti-Semitism, working for world peace, justice, charity, and reconciliation, and the conservation of creation.

Many evangelicals have criticized the section in which the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ is described. The statement renounces dual-covenant theology, but instead presents something which can be assessed as at least vague. There can be only one path to salvation, but from this—according to the document—it does not follow that Jews who don’t believe in Jesus will be excluded from God’s salvation. According to the apostle Paul, “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable,” and as a consequence, the Jews unquestionably participate in God’s salvation. “But how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery,” the document concludes. Is this reasoning some kind of theological necessity from Paul’s statement? Or is the commission still trying to assuage the enormous institutional guilt associated with former Catholic teachings and practices? The latter is the assumption made by Jim Melnick, LCJE International Coordinator, in *LCJE Bulletin* no. 122.

Aside from the positive goals of the dialogue, and the sections that raise questions, one can foresee an unintended byproduct that the Catholic Church—committed to inter-faith dialogue—apparently does not admit. The document states that there cannot be two different ways to God’s salvation. Nonetheless, it hesitates to claim that Jews should confess Jesus. Their participation in salvation happens through some kind of divine mystery. This attempt to reconcile two opposite propositions is not satisfactory for most evangelicals or for Jews who consciously deny Jesus as the Messiah, let alone for Jewish believers in Jesus. The Jewish believers consider *not* sharing the message about Messiah with a Jew as the worst form of anti-Semitism. The statement is not able to bridge the gap that is built into its argumentation about salvation. However, by emphasizing the

Jewish origins of Christianity and the connection between the church and Israel, you could say that it succeeds in taking a step forward in paving the way for the Messianic movement and Jewish believers in the universal church.

Chapter 2 describes the situation during the time of the apostolic church, when it was completely natural to be a Jewish believer in Jesus:

The first Christians were Jews; as a matter of course they gathered as part of the community in the Synagogue, they observed the dietary laws, the Sabbath and the requirement of circumcision, while at the same time confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah sent by God for the salvation of Israel and the entire human race. With Paul the 'Jewish Jesus movement' definitively opens up other horizons and transcends its purely Jewish origins. Gradually his concept came to prevail, that is, that a non-Jew did not have to become first a Jew in order to confess Christ. In the early years of the Church, therefore, there were the so-called Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians, the *ecclesia ex circumcisione* and the *ecclesia ex gentibus*, one Church originating from Judaism, the other from the Gentiles, who however together constituted the one and only Church of Jesus Christ.

History led to the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, but recent studies show that the separation of church and synagogue was a slow process. As the document points out, "Many Jewish Christians of the first period did not perceive any contradiction between living in accordance with some aspects of the Jewish tradition and yet confessing Jesus as the Christ." Present-day Judaism is a very different thing from the Judaism of Jesus' time. Still, according to the statement, Christians need to come to terms not only with first-century Judaism but also with today's Judaism for the sake of their own self-understanding. Not only that, but dialogue with the Messianic movement can also offer a very helpful mirror to increase self-understanding in the church.

Like *Nostra Aetate* 50 years earlier, this document works with some theological aspects that in the early centuries cemented the separation and even hostile relations between Christians and Jews. Today, many churches still seem to have a need for examining and revising their thinking concerning the paradigm of replacement theology. That is necessary also for interaction with the Messianic movement. The document does good work in laying a foundation. It denies the validity of so-called replacement theology, which gained favor among many church fathers. In the Middle Ages, it represented the standard theological foundation for attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. The statement confirms the Jewish roots of Christianity and speaks of God's faithfulness to Israel, his chosen people. It discusses the right understanding of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which has often been used to argue for the ideas of replacement and revoking. "The Epistle to the Hebrews has no intention of proving the promises of the Old Covenant to be false, but on the contrary treats them as valid." The conclusion that the document draws is,

At issue in the Epistle to the Hebrews is not the contrast of the Old and New Covenants as we understand them today, nor a contrast between the church and Judaism. Rather, the contrast is between the eternal heavenly priesthood of Christ and the transitory earthly priesthood. The fundamental issue in the Epistle to the Hebrews in the new situation is a Christological interpretation of the New Covenant.

Whether she is fully aware of it or not, the church stands on the foundation of the Abrahamic covenant. Without the Abrahamic covenant there cannot be a valid new covenant. The traditional

understanding of the covenants has generally been built on the juxtaposition of the old and new, and on repudiation of the previous covenants. The document states: “The New Covenant does not revoke the earlier covenants, but it brings them to fulfillment.” And also: “This recourse to the Abrahamic covenant is so essentially constitutive of the Christian faith that the Church without Israel would be in danger of losing its locus in the history of salvation.”

But the Jews also need the church: “By the same token, Jews could with regard to the Abrahamic covenant arrive at the insight that Israel without the Church would be in danger of remaining too particularist and of failing to grasp the universality of its experience of God.” Christians and Jews are therefore irrevocably interdependent and bound to each other, and dialogue is a necessity: “Without her Jewish roots the Church would be in danger of losing its soteriological anchoring in salvation history and would slide into an ultimately unhistorical Gnosis.” Despite the painful history and the split between them, the church cannot avoid the awareness of its enduring continuity with Israel.

Further on, the document contains these almost revolutionary words: “It is and remains a qualitative definition of the Church of the New Covenant that it consists of Jews and Gentiles even if the quantitative proportions of Jewish and Gentile Christians may initially give a different impression.” The Catholic Church, according to this statement, acknowledges Jews as integral members of the universal body of Christ, even though it doesn’t seem to recognize the Messianic movement as a part of this whole, at least not in this document. The following sentences explain that the thought refers to the eternal covenant that God made with the Jews and, on the other hand, to the different positions of Jews and Christians in God’s plan of salvation. But could this Bible-based, qualitative definition be understood in a much more literal way? Can’t the church of the New Covenant comprise both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus not only in history, but also today?

The statement says: “Christianity is by its roots connected with Judaism as with no other religion. Therefore the Jewish–Christian dialogue can only with reservations be termed ‘interreligious dialogue’ in the true sense of the expression; one could however speak of a kind of ‘intra-religious’ or ‘intra-familial’ dialogue *sui generis*.” However, regarding this intra-familial discussion, the natural family members for Catholic and other Christians to encounter would be Jews who believe in Jesus. The Messianic movement must be acknowledged as an essential part of the body, and interaction with it must be advanced, in order to reach the spiritual goals set in this Catholic document. “The mining of the spiritual treasures” together with our Messianic brothers and sisters can be a deeply enriching process. It can increase understanding of the Bible in the church and broaden the picture of what it means to live in faith in Jesus the Messiah—the Messiah who is salvation for both Jew and Gentile.

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