

A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People

# MISHKAN

Issue 82, 2020



## The Crevice

### Contents:

- Kabbalah and Christ
- The Nasara in the Quran
- What Hath Maimonides Wrought?

# MISHKAN

Published by  
The Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish studies, in cooperation with Jews for Jesus,  
the Danish Israel Mission, AMZI Focus Israel, and Chosen People Ministries.

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ISSN 0792-0474

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# MISHKAN

A FORUM ON THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

**ISSUE 82/2020**

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Dear Mishkan readers,

The Crevice takes us to examine the crack between Christianity and Judaism. At times this crevice is wide and at times it's very narrow — at times there's cooperation and reaching to the other side, and at times there's conflict and separation. But always this crevice intrigues and draws us to see the roots of our faith and where (and why) both of these sides have developed from the shared past during these two thousand years. May this issue give you a glimpse of our place by the crevice.

Spring 2020

Caspari staff

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# KABBALAH AND CHRIST:

## The Christian Use of Jewish Mysticism Since the Renaissance

Dr. William Varner

Around 1300 CE, a Hebrew book titled the *Zohar* began circulating in Spain and its adjoining countries. Meaning “brilliance,” the *Zohar* was basically a mystical commentary on the Torah attributed to the second century rabbi, Shimon bar Yochai. Later research has demonstrated conclusively that the real author was a contemporary Spanish rabbi named Moses de Leon.<sup>1</sup> The philosophical theology of the *Zohar* formed a decisive stage in the development of the Jewish form of mystical speculation known as the “Kabbalah.”<sup>2</sup>

From the emergence of the *Zohar* to the rise of the *Haskala* (the Jewish Enlightenment) over four hundred years later, the Kabbalah was the most influential molder of Jewish thought. Although never espoused by all Jews and always opposed by some, this mystical theosophy attempting to explain the true relationship between God and creation influenced the mind of every Jewish person. It can be safely stated that during the period following the Spanish expulsion in 1492, the *Zohar* ranked next to the Bible and the *Talmud* in its spiritual authority in the Jewish community.

Jewish mystical writings did not escape the notice of non-Jewish thinkers. Many Christian theologians did ridicule the Kabbalah as occultic and fanciful. At the end of the fifteenth century, however, a movement began to develop in certain Renaissance “Christian” circles that sought to harmonize the doctrines of the Kabbalah with Christianity. These writers attempted to show that the true meaning of Cabalistic mysticism served to actually teach Christian doctrines!

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 156–204.

<sup>2</sup> While there are a number of spellings for the word generally used to describe Jewish mysticism, the author has chosen *Kabbalah* because it is the simplest transliterated English rendering of the Hebrew word.

The two-fold purpose of this article is to explain the main points of this Christian interpretation of the Kabbalah, and then to examine its influence in some modern circles of evangelical thought.

### **Renaissance Cabalists**

Attempts to discover a Christian interpretation of Kabbalah before the late fifteenth century have failed. All agree that the founder of this approach was the Florentine prodigy Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). Pico evidently had a portion of Cabalistic literature translated into Latin for him by the convert Samuel ben Nissim Abulfaraj, later known as Flavius Mithridates. The major source for Pico's Cabalistic conclusions was the Bible commentary by Menachem Recanati. Recanati's commentary was basically a scaled-down version of the *Zohar*, which itself is styled as a commentary on the Pentateuch.

In 1486, Pico displayed 900 theses for public debate in Rome. Included among these were 47 propositions taken directly from Cabalistic sources, plus 72 more propositions that represented his own conclusions from his Cabalistic research. Pico himself announced that his work was "derived from the fundamental ideas of the Hebrew sages, greatly strengthening the Christian religion."<sup>3</sup> The theses contained the daring claim that "no science can better convince us of the divinity of Jesus Christ than magic and Kabbalah."<sup>4</sup> Pico, therefore, claimed that he could prove the dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation on the basis of Cabalistic axioms. This sudden discovery of a "secret tradition" hitherto unknown caused a sensation in the Christian intellectual world and aroused the fierce opposition of ecclesiastical authorities. To defend himself, Pico composed his *Apologia*, dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici. This was not sufficient for the authorities who declared him guilty of heresy, but he was cleared after a special appeal gained the pardon of the Pope.

Although Pico is always discussed as the founder of "Christian Kabbalah," an examination of his "conclusions" reveals a rather incoherent and unsystematic approach to his subject. He does not enter into a discussion of the precise schematization of the *sefirot*, he equates single terms from one system to another (e.g. "night" in the Orphic system is equated with *En Soph* in Kabbalah), and his suggestions regarding number

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

symbolism are inconsistent and haphazard. It was left to Pico's successors to clarify and systematize his original suggestions.

John Reuchlin (1455–1522) is known in Jewish and Christian history for his eloquent defense of Hebrew literature against Pfefforkorn and the Dominicans. To Reuchlin, however, these contributions were phases of his interest in the Kabbalah.

Although he cited Pico as his inspiration, the Jewish cabalist Joseph Gikatilla (*Shaare Orah*) was the source for his knowledge of Kabbalah. Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabalistica* ("On the Art of Kabbalah," 1517), reveals a well-thought-out theoretical approach building on and extending Pico's scattered ideas. Reuchlin's main contribution was a series of bold speculations on the names of God which "proved" or illustrated the Incarnation. Human history, Reuchlin argued, could be divided into three periods. In the first, a natural period, God revealed Himself to the Patriarchs through the three-lettered name of Shaddai (שדי). In the period of the Torah He revealed Himself to Moses through the four-lettered name of the Tetragrammaton (יהוה). In the period of redemption, He revealed Himself through five letters, i.e. the Tetragrammaton with the addition of the letter shin (ש), thus spelling *Yehoshuah* or Jesus. Thus, Reuchlin's arrangement was able to combine the Jewish belief in three ages (Chaos, Torah, and Messiah) with the tripartite Christian division of a reign of the Father, a reign of the Son, and a reign of the Holy Spirit. Whatever be the merits of Reuchlin's interpretations, from his time no Christian writer who touched on Cabalism did so without using him as a source: "That the Christian Kabbalah was at all respectable is attributable to the respect in which Reuchlin's work was held."<sup>5</sup>

During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a wave of conversions to Christianity induced by Kabbalah took place among the European Jewish communities. The most distinguished of these Cabalistic converts was Paul Ricci, who after his conversion became physician to Maximilian I and professor of Greek and Hebrew in the University of Pavia in 1521. His main work was the lengthy dialogue *De Coelesti Agricultura* in four books, and he also produced a translation of Gikatilla's *Shaare Orah*. Ricci unified the scattered dogmas of the Christian Kabbalah into an internally consistent system. Elaborate exegetical devices, however, as well as number and letter permutations, do not appear in his work. Ricci's system proceeded from Adam's original

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<sup>5</sup> Blau, 60.



innocence and knowledge of all ten *sefirot*, through the Fall and its consequence, the loss of knowledge of the three highest *sefirot*, to the conversion and redemption of man at the second advent of Jesus. The Christian interpretation of Kabbalah reached its apex of theological sophistication in the writings of Ricci.

Although there were many other Christian writers on Kabbalah down to the eighteenth century, these three “founders” laid the basis for all later Messianic speculation on the Kabbalah.

### **Ideas and Methods**

All discussions about the relationship between God and man center around the tensions created by the doctrines of God’s transcendence and/or immanence. Isaiah’s conception of the Deity combines both truths in a graphic way: “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell *on* a high and holy place, And *also* with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (Isa. 57:15). The question of whether God is very distant from man (transcendence) or very close to man (immanence) is answered by Isaiah in stating that the lofty God is close to the meek. Therefore, the Old Testament notion is clearly one of immanence. However, under the influence of Alexandrian Hellenistic Judaism the notion of transcendence clearly came to the fore. The conflict between a transcendent and immanent Deity demanded a resolution. An emanation doctrine seemed to provide a way to escape the horns of this dilemma. Philo was a well-known exponent of one type of emanation doctrine. The *sefirot* of Cabalism provided another. The *sefirot* reveal God to the earnest seeker through gradually more exalted attributes, but they are also intermediaries by means of which God’s intervention in human affairs took place. Therefore, the transcendent conception of deity held by Jewish Cabalists made it easier for them to accept the view of God presented in the New Testament. It was not difficult to substitute Christ for the *sefirot* as a means of explaining God’s nature.

But how exactly did Christ fit into the *sefirot* scheme? The ten *sefirot* were divided into an upper three, and a lower seven. The upper three are the most closely associated with *En Sof*, the ineffable God. The lower seven are most closely associated with the lower creation, i.e. the world of *asiah*. The first *sefira*, the one at the top of the schematic tree of the *sefirot*, was *Keter*, “crown.” This was the Father. Ricci also associated the name of God, *Ehyeh* (“I am”) with this *sefira*. The second, *chochmah* (“wisdom”) was associated with the Son, the second person of the trinity. Ricci also associated the divine name Yah with this

*sefira*. The masculine sefirot on this side of the schema also served to underscore the identification of *chochmah* as the Son. The third *sefira*, *binah* (“understanding”), corresponded to the Spirit of God. Ricci associated *elohim* with this *sefira* and emphasized the feminine characteristics of this side of the schema. Thus, the upper three form a triad answering to the Holy Trinity. This use of the upper triad of the *sefirotic* tree to teach the Trinity was a common denominator among all Christian interpreters of the Kabbalah.<sup>6</sup>

Another exegetical method employed by the Christian Cabalists was *gematria*. Since it was believed that Hebrew was the original language, then there must have been embedded within the very letters of the language certain divine messages for the readers. One of the Cabalistic books familiar to Pico, for example, was the *Sefer Yetsirah* (“Book of Formation”). At its very beginning, *Sefer Yetsirah* presents a theory of creation in which the letters play an active part:

By means of thirty-two mysterious paths of wisdom (that is, the twenty-two letters plus the ten *sefirot*) did the Lord of Hosts ordain to create His Universe. The twenty two fundamental letters God appointed, established, combined, weighed, and changed, and through them He formed all things existent and destined to exist.<sup>7</sup>

The term *gematria* was used in the Middle Ages to describe all the practices of numerical equivalencies, transformations, and permutations involving the Hebrew letters. In later times three terms developed to describe three different kinds of numerical methods. *Gematria* is the process of creating equivalencies from the numerical values of words. It is based on the fact that many ancient languages used the letters of the alphabet to also represent numbers. *Notarikon* is an acrostic system. The initial or final letters of the words in a phrase are joined to form a word which is then given occult significance. *Temurah* consists of transposing the letters of a word or replacing them with artificial equivalents obtained from one or another of a group of anagrams.

An example of how *gematria* was employed to affirm Christian doctrine is given by Reuchlin in his work *On the Art of Kabbalah*. The divine name יהוה was constantly experimented with to produce all kinds of secret “truths.” When the individual letters of

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<sup>6</sup> In the above section I have utilized English transliterations of the Hebrew names for the sefirot simply out of deference to the reader.

<sup>7</sup> John Warwick Montgomery, *Principalities and Powers* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973), 79.

the name are spelled out the total is forty-two: יוד (10, 6, 4), ה (5), ו (6,6) ה (5). From this flows the forty-two letter name, *Ab Elohim Ben Elohim Ruach Hakadosh Elohim Shelosha Beachad Achad Beshelosha*, that is, “The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; Three in One and One in Three.”<sup>8</sup>

Another of Reuchlin’s “evidences” of the Trinity is in the very first verse of the Bible. If each of the three letters composing the word “created” (ברא) are examined, and each is taken as the initial of a separate word, there results the expression ברא, “Son, Spirit, Father.” Furthermore, the word “stone” (אבן) in Psalm 118:22 can be divided into (אב בן) “Father, Son.”<sup>9</sup> It is easy to conclude that almost any doctrine can be “proven” or “illustrated” when such methodology is employed. Such “proofs” of the Messiahship of Jesus bring no honor to Christianity or Messianic faith and reflect badly both against him who uses them and against him convinced by them.

In addition to the parallels from the *sefirot* and the use of *gematria*, one other “evangelistic” method has been utilized by Christian interpreters of the Kabbalah — statements in the *Zohar* that seemingly imply trinitarianism. Although Pico and the other founders did not utilize these statements (due to their unfamiliarity with the text of the *Zohar*), the following passages are some which have been cited as clearly conveying that Jewish Cabalists affirmed the concept of plurality within the Godhead.

In commenting on the repetition of the Divine names YHVH, *Elohenu*, and YHVH in Deuteronomy 6:4, the *Zoharic* author asks,

How can the three Names be one? Only through the perception of faith: in the vision of the Holy Spirit, in the beholding of the hidden eyes alone. The mystery of the audible voice is similar to this, for though it is one yet it consists of three elements: fire, air, and water, which have, however, become one in the mystery of the voice. Even so it is with the mystery of the threefold Divine manifestations designated by YHVH *Elohenu* YHVH — three modes which yet form one unity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cited by Blau, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Cited by Christian David Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah* (New York: Macmillan Co, 1956), 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Zohar*, II, 43b.

After citing this and other *Zoharic* passages identifying the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 with the Messiah, C.D. Ginsburg comments:

That these opinions favor, to a certain extent, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Atonement, though not in the orthodox sense, is not only admitted by many of the Jewish literati who are adverse to the Kabbalah, but by some of its friends. Indeed, the very fact that so large a number of Kabbalists have from time to time embraced the Christian faith would of itself show that there must be some sort of affinity between the tenets of the respective systems.<sup>11</sup>

That an affinity existed between the theosophical beliefs of medieval cabalists and Christianity cannot be reasonably doubted. That it was the intention of the cabalists that the affinity justified Trinitarian views is another matter altogether.

### **Christian Cabalists Today?**

Kabbalah does not command the allegiance of the majority of Jews today, being confined mainly to the Hasidim. Has a remnant likewise of “Christian Cabalists” survived to the present? One looks in vain for a Christian interpreter who attempts to find evidence of the Trinity in the upper triad of the *sefirotic* schema, as was the custom of Pico and his successors. However, familiar Cabalistic hermeneutical methodology is still employed among some evangelical writers.

At the turn of the century an Anglican clergyman named E.W. Bullinger produced some voluminous writings that have influenced many even until today. His book *Number in Scripture* is a thorough discussion of the spiritual significance of numbers throughout the Bible. Although containing some useful material about the symbolic character of certain numbers as 3, 7, and 40, Bullinger lists an additional fifty numbers that convey hidden spiritual truth to the reader! Bullinger, however, seeks to even establish authorship by this Christianized *gematria*. Consider the following argument for the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. “The New Testament contains 27 separate books (3 x 3 x 3 or 3<sup>3</sup>). Of these 27 books, 21 (3 x 7) are Epistles. Of the 21 Epistles of the New Testament 14 (2 x 7) are by Paul, and seven by other writers. In this we have an argument for the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Without it the Epistles of St. Paul are

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<sup>11</sup> Ginsburg, 142, 143.

only thirteen in number, with it they are 14 (2 x 7)."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Bullinger simply could not comprehend how Paul could write thirteen epistles because it was a number associated with evil:

As to the significance of thirteen, all are aware that it has come down to us as a number of ill omen. Many superstitions cluster around it, and various explanations are current concerning them. Unfortunately, those who go backwards to find a reason seldom go back far enough. The popular explanations do not, so far as we are aware, go further back than the Apostles. But we must go back to the first occurrence of the number thirteen in order to discover the key to its significance. It occurs first in Gen. xiv. 4, where we read 'Twelve years they served Chedorlaomer, and the thirteenth year they REBELLED.' Hence every occurrence of the number thirteen, and likewise of every multiple of it, stamps that with which it stands in connection with rebellion, apostasy, defection, corruption, disintegration, revolution, or some kindred idea.<sup>13</sup>

Another writer on numerology popular at one time among some evangelicals is Ivan Panin. Panin's elaborate system of "Bible Numerics" actually attempted to establish the true text of the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> The real problem with this and all methods of gematria is that interpreters receive from their use just what they put into them. The possible number of permutations is endless, particularly when numerical totals are divided into factors! For example, consider Panin's treatment of Genesis 1:1:

The numeric value of the first word of this verse is 913; of the last 296; of the middle, the fourth word, 401; the numeric value of the first, middle and

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<sup>12</sup> E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 1969 reprint), 26, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Bullinger, 205. This author should have recognized that if he was going to borrow from Jewish writings, the number 13 often has a positive role in Jewish tradition. For example, at 13 a boy becomes Bar Mitzvah and is counted a member of the Jewish minyan. Furthermore, Judaism has 13 Principles of the Faith, famously formulated by Maimonides in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* (Sanhedrin 10). If one does venture into *gematria*, the number 13 is actually a good number because it gives the Hebrew word **יְהוָה** which refers to the "one" God! Finally, even in Kabbalah the number 13 indicates the ability of the Jewish people to rise above the influence of the 12 signs of the Zodiac (12+1=13).

<sup>14</sup> Montgomery, 91, 92.

last words is thus 1610, or 230 sevens; the numeric value of the first, middle, and last letters of the 28 letters of this verse is 133, or 19 sevens. If now the first and last letters of each of the seven words in this verse have their numeric value placed against them, we have for their numeric value 1383, or 199 sevens.<sup>15</sup>

When number totals are factored almost anything can be proven.

After careful consideration of the gematria techniques employed by a number of writers, John Davis provides the following excellent evaluation:

The thing that is of special interest, however, is the gross silence in works of the above men concerning the origin of their exegetical systems. No credit is ever given to Pythagoras the Talmudic or Cabalistic literature from which their methodology is derived. In fact, as one reads their works, he is constantly reminded of the fact that what they are proposing is new and unique. No man ever saw it until they brought it to light.<sup>16</sup>

There is no objective basis for controlling this methodology. The interpreter selects his words, and the combinations of numbers that he wishes. In other words, 7 might have several combinations (6 + 1, 5 + 2, 4 + 3). How do we know which of these combinations the author intended to bear symbolic implications? This whole system is based on a false premise. There is no proof that the Hebrews of the Old Testament used their alphabet in this manner (i.e., in Gematria). As was pointed out earlier, the Moabite Stone and the Siloam Inscription have their numbers written out. This is the case in all the Old Testament. If we should grant that the Hebrews did use their alphabet in this manner, it has yet to be proven that these two factors (i.e. Gematria and Number Symbolism) are combined in Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cited by John Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 141.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, 148, 149. Another fairly recent literary effort in this area was the popular book on prophecy, 1994, by Harold Camping. Camping concluded by elaborate and detailed calculations that Jesus would come

In addition to bequeathing to modern heirs the *gematria* technique, the Renaissance Cabalists also left the example of citing Cabalistic writings to illustrate the teaching of a plurality in the Godhead. The most recent work in this vein is one entitled *The Great Mystery, or, How Can Three Be One?* by Rabbi Tzvi Nassi (Hirsch Prinz), who is listed on the book cover and title page as “Lecturer in Hebrew” at Oxford University.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of the volume is clearly delineated in the preface:

The humble object of this little book is to prove that our sages of blessed memory, long before the Christian era, held that there was a plurality in the Godhead. Indeed, this teaching was held for yet 100 years after the destruction of the second temple, and, as it was contained and declared in the Holy Scriptures, it was also set forth in our most ancient books, as the reader will see from quotations given in these pages.”<sup>19</sup>

The book is written as a first-person description of the spiritual search of one “Nathanael” in the volumes of his father’s library. Nathanael’s method is to examine the passages in Scripture which seem to him to teach the plurality of persons in the God head. Much of the book, however, is given over to supportive quotations from the *Zohar* and the *Sepher Yetsirah*. Nathanael (i.e. Nassi) apparently accepts without questioning the traditional authorship of the *Zohar* by Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai, a second-century Palestinian sage.<sup>20</sup> Modern Jewish scholars, however, are in full agreement that the *Zohar* was essentially the creation of Moses de Leon in the late thirteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The author’s evaluation of the *Zohar* as being of the highest authority for Jewish belief would be seriously challenged by most Jewish scholars today. “[The *Zohar*] is considered among my nation to be of the highest authority in things pertaining to the knowledge of the nature and essence of God.”<sup>22</sup>

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in September 1994. Most of his methodology involved extensive use of *gematria*, although he never credited Jewish mysticism as the source!

<sup>18</sup> Tzvi Nassi, *The Great Mystery* (Jerusalem: Yanetz Ltd., 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Nassi, ii.

<sup>20</sup> Nassi, 5.

<sup>21</sup> See footnote #1.

<sup>22</sup> Nassi, 5. A popular tale told by many preachers is that “according to Jewish tradition” a rope was tied around the High Priest’s ankle on *Yom Kippur* in case he died inside the Holy of Holies. It is common

Although Nassi does not accept the traditional Abrahamic authorship of *Sepher Yetsirah*, he does say, “The book has great authority in the synagogue. It is probable that it may have been written shortly before or soon after the Babylonian captivity. Though this hypothesis may be disputed, at any rate it existed before the Christian era.”<sup>23</sup> No Jewish scholar would accept this dating today. The general opinion is that *Sepher Yetsirah* was composed no earlier than the 6th century CE.<sup>24</sup>

Nassi does cite some very interesting quotations from these Cabalistic works that do appear to advocate a plurality in the Godhead. His discussion of the *Memra* or “Word of the Lord” and the Divine attributes associated with it and his explanation of the *Metatron*, the exalted being often spoken of in divine terms, raise important subjects that need to be further explored in the Jewish-Christian dialogue.<sup>25</sup> His heavy dependence, however, on works of Kabbalah in an uncritical fashion lessens the force of his arguments even for the modern orthodox Jew, to whom these works carry even less authority than other medieval Jewish writings. The force of the Messianic argument rises and falls on the exegesis of Scripture, not on finding Jewish writings that appear to support the Christian position.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

The Jewish-Christian discussion will continue to be a lively debate in the future.

It is the author’s firm contention, however, that it should be carried on apart from any Cabalistic frame of relevance. For the Christian theologian and apologist, the emanation doctrine of Kabbalah should not be considered in any form as a valid doctrinal

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knowledge that such a practice is not found in the Leviticus, but it is also not found in any ancient Jewish and rabbinic literature, including Second Temple writings, the *Mishna*, *Gemara*, *Targums*, and *Midrashim*. The first time it appeared in print is in this thirteenth century document, the *Zohar*.

<sup>23</sup> Nassi, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Scholem, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Nassi, 30–44; 60–68. For a thorough discussion of the *Memra* and the *Metatron*, see George Foot Moore, “Intermediaries in Jewish Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* (January 1922), 42–85.

<sup>26</sup> Further critical evaluation of Cabalistic metaphysics can be found in Montgomery, 87–95. The author fully recognizes that more recent popular writers can be cited for examples of these “Christian Cabalistic” techniques. He has cited these earlier examples to avoid the controversy resulting from mentioning current authors and preachers. If readers see resonances of current teachers with these older writers, then his purpose has been fulfilled.



view. Its truth simply cannot be attested by Scripture, either in the Old or New Covenants, the only reliable means by which such a concept can be verified. In the Cabalistic theory of *sefirot*, there is far more similarity to the metaphysical world of Gnosticism than to the biblical world view. The Bible not only never mentions the *sefirot*, but there are passages which clearly contradict the idea that a series of emanations exist between God and man:

For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God (Col 2:18–19).

Since the New Covenant writings deal with some very metaphysical matters in their discussion of God, it would be strange indeed if the emanation doctrine would be entirely omitted if it was the world view of its authors. The *sefirot* doctrine is unnecessary for the believer in Jesus. The incarnate Son responded to Philip's request to be shown the Father in this unequivocal way, leaving no room for competing mediatorial beings or spheres:

Jesus said to him, 'Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves' (John 14:9–11).

The attempts by some Renaissance scholars to give a Christian interpretation to the Kabbalah arose from different motives. Some were seeking to establish a true understanding of reality (Pico), while others were seeking to convert Jewish people to a Christianity that would have more affinity with their background (Ricci). Although their motives may have been sincere, their hermeneutical methodology was so defective that more harm than good was done in its implementation. Their writings serve to warn us today about how *not* to conduct the Jewish-Christian discussion. Furthermore, their

questionable borrowing of such Cabalistic techniques as *gematria* should serve as a serious warning to modern evangelical teachers to beware of straying from a grammatical-historical hermeneutic.\*

\*Adapted freely and edited from an article in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 8/1: 47–59. Used with permission.

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# The “Nasara” in the Quran: A Jewish-Christian Window into the Middle Eastern Jesus-followers in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries<sup>1</sup>

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Paul W. Rood



During the past decade, as the armies of the Islamic State (ISIS) conquered territories in Iraq and Syria, their occupying forces painted the Arabic letter “*nun*” on the property owned by Christians — notifying that they were now expropriated as Islamic property. The “*nun*” stands for Christian— in Arabic *Nasrani*, the Islamic term for a follower of Jesus, the “Nazarene.” In solidarity, some Muslims and other minorities adopted the Arabic letter “*nun*” in opposition to ISIS, protesting on social media, “we are all *Nasara*.”<sup>2</sup> Yet few modern participants in these opposing campaigns of conquest/genocide or friendship/solidarity are aware of the etymology of the ancient terms. That this most ancient name for Christians — a term found throughout the Quran, the New Testament, the Jewish Talmud, and Hebrew prophetic Scripture — has been preserved and resurrected in today’s headlines is worthy of notice. This essay will examine the hidden Jewish Biblical, and later Muslim Quranic, background of this ancient term for the Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus in the Middle East.

The three major Semitic languages spoken in the Middle East today — Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic — share similar names for the indigenous “Christian.” The singular/plural for “Christian” in modern Hebrew is (*Notzri/Notzrim*), in Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> We presented this paper as the annual conference of the Association for the Study of the Middle East & Africa (ASMEA) in Washington, DC (2015). It has since been circulated in Arabic.

<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon went viral on social media in following the ISIS capture of Mosul in 2014. “A Christian Genocide Symbolized by One Letter,” by Christine Sisto on *National Review Online*, July 23, 2014. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/383493/christian-genocide-symbolized-one-letter-christine-sisto>

*Nasrani/Nasara*.<sup>3</sup> Millennia ago, the term for the followers of Jesus (*Yeshu* in the Talmud, or *Isa* in the Quran) is *identical* to the modern terminology.<sup>4</sup>

There is major scholarly disagreement about the identity of the *Nasara*, who are mentioned fourteen times in the Quran as "Scripture People" (*ahl al-kitab*). The Arabic language has both preserved and obscured the biblical content of the sacred texts of the Quran, redacted in the 7th century in northern Arabia. Some scholars believe that these were the descendants of the Jewish Christian communities of Arabia among whom the Apostle Paul stayed during his three-year retreat in Arabia following his conversion on the Damascus road.<sup>5</sup> Others vehemently disagree and argue that they were the gentile monophysite Christians opposed to Byzantine trinitarianism and possibly allied with the Sassanian Empire on the eve of the Islamic conquests. In this paper, we offer preliminary considerations of this topic without engaging the substantive academic work done by scholars such as Stephen Wasserstrom, Sidney Griffith, Edouard-M. Gallez, and others responding to work done in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by scholars such as Margoliouth, Goitein, Schoeps, and Geiger. The main point of controversy is whether the *nasara* in the Quran are Jewish Christians or gentile ones.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Dammen McCauliffe, in her study *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 93–128, focuses upon the later Muslim understanding of the term. In these exegetical works, the term came to mean "helpers" with only a minor sense of the geographical meaning of the term. Her study demonstrates the historical process of separation of Islamic hermeneutics from the biblical traditions.

<sup>4</sup> For general information, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009). There is a huge number of new works on Quranic origins but so far none of this new scholarship addresses the topic at hand. The acclaimed Encyclopedia of the Quran also has no data on the subject. Fred M. Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) set a new paradigm to understand the ecumenical anti-Trinitarian movement against the Byzantine Empire that led to the emergence of Islam as a new religion.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Debate as to whether the *nasara* referenced in the Quran are either Judeo-Nazarene believers, normative Greco-Syriac Christians, or an Arab-Nazorean proto-Islamic sect continues to circulate. Clearly, the Quran distinguishes the *nasara* from Judaic Jews (*Yahud*). Recent published research includes Sidney H. Griffith, "Al-Nasara in the Quran: A hermeneutical reflection" in Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *New Perspectives on the Quran: The Quran in its Historical Context* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011). Based

### Jesus the Nazarene in the Gospels

Obviously, one of the reasons that Jesus was called “the Nazarene” was because he grew up in Nazareth. To the Jewish religious leaders, Nazareth, in Jesus’ day, was an out-of-the-way town in the Galilee, tucked up in the mountains off the major highway going north from Jerusalem into Syria. The backward Galileans were despised by the religious elites of Judea, and even Galileans such as the disciple Nathanael viewed Jesus’ humble village with disdain — “can anything good come from Nazareth?”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the term has always had a perjorative connotation.

During the late Second Temple Period, the Davidic family was persecuted by the Herodians, who claimed the right to rule but who were not in the Davidic line. Herod the Great persecuted the descendants of David throughout his reign, killing most of the Hasmonean princes with Davidic descent.<sup>8</sup> Jesus’ parents, Joseph and Mary, both from Davidic clans, with direct lineage to King David, were likely among those whom had taken refuge in the out of the way Galilean village of Nazareth. The Christmas story tells of their trip to Bethlehem to respond to the census, the birth of Jesus, and their flight to Egypt to escape Herod’s massacre of the innocents. The gospel account follows with the Holy Family’s later return — after Herod’s death and the subsequent rule of his equally cruel

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on an analysis of textual changes over many decades of Quranic development, Edouard-M. Gallez made a far-reaching proposal that *nasara* was a later addition to the text:

[https://www.academia.edu/9112322/Codicology\\_of\\_old\\_Koranic\\_Mss\\_and\\_suspected\\_manipulation\\_to\\_the\\_text\\_table\\_and\\_examples](https://www.academia.edu/9112322/Codicology_of_old_Koranic_Mss_and_suspected_manipulation_to_the_text_table_and_examples). Even if it can be demonstrated that the term was edited into the text, to

toss it out as a meaningless fabricated manipulation would be an error. Earlier research includes David S. Margoliouth, *The Relations between Arab and Israelites prior to the Rise of Islam* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1924); Hans-Joachim Schoeps “Ebionite elements in Islam,” in *Theologie und Geschichte des Judentums* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1949).

<sup>7</sup> John 1:46. Some Bible commentators believe that “Nazarene” was simply used as a term of disdain, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 53 that the Messiah would be “despised and rejected” by mankind.

<sup>8</sup> Josephus relates that Herod the Great had the archives of the Roman administrative center at Sepphoris destroyed lest any pretenders challenge his royal pedigree or put forth their own. Steven Donald Norris, *Unraveling the Family History of Jesus* (Indianapolis: WestBow, 2016), draws from numerous extra-biblical sources to demonstrate a compelling argument that Joseph and Mary were both of Davidic Hasmonean clans who lost several parents and grandparents to Herodian assassins.

son Herod Archelaus — to the relative safety of Nazareth.<sup>9</sup> And so it was in this neglected little town on the frontier of Israel that the young Jesus “grew in wisdom, and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52).

Jesus’ extended teaching ministry in Galilee enabled him to remain on the fringes of the territory of the Herodians and their agents, the Sadducees. On occasion, Jesus would slip away into Phoenicia and the Syrian Decapolis to escape further beyond the borders of the territory under Herodian political control.

“Nazareth” (*Natzerat*, נָצְרַת) is a noun for “watchtower” in Hebrew. The town sits below a ridge which offers a panoramic view (Arabic: *nadhara*, also pronounced *nazara*) of the Jezreel Valley, to the northeast, south, and west. A watchtower is built in order to allow the defenders of the region to warn of the movement of armies — critical to the defense of Israel. Nazareth also acquired a symbolic meaning as the place of refuge for the branch (*netzer*) of the Davidic family, a shelter far from the reach of Herod, unlike their hometown, Bethlehem.

### **The *Notzrim*: The “Watchers” Who “Keep the Testimony”**

We have seen that the place-name of Nazareth is connected to its setting as a “high watchtower” over the Jezreel Valley and as a refuge for the “branch of David.” Similarly, the people who are called *Notzrim*, *Nasara*, or the *Nazoreans* are those who are “the watchers,” or, translated often, as in Psalm 119, “the *keepers* of my precepts (Hebrew *nasarati pikkudeka*).”

The root verb *netzer* (נָצַר) appears over sixty times throughout prophetic Hebrew scripture; frequently in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms — sixteen times in Psalm 119 alone.

The Greek word used in the Gospels, *Nazoreans*, and the Hebrew equivalent, the *Notzrim*, were terms in use during the Second Temple Period to designate those very observant communities which were expectantly awaiting the Messiah, including the little community in Nazareth, where the family of David had found refuge.

The early disciples of John the Baptist, who had undertaken repentance, ritual baptism, and the pursuit of a righteous lifestyle were also called *Nazoreans* in the patristic and apocryphal literature. While John himself had undertaken an even further separation and consecration — the extreme religious vow of a *nazir* (נָזִיר) — which included

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<sup>9</sup> Although Galilee was also ruled by Herod, it was separated by Samaria, under the rule of Damascus.

abstinence from alcohol, the cutting of hair, and touching the dead — only rarely would his disciples do so. Some linguists contend that the Greek word *Nazorean* (Ναζωραίων) — spelled with the letter ζ (zeta), is always transliterated from the Hebrew letter י (zayin) but never צ (tsade) as in *netzar* (נֶצֶר). Some use this as an argument that the early followers of Jesus frequently took nazirite vows; however, this cannot be demonstrated based upon the historical record. Transliteration from Hebrew to Greek often led to the blending and confusion of terms, fusing their meaning to create entirely new concepts.

Early in his gospel (1:9), Mark refers to Jesus as being “from Nazareth” (ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ). After his baptism (1:24) by John the Baptist, and three later passages, Mark refers to Jesus as “the Nazarene” (Ναζαρηνέ), perhaps signifying a broader Messianic label for Jesus and his followers.

Matthew, John, and Luke used the term *Nazorean* (Ναζωραῖος) repeatedly in their writings to indicate that Jesus was “from Nazareth,” but also to acknowledge him as the rightful heir of David — the royal “branch” (*netzer*) of David. The link between *Nazorean* and *Nazareth* is found in *Matthew 2:23*:

And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.  
There he made his home in a town called Nazareth [Ναζαρέτ], so that what  
had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called  
a Nazorean [Ναζωραῖος].’

In this verse, Matthew was interpreting the testimony of the Hebrew prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah, creatively linking the forms of the Hebrew *Netzer/Notzrim*. *Nazorean*, as used by the Greek translator of Matthew, is thus a new term, appearing here for the first time in association with Nazareth.<sup>10</sup>

Few prophetic passages are more Messianic than Isaiah 11:1–10. Jerome (c. 347–420) was the first known Church Father to link Matthew's prophecy to Isaiah 11:1: “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch (*netzer*, נֶצֶר) from his roots shall bear fruit.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, according to this interpretation, Jesus was the “branch” (*netzer*) from the house of Jesse (David's father), which had been cut off from Kingship, of which

<sup>10</sup>An inscription on a marble fragment from a synagogue found in Caesarea Maritima in 1962, confirms “נצרת” (Nazareth) was spelled with a צ (tsade), rather than a י (zayin). Avi-Yonah, M. (1962). “A List of Priestly Courses from Caesarea,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 12: 137–139.

<sup>11</sup>Jerome, *de situ*, 143.

only a buried stump remained. Epiphanius provides some additional background when writing about the Nazarenes, saying that before the Christians were given that name, they were called *Iessaioi* (of Jesse) in Greek.<sup>12</sup> The shoot coming out of the stump of Jesse, the branch (*netzer*), is Jesus, and his followers, the *Notzrim*. The prophet Zechariah and Jeremiah also make repeated mention of the Messianic "Branch," but use a different Hebrew word "*tsemach*" (נֹצֵם).<sup>13</sup> In Zechariah 3:8–9 (NIV), the prophet writes concerning the future Messianic Branch:

8 'Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch [נֹצֵם]. 9 See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day. 10 'In that day each of you will invite your neighbor to sit under your vine and fig tree,' declares the Lord Almighty.

Why would the Isaiah prophecy concerning the future Branch use the root *netzer*, while other prophets might use *tsemach*? Recent Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship indicates that both terms were used interchangeably for the "Messianic Branch."<sup>14</sup> A *peshet*

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<sup>12</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 29, 1,3–9; 4, 9. This is perhaps the root of the Quranic name for Jesus, which does not follow the Aramaic or Hebrew form of his name, Yasu'a. It is entirely possible that the Essenes also derived their name from Jesse, designating the expected Messiah as the root of Jesse. More research on this is required, especially since the Jesus movement in the Muslim world calls itself the "Isawiyah" movement, as in "Followers of Jesus," and colloquially call themselves in the genitive plural of 'Isa, "Isawieen" or "Isa'een," which sounds just like "Essenes." This may or may not be substantiated by further research.

<sup>13</sup> See Jeremiah 23: 5–6: "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch [*tsemach* ], a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.'"

<sup>14</sup> M.L. Coloe, *God Dwells With Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 171.



(commentary) on Isaiah 11:1–6 describes the *netzer* as the *tsemach haDavid*, the same term used by Zechariah in 3:8 and 6:12.<sup>15</sup>

It is significant that John's Gospel relates that when the armed guards come to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, they state twice that they have come to arrest "Jesus the Nazarene" [τὸν Ναζωραῖον]. When crucified, "Pilate had a notice [τίτλον, title] prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth [lit. the Nazarene, ὁ Ναζωραῖος], the King of the Jews."<sup>16</sup> It is most significant that this inscription on his cross is his "title," giving it great significance.

In Acts 24:5, the Jewish leaders charged the Apostle Paul with being a "ringleader of the Nazorean (Ναζωραίων) sect." Paul responds affirming his identity as a Nazorean, equating it with another description of the earliest Jesus followers:

14 However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way [*hodos*], which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets....

Clearly this term was used to describe a people with a specific set of beliefs (followers of the Nazarene, and the *Way of the LORD*), not residents of a specific town in Galilee. In the early rabbinic Jewish writings such as *Avodah Zarah 6a* and *Ta'anit 27b*, *Notzri* (singular) and *Notzrim* (plural) — spelled with the Hebrew נ (tsade) — are used to describe Christians. The Babylonian Talmud passage *Sanhedrin 107b* states "Jesus the Nazarene (*Yesu haNotzri*) practiced magic and led Israel astray." A clearer indication of early rabbinic antipathy toward the Messianic linkage of the Netzer (Branch) to Jesus followers is found in *Baraita Sanhedrin 43a–b*:

Our Rabbis taught: Jesus the Nazarene had five disciples ...When they brought Netzer (one of those disciples listed) before the court, he (Netzer) said to them '...It is written: an offshoot (*netzer*) shall grow forth out of his roots.' They [the judges] answered him: 'Yes, Netzer shall be executed, since it is written: You shall be cast forth away from your grave like an abhorred offshoot (*netzer*).' (Isa. 14:10)

<sup>15</sup> 4Q161 (4QpIsa Line 111). Martinez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), I:316.

<sup>16</sup> John 18:5, John 19:19.

Princeton scholar Peter Schafer, in his fascinating book *Jesus in the Talmud*, notes that the passage above clearly indicates that the rabbis connected Jesus and his followers with the *netzer* passages of Isaiah.<sup>17</sup>

It is also clear that Jewish Christians who followed a Jewish lifestyle continued to be called *Notzrim* by the Jewish and Aramaic/Arab communities, while they were called "Christians" by the Greco-Roman community, as in I Peter 4:16: "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." The Greek word Χριστιανός (Christians) is a translation of the Hebrew "Messiah follower," (*Meshiykhiyyim*, משיחיים). Arab Christians today also use this term — *masihiyun*, in addition to the older transliterated Greek term "Christian" (*krystiyan*).

The scholar Ray Pritz, in his definitive work *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, writes:

The Greek name, Christian, was first applied in Antioch, probably the earliest mission to the non-Jews, and it is well known that 'Christian' was originally used by non-Christians to designate believers among the Gentiles, while 'Nazarenes' was already used in Palestine to describe Jewish adherents to the new messianic sect.<sup>18</sup>

Pritz also concludes that over time, these Nazorean Jewish Christian communities were confused by the Church Fathers with heretical sects such as the Ebionites and the Mandaeans. The true "orthodox" Nazoreans continued to exist in scattered communities in Galilee and east of the Jordan, along with others in Syria and the northern Hijaz of the Arabian peninsula, up until the fourth century, possibly later.<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to know how their practices bridged Judaism and Christianity. As centuries passed, the Greco-Roman Church fathers accused the Nazorean Jewish Christians of heresy because they continued to express their faith in Jewish cultural terms — accordingly, the Greek term "Christian" was always used for those they classified as the "true" Church, while Nazorean

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Schafer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). Some commentators such as Klausner identify the disciple called "Netzer" to be Andrew, the first disciple of Jesus to be martyred.

<sup>18</sup> Ray A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Pritz, 8.

or Ebionite always signaled heresy, but that could reflect anti-Judaizing prejudices among gentile Christians, a perennial issue in church history.<sup>20</sup>

### **The *Nasara* in the Quran**

In the Quranic material, the *Nasara/Nasrani* appear as Christians who keep the Jewish dietary and religious laws (circumcision and Sabbath). Several scholars have offered hypotheses concerning their doctrinal and ethnic identity. A *Nasrani* priest, Waraqa Bin Nawfal, is said to have been a tutor and companion of Muhammad. According to the Islamic sources, Waraqa, a scholar of the "Gospel of the Hebrews" and the Old Testament, accepted Muhammad's prophecy, although he remained a *Nasara* (Christian). Khadija, Muhammad's first wife, was said to be the cousin of Waraqa, and the first convert to Islam.<sup>21</sup>

As the Muslim conquerors spread north and west, penetrating into the Greco-Roman provinces, they extended the Quranic name *naṣārā* to the Christians of that region. Most of these Greek *Christianos* and Syriac *Krystiyans* would likely have accepted this appellation in order to receive Islamic acceptance as *'ahlu l-kitāb* ("people of the book"). The Churches of the East have often continued to call themselves *Nasara/Nasrani*. in their own Syriac/Aramaic. The Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala, India, among the most ancient of Christian communities, continue to refer to themselves as *Nasrani*.

It is more than ironic that the modern Hebrew and Muslim terms for Christians preserve this earliest identifier of the earliest disciples of Jesus. Interestingly, while the modern Israeli Jew uses to the term *Notzrim* to refer to all Christians, everywhere, they also are likely unaware of the ancient Jewish Messianic roots of that term. In modern times, the Jewish communities in Arabia were eradicated except in Yemen, where they

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<sup>20</sup>Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, eds., *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), anthologizes the best scholarship on this topic available to the general reader today.

<sup>21</sup>We thank our friend Tony Maalouf, scholar of Islam and early Arab Christianity, for making us aware of the work by Juzif Qazzi translated into English as Joseph Azzi, *The Priest and the Prophet: The Christian Priest Waraka Ibn Warfal's Profound Influence Upon Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam* (Pen Publishers, 2005). Qazzi argues in detail that the Qur'an is a paraphrased translation of the Gospel to the Hebrews, the book read by the Nazorenes, and that Waraqa Bin Nawfal was an Ebionite priest who tutored Muhammad and mentored him for forty-four years before he died. An Arabic pdf file can be downloaded from [muhammadanism.org](http://muhammadanism.org).

hung with enormous difficulty to this day. Most of the rest of the Middle Eastern Jews (the "Saturday People") were expelled from the modern Arab states following the establishment of the State of Israel. Today, it is only the "Sunday People," the *Nasara*, who bear the name of the God of Israel in the Middle East.

### **The Hebrew Prophets Concerning "The *Notzrim*" and "the Last Days"**

Between twenty-five and thirty percent of the entire Bible consists of prophetic writings. The oracles of the prophets recorded in Hebrew scripture address the many pressing ethical and spiritual needs of the Israelite community of biblical times, as well as a significant number of specific prophetic statements regarding future events. Historical evidence exists to satisfy believers that many of these specific prophetic events have already been fulfilled (e.g., the Persian, Greek, and Roman conquests, the complete destruction of the Jewish temple, the dispersion of Israelites to distant nations, etc.). However, a portion of these Hebrew prophecies remains unfulfilled, most pertaining to the "last days" (the *acharet ha-yamim*) culminating in the present age of empires and nations. As well, the Christian prophetic scriptures of the New Testament (spoken and written by Hebrew prophets—the early Jewish Christians), also focus on the nation of Israel and its enemies during a period of great wickedness, slaughter, and global devastation in these "last days." In the New Testament Gospels, many of Jesus' disciples are described as expecting Jesus to fulfill these Messianic prophecies by restoring the Israelite Kingdom and judging the nations. In later generations, many Christian theologians taught that these prophecies concerning Israel have already been fulfilled through Jesus and during the devastating destruction of Jerusalem experienced by the generation that witnessed his first coming and the establishment of his kingdom community — the church.

The Apostle Paul recognized that a new period of history had indeed begun, with Israel to be dispersed and set aside "for a time" because of their unbelief concerning their Messiah. This was the *mysterion*, or the great mystery, that had been revealed to him, a mystery which fueled his outreach to the Jews and gentiles beyond the borders of Israel. This new people is the *Notzrim*, constituted initially by believing Jews and now enlarged by gentiles who believe in the Messiah of Israel and receive salvation of their souls through his atoning sacrifice. These *Notzrim* are to preserve the Word of God, keep watch, and to warn Israel and the nations of the great judgment that is yet to come before the fulfillment and restoration of all things by the God of Israel.

The *Notzrim/Nasara* are important actors in the apocalyptic literature, as in Jeremiah, Chapters 30 and 31. Chapter 30 foretells the regathering of the assembly of the Israel, the establishment of their own government, and the rebuilding of their cities on their ancient ruined land — in a continued state of unbelief. God will then act as a “whirlwind” on behalf of Israel and in judgment upon the wicked. The LORD will then draw Israel’s heart to Him. Chapter 31 of Jeremiah (NIV) reveals:

1 ‘At that time,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will be the God of *all the families* of Israel, and they will be my people.’

2 This is what the Lord says:

‘The people who survive the sword  
will find favor in the wilderness;  
I will come to give rest to Israel.’ ...

6 There will be a day *when watchmen* (*Notzrim*, נֹצְרִים) cry out on the hills of Ephraim,

‘Come, let us go up to Zion,  
to the Lord our God.’

7 This is what the Lord says:

‘Sing with joy for Jacob;  
shout for the foremost of the nations.  
Make your praises heard, and say,  
“Lord, save your people,  
the remnant of Israel.”

8 See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor;  
a great throng will return.’

### **The Testimony of the *Notzrim/Nasara* (Christians) of the Middle East**

The persecution, slaughter, and expulsion of the modern *Nasara*, the Middle Eastern Christian communities in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, should shock and engage our prayerful attention. This is not only a humanitarian catastrophe in the Middle East, but the massive refugee crisis it has spawned has produced a global wave of ethnic conflict and social

instability reverberating through Europe and to all corners of the earth. Moreover, Israel is a provocation to Muslims and a powerful sign to others who are seeking God amidst great suffering. Many of these seekers are turning to Jesus in revulsion against the hatefulness of Salafist ideology, which has completely severed the God of Islam from the God of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, and Jacob. In the midst of this tragedy there is also testimony: the testimony of the ancient Christian communities of the Middle East — the *Nasara* — and those Muslims drawn to identify with them in solidarity against *jihad*, are once again testifying to their faith in Jesus the Branch, the Messiah of Israel.

Some rabbis interpreted "*Notzrim*" as angelic "watchers" who will guard Israel in the last days and then gather to worship in the fully restored Zion, obscuring the meaning of the term. However, another prophetic reference to the *Notzrim*, Isaiah 49:6 (KJV), makes the rabbinical interpretation less likely:

6 It is insufficient that you be a servant to me only, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved (נְצִירִי) ones of Israel! But I will (also) appoint thee for a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach as far as the end of the earth.

It is interesting that in this passage the "preserved ones" is derived from the same Hebrew root "*netzer*": those of the "branch" who are the "keepers and watchers." In both passages the *Notzrim* can be seen as part of "all the families of Israel" — that is, the believers in the God of Israel. The apostle Paul later declared that other *Notzrim* — *the gentile followers of the Nazarene* — join the "tribes of Jacob" and the "remnant of Israel" with the formerly "lost" families of Israel in the last days.

The preservation of Israel through all generations and the ingathering of dispersed Israel in our own times testify to believing Jews and Christians the faithfulness of the God of Israel to his promises recorded in the Bible. The preservation of the text of Holy Scripture and the historical preservation of the deep meaning of these identifying names in Arabic, Aramaic-Syriac, and Hebrew languages and sacred texts are possibly another important means by which

The fierce anger of the Lord  
will not turn back  
until he fully accomplishes  
the purposes of his heart.

In days to come  
you will understand this.

Jeremiah 30:24 (NIV)

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# What Hath Maimonides Wrought?

Amy Downey

On the alleged tomb of Maimonides in Tiberias is found the inscription, “From Moses to Moses, there is none like Moses.”<sup>1</sup> This is a description that one could argue Moses Maimonides (aka Rambam) would have not only coveted for himself but also one that he would have considered justifiable for his contribution to the world of Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>2</sup> However, a better question that we in the world today of Jewish evangelism and missions should be asking about the life and legacy of Moses ben Maimon is “What Hath Maimonides Wrought?” as it relates to our work to sharing the Gospel of Messiah Jesus with the Jewish people today<sup>3</sup>

This was the question that I undertook in the completion of my PhD studies at Liberty University (Lynchburg, Virginia). The writing of my dissertation (2016) and then in the writing of *Maimonides’s Yahweh* (2019) physically took me backwards from Rambam’s alleged tomb in Tiberias<sup>4</sup> to his birthplace in Cordóba, Spain. This is the question I ask myself even now when I encounter not only Jewish rabbis who can quote from the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide for the Perplexed* but also the average individual who has been unknowingly indoctrinated with Maimonidean thought about why Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Abram Leon Sachar, *A History of the Jews*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965), 178. Information such as what is available as Maimonides’ tombstone could be considered common knowledge within the Jewish community; however, I have placed this information here for those who are not aware of this information.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Karen Downey, *Maimonides’s Yahweh: Rabbinic Judaism’s Attempt to Answer the Incarnational Question* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 62–63.

<sup>3</sup> This question specifically came about from chapter six from the author’s book *Maimonides’s Yahweh* (p. 127–49) and will be the focus of this article’s question as well.

<sup>4</sup> There is reputable doubt as to whether Maimonides is buried in Tiberias. He visited Palestine once during his life but did not stay. It makes for good apocryphal legend and I am one who doubts the tomb is legitimate. See also, Joel L. Kraemer, “Moses Maimonides: An Intellectual Portrait,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, Kenneth Seeskin, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 47.



people can never believe in Jesus.<sup>5</sup> This is the question I ask myself even now how one man born during the darkest days of the Middle Ages who traveled only from Andalusian Spain across North Africa could have so influenced world Judaism for almost a millennium. An influence that causes today's Judaism to no longer resemble the Scripture given to the world by the real Moses but reflects another Moses who has taken the "Chosen People" back to Egypt. Indeed, what hath Maimonides wrought?

In today's Judaism, Maimonides' influence can still be seen in six specific areas that should not be overlooked or underplayed, even though many in Judaism are increasingly uncomfortable with Rambam's misogynistic teachings, such as the following from *Mishneh Torah*:

A woman who studies Torah will receive reward. However, that reward will not be [as great] as a man's, since she was not commanded [in this mitzvah]. Whoever performs a deed which he is not commanded to do, does not receive as great a reward as one who performs a mitzvah that he is commanded to do. Even though she will receive a reward, the Sages commanded that a person should not teach his daughter Torah, because most women cannot concentrate their attention on study, and thus transform the words of Torah into idle matters because of their lack of understanding...<sup>6</sup>

The six areas I considered in *Maimonides's Yahweh* are philosophy, a general understanding of God, a broad consideration of who could and who could not be the Messiah in today's world, the validity and trustworthiness of the Tanakh (Hebrew Scriptures), how Judaism should perceive or recognize the difficult subject of theodicy in light of the Holocaust, and how specific Christian doctrines can be reconciled within a Jewish subtext. Obviously, not even one of these topics can be covered adequately in the

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<sup>5</sup> Rich Robinson wrote overall a flattering review of *Maimonides's Yahweh* for the *LCJE Bulletin*, Issue 136 (Summer 2019), page 20. However, there is one point of the review that I think he failed to quite understand. Robinson writes of the current perception that Maimonides might be out of fashion; yet, he is often or always brought up when the need arises for a quote in relation to a theological thought. Additionally, his undertone is ever present as will be shown in this article.

<sup>6</sup> Downey, *Maimonides's Yahweh*, 174–77. Quote from Maimonides is from *Mishneh Torah*, Bk. 1, Ch. 1, Sec. 1.

few pages allotted. However, we will seek to review two of the most important ones in the space allowed — who could and could not be the Messiah in today's world and the difficult question of suffering and theodicy in today's world. For the issue of messianic identity and Jewish suffering continues to be relevant wherever a Jewish person resides in the world today.

### **Maimonides and Messianic Identity**

It always surprises Christians and churches when they discover that the vast majority of Jewish people today have a plethora of perspectives as it relates to the identity of the Messiah today. From a belief in a literal person called Messiah to a cosmic principle they would identify as messianic belief, the view of "Messiah" in Judaism runs the gamut. However, each Jewish person who has some sense of a messianic concept would say they uphold the Maimonidean twelfth principle that states that they will believe in the Messiah and even if there is a delay in his arrival, the Jewish people will wait for him.<sup>7</sup> For example, Mayim Bialik, character actress from *The Big Bang Theory*, who also holds a Ph.D. in neuroscience, states this about her Modern Orthodox belief about the messianic age: "The concept of a messiah is a general ... notion that we are partners in making the world better, in moving the world forward. The Messiah is progress, participation, suiting up and showing up for life."<sup>8</sup> Reform rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles affirms a Messianic belief but one with a definite twist to Maimonidean thought:

Today the Messiah must represent an ideal of peace whose fulfillment lies in our own hands. The age of magic formulas or mitzvot flipping the eschatological switch is past. The nobility in the messianic vision is to live so that when the Messiah comes, we will no longer need him. That may prove beyond our powers, in which case, quite literally, God help us.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *Pirkei Avot with the Rambam's Commentary including Shemoneh Perakim: The Rambam's Classic Work of Ethics and Maimonides's Introduction to Perek Chelek Which Contains His 13 Principles of Faith*, trans. Avraham Yaakov Finkel (Scranton, PA: Yeshivath Beth Moshe, 1994), 181–82.

<sup>8</sup> Daphna Berman, et al., "What Does the Concept of Messiah Mean Today? (Interviews)," *Moment Magazine* (March–April 2012); available online at <http://www.momentmag.com/what-does-the-concept-of-the-messiah-mean-today/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

However, both Bialik and Wolpe would say they affirm Maimonides' twelfth principle that is today necessary to be considered "good Jews."<sup>10</sup> We who believe in Jesus as Messiah might ask rightfully—do they?

Yet, the real question and one that is especially germane to the issue at hand, does most of world Jewry even care? And if not, how much of the fault lies with the teachings of Moses ben Maimon? It could be argued that a great deal of the confusion as it relates to the Jewish understanding for the Messiah does indeed lie at the feet of Rambam. His concept and/or definition for messianic realization can be summarized simply as:

The messiah will die, his son will succeed him, and then his grandson. God has explained that he [the messiah] will die. He said: He shall not fail nor be crushed until he established justice in the earth, etc. [Isaiah 42:4] His kingdom will last an extremely long time. The duration of life will also increase, because with the removal of grief and hardship the duration of life increases. It would not be surprising if his dominion last for thousands of years.<sup>11</sup>

This statement from the *Commentary on the Mishnah* is perhaps not well known by many Jewish people but its unrealized hopefulness is present on the edges. This individual has never appeared in the lives of the Jewish people since Maimonides died in 1204. What instead has appeared has been a continuum of Crusades, Inquisitions, false messiahs, pogroms, and, of course, the Shoah that has destroyed the haunting wistfulness hope of a Messianic Age for many or most Jewish people. Perhaps this is why one finds a growing chorus of people such as Harris Lenowitz and Shalom Auslander whose view of a messiah sounds more like heresy than a twelfth principle affirmation.

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<sup>10</sup> Steven Schwarzchild, "The Messianic Doctrine in Contemporary Jewish Thought, in *Great Jewish Ideas*, ed. Abraham Ezra Millgram (Washington, DC: B'Nai B'rith Department of Adult Jewish Education, 1964), 239.

<sup>11</sup> Maimonides, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, ed. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 167. See also, Downey, *Maimonides's Yahweh*, 76. I avoided listing the standard Maimonidean objections to Jesus being Messiah as that litany is known by most everyone and can be responded to with the first coming vs. second coming prophecies argument. There is a deeper and more intuitive problem found within the writings of Rambam that needs to be uncovered.

Harris Lenowitz, professor emeritus in Hebrew from the University of Utah and scholar on false messiahs in Judaism such as Leo Franck, has described his messianic view in what could only be described as a melancholy manner:

Wherever there's a problem, there could be an answer. And the messiah is the biggest answer to the biggest single question: "Does God care about me?" We are lonely—Jews in particular—and we have long had evidence that God didn't care about us or our grandparents. And so, we create a messiah who is somehow heroic when we are fallible; with the Messiah, fear is of an entirely different order.<sup>12</sup>

However, the melancholy portrayal is much more "hopeful" than the one we find by Shalom Auslander, the disgruntled and angry former Hasid, who displays his disdain for religious Judaism in his view of any type of messianic belief:

I think [the concept of the Messiah] is as personally useful and globally destructive as it's ever been. It works for individuals because it gets them through the day but when it starts becoming a way that you live your life and dictating what you do and what other people should do, people tend to kill each other. If there is a messiah, I suspect he's laughing his a\*\* off at us.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, again the question is raised: "What Hath Maimonides Wrought?" I would propose both here in this article as I did in *Maimonides's Yahweh* that Rambam created a Messiah that was easy for him because it required nothing but what he wanted — someone who resembled him in all form and fashion and if he never appeared, so be it because he would be dead. In fact, one could argue that Maimonides' "Messiah" in all form and fashion was Maimonides and that suited Rambam just fine, but it left the Jewish people with a vacuum that has never been filled. Unless we who know the truth of Messiah Jesus do the work of repairing the damage left behind by Moses Maimonides.

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<sup>12</sup> Berman, et al, *Moment Magazine*, online.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Auslander's wording is perhaps shocking; however, one should recognize it is invaluable to the point being made.

### **Maimonides and the Question of Theodicy/Suffering**

Those who work in the field of Jewish evangelism are confronted often daily by the most difficult question of the Shoah — where was God when my family was killed? I remember sitting in the Dallas Jewish Community Center one night surrounded by older Jewish people when this question was being discussed with unabashed honesty. One older gentleman shocked even those present when he shouted out, “God was taking a nap.” No one knew how to respond; because, how does one respond to such a declarative sentence?

Yes, the gentleman was angry at Auschwitz. However, he ultimately was angry and confused over the question of evil, theodicy, and suffering. Where does evil come from in the universe? Why do people suffer? These questions are all at the core of humanity’s quest to understanding the pain of living (i.e., theodicy). Sadly, for Rabbinic Judaism, the answers found in the core texts provided by Rambam do not provide solace in today’s world which confronts evil and suffering on a daily basis.

Harry Blumberg states that Maimonides fought against the idea that God is the creator of evil because while He did create matter, it is matter that allows itself to be “the cause of all corruption and evil.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, man, because we are a subject of matter, became corrupt in the mind of Rambam when we became obsessed with the things of good/evil and not the higher ideals of truth/falsehood.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it could be argued that the Cairo rabbi would argue that humanity is the creator of his own evil—an idea that hold merit within some Christian thought. However, the difference lies in two areas: (1) the concept that miracles can still occur within Christendom and (2) the categorization of evil that Maimonides affirmed.

And, it is the concept of miracles that is an opening for Jewish evangelists in the closing words of this article. Maimonides did not believe in the possibility of miracles within Rabbinic Judaism and the hope of such a belief that they can occur today in Judaism has robbed Jewish people of something intrinsic in their faith and in their understanding

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<sup>14</sup> Harry Blumberg, “Theories of Evil in Medieval Jewish Philosophy.” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 43 (1972): 153.

<sup>15</sup> Warren Zev Harvey, “Maimonides and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil,” in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 2, Joseph Dan, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1989), 133, and Lawrence Berman, “Maimonides on the Fall of Man,” *AJS Review* (1980): 8.

of who God is to them. For, as Howard Kreisel emphatically states, the Cairo rabbi would argue that if they had occurred that they “were [simply] a product of the Deity’s impersonal governance of mankind.”<sup>16</sup>

This “impersonal governance” expression today would close resemble a deistic model and I would not disagree with this statement. Ultimately, and in my opinion, what Maimonides wrought was a deistic God in Rabbinic Judaism over the last 800+ years and the consequences have been spiritually devastating for the Jewish people. However, it also opens the door for evangelism as we can show the miracle of the resurrection, the miracle of the Incarnation which Rambam loathed, the miracle of a Messiah who loves and is personal and relatable and divine, and most of all a Messiah whose name is Messiah Jesus. We who know this truth simply must take advantage of these opportunities and recognize the weaknesses of Maimonidean theology instead of respecting his legacy. He is not the “second Moses” he wanted to be. Instead, he was and is the false prophet the “first Moses” warned us about in Deuteronomy 18.

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Kreisel, “Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, vol. 75, no. 2 (October 1984): 114.

# ***Learning Messiah: A Review and Reflections***

**Rich Robinson**

Edjan Westerman, *Learning Messiah: Israel and the Nations; Learning to Read God's Way Anew*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018.

Some twenty years ago, Kendall Soulen identified three kinds of supersessionism. The first two he labeled *punitive* (God is punishing the Jews for their rejection of Jesus) and *economic* (in the current "economy," or moment in God's plan, the people of God is no longer Israel but the church — as God actually intended all along). The third kind was *structural*, in which the traditional canonical narrative runs from Creation to the Fall to Redemption (in Christ) to the Final Consummation — in the process leaving the reader leapfrogging the Old Testament and the story of Israel. We could also call this third type "narrative supersessionism."

It is the third kind, structural supersessionism, which often characterizes the church's approach to the Bible, even in those congregations that preach a future for Israel. The bulk of the Old Testament is benignly (or not so benignly) neglected in much preaching. Sunday school and other forms of Christian education may fare better, as many long-term lay churchgoers have been exposed to the stories of the Exodus, the Judges, and the kings in those settings. But in many churches, Sunday school has been replaced by small groups, where the focus is on discussing that week's sermon — which has probably been preached from the New Testament. Add to this the current perplexities among both unchurched and churchied surrounding such "embarrassments" as Leviticus' sexual ethics and Joshua's alleged genocide, and the Old Testament becomes a huge question mark looming over the lives of Christians. What is this *doing* in the Bible?

Edjan Westerman, now retired, has served as a pastor in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. With *Learning Messiah*, he joins the postsupersessionist discussions now taking place in academic circles. The book has been enthusiastically endorsed by Kendall Soulen, Mark Kinzer, Richard Harvey, and others who are involved in the

conversation — the latter two are Messianic Jews — and so I thought I'd better have a look. I'm glad I did.

Westerman attempts to view the biblical narrative through the lens of Israel's centrality in God's dealing with humanity and the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament<sup>1</sup> promises as first of all to the Jewish people/Israel and then on to the Gentile nations. The result is a unique telling of the biblical account. The author sums up his book in this fashion: "This book is about the blessing of the God of Israel, His desire to and His actual blessing of the nations from the midst of His people Israel."

Part One covers the narrative of the Tanakh. The creation of the world has something to do with Israel, we learn, before we start exploring the origin of the nation of Israel, its election, redemption from Egypt, calling as a priesthood, land, sanctuary, kingship, disobedience, and the realization of its calling on the "eighth day," the author's term for the final time of fulfillment (see further below). All this happens in a kind of running commentary as we proceed from Genesis on: it is the story of Israel, familiar to many Christians, but seen through a new lens.

Rather than comment on the individual chapters, it may be helpful to point out some of the key emphases of Westerman's narrative, which are repeated throughout. One is the idea of God's faithfulness, which becomes a prime driver in a reconfigured canonical narrative. For as supersessionism made much of Israel's unfaithfulness, "the gospel became a message in which God's faithfulness toward His people had disappeared" (17.10). Surely a renewed appreciation that God is faithful to his promises, including those to Israel, can bring us to a new level of understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Another key emphasis is *kedusha*, sanctification, which Westerman calls "the goal of creation," citing Abraham Joshua Heschel (2.2). This is accomplished through *avoda*, service to God (particularly priestly service), likewise said to be a goal of creation (2.7).

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<sup>1</sup> The tendency now is to view "Old Testament" as implying a supersessionist stance, and the terms "Hebrew Bible," "Tanakh," or "First Testament" are now often preferred. I however grew up thinking that the "Old" Testament, being older and much thicker than the "New," was old by virtue of its antiquity and foundational solidity, like an old mountain chain in comparison with a small hillock. So I personally have no qualms with calling it the "Old Testament."

<sup>2</sup> The theme of God's faithfulness also surfaces in conversations surrounding the New Perspective on Paul and in exegetical discussion of Paul.



Israel's life is therefore to be one of *avoda* leading to ultimate *kedusha*. These twin terms become a recurring motif throughout.

Another key idea is that the consummation is not just a restoration of Eden but moves beyond it to a greater fulfillment. One way Westerman approaches this is via the idea of the "Eighth Day" (see, e.g., 13.7), a term found also in the church fathers. In fact, traditional Christian theology agrees that the end is not identical to the beginning. In Eden, so goes the traditional formulation, Adam was able not to sin (*posse non peccare*); after the Fall humanity was unable not to sin (*non posse non peccare*); but in the Consummation, humanity will be unable to sin at all (*non posse peccare*).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the doctrine of the Incarnation insists that Jesus will always remain human and a circumcised Jew. (So Westerman: "This incarnation has not simply been an emergency measure to be undone at some point in time." [13.7].) Further, Revelation portrays a diversity of nations in the worship of God, making the Consummation something beyond simply a "return to Eden" when there were as yet no nations. The end is therefore not like the beginning; there is a "more" to it. While Westerman does not adduce all the above points, he is reminding of us of something that Christian theology has recognized. In contrast to traditional theology, however, he applies this insight to the place of Israel within God's plan: Israel in fact will be part of the "more" of the final consummation. This stands in contrast to "the opinion of large factions of the Church ... that with the New Covenant, God returned to His original universal intentions, bringing an end to Israel's role in the foreground." (13.1).

Part Two moves on to the New Testament. According to traditional Christian theology, God "had changed His course with respect to Israel and the world, and in Jesus had come up with another plan of action." (13.4). Though Westerman does not explore this, we can note that even dispensational theology, which affirms a future for Israel, sees that nation set aside in the present in favor of the Church, before once again becoming "foregrounded" (to use Kendall Soulen's term) in the narrative. (This is the case with classic dispensationalism; newer forms have considerably nuanced this view.) This would probably be labeled as a form of economic supersessionism by postsupersessionist thinkers.

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<sup>3</sup> Theologians love Latin!

Finally, having extensively toured both Testaments, *Learning Messiah* in Part Three brings out the practical implications of living according to this new canonical narrative. It begins with a call to repentance on the part of the Church for its role in promulgating the traditional narrative, which is a “distortion” (22.2–3) of the true one. In addition, the Church must re-evaluate its identity as one informed not by “the anti-Judaic scheme of the traditional canonical narrative” (23.6) but rather by a deep connection with Israel. In particular, Westerman takes issue with the idea that Pentecost was “the birth of the Church”; rather, its “newness lies in the fact that the God of Israel is beginning to realize His promises in Israel’s midst” (23.8). (Well, could it be both?) Westerman realizes that this rereading of the narrative “will meet opposition from an ethnic and religious contextual background. We can think of the preference of Christians in Islamic or Asian cultures for a proclamation of the gospel along the lines of the traditional canonical narrative, in which Israel ultimately has no lasting place” (23.9). Thus, there is an entire missiological dimension to this rereading, which Westerman notes (but does not explore).

Let me make several observations, some of which directly arise from *Learning Messiah*, and some of which are suggested by its subject matter.

**One.** I would not be so quick to trace a straight line from supersessionism to the Holocaust as does Westerman (see esp. 13.9). Certainly, we must recognize (and memorialize, and bewail) the frequent anti-Jewishness of the early church as it turns into the overtly murderous anti-Semitism of medieval times and then metamorphoses into its modern, and now resurgent, variety. Yet we must remember that Hitler and Nazism (though not all Germans at the time) were just as opposed to Christianity as to Judaism. It was a kind of German national paganism with which Hitler resonated. As Doris Bergen has noted: “War was a sacrament and a celebration of the German Christian people’s church, the formative moment that replaced Pentecost.”<sup>4</sup> As she also writes, “Most Christians in Germany did not share Bonhoeffer’s conviction about the fundamental opposition between those two worldviews [Nazism and Christianity], but hard-core Nazi

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<sup>4</sup> Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 57. Elsewhere in the book she notes that while the German Christian movement did draw on anti-Semitic precedents, the Nazi leadership was not enamored with the “Christian” component.

leaders did. Martin Bormann and Heinrich Himmler, as well as Adolf Hitler himself, considered Nazism and Christianity irreconcilable antagonists.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some would say that the Holocaust is *sui generis*, its causes complex, demonic, and ultimately beyond understanding.

Furthermore, we can find those in the supersessionist camp who show great appreciation for the gospel’s Jewishness and for the history of Israel in the Old Testament; and who uphold Jewish people, and sometimes even the State of Israel on the grounds of general humanitarianism, Christian principles, and general moral arguments. Supersessionism, at least of the economic and structural kinds, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup>

**Two.** This book operates with postsupersessionism as its presupposition. It therefore does not offer — nor is its purpose to offer — closely argued exegetical discussions or a theological “system” in defense of his hermeneutic of the Old Testament. Because of this, a Reformed supersessionist could agree with much in the first part of the book, including the foregrounding of Israel in the narrative, but simply respond that the New Testament “reinterprets” everything. For a detailed exegetical defense one should therefore consult a book such as *The New Christian Zionism*.<sup>7</sup> But as far as I can tell Westerman is not looking to write a defense as much as to show, given postsupersessionist premises, what a reading of the Old and New Testaments looks like. Like any reading of the Bible, it either succeeds in carrying its own plausibility or it fails to. Plausibility does not equal proof, but it factors into any final evaluation. And as a running biblical narrative along postsupersessionist lines, I know of nothing else quite like it.

**Three.** Westerman does not speak of an “Israel-centered” or “Israel-centric” reading of the Bible, as some do. But we need to be careful that this kind of canonical reading does not lead there. The Bible is always first and foremost God-and-Messiah-centered. That established, it can be argued that Israel is front and center as the human

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Conversely there are well-meaning folks who “love the Jews” as an abstracted idealization, who hold a truncated view of the Jewish people. This begets its own set of problems.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, ed., *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), esp. “Part Two: Theology and the Bible.”

player, foregrounded in the biblical narrative. The point here is not to overstate the position, especially if one wants to “win friends and influence people.”<sup>8</sup>

**Four.** The universal and particular thrusts of Scripture play key roles in postsupersessionist hermeneutics. If the Consummation is more than just a return to Eden, then the particularism of Israel remains even alongside the universalism of the gospel (and we might add, the presence of many nations and many tongues in Revelation’s vision of the future argues for many particularisms—is Israel perhaps in some way *primus inter pares*?)

Let me repeat a quote from Westerman, that a rereading of the canonical narrative:

will meet opposition from an ethnic and religious contextual background. We can think of the preference of Christians in Islamic or Asian cultures for a proclamation of the gospel along the lines of the traditional canonical narrative, in which Israel ultimately has no lasting place (23.9).

Yet is it not the universalism of Scripture that forms one appeal to the non-Jewish nations of the world? Can we appropriately emphasize that universalism even while teaching the place of Israel in God’s plan? The narrative of Scripture can be read through both universal and particular lenses, and each is appropriate in its own context. As Qohelet 3:1 reminds us, “For everything there is a season.” Is it possible to read the Scriptural narrative in a new way that still allows for both emphases to co-exist?<sup>9</sup>

**Five.** In the book, Westerman makes some thought-provoking statements. Not everyone will agree with all of them (and you will need to read them in context to get at his full meaning). To be sure, there are also some questionable leaps of intertextuality and some idiosyncratic terminology. But here is a sampling of passages I found worth pondering:

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<sup>8</sup> So the title of Dale Carnegie’s classic 1936 volume, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

<sup>9</sup> For one Jewish writer’s attempt to find both the universal and the particular in the calling of Israel, see Max I. Dimont, *The Indestructible Jews* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014; orig. publ. 1971). His sympathies clearly lie on the universal side of the fence, as he sees the “manifest destiny” (=calling) of Israel to be that of establishing a brotherhood of mankind.

Israel may need to suffer because of the righteousness and patience of the Holy One in regard to the nations. A glimpse of the figure of the Servant of the LORD can be seen here already. (4.1)

Since the history of Israel is focused on this future re-creation, the specific Jewish character of this history is not transient in nature. (5.5)

There is a visible structuring in “circles” within the Torah that parallels the structuring God ordained in the camp of Israel. (7.9)

... every canonical narrative creates its own world of consequences. (13.17)

This confession of the sovereign freedom of God is important in Judaism. The Jewish author Wyschogrod, therefore, holds the opinion that nobody — not even a Jew — can postulate *a priori* that with respect to Jesus, the thought of an Indwelling of God in the flesh of Israel *must* be out of the question. This only could be the case when the incarnation in Jesus implied that God retracted His promises to Israel. (15.4)

When He is unclothed and nailed to the cross, He suffers the same judgment that the people and land will suffer. The dividing of His clothes and the casting of lots over them by the Roman soldiers are a token of what the nations will do to God’s people and land. The nations will disperse the people of Israel, divide the land, and cast lots over God’s people. (19.5)

[On Sunday worship:] Gathering together on the first day is a recognition of God’s new salvation acts, as that was the case on the days of *Purim* and *Hanukkah*. Those feasts were also not commanded at Sinai, but came forth from the experience of new salvific acts of God. (20.14)

**Six.** There is the question of separate callings of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Yeshua. Westerman says,

The decision, spread by letter to the newly formed faith communities among the nations, shows that in the Messiah there are two kinds of an “obedience of faith.” These are two kinds of *halakhot* based on the Torah God gave to Israel. And this decision in no way invalidates the Torah. What it means is that there are two peoples in the Messiah: one people from Israel, and one from the *goyim*. Each is addressed in a different manner, and

both must live their own calling and walk their own path. Both of them have their own torah — meaning instruction with respect to what specific obedience is expected from them. ...

... A consequence of this opinion [i.e., an opinion different from the view expressed in the previous paragraph] is that the Torah obedience of Jewish followers of the Messiah was seen as belonging to a transition situation.

Or more simply: “Within Christian re-thinking the question increasingly is asked: do Jews and believers from the nations have different callings within the faith community around Messiah Jesus?” (13.13) This matter of separate callings is likewise addressed by Mark Kinzer in his bilateral eschatology and by David Rudolph. If there are in fact separate callings, what does that entail for Jewish believers? Would their calling be based on “covenant fidelity” (i.e. to the Torah of Moses), and/or on Paul’s mandate in 1 Cor 7 for believers to remain in their calling, or on other factors? Does this mean engaging in “Torah observance”—which is susceptible of more than one understanding? Once again, we have a need for close biblical exegesis and biblical theology to ground any conclusion.

Westerman also broaches what in North America we have come to call “cultural appropriation.” He writes:

The question again confronts us: will it be possible that, apart from a Messianic-Jewish celebration of the *Shabbat*, there also can be a Messianic co-celebration of the *Shabbat* by believers from the nations in such manner that Israel does not once again feel robbed?

This practical question bears on Christian observance of, e.g. Passover seders — a practice decried by some rabbis and encouraged by others. I know of an evangelical church that builds a booth each year for Sukkot. Is this a legitimate sharing in the church’s Jewish heritage or an encroachment on Jewish culture?<sup>10</sup> Is it cultural appropriation or a confusion of “callings”?

**Seven.** There is the question of the role of Jewish tradition and rabbinic authority in the preservation of the Jewish people. Westerman writes:

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<sup>10</sup> A completely different issue is that of Christians who believe the church calendar is pagan and therefore the Church must celebrate all the biblical Jewish holidays.

The safekeeping of Israel's existence in the exile—*galut*—and the gradual, and in our times big-scale, return to the land are not facts within themselves, separated from Divine action. This being the case even if the enigma of the *Shoa* thereby becomes even more pressing.

Neither have spiritual developments within the people taken place outside of His reign. The codification of tradition in the Mishna and later the Talmud, the further development of rabbinic Judaism, the rise of Jewish mysticism and Chassidism, but also Zionism (both secular and religious), have in some way or another, even if we do not know exactly how, a place in the mystery of the Messiah's connection to the whole of Israel. This is even the case with Jewish atheism as a response to the pain of the *Shoa*.  
(23.7)

Here we face the interplay between Jewish history and Jewish faith of the past 2,000 years on the one hand, and God's sovereignty on the other. Both faith and history intersect when we ask whether God has used rabbinic Judaism, or Jewish suffering, or for that matter Jewish flourishing,<sup>11</sup> as a means of Jewish survival. Is this view possible even for those who judge the Judaism of the rabbis negatively to one degree or another? Or does it entail an acceptance of God's working within either (a) rabbinic Judaism (even to the point where rabbinic authority must be accepted) and/or (b) an authority invested in the Jewish people as a whole? (see, e.g., Mark Kinzer.<sup>12</sup>) We reflect that God also used pagan nations—whose faith was definitely judged as idolatrous, harmful, and wrong — both in

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<sup>11</sup> See Max I. Dimont, *The Indestructible Jews* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014; orig. publ. 1971): "There is a popular belief that throughout their history persecution has held the Jews together and that therefore an occasional oppression is not so bad because it goes such a long way. There is scant historic evidence for this view. Freedom, not adversity, has been the creative crucible for Judaism" (Kindle locations 2306–2308).

<sup>12</sup> Mark S. Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity*, Jennifer M. Rosner, ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), e.g., p. 61: "It is not inconsistent for us to respect the authority of the rabbinic tradition while rejecting its judgment concerning Yeshua." Or, p. 178: "Furthermore, *PMJ* [his book *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*] argues that this solidarity involves an acknowledgement that the Jewish people remains a community in covenant with God, and that its corporate resistance to Yeshua-faith has not undermined this covenant nor vitiated the authority of its tradition and its teachers."

punishment and in restoration to accomplish his positive intentions towards his people. What then does it mean for God to use post-70 Judaism as a preservative (and much more than a preservative, cf. the ongoing current privilege and role for Israel in blessing the world *now*, not merely in the past and future)? How do we evaluate this Judaism post-Yeshua vis-à-vis Jewish faith pre-Yeshua, which the prophets often spoke against in harsh terms? This is all part of what Westerman designates as “the mystery of the Messiah’s connection to the whole of Israel” (23.7). Mark Kinzer too, speaks of such a connection using different words (Yeshua “hidden” within Israel).<sup>13</sup>

I’m not sure I would phrase things in those ways; the biblical text speaks of the remnant as bearers of testimony to Yeshua from within all Israel more than it speaks of Yeshua “mysteriously” or in a “hidden” way present in all the Jewish people. Consider too that Scripture knows about times when God’s presence departed from Israel in both Old and New Testaments (though always with a final hope). These are the kinds of questions that postsupersessionist thinkers are grappling with, or should be.

**Eight.** The question of Jewish evangelism. Is this a time in history in which it is only legitimate to proclaim the gospel to the nations but not to Israel? (Cf. 24.4, “After all, now is the time for the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom among the nations,” citing Matthew 28:18–20.)

Westerman writes that, “After centuries of blindness and bitter contempt for God’s people, now is the time of comfort for Israel.” How does he mean this? In the thinking of some Christians, “comfort” has become a substitute for evangelism, as though past events mean that Gentile Christians have no right to tell Jews about Jesus at this moment in history.

Vis-à-vis the Jewish people, Westerman affirms that the church needs to “stand before God as priests from their nations, confessing their guilt toward God’s people Israel before God, and to humble themselves before the people of Israel.” The church must find ways to encourage reconciliation between Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians (he refers us to the Toward Jerusalem Council II movement in this regard: [www.tjcii.org](http://www.tjcii.org)). The church must pray with Israel; serve Jewish people without ulterior motives; stand against anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism; and support Israel. These are all more than

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<sup>13</sup> So, e.g., “we acknowledge Messiah Yeshua not only as the goal of Jewish history, but also as its hidden origin and enduring center” (ibid., p. 82).



commendable goals; we could wish that Numbers 11:29 applied here, “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”

Yet Westerman can also write:

Part of this “alternative” gospel is that the (believers from the) nations learn to seek the nearness of Israel while learning to love this people of God. In humility, they are called to be willing to learn from the treasure storeroom of Israel. They are mobilized as comforters of God’s people, a people that walks its path in exile. In this way they also comfort the Holy God in His sorrow and as He longs for Zion. It is on this path that they bless Abraham’s seed, and are therefore blessed themselves, as God promised. This is the manner in which they have been called to make all Israel jealous. (23.9)

And more directly:

Conversion to “Christianity,” whether or not by force, was accompanied by the requirement to radically break with the Jewish community and way of living. Thereby, missionary work also threatened the survival of Israel as a distinct people among the nations. Reconsideration, partly started by the second World War and the *Shoa*, has rightly resulted in “Missions to the Jews” and “Proclamation of the gospel among Israel,” giving way to “seeking the encounter and dialogue with Israel.” (23.13)

This, in my opinion, is unacceptable. As Matthew 23:23 says in another context, “These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” Westerman’s is a viewpoint that has increasingly taken root especially in Europe, the place most directly impacted by the Holocaust. Perhaps he would allow for Messianic Jews to speak to their own brethren about the Messiah. Yet the fact remains, many Jewish believers in Jesus owe their faith, humanly speaking, to the witness of a Gentile brother or sister. And especially from the 1970s on, Jewish believers in Jesus have emphasized Jewish distinctiveness. Therefore, the necessity to proclaim the gospel to the Jewish people (sensitively and appropriately)

has been set forth in many venues, not least in the context of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in their Occasional Paper No. 60.<sup>14</sup>

**Nine.** In the epilogue, Westerman points out that traditional Christian theology has value (“an abundance of exegetical and systematic-theological treasures”), even in the context of the standard narrative. Here we need to explore the question of “has the church misread the Bible?”<sup>15</sup> Is the postsupersessionist perspective a rediscovery of something lost or something new? If we believe the Holy Spirit has been at work in the history of the church, how can we say the church has gone astray through most of its history on the matter of Israel?

Though affirming traditional theology, Westerman’s main point in *Learning Messiah* remains: “It is not only needed, therefore, to read both the Tanakh and the Scriptures of the New Covenant with a non-supersessionist hermeneutical lens, but the traditional canonical narrative must be replaced” (13.16).

But can we see a way forward to not completely reject the standard narrative? After all, for someone who is spiritual seeking, especially if they are a non-Jew, the Four Spiritual Laws (an example cited by Westerman) do in fact convey the gospel: God’s intentions (Creation), our sin (the Fall), the bridge to God (Jesus’ life, death, resurrection), and the need to exercise faith (“receive” Jesus). Westerman says,

For instance, whomever allows the gospel concur with the structure of misery-deliverance-gratitude, with the ‘bridge illustration’ or with the ‘four spiritual laws’, shows that obviously there is no need for Israel to play a real role in the (presentation) of God’s purposes. (Introduction)

Yet where would we expect to fit in Israel at that point to a person in relational pain, or looking for spiritual truth? Again, we are reminded that the Scripture speaks of both the universal and the particular, and there is an appropriate time to stress each. I would argue

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<sup>14</sup> “Jewish Evangelism: A Call to the Church” (Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 60, produced by the Issue Group on this topic at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, September 29 to October 5, 2004). Online at <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-60>. For a response to arguments that Jews should not hear the gospel, see Avi Snyder, *Jews Don't Need Jesus & Other Misconceptions: Reflections of a Jewish Believer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2017). Avi Snyder is a colleague of mine on the staff of Jews for Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> So the title of Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

that when the gospel existentially touches the lives of those making that initial step of faith, indeed “there is no need for Israel to play a real role” in the presentation. Small children after all need to hear different things than do older ones.

The above nine considerations arise not only from *Learning Messiah* but from the ongoing conversations among postsupersessionists and others. I am glad to see that Edjan Westerman recognizes the contributions of Messianic Jews at several points throughout his book. As a North American, I am also grateful to hear from a European perspective. The book’s focus on narrative plausibly shows what a postsupersessionist perspective can look like when applied to the entire storyline of the Bible; others in the postsupersessionist discussion may write the story differently. I commend *Learning Messiah* as stimulating, paradigm-challenging, forward-looking, and thought-provoking.

**Rich Robinson** is a senior researcher with *Jews for Jesus*, USA.

## ***Learning Messiah: The Review by Rich Robinson: A Reaction***

**Edjan Westerman**

I am grateful to the editorial board of *Mishkan* for this opportunity to share some thoughts in response to the review of my book by Rich Robinson. Let me start with stating that I have not yet seen many reviews of my book—referring to reviews of the Dutch original, that appeared in 2015—written from so deep an engagement with the subject theme, and from an understanding of what the book wishes to be. It is therefore with gratefulness that I write this reaction.

Robinson rightly observes that *Learning Messiah* does not want to be “a defense” of the narrative along postsupersessionist lines, but wishes to show what such Biblical narrative looks like, or could look like. The Dutch publisher wished to publish the book precisely because it tries to present a full narrative instead of engaging with just parts of it, as many Israel-related books in the Dutch language do. So, I knew from the start that this concept would mean that many exegetical questions could not be answered in full detail, and that many consequences of this “new” narrative could only be summed up — as Part III of the book does — without opportunity to discuss everything in full. Also, my choice to write not just for an academic audience, but for a broader readership — although in such a manner that “the end product” could still be academically substantiated — leaves some readers with questions that need to be answered in detail, while others already have more than enough to digest in the book as it is.

Yes, “[t]his book operates with postsupersessionism as its presupposition.” As with every hermeneutical choice, this is the result of a complex “history of interpretation” of both the church as a whole as well as personally, in which the continuous (re)reading of Scripture is central, as is the prayer to understand the leading of the Holy Spirit, when confronted with the harsh reality of what the traditional reading and Christian narrative has contributed to. It is undeniable that the reality of the age-old theological anti-Judaism of the Christian church has contributed to the (also) age-old hatred of Jews, and so has contributed in many respects to the Shoah. Of course, all kinds of (theological and church historical) exceptions could be mentioned, as in fact the book does in places. But the spirit in which the book has been written is as if being confronted by Nathan rebuking David with his “You are that man!” The book wishes to share in the attitude of Daniel praying:

“we have sinned ... [w]e ... and our ancestors are covered with shame.”<sup>1</sup> Since it is my desire that the book will contribute to developing a new spiritual attitude and new relations with the whole of Israel, I did not elaborate upon all exceptions. In contact with the whole of Israel, it is perhaps not helpful to stress “the exceptional corner” of the Christian faith community I might belong to—this on the contrary could stiffen our self-righteousness before God and men. Often I come across Jewish theologians and historians, and “lay people” who are still suffering in some way by what mainline Christianity has brought about in relation to the Jewish people; talking about exceptions is then no comfort, humbling like Daniel is.

But also, the hermeneutical choice for postsupersessionism has a deep theological fundament, taking utterly seriously the incarnation of Messiah Yeshua. The incarnation took place within the full streambed of what God revealed and did, as written in the Tanakh. By His “enfleshment” within Israel the Messiah also “takes upon” Himself the task of bringing God’s salvation to bear on the physical and geographical aspect of Israel’s election. His “enfleshment” within Israel makes that there is no place for a “theology divorced from embodiment and physicality.”<sup>2</sup> The gospel has no “geographical-docetic” or genealogical-docetic nature.<sup>3</sup> The incarnation takes seriously the character of particularity of the election of the people of God and its history. It is therefore that the title of my book is *Learning Messiah*.

The focus of the book on learning *Messiah* helps us also to understand better the interrelation between particularity and universalism as far as Israel is concerned. By “learning” Him<sup>4</sup> in a deeper way new light falls on both Israel’s particularity and its implicit and explicit representative function with regard to the nations. According to the words of Israel’s calling uttered at Sinai, the first goal of Israel’s election is to be God’s *am segula*, His most private “treasured possession.”<sup>5</sup> The “kingdom of priests” part of the calling is not the first that is mentioned. This is important. Very often, within Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 9:7–8 (NIV).

<sup>2</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, Introduction, What is the New Christian Zionism, in: Gerald R. McDermott, ed., *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:20 speaks about “learn[ing] Christ” (RSV).

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:5–6.

theology, we start with the “kingdom of priests” part and then try to understand the interrelation between Israel’s special election and its task toward the nations. Very often “Israel-lovers” too defend God’s special choice for His people and try to “soften” this particularity-choice of God by pointing to the universalistic outlook that is also present in the idea that Israel will be a nation of priests amidst and for the nations. Even some of my (non-Messianic) Jewish friends sometimes pass by the calling to be *am segula*. As one of them said to me explaining this omission: “we have so often been accused of a self-assumed superiority.” And of course, there *is* a full view on the nations and the universe implicit in both Abra(ha)m’s and Israel’s calling. But it is only by the full and perfect living up to the first part of Israel’s calling that the priestly nation as a whole will be a blessing to God and the world. The particular obedience to the particular command to love the LORD more than his son made Abraham a blessing for his descendants *and* for the nations. To cleave to the LORD was and still is Israel’s calling. Messiah Yeshua has lived the calling to be God’s “treasured possession” to the fullest. He has been a pure blessing to the LORD, and it is thereby that He has become also a blessing for Israel, and in that way — as Israel’s Firstling — He also has brought blessing to the nations. The gospel is about an obedience-in-particularity that has universal outworking. And the structure of this blessing flowing from the midst of the earth, from “the navel of the earth”<sup>6</sup> to the whole “body” of earth and cosmos, from the center to the outer circles, from Jerusalem to the nations — as exemplified by the structure of the camp of Israel — is part of the future too, as Revelation shows. Also, there we meet both Israel and the nations, and as Robinson writes: “the presence of many nations ... argues for many particularisms.” But I suggest that instead of speaking about Israel as “*primus inter pares*,” we could better think of this completely perfected Israel as still fulfilling a central priestly role (analogous to the Aaronic priests within the priestly people as a whole). We could perhaps find another analogy in the special place that John had among the disciples.

Robinson asks: “Can we appropriately emphasize that universalism [of Scripture, EJJ] even while teaching the place of Israel in God’s plan?” I would definitively answer in the positive, but I think that Israel’s special place and God’s blessing for the world of nations and cosmos can never be separated. The special election of Israel has this representative aspect by which the nations of the world are always implicitly present.

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<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 38:12 (Hebrew: the navel of the earth).

And the blessing of God for the nations is always “salvation ... from the Jews.”<sup>7</sup> Of course we can sometimes focus and preach on the universal outworking of God’s blessing, and at other times focus more on “the center” where the blessing came from. But that “salvation is from the Jews” is basic to the understanding of the story and plans of God, and to the understanding and knowledge of His Messiah Yeshua. We do not need to fully explain all wonderful details of this short statement in every counseling setting. But saying that God’s grace, forgiveness, hope, and love has reached us from Jerusalem, from Israel’s midst by Messiah Yeshua makes our message more a part of history, and gives it a real basis in this world. Mentioning where this salvation came from also creates a basis for further teaching in which God’s election of the Land and His promises about Israel’s restoration then form no unexpected turn in, or appendix to the story. Also, we should be aware of the fact that in the present day — as in the time of Nazism — the eternal election of Israel, and its Messiah being a crucified and risen Jew, are still a make or break issue. There is a God-given stumbling block here, like there was for the Nuremberg Nazi war criminals, who received a copy of the Bible from an American chaplain with the words: “Here you can read how the blood of one Jew can save you.”

Robinson addresses also the theme of “the interplay between Jewish history and Jewish faith of the past 2,000 years on the one hand, and God’s sovereignty on the other.” He asks:

What then does it mean for God to use post-70 Judaism as a preservative (and much more than a preservative, cf. the ongoing current privilege and role for Israel in blessing the world *now*, not merely in the past and future)? How do we evaluate this Judaism post-Yeshua vis-à-vis Jewish faith pre-Yeshua, which the prophets often spoke against in harsh terms.

He relates this to my speaking of “the mystery of the Messiah’s connection to the whole of Israel,” a phrase he is not sure to use himself. “[P]ostsupersessionist thinkers are grappling with [these questions], or should be,” he adds. I would answer: “Yes, we are grappling with these questions. I personally am, and I think we all should.” The point is that we are in need of new concepts to help us understand God’s relation(s) with the *whole* of His people in the post-Yeshua time we are in. Due to the supersessionist paradigm that has been prevalent in mainline Christian theology over so many centuries,

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<sup>7</sup> John 4:22 (NIV).

there was no necessity for us to search the Scriptures for revelatory elements that could help us to discover more about His enduring relationship with the whole of His people, even while only part of it had recognized Yeshua as His Messiah.

Confronted with this rejection by (the major) part of Israel we have less attention for what I would phrase as the Hosea-love of God, the love that waits and works toward the renewal of the first love. We have not understood the depth of God's faithfulness, that does not despise His people and does not annul His covenant even when the people is under judgment.<sup>8</sup> The LORD Himself speaks about His Presence among the exiled people, albeit in a 'diminished' manner.<sup>9</sup> But we have had, and still have problems envisaging this Presence, and understanding what it implies. Our hermeneutic has very often been determined by the question of whether or not Jews had come to recognize Messiah Yeshua, forgetting at the same time that this recognition through the centuries became more and more difficult because of our traditional Christian message (in which the eternal election of God's people, land, and city played no real role any longer), and our anti-Jewish, and often also anti-Semitic behavior. We are in need of new concepts and images that help us think and speak about the full specter of God's relations with His people. Therefore, I have tried to find some new ways of looking at this. I introduced (1) the concept of "the Hebron-kingship" of Messiah, that seeks to understand — in analogy to David, who also waited for all Israel to come — the waiting aspect of Jesus' kingship, and also the exilic aspect of it, as seen from Jerusalem. Not-yet is He king over all Israel, also not-yet in Jerusalem, not yet over all the world. I also tried to understand (2) the suffering and death of our Messiah as the entrance of this Firstling of Israel into the judgment of exile in its deepest form, leading to speak about Him as (3) simultaneously sharing in Israel's exile and receiving as its Firstling glorification and blessedness by God.

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<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 26:44.

<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 11:16. Interpretations of the Hebrew (*lemikdash me'at*) vary from stating that God's Presence among the people will be "for a little while" (meaning either for a limited time, or [as promise] for the short period that exile will last) to His Presence being "diminished" due to the fact that the exiles do not have access to the (destroyed) Temple, or to His Presence having a lesser degree. Traditional Jewish interpretation finds here the promise of "little sanctuaries," meaning synagogues and houses of learning. This footnote comes from an article I wrote this year with the title: "For Better and For Worse, The Faithfulness of God and the Exile and Returning of the Shekhina." This text has been published in Dutch in the theological magazine *Israël en de kerk*, September 2019 (see [www.messiasleren.nl](http://www.messiasleren.nl)), and it might be published in English sometime.



He is the Firstling of Israel, (4) who merited and received the right to all blessings promised. And further, (5) in alignment with the New Testament identification of the Messiah with the Shekhina of God, we can perhaps begin to understand how in Him the Presence of God shares Israel's existence in the manner of Ezekiel 11:16, while (6) simultaneously in and through Him from Israel's midst the message goes out to all nations. This short enumeration perhaps shows how I try to grapple with the questions that Robinson mentions. Space allows not for a more extensive answer.

Due to the thinking and attitude (and actions following) of traditional Christianity, relations between Jews and Christians have very often been strained, or bad, or even non-existent. Of course, there have been exceptions, but these have not been the rule. Even in these days, although now relations are improving, the painful history plays an important role. Jewish scholars today can still summarize the Christian message along the lines of the traditional narrative, just as large parts of the church still do. This shows that our theological misunderstandings have taken root in Jewish thinking about "us." (For this reason also the phenomenon of Messianic Judaism causes a theological enigma, not fitting in the traditional paradigm). But even deeper is the pain of all that Israel suffered, culminating in the Shoah. That pain is not theoretical, but it is present in hearts, minds, family histories, and communal experience. It is like the sexual abuse crisis within the Christian faith community: the victims are wary of the (message of the) perpetrators. Especially since this message was and often still is in contradiction to what the Tanakh revealed about God and His faithfulness.

David — waiting in Hebron for all Israel to come to him — was confronted with followers who tried to force this unity (the Hebrew name *Chevron* means unification) by violence and even murder. As followers of Messiah — Hebron-king too — we have behaved in the same manner, confessing as we could like Daniel.

Therefore, our rethinking and theological re-evaluation should be accompanied by a new behavior. I must think of Messiah Yeshua lovingly and humbly washing the feet of His Jewish disciples, we cannot do less with regard to the people of Israel. We are called to show the love of God, which we have learned and received, in our loving attitude toward all Israel. In (these) new encounters we may be asked what drives us. For me personally, my telling a "renewed" story — inviting through my book also Jewish readers

to read over our shoulders, and see what we are learning<sup>10</sup> — implies also sharing how I have come to “learn Messiah.” It is my conviction that only from “love motivated by love only” sometimes opportunities arise, when we might be asked what drives us. As an Amsterdam-based rabbi said to a friend of mine, referring to Romans 11:14: “What has church history brought, that should make us Jews jealous?” Therefore, engaging with each other deeply, in new relations, opens the door to a mutual sharing of the deepest layers of faith in our hearts. A “new” narrative then causes sometimes the reaction: “But then it is a totally different story.” In itself then, already a bit of healing and non-threatening reshaping of thoughts about Christians and their gospel and Messiah takes place, this being a witness to the lovingly waiting Hebron-king.

In his ninth consideration Robinson writes:

... we need to explore the question of “has the church misread the Bible?” Is the postsupersessionist perspective a rediscovery of something lost or something new? If we believe the Holy Spirit has been at work in the history of the church, how can we say the church has gone astray through most of its history on the matter of Israel?

Yes, how could this be the case? But it is! It is possible, as Paul states, that building upon the fundament of Jesus Christ can take place with materials that do not survive the judgment fire of God.<sup>11</sup> As just one example, we could think of Martin Luther, used by God in order to rediscover elemental truths from Scripture, but in the last part of his life writing in such strong anti-Judaic and fully anti-Semitic spirit that in the Nazi times his work was used to theologically legitimize the hatred of Jews and their elimination.<sup>12</sup> The Holy Spirit being at work does not prevent weeds from growing among the wheat. Moreover, since God’s enemy is also at work, we could expect them, this realization bringing us to prayer and deeply searching of our hearts and minds.

Robinson wonders if there would be “a way forward to not completely reject the standard narrative?” He thinks of the encounter with spiritual seekers, and asks “where

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<sup>10</sup> In the Preface to the English edition I therefore wrote some lines for my Jewish friends and other Jewish readers.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:11–15.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

would we expect to fit in Israel at that point to a person in relational pain, or looking for spiritual truth?" He then states:

[that] there is an appropriate time to stress each [i.e., both the universal and the particular, EJW]. I would argue that when the gospel existentially touches the lives of those making that initial step of faith, indeed "there is no need for Israel to play a real role" in the presentation. Small children after all need to hear different things than do older ones.

As I already said above: of course, we need not explain in depth all that is implicit in the words of Yeshua that "salvation is from the Jews." But since an initial step of faith also asks for repentance and turning "to God from idols to serve the living and true God,"<sup>13</sup> explaining Who this True God is, identifying Him as the Creator and God of Israel, showing why His Son as Messiah of Israel is "the bridge" also for the nations, is fundamental teaching that is needed in order for seekers to make an informed choice. The little "building blocks" within our teaching make more sense when we see from what "package" they came, and what their essential meaning and purpose is.<sup>14</sup> Also we must see that a contextualizing spiritual guidance for seekers requires that we are conscious of the fact that the broader context of today asks for not shying away from the Jewishness of Scripture, the Messiah, and the gospel. Confronted by resurging anti-Semitism and age-old hatred of Jews in new (whether Christian theological, secular, or Islamic) forms, we are to make clear from the start what the message about Messiah Yeshua is about. Experience shows — I also think of the challenges presented to churches in some European countries by the presence of large Muslim minorities — that God's enduring

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:9.

<sup>14</sup> This metaphor of building blocks and the package they came from can also be used to see why it is important to stress that regarding Pentecost its "newness [in the first place] lies in the fact that the God of Israel is beginning to realize His promises in Israel's midst." But because as a consequence of this action of God the well of salvation began to flow to the nations, it is also the beginning of the eschatological community that the church is meant to be, in which Israel and the nations together serve God. When Robinson asks: "Well, could it be both?" my answer is: it is essentially both, but the traditional use of the designation of Pentecost as the "the birth of the Church" implied the absence of Israel as a whole from God's salvific and future plans. The broader context of church history asks from us a proclamation that is aware of historic misunderstandings and that tries to not further contribute in this direction.

covenant with His people Israel, perfected and fulfilled by Messiah Yeshua, then again sometimes shows to be a stumbling block, with all kinds of effects.

Rich Robinson has written a detailed review and asked a lot of questions, some of which I have reacted to. Others should wait for another time. It is my hope that this reaction has contributed to an intercontinental discussion, and that the Holy Spirit will lead us in our searching and thinking.

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# **Thoughts from the Sidelines: Genuine or Fake Dead Sea Scrolls**

**Torleif Elgvin**

“Are some Dead Sea Scrolls modern counterfeits of old texts, ‘new words’ laboriously applied to old papyrus and parchment?”

The Dead Sea Scrolls were found close to Khirbet Qumran on the northwestern end of the Dead Sea between 1947–56. Remnants of more than 900 scrolls — Old Testament scrolls and scrolls of other early Jewish writings — were discovered, first by the Bedouin and subsequently by the archaeologists. The larger scrolls now belong to the “Shrine of the Book” at The Israel Museum, where some of them are exhibited. Ten thousand larger and smaller fragments are taken care of by the Israel Antiquities Authority. I have often worked in their lab, the “scrollery,” with a magnifying glass trying to read old parchment or papyrus. During the last few years, I have used an advanced, digital microscope through which I am able to see tiny details and discover letters and ink traces not seen by the naked eye.

## **Norwegian Dead Sea Scrolls**

In 1994, the Norwegian Schøyen Collection got hold of texts from the Judean desert. In the beginning, the collection obtained tiny fragments that had fallen off larger scrolls when they were photographed in Jerusalem in 1949. From 1999 to 2009, new fragments were added to the collection, bought from an antiquity dealers’ family in Bethlehem. In the 1950s this family was mediating between the Bedouin and the authorities, so that the fragments ended up in the Rockefeller Museum in East Jerusalem.

The two larger fragments in the Schøyen Collection are from the biblical books Leviticus and Joshua. They measure about 9x22 centimeters; the other fragments are much smaller. The collection also has some artefacts from the Judean desert, the most interesting one being a linen cloth measuring 53x65 centimeters, which likely had surrounded an important scroll, the Temple Scroll, discovered by the Bedouin in 1956 in Cave 11 north of Qumran.

With financial support from The Research Council of Norway and the University of Agder we established a team of researchers. Beginning in 2012, we worked intensely on the texts of the Schøyen Collection. The team was made up of three textual scholars in Norway, one textual scholar from Jerusalem, one physicist and a papyrus conservator in Berlin, a palaeographer (handwritings expert) in Strasbourg, and experts on radioactive testing of ceramic material in Jerusalem, Budapest, and Missouri. For dating the linen cloth, we had access to a Dutch laboratory for carbon-14 testing.

### **The Suspicion Aroused**

In 2014, our French palaeographer sounded the alarm. Michael Langlois is an associate professor in the Old Testament, a believing Christian, and plays bass guitar in a professional band with the ponytail fluttering around his head. He is a world-class expert in deciphering handwriting of several ancient languages, often being able to determine the date of a manuscript within a 20-year margin of error. Looking at the fragments from the Schøyen Collection under the microscope he discovered that the ink on a couple of fragments was unusually glossy and shiny, so he started to doubt that the ink could be over 2,000 years old. Had the letters recently been added to ancient parchment and papyrus?

The textual scholars in Norway then went back to more closely examine characteristics that they had noted earlier. Many of the texts preserved interesting deviations from the standard Old Testament text. They appeared for the first time on these fragments, but some of these “variants” were already known as suggestions in the critical note apparatus in the scholarly Hebrew Bible. So many textual variants appearing for the first time seemed “too good to be true.” And for some fragments, the texts matched modern text editions line-for-line. That so many scrolls would have exactly the same line lengths as *Biblia Hebraica*, or earlier-published texts from Qumran, seemed unlikely. The letters often appeared uneven as if they were written on old, worn material, and not on freshly prepared parchment and papyrus. And some of the letters looked as if they had been “squeezed” to fit the edges of the fragment.

### **Modern Ink**

Five suspicious fragments of parchment and papyrus were specially sent and delivered to Berlin, together with some authentic papyri for comparison. In the Berlin laboratory the fragments were scanned with advanced methods. I asked our physicist if she was able

to identify ink upon the layer of dust sediments that had been connected with the parchment or papyrus through 2,000 years in the desert. She confirmed my question.

Three fragments from the apocryphal books of Enoch and Tobit were written on papyrus. Ancient papyrus consists of two layers of reed fibers: one vertical, and one horizontal. The latter is prepared smoother and makes up the front page, as writing alongside horizontal fibers would be easier. Only 10 percent of scripts on ancient papyri are written vertically across the fibers, our German papyrus expert informed us. She quickly discovered that our three fragments were written across the fibers. The same feature is true of a fourth fragment, also from Bethlehem, which is found in a Christian collection in Texas. The chance of only four genuine papyrus fragments appearing after 2003, all four with handwriting crossing the fibers, may be estimated to around 1:10,000.

Thus, the research team could conclude and document the existence of modern counterfeiting of some Dead Sea Scrolls fragments. The academic world of biblical scholarship was informed in an academic article in *Dead Sea Discoveries* in 2016, and the problematic texts were discussed among scholars at a biblical congress in Berlin the same year. Fake texts had been produced so professionally that our team suspects that biblical scholars had been involved. And the fake fragments had already been sold for millions of dollars to the collection in Norway and evangelical institutions in the U.S.

What did we conclude about the fragments in the Norwegian Schøyen Collection? It contains eight Old Testament fragments from the Judean desert, without doubt genuine, and eight fragments from early Jewish writings that are genuine, too. We now classify nineteen fragments as probable forgeries, while the authenticity of two fragments are debated. The fake texts are from the Old Testament, the book of Tobit, and the book of Enoch. And almost all the Old Testament fragments in four American collections (around thirty altogether) seem to be clever counterfeits.

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# **From the Israeli Scene: Shabbat — the Lesson of Slowing Down**

**Sanna Erelä**

Shabbat is a special time here in Jerusalem. Most of my neighbours are religious Jews — not the black-wearing, isolated community members, but people whose daily lives are conducted by the Jewish tradition. As the sun goes down on Friday, and the Shabbat horn sounds over the city, a peace falls over the house. The entrance door is left unlocked, so that visitors do not need to press the buzzer. The energy-saving lamp lights the stairwell throughout the night. According to the Torah, fire-making is forbidden on Shabbat, and Rabbinic Judaism equates the use of electric switches with that. Therefore, religious Jews do not turn the power on or off during Shabbat. Timers and thermostats are needed, for example, to keep food warm. Many tourists staying in hotels in the Holy Land are familiar with the Shabbat elevators, which stop at every floor.

It seems that I am the only gentile in the house, because I'll be approached when something goes wrong. The subtleties of the Jewish Law do not apply to people from other nations. Many times I have been asked to press the button for the air conditioner or radiator. The first time I must have looked quite stunned, but now I know what knocking on my door on Shabbat means. And if these little favors are the way to get in touch with my neighbors, I'm happy to go.

The Jewish Shabbat observance tends to make us Christians smile. The Jewish people represent the offspring of the New Testament Pharisees, and the Pharisees — so we believe — were hopeless hypocrites. We think that the present-day Jewish people are bound to the “letter of the Law,” and they are unable to see the difference between important and marginal issues. But in fact, we can't afford to laugh. For me personally, all these years in Israel, Shabbat has been a lesson in rest and unwinding.

Israel is one of the world's most active users of social media. On the bus, all under age 70 seem to have a mobile phone growing out of their hand — that is, on six days of the week. On the seventh day, the phones are switched off, the internet is shut down, and the television is quieted. The Shabbat is a time for cool down and fellowship. The shops



are closed, public transport stops. It is time of sharing a meal together, singing, going to synagogue (if the family is religious), and spending time with relatives and friends. What do you think: would you and your family be able to cut off all outside connections for one day on a weekly basis and just be together? For me that would be quite a challenge!

It was recently reported that excessive browsing on smartphones can cause impaired concentration and symptoms of ADHD, even in adults. It almost looks like the whole of Western society could be suffering from exhaustion and memory loss due to information overload. Overactive lifestyles and constantly beeping smart devices drive more sensitive individuals to puzzle, how they can cope with everything? And so, all kinds of downshifters, mindfulness teachers, and other alternative lifestyle gurus show up to rescue us. Is derailing to the other end really the only option for us? Where did the biblical idea of Shabbat go? Who would teach Christians to repose in “a mindfulness prayer”?

Once a year in Israel, Yom Kippur, the Day of the Atonement, everything comes to a stop. On that day, a majority of the Jewish population will fast from food, drink, and entertainment for 25 hours to examine their hearts and repent from their sins. All traffic, from private cars to airplanes, stops. Even non-fasting Israelis respect the special character of the day. Although I, as a Christian, do not believe that fasting would cleanse anyone from sin, there is still something powerful in Yom Kippur. It is a picture of how our relationship with God should come first in our lives. It's as if society itself is stopping to say: Without God we have nothing. Without him, we will not even survive.

The observance of the Jewish Shabbat may appear to Christians like a form of bondage. In the vaults of our minds, we hear biblical passages echoing that the observance of the Law is a distortion of the freedom of the Spirit. Indeed, for many Jewish women the Shabbat rest doesn't come for free. They need to do much preparation in advance so that the family can rest. Still, I wonder if we could learn something from them, without adding extra burden on ourselves or others? Should we Christians observe more discipline and order in our freedom, to give our overwhelmed brains a short break — not to mention the refreshing of the spirit and soul?

I don't have a family of my own, so sometimes my Saturdays here are quite stagnant. There is no public transport, which limits meeting people and the way of spending the weekend. Over the years, I have learned to take this as a blessing — this Shabbat rest, whether I want it or not. Disconnecting from activities leads to silence,

which at best is full of peace filled with the presence of God. Or not — sometimes it's just extremely boring. In any case, my overly stimulated nervous system can recover.

The day of rest was set for man already in creation. We have not changed since then, even though many shops in Europe are open on Sundays. The Jewish Shabbat teaches us the art of being present. Without smart devices and other continuous entertainment, we will have to come down from our imaginary worlds into this moment, into our own body. It can be liberating or boring, even painful, but it is in any case something that is true. God can also be met where we anchor ourselves to reality. Jesus, the Lord of Shabbat may speak to us, when we are present for ourselves and others.

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