

Scripture & Tradition¹

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Many Messianic Jews consider the message of the Bible as clear and indisputable, a fact independent of external interpretation. The individual who reads the text with faith and an open heart will understand what it says. Why, then, are there such a plethora of divergent interpretations, so many of which strike us as misleading? The answer must lie, we think, in merely human readings of the text which have congealed into hardened traditions that prevent others from seeing what is so evident to us.

It is ironic that our contempt for tradition derives from tradition. We may think that such a view follows ineluctably from Yeshua's teaching in Mark 7:6-13 or Paul's in Colossians 2:8, but there are many other passages in the Apostolic Writings that treat "tradition" with great respect (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6), and even more that employ traditional midrashic motifs (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:4; John 1:1). Distrust of all extra-biblical tradition does not derive directly from the Bible itself but from a particular stream of Protestant interpretive tradition. In our efforts to be purely Biblical, we find ourselves once again captive to tradition.

All attempts at a "purely Biblical" perspective are destined to fail. One never reads the Biblical text apart from preconceptions drawn from one's own particular historical setting and from some stream of interpretive tradition. That setting and tradition will shape the questions we address to the text, the concepts and terms we use to answer those questions, and our selection of the portions of the text that speak most directly to our questions and therefore seem to be of greatest importance. They will likewise influence how we construe the unified message of the document as a whole, and relate

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that message to our life today. This does not mean that the Bible lacks the power to reshape our questions, or transform our preconceptions. It does mean that the direction of influence is two-way – our existential situation in the flow of history and tradition forming our reading of the text, and the text in turn forming our existential situation.

Interpretive tradition consists of the accumulated insights of a community transmitted from one generation to the next. In a Messianic Jewish context, tradition represents the understanding of Scripture preserved through the generations among the communities – Jewish and Christian – within which Scripture itself has been preserved. If we are connected to these communities, then we are also heirs of their traditions. The text itself is the core of these traditions. In the words of Paul van Buren, the Bible is always a “carried book”:

But historical scholarship can only *help* us to understand these books, for we shall not have reached the understanding we seek until we have found a way to receive light upon our present path for the steps which we are about to take. For such an understanding, we need to know the steps we have already taken and what light our predecessors received – or thought they received – from this book. In short, we have to realize that we have this book in our hands not directly from its original authors or even from the communities for which and in the context of which they were first written, but from those who immediately preceded us in the Way, and through the whole long line of those who have walked before them. This carried book – the one we actually read and keep bringing into our own conversation – is the one from which we hope to receive light for each step along the Way.²

Respecting tradition and learning from it is a way of recognizing that we have “predecessors,” that we are part of a community with a history. It involves the humble recognition that we are not the first ones to encounter the sacred text, and that we must listen to what our parents have said about it before we speak in turn.

2001), 29-37.

² Paul van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality, Part 1: Discerning the Way* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 121

Scripture Always Accompanied By Tradition

The distinction between Scripture and tradition is problematic. In part this is because Scripture is itself the core of tradition. However, the distinction is also problematic for another reason: unless we are scholars dealing with ancient manuscripts, we never encounter Scripture unaccompanied by tradition. We are usually unaware of its presence, but it is as much a part of our reading of the text as the air we breathe is part of our daily physical activity. How is this the case? First and foremost, tradition is reflected in the canonical selection and arrangement of the books of the Bible. In the case of Tanakh, the basic outline of this selection and arrangement were determined before the first century C.E., but the definitive listing of books did not come till after the destruction of the Second Temple. In the case of the Apostolic Writings, the basic outline was clear by the end of the second century C.E., but the final listing of books was not complete until the fourth century. One can engage in theological disputes about whether the Jewish and Christian communities established the canon or merely recognized it, but the essential historical fact remains: the decision as to which books are in the Bible and how they are arranged was not made through a prophetic pronouncement or an apostolic decree, but through a protracted process of communal discernment. The canon is delivered to us as a product of Jewish and Christian tradition.

Second, tradition accompanies the text through the massive edifice of scribal clarification. In the case of Tanakh, the original manuscripts would have contained an unpunctuated, unparagraphed consonantal text. The Masoretic scribes developed a complex system of vocalization (vowel pointing) and punctuation, and added it to the text in a way that reflected traditional readings of that text. They also added paragraph

divisions, and even indicated through their novel system of vocalization where the consonantal text needed to be corrected. Whenever we read the Hebrew text of Tanakh in a printed Bible, we encounter not only the work of the original author or authors, but also the interpretive framework supplied by the Masoretes. In the case of the Apostolic Writings, the original manuscripts have no word divisions, paragraph divisions, chapter divisions, or punctuation. Even those of us who are able to read a printed Greek New Testament do not thereby encounter the text in its original form, but benefit from generations of scribes and scholars who supplied reading aids that the original manuscripts lacked.

Third, interpretive tradition accompanies the text whenever it is read in translation. Translation is the most elementary form of interpretation. It always involves restating *in other words* what is understood to be the meaning of the original text. The interpretive power of translation should be especially evident to us as Messianic Jews, since we must deal with anti-Jewish and anti-Torah biases every time we pick up a leading Christian version of the New Testament. This is why David Stern's labors have been of such great importance to the Messianic Jewish movement. The *Jewish New Testament*, like every New Testament translation, presents an interpretation of the text; but in this case the interpretation reflects the convictions and culture of Messianic Judaism.

Awareness of the interpretive power of Bible translation is reflected in the emergence of diverse translations in the second half of the twentieth century. As D. G. Hart notes in a review of Peter J. Thuesen's *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible*:

In the twentieth century the debates about the Bible escalated as Protestants recognized that even such simple matters as translation were bound up with interpretation. Consequently, evangelicals suspected the Revised Standard Version as a liberal Bible, and eventually countered with the New International Version, a translation produced by conservative scholars. Along the way, Protestants demonstrated what Catholics already knew – namely, that the Bible never stands alone but, even in its translation, is situated in a web of relationships that involve the authority of church leaders and questions about who has responsibility for determining orthodoxy.³

Similar controversies over translation have occurred within the Jewish world. The Orthodox refused to participate in the production of the New Jewish Publication Society translation of Tanakh. Use of the Stone Tanakh or the NJPS Tanakh identifies one's brand of Judaism as much as use of the KJV, NASB, NIV, RSV, or NAV (a Catholic translation) marks one's Christian loyalties. Diverse translations embody diverse interpretations found in diverse communities that are heirs of diverse traditions.

Fourth, interpretive tradition accompanies Scripture whenever we read the text in a reference edition. Study Bibles often include, along with a particular translation of the text, introductions and outlines for each book, commentary for each unit, and cross-references for each verse. Such study aids might appear to be neutral guides through the text, but they contain and conceal just as many interpretive decisions as do translations. Even cross-references entail such decisions, for they inevitably involve a selection among potential correspondences, thus inviting the reader to connect certain verses and ignore other possible relationships. Just as one's choice of Bible translation displays the interpretive tradition with which one identifies, so with study Bibles. In fact, one particular study Bible – the Scofield Bible – served as the single most powerful vehicle for the promotion of dispensationalist theology in America in the early twentieth century.

³ D.G. Hart, "Scriptura without Solace," *First Things* (October 2000, Number 106), 65.

Now each community of interpretation has its own study Bible, or is in the process of producing one.

It should be clear by now that we never deal with the Biblical text apart from interpretation and tradition. The question is not whether we will draw upon an interpretive tradition. Instead, the question is *which* tradition(s) we will draw upon, and whether we will do so consciously or unconsciously.

Entering the Conversation

This question poses a special challenge for Messianic Jews, for we have no continuous interpretive tradition of our own. The early community of Jewish followers of Yeshua became extinct in the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. Yet, we do share in the heritage of two communities – Jewish and Christian – each of which possesses a rich and continuous tradition of Biblical interpretation and lived faith. Unfortunately, throughout much of their history these two communities, though both rooted in the soil of Second Temple Judaism, have been locked in conflict and have defined themselves over against one another. Thus, our parents divorced with great acrimony, and though they are beginning to talk to one another again, their new identities seem to preclude genuine reconciliation.

This challenge is also an opportunity. At the heart of our vision as Messianic Jews are two convictions, one treasured by the Jewish people and denied by the Church, the other guarded by the Church and denied by the Jewish people: (1) The eternal and irrevocable election of Israel (i.e., the Jewish people) as an ethno-covenantal community, with a central role to play in the Divine plan for history, and with a particular G-d-given way of life rooted in the Torah; and (2) The Messiahship and Divine Sonship of Yeshua,

light to the nations and glory of Israel, who died as an atoning sacrifice and rose from the dead as the first-fruits of the eschaton. Therefore, we see both the Jewish and Christian traditions as bearing imperishable truth in what they affirm as their core message, and as lacking something important because of what they deny in the affirmation of the other. Our parents may find it difficult to listen to one another, but each is incomplete on its own. Our vocation is to bring our parents together once again, not just as friends but as partners.

As members of the one elect ethno-covenantal community of Israel, Messianic Jews receive the text of the Torah as it has been “carried” by the Jewish people throughout their history, and are obliged to enter into that conversation about its meaning and application that has been central to Jewish life as long as Judaism has existed. In fact, the summit of Jewish piety – *talmud Torah* (study of the Torah) – consists of just such cross-generational conversation. Jewish study of the sacred text is never conceived of as a purely individual task, but as a communal obligation that binds Jews across space and time. Like every Jewish conversation, this one involves argument and disagreement. Giving tradition its due in the Jewish reading of Scripture does not mean bowing before an unquestioned authority, but entering into the discussion as a serious listener and disputant.

The nature of Jewish study of Torah is revealed most vividly in the classic Rabbinic study Bible, *Mikraot Gedolot*. Edward L. Greenstein describes this text as follows:

The traditional Jewish edition of the Bible, *Mikra 'ot Gedolot*, “Great Readings,” or “Big Scriptures”...is essentially a medieval product. It presents the standard Hebrew text of the Bible, an ancient rabbinic translation into Aramaic – the *targum* – and a number of medieval commentaries in Hebrew...Although most

extant works of the major commentaries are available in separate editions and can be read in isolation from the others, the arrangement in *Mikra'ot Gedolot* encourages dialectic among the distinguished voices on the page, confirming the well-known witticism that where there are two Jews, there are three opinions.⁴

In his novel *In the Beginning*, Chaim Potok describes how young David Lurie first learns from his teacher, Mr. Bader, how to read *Mikraot Gedolot*:

I opened my *Mikraot Gedolot* and reread the Rashi commentary on the first word of the Hebrew Bible, *bereshit*, “in the beginning.” Then I reread the Ramban, another commentary. “Listen to how they talk to one another, David,” Mr. Bader had said to me the week before in his study. “Look at how the different parts of the page are arranged and you’ll understand how Jews have been talking to each other for two thousand years about the Bible... You’ll learn to listen to their voices, David. You’ll listen to the way they talk to each other on the page. You’ll hear them agreeing and disagreeing with each other. Sometimes the Ramban gets very nasty when he disagrees with Ibn Ezra. At times he disagrees strongly with Rashi.”⁵

David immerses himself in *Mikraot Gedolot*, and he experiences the Biblical text in a new way:

I shuttled back and forth between ancient Palestine and medieval France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. I listened to them talking to one another about the words of the Torah... Through their voices the text of the Torah took on a luminous quality.⁶

Yet, David eventually finds that he must enter into the discussion himself and offer his own answers. He does not become a scholar of Rabbinic commentary on the Bible, but a true Biblical scholar. Still, he never leaves the conversation. That would be to leave Judaism.

Thus, *Mikraot Gedolot* functioned for centuries as the authorized Jewish study Bible, presenting traditional Jewish interpretation and defining the issues that were important in the text. However, unlike most modern study Bibles, it did not present one

⁴ Edward L. Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” in *Back to the Sources*, ed. by Barry W. Holtz (New York: Touchstone, 1984), 214-15.

⁵ Chaim Potok, *In the Beginning* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 249-50.

view of the text, but several divergent views. The reader was summoned to make choices among possible interpretations. In this way the reader learned that the text was not simple and self-evident in its meaning. Also, the way was implicitly left open for new readings of the text. This approach to the study of Scripture is of crucial importance for us as Messianic Jews. If Messianic Judaism is truly Judaism, we must imitate David Lurie: we must offer our own explanations for the difficulties posed by the text, explanations that reflect our distinctive Messianic perspective, yet always as our contribution to an ongoing cross-generational conversation.

At the same time, Messianic Jews also share in the heritage of that multi-ethnic people who have been joined to Israel in Messiah. Just as Israel was entrusted with the Torah and has carried it through the centuries, so the Messianic community was entrusted with the Apostolic Writings and carried it faithfully. We have received these writings through the Messianic community, and are obliged to enter into its conversation about the meaning of the person and work of Yeshua for Israel and the Nations. We are not free to ignore or reject with contempt those fundamental decisions reached in the fourth and fifth centuries regarding Yeshua's identity and its implications for our understanding of the Divinity. We may have concerns with some aspects of the conclusions reached or the language used to express them, but they embody the unified insights and intuitions of the community which transmitted the Apostolic Writings and the Apostolic Faith to us, and must be treated respectfully, and engaged with seriously.

⁶ Ibid., 256.

The Primacy of Scripture

If the distinction between Scripture and tradition is problematic, it is nonetheless necessary. An appreciation for tradition and a serious engagement with it in our reading of Scripture need not imply an obliteration of the line separating Biblical tradition from post-Biblical tradition or an elevating of the latter above the former. Michael Wyschogrod asserts this point from an Orthodox Jewish perspective:

The rabbis instituted the reading of the Pentateuch in the synagogue and not the reading of a rabbinic interpretation. However important the rabbinic interpretation of scripture is – and it is very important – it is scripture without further interpretation that is read... Sometimes we are so eager to validate the divine origin of the oral Torah that we refuse to recognize any difference between the two Torahs. But that is profoundly unrabbinic... Many Orthodox Jews have lost the ability to read a biblical text as it stands, without rabbinic commentary... We must be careful not to become so anti-Karaitic that we lose direct contact with the text of scripture.⁷

Just as Scripture shapes our lives at the same time as our life-setting shapes our reading of Scripture, so direct engagement with the Biblical text informs our understanding of tradition at the same time as our participation in the tradition informs our reading of the text.

Messianic Jews have an important role to play in the ongoing Jewish and Christian conversations about Scripture. Our sharing in the Jewish conversation affects our reading of the Apostolic Writings in a way that will surprise and enlighten the Christian community. Our commitment to direct and sustained contact with the Biblical text can stimulate a move in the wider Jewish community in the direction that Wyschogrod recommends. Our inclusion of the Apostolic Writings within the framework of the sacred writings will make our part in the Jewish conversation a unique one, but it need not remove us from the discussion. Our voice, though long silent, needs to be heard again. It

is only by listening to all the voices speaking from the margins of the page that one hears clearly that One Voice at the center of the page, and encounters him anew in the sacred text.

⁷ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996), xxii, xxiv.