

Jewish Disciples of Yeshua & the Healing of the Two-fold Tradition: Eight Theses

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After much discussion, Fr. Antoine Levy and I decided upon a common question that each of us would attempt to address. "We both agree that Yeshua, the living Torah, is the ultimate authority in shaping the way of life of all Jewish disciples of Yeshua, and in giving it a distinctively Jewish character. The question then arises for us, how do we receive his guidance? What role does Christian tradition play in the process? What role does Jewish tradition play?" As I have reflected upon this question, I have concluded that it cannot be answered in a single and uniform manner for all Jewish disciples of Yeshua. Perhaps that is the most significant conclusion I have reached – but its meaning will only become clear as my presentation unfolds.

My views on the role of Torah observance for Jewish disciples of Yeshua are well known. I have argued that the distinctive Jewish practices commanded in the Torah which have defined the way of life of the Jewish people since the destruction of the Temple (e.g., Shabbat observance, the holidays of the Jewish calendar, ritual circumcision of male children on the eighth day of life, and the dietary laws) remain obligatory for Jews who have accepted Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel.¹ Just as well-known are my views on the essential role of Jewish religious tradition in determining how these practices should be configured. I have argued that it is a hopeless and fruitless to attempt to observe naked biblical commandments apart from the clothing they have received in the course of Jewish history.² Search though we may through the Bible, the Ecumenical Councils, the Church Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, or John Calvin, we will not learn how to observe a Passover Seder, how to build a valid Sukkah (i.e., a booth for habitation during the Feast of Tabernacles), how to slaughter a chicken or a cow in a way that renders it fit for Jewish consumption, or how to make ritual fringes for a four-cornered garment.

Some have interpreted my writings as advocating an orthodox Jewish lifestyle for all Jewish disciples of Yeshua. I have stated unequivocally that this is not the case.³ Forms of modern Judaism other than Orthodoxy participate – along with orthodox Judaism -- in the organic development of the Torah, and we can learn something from them all. Furthermore, we must claim our own measure of halakhic authority as a prophetic movement for Yeshua among the Jewish people.⁴ The decisions we reach must take account of Jewish tradition, but at times they will depart from existing precedent and break new ground.⁵

¹ See *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 49-96.

² See *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 235-62, and *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 29-61.

³ See *Israel's Messiah*, 61, 186-87.

⁴ "...any Messianic Jewish version of the Oral Torah must recognize two legitimate halakhic authorities in tension – those recognized by the Jewish community as a whole, and those presiding over its messianic sub-community. Our halakhic authority to bind and loose is prophetic in nature, just as Yeshua's own authority derived not from institutional office but from messianic empowerment. When the requirements inherent in the faith of Yeshua

The approach to these matters advanced in my writings has received a wide hearing in the Messianic Jewish movement. Many remain unconvinced, but the approach has been adopted in large part by one leadership organization (i.e., the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council), and in that context it is being tested in the concrete details of congregational life. At this point the approach appears feasible and fruitful in such a setting.

In contrast, it seems clear that my conclusions regarding Torah praxis and Jewish tradition are practically unworkable for most Jewish Christians (i.e., those Jewish disciples of Yeshua whose primary ecclesial context is a Christian Church rather than a Messianic Jewish group or a traditional mainstream synagogue). This is especially the case for Jews in historical churches which possess a rich and densely-textured liturgical life, but to a great extent it applies to Jewish Christians in more free-form Protestant settings as well. How, for example, can adherence to the Jewish calendar of holidays be reconciled with a conflicting Christian calendar? If Jewish Christians are to express and preserve their identity as Jews, they will need to adopt a different approach to Jewish tradition than the one I have advocated for Messianic Jews. What might such an approach look like, and how might it resemble or diverge from a Messianic Jewish approach? This is a question I have never addressed.

A second question arises which I have only addressed in past writings in the most general terms.⁶ What role should *Christian* tradition play in the development of Messianic Jewish life? If the appropriation of Jewish tradition poses a formidable challenge for Jewish Christians, so the appropriation of Christian tradition raises analogous concerns for Messianic Jews. Most Messianic Jews fail to see any relevance of the Christian tradition for their lives, just as most Jewish Christians find little of enduring significance for themselves in Jewish tradition. If we Messianic Jews want Jewish Christians to reconsider the matter of Jewish tradition, then we should likewise be open to the reconsideration of Christian tradition.

In what follows I will propose eight theses regarding the Jewish and Christian traditions, and their particular significance for Jewish disciples of Yeshua. Given the time and space limits facing us, I will not attempt to argue on their behalf. I will simply set them forth as a basis for discussion, so as to provide public clarification of my views, and to stimulate further communal dialogue on these questions.

conflict with the norms of rabbinic tradition and the institutions of the wider Jewish community, then we must find a way to be true to Yeshua while maintaining respect for the community and its tradition” (*Israel’s Messiah*, 61).

⁵ To understand better the character of the halakic process which I propose for the Messianic Jewish community and the type of halakic conclusions it might reach, see the public documents of the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, of which I am a part (ourrabbis.org).

⁶ See “Finding our Way Through Nicaea: The Deity of Yeshua, Bilateral Ecclesiology, and Redemptive Encounter with the Living God,” *Kesher* 24 (Summer 2010), 29-55; “Praying the *Amidah* as an Extension of the Eucharist,” a paper presented at the 2013 Helsinki Consultation in Oslo, Norway. 7-11.

Theses One through Four: The Jewish and Christian Traditions

Thesis One: The One Two-fold People of God and of the Messiah

The Jewish people and the Christian Church together form the one people of God, and Yeshua dwells among them both (albeit in different ways) as the mediator of the presence of the Father.

I understand the Christian Church to be as much a visible and historical community as the Jewish people. I also understand the Jewish people to be as much a spiritual and transcendentally-moored reality as the Christian Church. We must avoid any simplistic differentiation between the two which identifies one as visible and earthly, the other as invisible and heavenly.

The assertion that Yeshua dwells among the Jewish people as well as the Christian Church is central to my past writing, and should need little further explanation here. I acknowledge the differences in the mode of his indwelling, and these differences are manifested (though not precisely specified) in the way each tradition speaks of the community's relationship to the Divine Presence. (For example, Christian tradition emphasizes the preposition "within" [e.g., "Christ in us"], whereas Jewish tradition prefers prepositions such as "in the midst of" or "among.")

This first thesis deals with ecclesiology rather than tradition. That is because the meaning and function of tradition must be understood as an aspect of the life of the people of God as it transmits its life from one generation to the next. Thus, any discussion of tradition must begin with ecclesiology, just as ecclesiology must begin with Christology and pneumatology.

Thesis Two: Tradition and the Spirit

Yeshua, the living Torah, guides his people by means of the Holy Spirit, who is the fundamental principle of Scripture and Tradition (with the latter referring to both the Apostolic Tradition and the Oral Torah). Thus, the Spirit – like Yeshua, whose presence the Spirit mediates -- also dwells among both communities, albeit in different ways.

Yeshua underlines the connection between himself, the Spirit, and the Apostolic Tradition at his final meal with his disciples before his death:

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you...I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 14:25-26; 16:12-14)

Michael Wyschogrod speaks about the Oral Torah in a similar fashion: "The oral law is that part of the law carried in the Jewish people...the Torah enters the being of the people of Israel. It is

absorbed into their existence and they therefore become the carriers or the incarnation of the Torah.”⁷ Though the authoritative texts of the rabbinic tradition bear witness to the Oral Torah, the two are not equivalent, for the Oral Torah is a living reality that can never be confined to or fully contained in writing. Thus, in Jewish tradition the relationship between the Oral Torah and the Written Torah is analogous to the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Incarnate Word in Christian tradition. And just as the Incarnate Word is the source and principle of the Written Torah, so is the Holy Spirit the source and principle of the Oral Torah.

Thesis Three: The Freedom of the Spirit-Inspired Tradition

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). The Spirit brings freedom by granting access to the Father through the Son, and by imparting strength for the observance of the Divine Word, but also by bestowing upon the community the gift of wisdom to understand and apply the Divine Word in ever new settings. In this process, the work of the Spirit empowers the community to become a free, creative, and responsible partner with Yeshua in the unfolding of Divine Revelation.

In both Jewish and Christian theology, spiritual freedom entails the capacity to fulfill one’s divinely-founded vocation as an active agent rather than a passive instrument. The two-fold Tradition of the one people of God manifests and bears witness to such free, active, and creative human participation in the process of transmitting, interpreting, applying, and embodying the Divine Word.

Thesis Four: The Tragic Legacy of Schism

While Yeshua has acted by means of the Spirit to shape the bilateral tradition of the one two-fold people of God, the Jewish and Christian Traditions have each developed in a partial and one-sided manner as a result of the tragic schism that has rent this people asunder.

From an early period the Jewish community and the Christian Church became locked in a debilitating conflict characterized by rivalry, animosity, and mutual reactivity. The tendency of each community to define itself in opposition to the other displayed in perverse fashion the interlocking nature of their communal identities and destinies.

The wholeness of “catholic” tradition consists of these two traditions, purified of their mutual negations, and complementing one another without losing their distinctive properties. The Chalcedonian definition of Christology captures well the best way of conceiving of their proper relationship: they are to be “undivided” and yet “unconfused.” Those who recognize this truth must labor to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition, so that each partner can learn from the other without forfeiting its particular calling.

⁷ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996), 210.

Theses Five through Eight: Jewish Disciples of Yeshua and the Two-fold Tradition

Thesis Five: The Freedom of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua for the Healing of the Tradition

The emergence in our day of a community of Jewish disciples of Yeshua is a new work of the Spirit, who has granted to this developing body the authority to fashion an appropriate way of life which can contribute to the healing of the two-fold Tradition. To fulfill this calling, Jewish disciples of Yeshua must bring together what has been separated, and by the guidance of the Spirit draw from both Traditions what each can supply for this purpose. However, the mode of engaging with each of the two Traditions will differ for Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews.

As noted already in Thesis Three, the freedom given by the Spirit entails a capacity to participate actively in the unfolding of the divine purpose. The way this freedom is expressed depends upon one's particular setting and calling. Jewish disciples of Yeshua in the twenty-first century find themselves in a new situation with new opportunities and dangers which demands a creative engagement with both the Jewish and the Christian traditions. For us, the freedom of the Spirit is a commission and a charge as much as it is a gift, and the charge demands faithful immersion in both of these traditions and innovative developments anticipated by neither.

By virtue of their divergent ecclesial settings, Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews begin with distinct and contrasting relationships to the two-fold tradition. Nevertheless, neither is free to disregard, disrespect, or deny the significance of that part of the tradition which is secondary rather than primary in establishing its own identity.

Thesis Six: Messianic Jews and the Two-fold Tradition

Messianic Jews should begin with the consensus practices and way of life of observant Jews, and then assess and adapt them in light of the theological and practical wisdom gained through the Apostolic Writings and the living tradition of the Church. Messianic Jews should also receive the distinctive sacraments of the Renewed Covenant as transmitted in the life of the Church, and seek to practice them in forms adapted from Jewish tradition.

In developing their way of life, Messianic Jews should take as their starting point the Jewish tradition as it has developed over the past two millennia. A starting point – but not an end point. Just as the Apostles interpreted creatively the biblical tradition in light of the life, work, and teaching of Yeshua and the guidance of the Spirit, so Messianic Jews should do the same for the post-biblical Jewish tradition. The result will be a recognizably Jewish way of life, with innovations reflecting the messianic distinctive. That messianic distinctive should be rooted in the Apostolic Writings and the tradition of the Church.

To take the Jewish tradition as a starting point means that practices acknowledged by the full spectrum of observant Jews require no further justification to be accepted as authoritative. Departure from such practices, on the other hand, does require such justification. In some cases, departure will undoubtedly be warranted, but the warrant must be articulated and of a weight proportional to the significance of the practice which is being modified.

While providing a starting point that can be adopted or adapted, the traditional Jewish way of life does not provide all that Messianic Jews need in order to be faithful disciples of Yeshua. Yeshua instituted certain new practices among his disciples whose concrete pattern and full theological significance can only be learned through engagement with the tradition of the Church. While receiving these practices from the Church with gratitude, Messianic Jews must also exercise their particular freedom in the Spirit by fashioning for these practices new forms drawn from Jewish tradition.

Thesis Seven: Jewish Christians and the Two-fold Tradition

Jewish Christians should begin with the consensus practices and way of life of their particular ecclesial traditions, and then assess and adapt them (within the limits permitted by their ecclesial authorities) in light of the theological and practical wisdom gained through classic rabbinic texts and the living tradition of the Jewish people. Jewish Christians should also receive the distinctive signs of holiness (kedushah) and election as transmitted in the life of the Jewish people, and seek to express them in forms accessible to their ecclesial communities.

Just as Messianic Jews take the Jewish tradition as their starting point, so Jewish Christians take the Christian tradition as their starting point. And, once again, the starting point is not the end point. Many Christian thinkers are already engaged in the process of retrieving the Jewish roots and character of their respective ecclesial traditions, in conversation with Jewish scholars and the ongoing Jewish tradition, and Jewish Christians should draw from the fruit of their labors.

While providing a starting point for the fashioning of a distinctively Jewish mode of Christian discipleship, the traditional Christian way of life cannot provide all that Jewish Christians need in order to be faithful Jews as well as faithful Christians. Distinctive Jewish expressions of holiness and election which were lost in the Christian Church have been preserved among the Jewish people, and their concrete pattern and full theological significance can only be learned through direct engagement with Jewish tradition. While receiving such signs of holiness and election with gratitude, Jewish Christians should also exercise their freedom in the Spirit by developing ways of expressing these signs that fit their particular ecclesial contexts.

Thesis Eight: Messianic Jews and Jewish Christians Together

While Messianic Jews and Jewish Christians have much in common and can learn much from one another, their ways of living out Jewish discipleship to Yeshua will vary because of their differing relationships to the Jewish and Christian Traditions. They cannot develop a common halakhah, nor should they seek to do so. However, they can seek to develop a relationship of ecumenical brotherhood and sisterhood in which they support one another in their common commitment to the healing of the two-fold people of God and its two-fold tradition. This relationship will also enable them to speak publicly with one voice about this common commitment, so that the Church, the Jewish people, and the world might hear and be blessed.

This is the charter for the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Messiah. Over the past four years the members of the Consultation have developed bonds of friendship that have surprised and inspired us. Despite all of our differences – no, because of all of our differences – we have drawn close to one another and enriched our lives as Jewish disciples of Yeshua. We believe that this experience is not just for us, but for Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews around the world.

Our prayer together is that the God who raised Yeshua from the dead may, by His Spirit, raise up in our day an ecumenical community of Jewish disciples of Yeshua, as a prophetic sign and catalyst for the healing of the two-fold people of God and its two-fold tradition.