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Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah 2008

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Focusing on God's instructions in the Torah is an undeniable part of not only the Messianic lifestyle, but also the Messianic experience. Ever since the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon, the public reading of the Torah to instruct God's people on what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior has been a regular practice (Nehemiah 7:73-8:12). This is something that is also witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures (Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:15) and continues in the traditions of today's Jewish Synagogue. The repetition of hearing Moses' Teaching is important for men and women of faith, particularly in understanding the fuller meaning of "For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44). The statutes and commandments of the Torah are to make God's people different from the rest of the world, possessing qualities and wisdom that attract outsiders to Him (Deuteronomy 4:6).

The Messianic community has grown significantly in the past ten years (1999-2008) via the great interest in evangelical Christians embracing their Hebraic Roots. Such people know that their (exclusive) examination of the New Testament Scriptures while in Church has been incomplete without a foundational basis in the Torah and Tanach. While the Holy Spirit has first convicted such individuals about the need to consider the importance of things like the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*, the appointed times or *moedim*, and the kosher dietary laws—things that the Messianic movement considers to be prime elements of Torah observance¹—Torah observance is obviously much more than these three aspects of one's faith practice. A great deal of Torah observance includes one's ethics and morality, and how a person interacts with others demonstrating God's kindness and

¹ Consult the book *Torah in the Balance, Volume I*, and the forthcoming *Volume II*, by J.K. McKee, for an examination on the validity of these areas of the Bible for Believers today, and how these things can be realistically observed today in the Twenty-First Century.

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love (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28; cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).

The ruling of the Jerusalem Council was that after the new non-Jewish Believers would “abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20), that they would understand that “Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21). These were four areas of instruction with a significant Torah background,² and the need for these former pagans—now having received salvation in Yeshua—to be trained in the essentials of God’s Word could not be more overstated. Most of today’s Christian commentators on the New Testament are clearly aware of the fact that these non-Jewish Believers would have had to have been somewhat familiar with the story of Ancient Israel in the Old Testament for the Apostles’ teachings and epistles to have made any sense.³ For example, the Apostle Paul appeals to the Exodus in telling the Corinthians, “our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1).⁴

Many non-Jewish Believers in today’s Messianic community do not need the same kind of instruction in the Torah and Tanach that the first non-Jewish Believers had, who came out of First Century paganism and were often totally ignorant of the God of Israel. Most of these people in the Messianic movement today received a basic understanding of the stories and history of Ancient Israel from Sunday school, even though such basic understanding can certainly be expanded upon and more thoroughly explored. This is being accomplished quite well by Messianics following the Jewish tradition of reading the weekly Torah portion, and reading through the Torah on either an annual or triennial cycle (whichever best fits the local congregation’s needs).

When the Torah is examined in this way, though, and not just surveyed for people, places, and events⁵—it becomes quite clear that Torah observance is *much more* than just *Shabbat*, the festivals, and kosher. A great number of ethical and moral issues/commandments become significantly conscious to the Torah reader. Likewise, a person has to encounter a world going not only back some 3,300 years to the time of the Exodus, but multiplied millennia to the Creation of the cosmos itself. The questions and the controversies that the first five books of the Bible

² Acts 15:20: “things contaminated by idols” (cf. Exodus 34:15-17); “fornication” (cf. Leviticus 18:6-23); “from what is strangled and from blood” (cf. Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 7:26; 17:10, 14; 26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23; 15:23).

For a further discussion, consult the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

³ As a simple example (of many possible quotes) of this, commenting on Philippians 1:1-2 and Paul’s reference to he and Timothy being “servants of Christ Jesus” (RSV, NIV), Gordon D. Fee indicates, “They had entered the ‘society’ of a people whose roots were in Judaism and whose story had its origins in the Old Testament, a story that the Philippians by now would have known well in its Greek form—the Septuagint (LXX)” (*New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 63). This is an academic testimony to the fact that the early non-Jewish Believers were being trained in the foundational accounts of the Tanach.

⁴ Consult the article “The Message of Exodus” by J.K. McKee.

⁵ Surveying the Scriptures is by no means something unimportant, though, as it provides a Bible reader with a framework of understanding the great tapestry of God’s Word and the people, places, events, and concepts that it communicates. It is just that responsible Bible reading and instruction cannot end at surveying the Bible.

Consult the workbooks *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* and *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

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present to us, not just as students of God's Word, but specifically as Messianic Believers—are quite significant. **Many people do not know what to do when the social norms of the ancient period are different than those of today**, and are often at a loss when reading the Torah. Not infrequently, such issues are just avoided or outright ignored in Messianic Torah study.

Only diligent discipleship and study can adequately address all of the issues that the Torah presents to a person, pertaining to what such issues meant against their ancient context and what they mean for modern people today. It is very good that today's Messianics have submitted themselves to the instructions of God's Torah, and people have become familiarized, or even re-familiarized, with its foundational accounts and histories. Yet, as the Messianic movement prepares to enter into a new chapter in both its spiritual and theological development, it is clear that there is much in the Torah that still needs to be explored by us. Ironically enough, these are the areas of the Pentateuch that *both* Jewish and Christian Bible scholarship have largely resolved to one degree or another. Today's Messianic community need not find itself (unnecessarily) lagging behind in these areas, as having a better handle on them will help us in both our Biblical Studies and in understanding the mission that the Lord has laid out for us—to be a kingdom of priests and a light that can make a difference in the world (Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 42:6)!

This analysis of **frequently avoided issues that Messianics encounter in the Torah** by no means can be the “end-all” of our examination of the Torah. But this analysis does intend to provoke some important questions. These questions should be a part of future Messianic discussions and our engagement as a faith community in larger sectors of conversation on the Scriptures. I do intend to ask some questions regarding the Torah of today's Messianics that, at least on the whole, our movement is largely unprepared to consider (in 2008). These are questions that any reader of the Biblical text will encounter, they are by no means hidden, and they are by no means inappropriate as both the Synagogue and the Church have already had to consider them. So certainly, as a movement that has its spiritual and theological origins in both of these institutions, a critical part of *our maturation process* is for us to consider them as well.

Your Typical Messianic “Torah Study”

Having been in the Messianic movement since 1995, I am very much aware of the benefits of examining the weekly Torah portion. For a new person entering into the Messianic community, some kind of weekly Torah examination is essential to understanding the heritage of faith that all Believers in Yeshua have inherited. As many have first examined the Torah in this way, their response is not that unlike the Psalmist, who extols “I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds. Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God?” (Psalm 77:11-13). Becoming more cognizant of the wonderful world God has made, the great promises He has made to the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and His deliverance of Ancient Israel via the Exodus—are certainly all things that constitute His wonders!

But if we are honest with ourselves, even though these things are seen in the history of the Torah, there are many parts of the Torah, which—at least at first—

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many of us have scratched our heads about. It is one thing, for example, to read about a great event like the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea, but what do we do about Biblical commandments relating to the Tabernacle or animal sacrifice? What do we do about the description of an agricultural economy, when we have an industrial economy today? What do we do about those things which seem to place women in a second-class position (in subservience) to men? What do we do about Torah commandments that regulate slavery? What on Earth do we do when God commands that Israel completely wipe out and decimate the population of a town?! *The list could go on and on...*

Not surprisingly, many Messianic “Torah teachers” do not know what to do, hence making things like these frequently avoided issues. This can often be compounded by a few Messianic teachers, who may pound the pulpit and strongly assert, “You can’t pick and choose which commandments to follow!” *and* then they are confronted with commandments that they do not know what to do with. Yeshua Himself did absolutely say, “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). But what do we do when we encounter a situation in life today where a Torah commandment just does not apply? Are we to consider this “loose[n]ing” (YLT) or “relax[ing]” (ESV) of a commandment? Do we become hyper-literal in our reading of the text, and try to “make” *or even force* a Torah commandment to fit? Or do we try to understand the uniqueness of God’s Law to those who originally received it, and implore the Holy Spirit to see if such a commandment can really be applied or not? What do we do with Yeshua’s declaration that there are indeed “some weightier provisions of the law” (Matthew 23:23) when compared to others?

This is a dilemma that many of today’s Messianic Believers face. Many of today’s Messianic teachers and leaders do not know what to do with Torah issues of controversy. Some fail to understand that there are commandments that are “least” or “greatest” among the Torah *mitzvot*, as Yeshua’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7) primarily deals with one’s relationship to the Heavenly Father and the ethics a person displays toward one’s fellow human beings. That does not mean that things like *Shabbat*, the festivals, or kosher are unimportant or are to be ignored, as Yeshua and His Apostles surely followed them. However, Torah principles that Believers must clearly focus on in their day-to-day lives ***and never overlook in any capacity*** regard things like not committing murder (Matthew 5:21-22; cf. Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17), having peace with others (Matthew 5:23-26; cf. Proverbs 25:8-10), not committing adultery (Matthew 5:27-31; cf. Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18), etc., etc. These things clearly make up some of the “greatest” of the commandments. They directly concern our attitudes and whether or not we place the same kind of value on other people as God Himself does.

It is unfortunate that in the quest to reclaim a Torah foundation for our faith, that perhaps *only addressing* the weekly Torah portion has become quite the norm in a noticeable majority of the Messianic community. A negative consequence of this would be that the Prophets, Writings, and Apostolic Scriptures often get ignored in Biblical teaching. What this means is that issues first addressed in the Torah may not get further examined, as the remainder of the Bible may have some additional things to add to the discussion. It is notable that this style of Bible

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teaching does not have a witness in ancient times, as in Pisidian Antioch the Apostle Paul got up to speak “After the reading of the Law and the Prophets” (Acts 13:15), the latter being a section of the Scriptures that many Messianic congregations today do not examine in any detail. (This is also an indication that such synagogues frequently had sermonic messages *independent* of the weekly reading in the Torah and Prophets, something that we should also be doing in today’s Messianic congregations.)

A significant reason why many Messianic teachers do not know what to do with some of the other commandments of the Torah, perhaps choosing to just jump over or avoid them when *that parashah* comes up in the cycle, is **that too much of our Torah study is removed from its Ancient Near Eastern setting**—forgetting neighboring civilizations such as those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Canaanites, and how it affects our view of the text.⁶ Not enough are aware that Hebrew can be a vague and imprecise language, leading to multiple interpretations of various Torah commandments. The fact that Biblical Hebrew was an ANE language with a limited vocabulary of around 3,000 words (compared to an English language of almost 150,000 words!), and with cognate languages such as Aramaic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic, is not understood by many of today’s Messianic Torah teachers.⁷ Placing the Torah into its ancient historical context is often something that many of today’s Messianic Torah teachers do not do, instead preferring to (cut corners and) consult the Orthodox Jewish tradition (i.e., the *ArtScroll Chumash*) whose exegesis is often devoid of any historical data from the period. And, this is only compounded by the significant number of “packaged” Messianic teachings from the Torah, which some ANE history can refute.⁸

Knowing about these kinds of things is especially poignant to the more independent sectors of the Messianic movement, or Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, which can often tend to attract a deal of controversy. Many of its well known (traveling) teachers will often make claims about the Torah, without being a part of a conversation in Biblical Studies. It is not as problematic for today’s Messianic Judaism, which is often more open to non-Orthodox Jewish and evangelical Christian scholarship. Still, because of the overwhelming dominance of Orthodox Jewish examination in *even* much of Messianic Judaism, Ancient Near Eastern history can just as easily be ignored as it is elsewhere in the Messianic community. **This will need to change in the future.**

Those who do choose to address some of the controversial issues seen in the Torah often find themselves overly relying on the Rabbinic tradition. While the Rabbinic tradition should *not* at all be excluded from our examinations of various issues, if it is the *only* thing we consult, we will run into problems. Ironically enough, many others in our ranks who choose to address the controversial issues seen in the Torah, and who do not consider the Rabbinic tradition, will often follow an allegorical style of interpretation most consistent with that of the Third-Fifth Century Christian Church (which they often unfairly repudiate). Certainly

⁶ Consult the article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation,” appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

⁷ Consult Gene M. Schramm, “Languages (Hebrew),” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:203-214, for a thorough summary on the development of Hebrew as a language.

⁸ For an example of this, consult the FAQ entry on the Messianic Apologetics website “Genesis 5, 11 Genealogies.”

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while such a style does rightly try to hold all of Scripture in high regard, when one (over-) spiritualizes various passages of the Torah, what the commandment or ordinance meant to its original audience and setting can be significantly lost. Add to this mix those Messianics who desire to emulate an Orthodox Jewish style of Torah *halachah*, when a more moderate branch of Judaism should be preferred, and you see some of the difficult things that lie in store for our Biblical scholarship and orthopraxy in the near future.

It is absolutely true, that much of what the modern, albeit still emerging, Messianic movement, has had to accomplish, has been to help restore a Torah foundation to God's people. This especially concerns accounts, commandments, and issues which many Christians in the past have ignored, and are now no longer being ignored. Alas, within this, few take into consideration the fact that Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Jews and Christians, in a relatively modern world, are not at all the original people who received Moses' Teaching from Mount Sinai. While many Messianic Believers are tuned in enough to realize that the letters of the Apostle Paul, for example, need to be understood first for their ancient audiences, before their principles are applied in a modern setting—the Torah or Pentateuch is not often approached from this perspective. Yet, **this is precisely what needs to be factored in to many of the frequently avoided issues** facing the Messianic movement today as it concerns the Torah. The word of Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, in their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, should be well taken as we proceed:

“The Israelites were not the first people to live by laws. Several other law codes have survived from ancient nations from times even earlier than the time the Law was given to Israel through Moses (1440 B.C. or later, depending on the date of the exodus from Egypt). When these earlier laws are compared to the Old Testament law, it becomes evident that the Old Testament law represents a definite advancement over its predecessors. One can more fully appreciate the Old Testament law if one recognizes the difference between it and the other ancient laws it improved on. We do not mean by this to suggest that the Old Testament law represents the highest possible standard of moral or ethical teaching. This indeed comes only with the teaching of Jesus himself in the New Testament. But the Old Testament law does show a remarkable degree of progress beyond the standards set prior to it.”⁹

Has the arrival of Yeshua changed anything?

While all Messianics who label themselves as “Torah observant” truly have a high regard for the Torah, too many are afraid to ask the following question: Can *all* of the Torah really be followed today? This is not the voice of someone looking for loopholes, nor of someone desiring to disobey God. It is the honest question of wanting to know if all the commandments of the Torah can actually be followed in the Twenty-First Century. This question is best answered with another question, which too many are simply afraid to ask when their congregational leader may be caustic or obnoxious when it comes to the Torah: **Has the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah and His sacrifice changed *anything* in regard to the Torah?**

⁹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 175.

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Is there a trajectory built into the Scriptures, beginning in the Torah, and continuing through the Prophets and Writings? Yes! The Messianic expectation given by the Prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7:12-17) was intended to be, as King David testified, a *torat ha'adam* (תּוֹרַת הָאָדָם), a “law (for) humanity” (2 Samuel 7:19, my translation) or “the charter for humanity.”¹⁰ Yeshua Himself said in Luke 22:44, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Paul says in Romans 10:4, “For the goal [*telos*, τέλος] at which the *Torah* aims is the Messiah, who offers righteousness to everyone who trusts” (CJB). There are undeniably Messianic overcurrents and undercurrents seen throughout the Tanach Scriptures that any responsible Biblical interpreter cannot avoid.

The first Messianic prophecy is seen in the Father’s words to Eve, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Genesis 3:15), as salvation was to come “through the child-bearing” (1 Timothy 2:15, YLT). The steady process of salvation history moving forward (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2) is that humanity is to be brought back to a condition similar to that first experienced in Eden (cf. Revelation 21:1-3). The commandments and statutes seen in God’s Torah are *the first important steps* back to that condition. Along with the blood of Yeshua the Messiah having fully atoned for humanity’s sin¹²—something that the animal sacrifices in the Torah could not do as they had to be offered and re-offered many times (Hebrews 7:27; 9:12)—an equality for all has been restored by His work that had not been seen since Eden (Galatians 3:28).¹³

In the Prophet Jeremiah’s declaration about the New Covenant that God will make with His people, the Lord says “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 33:31), *nattati et-Torati beqirbam v'al-l'bam ektavennah* (נָתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתְּבֶנָּה). Contrary to popular belief, the New Covenant has nothing to do with replacing the Torah, but is in fact the Torah internalized on the heart—written by the power of God’s Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-27). It is notable though, that the Greek Septuagint rendered *Torati*, “My Torah” (ATS), with the plural *nomous mou* (νόμους μου) or “My laws,” also followed by the author of Hebrews (8:10; 10:16). While the Torah is certainly in view here, this slight difference does beg the question if Yeshua’s work has changed *anything*. Is “My laws” a reflection on the view that God will steadily write His commandments on the hearts of His people as they mature in faith, or is it also a reflection on the sacrificial system and Levitical priesthood being set aside until the Millennium (Hebrews 7:18; cf. Ezekiel 40-44)?

If the latter is the view that is to be accepted—the *temporary* setting aside of the Levitical priesthood until the Tribulation period and Millennium—the New

¹⁰ Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 122.

¹¹ Grk. *dia tes teknogonias* (διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας), including the definite article “the” with the noun, pointing to Yeshua the Messiah and not the process of giving birth.

¹² 1 John 2:2; 4:10; Romans 3:25; Ephesians 2:13; Hebrews 9:26; 10:12, 19; 13:20.

¹³ Consult the exegesis paper “Galatians 3:28: Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement” by J.K. McKee.

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Covenant of God's "laws" being written on the hearts of His people still includes *the considerable bulk* of the Torah. Old Testament theologian Walter C. Kaiser writes, "Some have argued that it was the Lord's original intent to replace the old with a new covenant, but if that were true in every respect, then why does the new covenant repeat almost three-fourths of what had been in the Abrahamic-Davidic covenants? Rather than *superceding* the covenants of promise that had preceded it, it affirmed them as well as *supplemented* them."¹⁴ As it regards Messianic Believers today, the "laws" that are written onto the redeemed heart by God certainly concern those things which will enable us to live the life that Yeshua modeled for us (cf. Galatians 6:2).

The arrival of Yeshua has certainly changed some things as they concern animal sacrifice for the atonement of sin, and the transfer of priesthods from that of Levi to Melchizedek. Hebrews 7:12 details, "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also." This *nomou metathesis* (νόμου μετάθεσις) though, is not the widescale abolition of the Torah's commandments—especially those of ethics and morality—but as David H. Stern rightly emphasizes, it "implies retention of the basic structure of *Torah*, with some of its elements rearranged ('transformed')," particularly of those "not connected with the priesthood and the sacrificial system."¹⁵ And, even though the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system may be shadows of the reality seen in Yeshua's sacrifice (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1; cf. Exodus 25:40), they are nonetheless important shadows that mature Believers are to study and understand! The Pentateuchal Scriptures represent the first stage in God's unfolding plan of salvation history, *and cannot be ignored*.

The Frequently Avoided Issues

It is sad to say this, but the Jewish Synagogue—which does not acknowledge Yeshua as the Messiah—often has a better handle on what commandments in the Torah can and cannot be followed today than the Messianic community does. The very question of *halachah* (הִלְכוּת), meaning "the way to walk"¹⁶ in the Jewish theological tradition, arose precisely because people found themselves in circumstances and situations to which the Torah did not directly apply. In order to afford the Torah the authority that it has for God's people, Jewish innovation had to step in and determine which commandments could be followed in the new circumstances and what could actually be done. Most of these new circumstances included living in the Diaspora, and how changes in both technology and economy affect the relevance of various commandments. While God's ethical and moral standards remained constant, as did His instructions on what were to make Israel a unique people, a good feature of the Rabbinic tradition is its testimony to the fact that not all of the commandments are applicable for today. *And that is without recognizing Yeshua as the Messiah who atoned for the world*.

¹⁴ Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 367.

¹⁵ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 681.

¹⁶ In the Rabbinical literature, *halachah* can mean "practice, adopted opinion, rule," as well as "a traditional law or a traditional interpretation of a written law" (Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* [New York: Judaica Treasury, 2004], 353).

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The fact that *halachah* has to be something that adapts to the times is clear even within the Biblical period. The Torah specifically commands that Passover was to be celebrated in the place of the Lord's choosing (Deuteronomy 16:16), that place being Jerusalem. And indeed, we have adequate Biblical testimony that many people did expel the effort to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, including Yeshua's own family (Luke 2:41-43). Yet Acts 20:6 indicates that the Apostle Paul commemorated the Passover in Philippi. Would this have been considered a legitimate Passover celebration according to the Torah? If one has a strict black-and-white reading of the text—no. If one sits firmly within the Jewish theological *halachah*—yes. It was one thing for Yeshua's family to travel to and from Galilee to Jerusalem to commemorate the Passover. But for Jews living as far east as Persia, or as far west as Belgica in the First Century, it would have just been impossible to go to Jerusalem for all three of the pilgrimage feasts. Accommodations had to be made, and the local synagogue would undoubtedly be a place of gathering for prayer and praise during this time for those who could not make the long journey. Recognizing that God is merciful to His people in those areas where they are unable to perfectly follow His Law was also important.

Understanding an historical reality like this is only a third of the difficulties that today's Messianics face when it comes to the commandments of the Torah and their applicability. Another third comes in the form of how the Torah's commandments are specifically classified. The Reformed Christian tradition has often subdivided the Pentateuchal ordinances between moral, civil, and ceremonial, with the latter two no longer being applicable because of Yeshua's sacrifice.¹⁷ While rightfully believing that the Torah's moral or ethical statutes can never be revoked and were upheld by Yeshua and the Apostles, this threefold division is rather artificial, as a reading of the Torah itself indicates a much more organic division as commandments applying to males, females, children, priests, farmers, businesspersons, married, unmarried, etc. are to be followed by those sectors of society. Some commandments apply to all, and then other commandments apply to only certain people.

Even when we recognize these much more natural divisions among the Torah *mitzvot*, there has not been a great deal of Messianic engagement with what scholars often refer to as apodictic or casuistic laws.

Torah commandments that would be considered *apodictic* are most often those with some kind of "Thou shalt not..." attached to them, indicating that they are immutable principles that cannot, at least easily, be amended or revoked. They concern things that remain constant for the sake of God's people and in making them as holy and set-apart He has called them out to be. The Ten Commandments are clearly in this category, as are many other ordinances that can easily be followed today with a minimum of difficulties. Other than the ethical and moral ordinances of the Pentateuch, which the historic Christian Church has always held dear, they include many of the things that have constituted Jewish identity over the centuries which many of us believe that the Messianic movement is restoring to the faith.

¹⁷ In the Reformed tradition, passages such as Ephesians 2:14-15 and Colossians 2:14 are often interpreted as relating to the so-called ceremonial law of the Torah, not the Torah as a whole.

Consult the book *The New Testament Validates Torah*, and the commentaries *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* and *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*, for a Messianic examination of these passages.

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In contrast to this, *casuistic* laws or case laws include those things which clearly have some kind of timestamp on them. An excellent example of this is Deuteronomy 23:23, which says “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD,” indicating that the eleventh generation could very well enter into the *qahal ADONAI* (קָהָל יְהוָה). However, there are other casuistic types of commandments in the Torah that are not as easily classified as such. They have to be examined on a case-by-case basis, and the interpreter who holds to the continued validity of the Torah has to ask if such commandments only concerned an ancient setting, economy, and technology level—certainly teaching us things about God’s character and Ancient Israel’s uniqueness—or whether they apply to all cultural settings and all generations.

Reasoning through Torah commandments and those that are applicable or non-applicable will be very difficult for varied sectors of today’s Messianic movement. The Apostle Paul wrote Timothy, “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Timothy 1:8, NIV). Learning how to do this will be a challenge for some of today’s Messianics as we weigh: (1) the impact and changes inaugurated by Yeshua’s atoning sacrifice, (2) the role of *halachah* in the Jewish theological tradition, and (3) whether a Torah ordinance is apodictic or casuistic. A great deal of the controversy, if not experienced now then certainly to be experienced in the future, regarding Torah observance will *not* be focused around things like *Shabbat*, memorializing the appointed times, or *kashrut*. A great deal of the controversy surrounding Torah observance will regard those things in the Torah that directly concern the Ancient Near Eastern world to which the Moses’ Teaching was originally given to Israel. How we deal with those things in our Twenty-First Century world could very well determine how our faith community rises or falls, at least in the short term.

Of the seven frequently avoided issues that we have chosen to address, about half of them have some kind of direct applicability for the Twenty-First Century, which I have indicated by the designation **today**. They concern obvious ethical and moral issues that the Messianic movement cannot afford to avoid any longer, and where Jewish and Christian Biblical scholarship is far superior. The other part of these issues primarily concern an ancient setting, most often where the Torah’s instruction for Ancient Israel ran into direct contrast or subversion to the law codes of their neighbors, indicated by the designation **ancient times**. When examining those issues, we see the trajectory of God’s Word at work, as the Pentateuchal legislation often lays *the first stepping stones* back to the idyllic state first seen in Eden, which are continued in the further revealing of salvation history in the Prophets, Writings, and Apostolic Scriptures. These are issues where there is a great deal of confusion in the Messianic community, which needs to be quickly dispelled.

As you prepare to read through all these issues, you will doubtlessly see things that are avoided at many Messianic Torah studies, and many of your questions concerning them will hopefully be answered. This selection of seven topics is by no means exhaustive, but should give you a good idea about how to approach similar and related things witnessed in the Torah when you encounter *that parashah* next time in your yearly Torah studies. You should have your senses trained to consider the ancient context of various Biblical commandments, and what they meant when

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set against that context, indeed indicating whether such things should *or can* be followed today.

Issue #1: Human Beings Made in the Image of God today

One of the most significant issues that is avoided by most Messianics today appears in the very first Torah portion, *Bereisheet* (Genesis 1:1-6:8). Considering the fact that we encounter this issue every single year, and thousands of pages of thoughts, commentary, and theological analysis of this issue are seen in both the Jewish and Christian scholastic traditions—the fact that most Messianics do not deal with it is a sign that (as of 2008) we are not at all where we need to be. The Biblical assertion that human beings are made in the image of God (Lat. *imago Dei*) is significant not only as it concerns human origins, but also as it concerns the composition and value of the human person. The ramifications of what it means to understand human beings made in God's image concern not only the uniqueness of the human race in His Creation, but also affect the mission and outlook of the *ekklēsia* in today's world as Believers should desire to see other people the way that He sees them.

As the Creation activities of God begin to draw to a close, He says something very important in Genesis 1:26-27, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים)—actually speaking to Himself—says "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (NRSV), *b'tzalmenu k'demutenu* (בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ). The human being possessing these qualities would be able to have dominion over God's Creation. Being made in God's image not only concerned the human male, but *also* the human female.

This assertion of Genesis 1:26-27 would have run completely contrary to Ancient Near Eastern concepts of rulership. Victor P. Hamilton writes, "It is well known that in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian society the king, or some high-ranking official, might be called 'the image of God.' Such a designation, however, was not applied to the canal digger or to the mason who worked on a ziggurat...In God's eyes all of mankind is royal. All of humanity is related to God, not just the king."¹⁸ Both the male and female were originally created by God and intended to rule over God's Creation as His viceroy. In the words of Nahum M. Sarna,

"A human being is the pinnacle of Creation. This unique status is communicated in a variety of ways, not least by the simple fact that humankind is last in a manifestly ascending, gradual order. The creation of human life is an exception to the rule of creation by divine fiat...Human beings are to enjoy a unique relationship to God, who communicates with them alone and who shares with them the custody and administration of the world."¹⁹

¹⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 135.

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 11.

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In this schema, at least before the Fall, man was intended to be second *only to God* in Creation—a status which is restored to him to eternity. However, because of the Fall and the introduction of sin, the image of God on man has been marred.

I actually encountered one Messianic teacher who actually took up the subject of human beings made in God's image.²⁰ This individual advocated that it was only Adam, the first human being, who was created in God's image. Because of Adam and Eve's fall from grace, it was said, human beings are no longer made in God's image. Genesis 5:3 was supplied as a proof text: "When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of *a son* in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth." The Hebrew text says *v'yoled b'demuto k'tzalemo* (וַיֵּלֶד בְּדַמוּתוֹ כְּצַלְמוֹ), "and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image; and named him Shet [*v'yiqra et-shemo Sheit*, וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שֵׁת]" (Jerusalem Bible-Koren). According to this, Seth was made after the image and likeness of Adam, as opposed to the image and likeness of God. And this is where the argument stopped.

But the Book of Genesis itself does not stop there. Genesis 9:6 further says, "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man." Mortals who are killed by sinful mortals are still considered by God to be made in His image. The difference is, of course, unlike Adam who was originally created without a sin nature, is that every human born since Adam has inherited that sin nature (cf. Romans 5:12). In that context *alone* are all human beings made "in Adam's image." A human being still possesses the unique Divine imprint of his or her Creator.

James, half-brother of Yeshua, says that the tongue can curse other people, all of whom "have been made in the likeness of God" (James 3:9). He uses the Greek word *homoiōsis* (ὁμοίωσις), "a making like" (*Vine*).²¹ This is the same word used in the Greek LXX to translate *tzelem* in Genesis 1:26, and UBSHNT renders *homoiōsin Theou* (ὁμοίωσιν θεοῦ) as *tzelem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), indeed indicating that human beings—even after the Fall in the Garden of Eden—have been made in "the image of God." James expects his audience to show due respect for other human beings through what they say, regardless of whether or not they are saved and of the community of faith. John Wesley commented, "Indeed we have now lost this likeness; yet there remains from thence an indelible nobleness, which we ought to reverence both in ourselves and others."²² While people are not as perfect as Adam was prior to the Fall, they still have enough of God's image within them as fallen humans to show others proper respect and character. We have enough of God's image within us that we should be drawn to things of God rather than things of Satan—and for those regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit via the gospel of Yeshua the Messiah, that image should indeed have been restored.

Understanding what it means for a person to be made in the *tzelem Elohim* is significant. Christopher J.H. Wright asserts, "this forms the basis of radical equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion or any form of social,

²⁰ Cf. Monte Judah. "The Leaven of the Pharisees" *Yavoh: He is coming!* Vol. 9 No. 9, September 2003.

²¹ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1968), 372.

²² John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 864.

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economic, or political status.”²³ He goes on to conclude, “Anything that denies other human beings their dignity or fails to show respect, interest and informed understanding for all that they hold precious is actually a failure of love.”²⁴ If one is to truly demonstrate God’s commanded love (seen in both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures) to His human creatures, then one must recognize that there is a strong value placed on them as made in His image. To stretch the meaning of Genesis 9:6, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” (RSV), by not demonstrating Yeshua’s love to others—could it be considered tantamount to murder?

The human being is of extremely high value, especially in comparison to the rest of Creation. Being made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26) obviously means that human beings possess unique qualities that those of the animal kingdom do not possess. In the Creation account, Genesis 2:7 says “the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” One part of the human being, his/her body, is clearly of this Earth. Yet it is significant that nowhere in the creation of the animals is it said that the animals had *nishmat chayim* (נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים) breathed into them. The *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* makes the important point, “the vital principle in man is different from that in the animal... The beasts [only] arose at the creative word of God.”²⁵

The *nishmat chayim* breathed into man indicates that people do possess a uniqueness specifically endowed by their Creator, a part made not of this Earth. The Hebrew language has no specific word for “mind” or “consciousness,” but it is safe to say that this *neshamah* (נִשְׁמָה) or specific “breath” from God, would help constitute it. In fact, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, the Apostle Paul only makes the point that “death spread to all men” (Romans 5:12), *eis pantas anthrōpous* (εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους) or “to all humans.” **Human death is by no means the same as animal death.** To equate animal death and human death as being the same is to disregard the uniqueness of the human race in God’s Creation, and the Divine imprint He has placed upon all men and women. Throughout history, human culture has demonstrated a number of unique qualities, bearing witness to God’s imprint, including:

1. awareness of a moral code “written” or impressed with a conscience
2. concerns about death and about life after death
3. propensity to worship and desire to communicate with a higher being
4. consciousness of self
5. drive to discover and capacity to recognize truth and absolutes²⁶

²³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 423.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 423-424.

²⁵ *E-Sword 7.6.1: Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2005.

²⁶ This list of five character traits is copied from Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis*, second expanded edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 55.

Among Hugh Ross’ other notable works include: *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004); *Why the Universe Is the Way It Is* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

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Indeed, it is only the human race among all of God's Creation which possesses intelligence, a capacity to reason, and verbal speech—making it different when compared to the animals.

Psalms 8 picks up on the theme of man made in God's image, and specifically on the fact that God made man to rule over His Creation (Psalm 8:6-8). But the Psalmist's assertion is a very important one that cannot be overlooked: "You have made him a little lower than God" (Psalm 8:5a) or "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings" (NIV). The Hebrew clause of interest is *m'at m'Elohim* (מֵאֵת מֵאֱלֹהִים), "lower than God," rendered in the Greek LXX as *brachu...par angelous* (βραχύ...παρ' ἀγγέλους), "a little less than angels" (LXE), due to the ambiguous nature of *Elohim*.²⁷ Regardless, though, the lot of humanity is not cast with the animal kingdom **but instead** with the Heavenly host; the Psalmist **did not say** that man was made "a little higher than the animals." The debate that the Messianic movement has from time to time, about the intermediate state between the death of a person and resurrection would, in fact, be easily solved if we could understand what it means to be made in God's image with human beings possessing qualities different than the rest of Creation.²⁸

The day-to-day aspects of understanding what it means for human beings to be made in God's image are quite severe for where sectors of the Messianic movement stand right now. Every person on Earth today has value in the eyes of the Creator, and it is the responsibility of those who have placed their trust in Yeshua to see value in other people. In today's Messianic community, we often see a great deal of vehemence and hatred released against fellow brothers and sisters in the Christian Church, and even the Jewish Synagogue, much less those of other religions. I have sat in Messianic worship services where people have prayed that the Israeli army roll their tanks over "the cursed bones of their Muslim enemies," but then have seen Israeli military being interviewed on television, testifying to the ethical dilemmas they face in defending their country. For some reason or another, rather than seeing value in Muslims as human beings made in God's image, various persons in our faith community have thought that it is appropriate to treat them as animals—even though our Heavenly Father *does not*. The Lord is every bit as concerned for their salvation and redemption as we should be!

There are undoubtedly any number of reasons why the image of God, a critical issue in the Torah, is avoided every year in the annual cycle. Have we adequately dealt with the questions of a person's composition? Do we really think that a human being is unique compared to the animals, or is no different than a dog or cat? Do we realize that each of us has a connection to the Heavenly dimension? Do we understand the responsibility for each of us to demonstrate love and respect toward others, because all of humanity bears the Divine imprint? This is an issue that simply cannot be avoided any more. What will it mean for the redeemed to rule and reign with the Lord throughout eternity?

²⁷ The author of Hebrews applies Psalm 8:4-6 to Yeshua the Messiah and His Incarnation (Hebrews 2:6-10), whose ministry and service for the world restores redeemed humanity as second only to God in Creation.

Consult the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee for a further explanation.

²⁸ Consult the publication *To Be Absent From the Body* by J.K. McKee.

Issue #2: Murder and Capital Punishment

today

Virtually every society on Earth, no matter how advanced or how primitive, abhors the practice of murder—a human life terminated for no good reason. Even before the prohibition against murder seen in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17), the reason for God sending the Flood to judge humanity was because “the earth was filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11), most certainly involving manslaughter. After the Flood, the Lord tells Noah “Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed” (Genesis 9:6), formally constituting the penalty of capital punishment for all who indiscriminately take a human life. Human life above all, as men and women are made in God's image, is most precious to Him. When another human life is taken for no good reason, capital punishment is the most severe penalty that any person can impose on another person.

The topic of murder is not totally avoided by Messianics today. Murder, as terrible as it is, is a feature of the Biblical narrative. But what is often not discussed by Messianics today is murder and its relationship to capital punishment. There is a great deal of confusion between “killing” and “murder,” as terrible as *both* are, and the place of capital punishment in society today. The reason this is a serious subject to consider not only concerns the psychology of the murderer, but also the work of Yeshua at Golgotha (Calvary) for all sinners. Murder is arguably the most severe of all sins a human person can commit against another. It is justified for one to ask whether or not the death penalty for taking another life is valid in a time when Yeshua's sacrificial work has removed the penalty of capital crimes as originally laid forth in the Torah.

It should first be noted, as it is by many Biblical scholars, that the King James Version made an error in translating Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 as “Thou shalt not kill.” Pacifists have a field day with this rendering, connecting it with Yeshua's words on turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39) as though people are not supposed to defend themselves against aggression—when that is not what is in view in the Decalogue, and property as opposed to a human life is the issue as specified in Matthew 5:40-42. The Hebrew verb *ratzach* (רָצַח) primarily means “murder, slay, with premeditation” (BDB),²⁹ and was rendered in the Septuagint by the Greek *phoneuō* (φονεύω), “to murder, kill, slay” (LS).³⁰ Most of today's modern Bible translations render these two commandments properly with “You shall not murder” (NASU, NIV, NKJV, NJPS, NRSV, ESV, etc.).

Numbers 35:9-34 issued some important legislation to the Ancient Israelites, specifically in terms of defining unintentional manslaughter, intentional manslaughter, the conviction of a murderer, and the establishment of various cities of refuge in the Promised Land. The Levites were to be given the administration of six cities of refuge (Numbers 35:10; cf. Joshua 20:1-9) for the specific intention that a person who has accidentally killed another may find asylum or sanctuary until a trial (Numbers 35:11-12). These places were set aside so that the victim's family could not inflict any kind of vigilante style of justice, and proper jurisprudence

²⁹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 953.

³⁰ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 869.

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would be observed. This kind of practice was not unique to the Ancient Israelites, as “Many peoples of the ancient Near East maintained certain places as asylums for fugitives accused of crimes; once the fugitive was within the sanctuary he could not be apprehended or punished, whether guilty or innocent” (*ISBE*).³

The instructions listed in Numbers 35:16-23 list a variety of factors that are to be considered by those who judge the accused, and specifically concern the method of the death in question, and the motives of the accused. The Torah’s instruction specifically says, “the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the blood avenger according to these ordinances” (Numbers 35:24). Also included is an allowance that should the accused leave the city of refuge, presumably trying to escape, the victim’s family is allowed to kill him without fault (Numbers 35:26-27). The trial of an accused murderer is so severe, the Lord says “If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death at the evidence of witnesses, but no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness” (Numbers 35:30). The principle of multiple witnesses is required later so that “on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed” (Deuteronomy 19:15; cf. Matthew 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19) regarding issues that *have nothing to do* with the trial of an accused murderer. So significant is the enactment of the death penalty against a murderer, the Torah does not allow any kind of a ransom to be allowed in his stead (Numbers 35:31), meaning that no one could buy his way out.

Many Christians who read through the Pentateuch have, at least unconsciously, the idea that Ancient Israel must have had a really long line of sinners being stoned or executed left and right, when indeed this is not the case at all. The procedures for executing a murderer as seen in the Torah are actually quite rigorous. Certain rights are afforded to the accused, whether death is caused intentionally *or* unintentionally, until the facts of the case can be determined. If the accused decides to leave the safety of the city of refuge, those rights have been forfeited. We can certainly see some parallels between the service of the Levites who oversee these cities of refuge, and those today who serve in the prison system, who do have to watch over accused persons—whether innocent *or* guilty—guaranteeing their safety in protective custody before trial.

The Torah very clearly places a high value on human life, and prescribes a serious penalty for those who murder: capital punishment. And indeed, many societies—both those preceding Ancient Israel and many thereafter—have likewise used capital punishment for condemnation of murderers. The dilemma for many people today, especially many Christians, is whether capital punishment is now acceptable given that the Messiah has come. Paul says in Colossians 2:14 that Yeshua has “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” The death penalty pronounced upon sinners in the Torah, composing the *cheirographon* (χειρόγραφου) or “the bond” (RSV) against us, was remitted via His sacrifice. As a result, many in both Christianity and the Messianic movement believe that capital punishment is now no longer appropriate, and can be substituted with something less severe, such as life imprisonment. Is capital

³ S.G. deClaisé-Walford, “Refuge, Cities of,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:66-67.

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punishment now unacceptable, given that the Messiah has come and has been sacrificed for the sins of the world?

None of us should argue the fact that if capital punishment is to be practiced, specifically as a pre-Sinaitic ordinance (cf. Genesis 9:6), that it should not be used flippantly. What happens when a Messianic Believer is called to jury duty, and the accused person is on trial for murder? What if you have to decide whether or not a person is not only guilty, but if the death penalty is to be used as punishment? The facts of a case involving murder need to be carefully considered. Life imprisonment can be a safe alternative if the facts are inconclusive, yet the accused clearly does need to be separated from society.

Murder is not the only high crime seen in the Torah to which capital punishment has been assigned, but it is by far the most severe. Because murder is the most severe of all the crimes seen in the Torah, with capital punishment even stated as a penalty before Mount Sinai, it deserves special attention when compared to some of the other crimes with capital punishment attached.

Halachic innovation for capital crimes outside of murder is evidenced in 1 Corinthians 5,³² where Paul writes concerning the incest going on in Corinth (5:1-5). The Torah prescribes the death penalty for this high sin, and related crimes involving adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality (Leviticus 20:10-16). Yet Paul's instruction to the Corinthians is different: "to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Yeshua" (1 Corinthians 5:5). Such sinners were to be tossed out of the *ekklesia* if not repentant, being consumed by their sin.

The offenders in Corinth had not committed murder, but were to be allowed to foolishly continue in their sinful behavior and suffer the physical consequences of it. When the destruction of their bodies would come—as a clear result of their gross sin—the mercy and grace offered by the sacrifice of Yeshua would be there to save them, with Paul hoping that by such a point the offenders would have realized the futility of their sin. In this case, the definition of the sexual sins in the Torah certainly remained the same, but the capital punishment demanded of them had been taken away by Yeshua's atoning work. The *halachah* for the Apostles seems to be that with the arrival of the Messiah, ex-communication from the assembly has replaced the capital punishment specified for many high crimes in the Torah.

Issue #3: Slavery *ancient times*

The most significant event of the entire Torah is the Exodus of Ancient Israel from Egypt, and the deliverance of the Israelites from their servitude to Pharaoh. Moses admonished the people in Exodus 13:3, "Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the LORD brought you out from this place." There is no doubting the fact that Ancient Israel was removed *m'beit avadim* (מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים) or "from the house of slavery." The Ten Commandments themselves open up with the declaration, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"

³² For a summary on the events going on in Ancient Corinth, consult the entries for the Epistles of 1&2 Corinthians in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

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(Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). If the main feature of the Exodus was liberation from bondage, and the utter humiliation of the Thirteenth Century B.C.E. superpower by the removal of its workforce, then why do we see legislation in the Pentateuch regulating the practice of slavery? What do we do with slavery as Biblical interpreters who live in the Twenty-First Century, where such a practice is viewed as utterly abhorrent? Immediately after the Ten Commandments are delivered in Exodus 20, Exodus 21:1-6 lists a series of regulations regarding an *eved Ivri* (עֶבֶד עִבְרִי) or a “Hebrew slave,” which could be viewed as somewhat antithetical to the whole message of Israel being removed from Egyptian bondage.

This is a significant area of difficulty for Messianics, especially when various “Torah teachers” in our midst forcibly assert that “all” of the Torah can be followed today. Such people either make the mistake of having to allegorize or spiritualize commandments regulating slavery, forgetting their ancient context, or make the even worse mistake of acting like these things do not appear in the Biblical narrative. Any objective reader of the Torah cannot avoid the fact that slavery is a part of the Bible’s story, and that commandments regarding slavery were given to Ancient Israel. What are we to do with them today?

It must be observed that there is no specific differentiation in the Hebrew between what in English we could call a slave *or* a servant. The Hebrew word *eved* (עֶבֶד) means both “slave” and “servant” (*CHALOT*).³³ Likewise, the Greek term *doulos* (δούλος), often used to render *eved* in the Septuagint and whose usage carries over into the Apostolic Scriptures, means “a born bondman or slave” (*LS*).³⁴ Some English translations like the NASU provide the rendering “bond-servant” for either *eved* or *doulos* in some locations, but the source vocabulary in either Hebrew or Greek does not provide a specific term that would substantiate something beyond “slave” or “servant.”

Any kind of slavery or servanthood regulated in the Tanach primarily concerns Ancient Israel functioning in an Ancient Near Eastern economic system. The Torah’s commandments regarding slavery can most often be divided into categories regarding debt-bondage and manumission (Exodus 21; Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15),³⁵ whereas a great deal of slavery in the surrounding cultures—primarily of Mesopotamia and Egypt—was focused around the people of those societies being the subjects of a deity-monarch. The Ancient Mesopotamian creation story *Atrahasis* depicts humanity being created by the gods specifically so that they could serve as slaves,³⁶ when set against the Biblical creation account where humanity is made to commune with God in a garden planted by Him (Genesis 3:8). While even a slavery for repayment of debt may have never been something desirable, the rules for such slavery as seen in the Torah do afford the slave considerable rights.

When one reviews the Torah instructions regarding slavery, one sees that male and female slaves within Israel were expected to participate in the Passover

³³ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 262.

³⁴ *LS*, 210.

³⁵ Cf. J. Albert Harrill, “Slave,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1232.

³⁶ Stephanie Dalley, trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp 14-15ff.

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(Genesis 17:13; Exodus 12:44), to rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14), to live wherever they please (Deuteronomy 23:15-16), and severe penalties are placed upon masters who abuse their slaves (Exodus 21:20-27). G.H. Haas notes in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, “Israelites who must sell themselves into bondservice (because of personal impoverishment or inability to pay a debt or a fine) are not permitted to be treated like foreign slaves. They may not be sold as chattel slaves to other masters. Their time of service to fellow Israelites is limited to six years, and to resident aliens it is limited to the Jubilee Year.”³⁷

This kind of “slavery” is what is witnessed in Exodus 21:1-6, specifically in what is often termed the law of the bondservant. A Hebrew slave was only allowed to sell himself into service for a maximum of up to six years (Exodus 21:2), and had to leave the master’s care with adequate provision (Deuteronomy 15:12-15). If he went into servitude with his wife, he and his wife were to leave together (Exodus 21:3). However, should the slave’s master provide him with a wife resulting in children, such a wife and children could not leave the master’s house with him (Exodus 21:4). What this would do, in many cases, is create a permanent bond between the slave and his master’s household, as Exodus 21:5 records a slave saying “I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man.” The male slave could take a physical mark on his ear designating his permanent bond to his master’s house (Exodus 21:6). The reason for allowing a male slave to be permanently bonded to his master’s house is a clear, if obvious one when this regulation is set against its ANE context. Sarna indicates,

“In the ancient Near East it was common practice for a master to mate a slave with a foreign bondwoman for the purpose of siring ‘house born’ slaves. In such instances, no matrimonial or emotional bond was necessarily involved, and the woman and her offspring remained the property of the master.”³⁸

Allowing a slave to willingly be bonded to his master’s house was a safeguard so that the master would never treat the wife he provided, and the children sired, as some kind of expendable property. If a slave showed love (Heb. verb *ahav*, אָהַב) toward his master, wanting to become a permanent member of his household, by necessity the master would have to show some respect and care for his family who would now be bonded to him. While this is difficult for many people in the Twenty-First Century to understand, we have to put ourselves back into ancient times. Selling oneself into bondage was the only way for some to exit financial straits. This is where the Pentateuch parallels contemporary law codes of its period, as the Code of Hammurabi from almost one-thousand years earlier had allowed for something similar:

“If a man incur[s] a debt and sell[s] his wife, son, or daughter for money, or bind[s] them out to forced labor, three years shall they work in the house of their taskmaster; in the fourth year they shall be set free” (117).³⁹

Peter Enns reminds us, “the point of the law [in Exodus] is not to question the existence of this social condition, but to give clear guidelines for how people in

³⁷ G.H. Haas, “Slave, Slavery,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 781.

³⁸ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 119.

³⁹ W.W. Davies, *The Codes of Hammurabi and Moses* (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2006), 57.

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such a condition must be treated.”⁴⁰ While in Hammurabi’s Code the period of servitude is shorter, the stipulation in the Torah is that when such a slave is let go, the master “shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you” (Deuteronomy 15:14). The significance of the Exodus 21 instruction being delivered right after the occurrence of the deliverance from Egypt was for the Ancient Israelites to *never* treat such slaves, having to sell themselves to pay off debts, the way that they were treated harshly and unfairly by the Egyptians. Here, we see a direct example of the Torah instructing Ancient Israel in its ancient world, and it is safe to say that the Exodus 21:1-6 commandments classify as casuistic law applying to a specific situation and not for all times.

Some Christian and Messianic interpreters have tried to allegorize Exodus 21:1-6 as Believers now relating to Yeshua the Messiah as His “bond-servants,” per varied references to the Apostles serving as *douloi* of the Lord.⁴¹ This view runs into a problem because of the verses immediately following in Exodus 21:7-11, which begin with the instruction “If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do.” It is fairly difficult to spiritualize or allegorize these verses, absolutely requiring us to place them in their ancient context. The Apostles’ service as the *douloi* or *avadim* of the Lord is **not a connection to Exodus 21:1-6**, but rather their association to the previous *avadim* of the Lord who had preceded them such as Moses and the Prophets,⁴² indicating how serious their authority from God actually was.

Just like the man having to sell himself into slavery to pay debts, a father had the right to sell his daughter to a family (Exodus 21:7), presumably because the family was destitute and did not possess the resources to provide for the daughter’s well-being. As Kaiser is clear to point out, “This pericope pertains to a girl who is sold by her father, not for slavery, but for marriage.”⁴³ Such a female, if displeasing in the eyes of her master, had to be let go “redeemed.”⁴⁴ He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her” (Exodus 21:8). Such a female was to be treated as a fellow daughter should the master designate her as a wife for his son (Exodus 21:9), with the stipulation as Sarna indicates, “she would normally be protected from sexual abuse.”⁴⁴ And, should the master choose another woman instead of her as his wife, she was not to be denied life essentials (Exodus 21:10). If the master failed to uphold the terms of the female being sold to him—by refusing to marry her, refusing to give her to his son, or refusing her to be redeemed—then she could go away without having to pay him anything (Exodus 21:11).

Perhaps the closest parallel that we see in more modern times would be the practice of arranged marriages adhered to in many cultures, where marriages between families have more do to with the maintenance of property and/or strategic alliances than romantic love. This does not mean that love is a factor that

⁴⁰ Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 444.

⁴¹ Luke 2:29; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Jude 1; Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 2:7; Colossians 1:7; 4:7; 2 Timothy 2:24; Titus 1:1; Revelation 1:1; 15:3.

⁴² Exodus 14:31; Numbers 12:7; 2 Kings 18:12; Jeremiah 25:4; Ezekiel 38:7; Amos 3:7; Zechariah 1:6; Daniel 9:6; Psalm 60:26.

⁴³ Walter C. Kaiser, “Exodus,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:430.

⁴⁴ Sarna, *Exodus*, 121.

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is not there (think Queen Victoria and Prince Albert), but love may not be the immediate motivation. Some sectors of European royalty can easily come to mind, particularly in the close relationship of royals from the weak German states historically having a link with the British crown by providing (Protestant) royal spouses for princes and princesses. Likewise, consider the role of a nanny or a tutor being permanently connected to aristocratic and/or well-to-do families as part of the extended household. Exodus 21:7-11 is best thought of in this kind of context. Today, however, due to the advances in economy in the Western world, Exodus 21:7-11 has few parallels due to the ease of getting a paying job and welfare programs offered by the state. People do not often have to be “married out” to ensure their well-being. Nevertheless, the Torah’s instructions seen in Exodus 21:1-11 about “slavery” did have some differences when compared to other law codes of the same period.

There is no indication in the Torah that its slavery was to be encouraged as a permanent practice for Ancient Israel; it is simply regulated as a practice that existed, having been available to those one step below utter poverty. So we should not be surprised, especially with the emphasis of equality for all that we see in the Apostolic Scriptures (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11), that for the first Believers in Yeshua slavery was a practice that *was on the way out*. In fact, speaking about a generation before Yeshua, the great Sage Rabbi Hillel said, “lots of slave girls, lots of lust; lots of slave boys, lots of robbery” (m.*Avot* 2:7)⁴⁵—largely negative words on the practice. Such sentiments no doubt affected the Apostle Paul, having been a member of the School of Hillel (cf. Acts 22:3).

By the Apostolic era, the ancient economy and banking had improved so that it was much easier for people to acquire jobs in the more “cosmopolitan” sense of the word, even though some would be closely attached to various households as servants. While some Jews during the time of Yeshua owned slaves in the First Centuries B.C.E and C.E,⁴⁶ by no means did slaves ever become the kind of force like they were for the Ancient Egyptians, as they served much more menial functions. The New Testament reflects a rather progressive view when it regards Believers in Yeshua owning slaves, and does not encourage Believers to own other Believers. Slaves who believed in Yeshua were to not be disobedient to their masters who did not believe, but they were to demonstrate proper character because of their faith (Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; 1 Timothy 6:1).

The Messianic Writings do envision the day when members of the community of Believers in Yeshua would never have to sell themselves into servitude. Instead, all are to be treated as fellow brothers and sisters, and the *ekklēsia* is to provide for the needs of the destitute. Acts 2:45 attests that the first Believers “sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.” Paul’s instruction to Philemon regarding the runaway slave Onesimus is, “perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 15-

⁴⁵ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 676.

⁴⁶ Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *A Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 590.

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16).⁴⁷ The New Testament undeniably sees the time when all human beings will be emancipated (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:21), and any Messianic today who would argue that slavery is a practice still to be followed—seeking justification from the Torah to do so—is taking the Torah out of its ancient context *and* is forgetting the trajectory of the Scriptures back to the equal status of all human beings as seen in Eden.

The Pentateuchal laws of slavery can actually teach us some important things about how radical the Torah was for the Ancient Israelites to follow, when compared against the law codes of some of their neighbors. It can teach us important things about the character of God, as well as a steady plan to restore humanity back to its original condition. But, such Torah commandments regarding slavery are very clearly case laws that were given for a different time and a different economic environment, and they cannot be followed today.⁴⁸ Other than deriving principles on the great respect the Torah shows for others in low social straits, the Messianic movement must stand with the *halachah* of today's Jewish Synagogue whereby these commandments cannot be followed in the economy of the modern world.

Issue #4: Lying today

The Ninth Commandment is a fairly direct injunction against lying: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20). The Book of Proverbs issues many injunctions against a false witness, including, “A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will not escape” (19:5); “A false witness will perish, but the man who listens to the truth will speak forever” (21:28); and “Like a club and a sword and a sharp arrow is a man who bears false witness against his neighbor” (25:18). It is not stereotypical to say that those who lie to others almost always have malicious intent behind what they say—or do not say. The witness of the Scriptures is clear that those who lie against God will pay for it, as is evident by the example of Ananias and Sapphira:

“But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?’ And she said, ‘Yes, that was the price.’ Then Peter *said* to her, ‘Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your

⁴⁷ Consult the entry for the Epistle to Philemon in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

⁴⁸ Cf. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 97-98.

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husband are at the door, and they will carry you out *as well*.' And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband" (Acts 5:1-10).

The context of the death of Ananias and Sapphira is that they committed to selling a piece of property, and then to give all of the money to the efforts of the Believers. They did not give all of the money, and then they lied to the Holy Spirit when confronted by the Apostle Peter—*so they died*. So why is it important that we discuss the subject of "lying"? What makes this a frequently avoided issue in the Torah for today's Messianics? Is it not a straightforward matter in the Scriptures?

One of the biggest ethical issues in both Jewish and Christian Bible teaching concerns those instances when it is, in fact, justified to *not* tell the truth. Now, atheists and agnostics who oppose the Ten Commandments being displayed in a court room will still advocate that telling the truth under oath is required in a court of justice—but that is not the issue at stake here. The issue at stake here is not lying to the Holy Spirit, nor even to fellow Believers should one be confronted with a sin or inappropriate action. The issue at stake here is whether there are ever exceptions to the rule, and determining what those exceptions might be.

It is not that surprising that a place Messianics encounter very early in the Torah cycle, in *Lech Lecha* (Genesis 12:1-17:27), actually includes an ethical controversy that we frequently avoid. The Patriarch Abraham and his extended company are forced to move to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan, and while they enter into Egypt, Abraham instructs his wife Sarah, "Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you" (Genesis 12:13). Here, Abraham actually tells his wife *to lie* to the Egyptians! Why?

In Genesis 26:5 the Lord says "Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws," which although were certainly added to at Mount Sinai with Israel-specific ordinances, surely at the time included an understanding of telling the truth. This is a basic precept which all major cultures, even those sitting outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, highly value. Why did Abraham tell his wife to lie to the Egyptians, saying that she was his sister and not his wife?

It may be that there is an historical explanation for Abraham wanting Sarah to say this, particularly as it regarded his own life. J.H. Hertz comments, "To kill the husband in order to possess the wife seems to have been a common royal custom in those days. A papyrus tells of a Pharaoh who, acting on the advice of one of his princes, sent armed men to fetch a beautiful woman and make away with her husband."⁴⁹ Surely enough we see that "the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house" (Genesis 12:14-15). While it may be said that Abraham had a lack of faith for God to protect him, after Sarah is taken into the Pharaoh's house a plague hits and Abraham and his company leave Egypt unharmed (Genesis 12:17-20).

Rabbis and theologians have wrestled for centuries with the question of whether or not there are justified times to lie, particularly when one's life is on the line. The Jewish concept of *Pikku'ach Nefesh* or Regard for Human Life allows for

⁴⁹ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 47.

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any commandment of the Torah to be broken, save those prohibiting idolatry, in order for a life to be saved. Lying about one's Jewish background to Nazis would clearly fall under this category. Lying about one's Israeli citizenship to hostile Muslims would also apply. Likewise, many Christians of the Second-Fourth Centuries lied to the Romans in order to avoid persecution. While these may be some extreme examples, they are nonetheless examples that cannot be excluded from future Messianic examinations of Biblical ethics—and whether or not there are justified instances for Messianic Jews to lie to other Jews that they believe in Yeshua. Our Lord does clearly say, “But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 10:33). Clearly, questions are being asked of our faith community now that are not easily answered. And, this issue will become even more complicated as the return of Yeshua draws near, and with it the prophesied despotic reign of the antimessiah/antichrist.

Issue #5: Animal Sacrifice

ancient times

Believers in Yeshua the Messiah rightly recognize that His sacrifice at Golgotha (Calvary) has changed the dynamics between the original giving of the Torah, and the way things stand today. Hebrews 9:26 affirms, “at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself,” specifically “having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time” (Hebrews 10:12). While we will not sacrifice animals for the atonement of our sin—even though the Millennial Kingdom Temple described in Ezekiel chs. 40-44 does depict memorial animal sacrifices occurring—Messianic Torah studies will nevertheless encounter animal sacrifices. Animal sacrifice was a very important part of the Tabernacle service, and makes up a considerable part of the Books of Leviticus and Numbers in the Pentateuch.⁵⁰ It makes up a part of the Jerusalem Temple service (cf. Romans 9:4), and would have served as a memorial for the Jewish Believers of the sacrifice of Yeshua in the period after His resurrection (cf. Acts 3:1).

It is not that surprising why there are not detailed studies by today's Messianics on the sacrificial system of the Torah, even though it does possess shadows of the final sacrifice of Yeshua (Hebrews 10:1). Even the Jewish Synagogue and Christian Church have difficulty with this part of the Torah, “for the two traditions have both been attracted to and repelled by the image of slain animals being offered up within the sacred precincts” (ABD).⁵¹ It is much easier for all of us to go right to the declarations of the Prophets who often denounce what would become much of Ancient Israel's hollow attempt at sacrificing animals: “‘What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?’ says the LORD. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats’” (Isaiah 1:11). While the Prophets' words of improper sacrifice are all too valid—they can lose their significance if one does not have some kind of knowledge of the sacrificial system of the Torah.

It is entirely inappropriate for anyone examining the Torah to think of animal sacrifices in broad terms, as there are a variety of specific types of sacrifices specified in its instruction to Ancient Israel. Leviticus chs. 1-7 lay out some of the

⁵⁰ Consult the entries for the Books of Leviticus and Numbers in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

⁵¹ Gary A. Anderson “Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings (OT),” in *ABD*, 5:871.

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general rules for animal sacrifice, specifically “where to bring the animal, how to lay on hands, where to kill it, how to handle its blood, how to prepare the altar, and what to burn on the altar” (*EDB*).⁵² These chapters conclude with the word, “This is the law of the burnt offering, the grain offering and the sin offering and the guilt offering and the ordination offering and the sacrifice of peace offerings, which the LORD commanded Moses at Mount Sinai in the day that He commanded the sons of Israel to present their offerings to the LORD in the wilderness of Sinai” (Leviticus 7:37-38). There were specific procedures to be followed, indicating the sacredness of this practice.

Occasions for animal sacrifice as seen in the Torah can be divided among three general categories: (1) the ordinations of the priests and Levites (Leviticus 8-9; Numbers 8), and the dedication of the Tabernacle (Numbers 7); (2) the sacred festivals and daily burnt offering (Leviticus 16, 23; Numbers 28-29); and (3) rituals pertaining to the life cycle such as childbirth (Leviticus 12), leprosy (Leviticus 13-14), a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6), impurity (Leviticus 15:13-15), and corpse defilement (Numbers 19). Knowing this provides an appropriate framework for the times we see in the Torah when animals were to be sacrificed, as indeed the instructions are very specific. Animals were to be of a very high and distinct quality, thus constituting a “sacrifice,” as many of them had to be offered as some kind of “covering” for the wrongdoings of human people (cf. Leviticus 17:11). It is important that each of us keep in mind that for an agrarian society as Ancient Israel, animals of high quality constituted the wealth of many people. To a certain extent, killing such animals would not be that dissimilar from burning paper money today!

There are four main types of animal sacrifice that are detailed in the Torah, including:

1. a burnt offering or *olah* (עֹלָה)
2. peace offerings or *shelamim* (שְׁלָמִים)
3. a purification offering or *chattat* (חַטָּאת)
4. a reparation offering or *asham* (אַשָׁם)

We are at a disadvantage in the Twenty-First Century, because animals do not often make up the livelihood and wealth of modern persons the same way as they did the ancients. Animal sacrifice was by no means something limited to the Ancient Israelites, and even the Greeks and Romans to whom the Apostles ministered in the First Century would have had a better idea about its significance than we usually do. When Messianics encounter things like the *olah* (Leviticus 1; 6:8-13; Numbers 15:1-10), various *shelamim* (Leviticus 3; 7:11-34), the *chattat* (Leviticus 4:1-5:1; 6:24-30), or the *asham* (Leviticus 5:14-6:7; 7:1-7)—we often have no idea what to do because we are so removed from the time of the events. While it is absolutely true that the repetition of these various animal sacrifices, whether offered for the restitution of some crime or sin, does point to our corporate need of Yeshua’s final sacrifice—we can still miss the point of why these sacrifices were prescribed in God’s Law for the time prior to Yeshua. We can often miss out on a great deal of what Moses was instructing the Ancient Israelites, and the role that animal sacrifice would have played in the economy of the ancient period. **It may be**

⁵² Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifices and Offerings,” in *EDB*, 1149.

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that all that can be said right now is that our paying attention to detail in this area needs improvement.⁵³

When surveying the specific instructions regarding animal sacrifice in Leviticus and Numbers, you should be struck by the fact that the quality of the animals has to be very high. A frequent term used in the Hebrew text to describe this quality is *tamim* (תָּמִים), which can mean either “complete, unscathed, intact,” or “without fault, free of blemish” (*HALOT*).⁵⁴ In a non-cultic sense, *tamim* is employed in Deuteronomy 18:13 where “You shall be blameless [*tamim*] before the LORD your God,” describing the moral character of God’s people.

Just as the animals that were to be offered in their stead were to be “blameless,” so are God’s people to be blameless. The Apostle Paul, in all likelihood reflecting on the sacrificial system of the Torah, wrote the Romans, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship*” (Romans 12:1). This was not just a statement about the need to be living in obedience to the Lord, worshipping and serving Him—but just as the animals offered in the Tabernacle and Temple were to be of the highest quality, *so were they!* Just as the animals offered in sacrifice had to be *tamim*, so are Believers to be *tamim*. This is especially true of anyone who serves God’s people in the *ekklēsia* in a formal ministry capacity—as such individuals are to be of the right spiritual temperament, possessing discernment, wisdom, knowledge, the intelligence and reasoning capacity, and even the training to serve Him in such a position well. Connecting the sacrificial system in Leviticus and Numbers, Romans 12:1, and with these themes will undoubtedly be a very important thing for the future Messianic movement.

Issue #6: Genocide

ancient times

One of the most significant claims against the Tanach, particularly as argued by both critics of the Bible and liberal theologians, is that the Old Testament portrays a God who is intent on killing everyone who opposes Him. It does not take that much to find that a great deal of criticism against the Bible is focused around the view that the Lord is genocidal, telling the Ancient Israelites to move into a location and utterly decimate a population and its property. Much of the Messianic movement has made a mistake in failing to address these issues from a proper, conservative perspective that seeks to understand whether or not God is really “genocidal.”

While there are some significant examples in the Pentateuch that are often argued as being “genocidal,” from the Flood of Genesis 6-8⁵⁵ to the judgment on the

⁵³ For further reading on the kinds of animal sacrifices seen in the Torah, consult E.E. Carpenter, “Sacrifices and Offerings in the OT,” in *ISBE*, 4:268-269; and R.E. Averbeck, “Sacrifices and Offerings,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 710-722.

⁵⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:1749.

Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23; 5:15, 18, 25; 22:19, 21; 23:12; Numbers 6:14.

⁵⁵ For a theological analysis of the Genesis 6-8 Flood, consult the article “Encountering Mythology: A Case Study from the Flood Narratives” by J.K. McKee. This article compares and contrasts the Genesis 6-8 Flood with the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh.

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firstborn of Egypt (Exodus 11-12)⁵⁶—both of which may be classified as “acts of God”—what should concern us the most regarding “genocide” is seen in the Book of Deuteronomy as Ancient Israel prepares to take the Promised Land:

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2).

For a God who has just called His people to love Him in the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-6), it is no wonder why this kind of instruction is often overlooked in our reading of *V'et'chanan* (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11). But it is clear that if our engagement with Biblical Studies is to improve, these kinds of issues cannot be avoided any more. The verb *charam* (חָרַם), occurring in the Hifil stem (casual action, active voice), means “ban, devote, exterminate” (BDB),⁵⁷ and appears twice in v. 2: *hacharem tacharim otam* (חָרַם תַּחַרְיִם אֹתָם) or “doom them to destruction” (NJPS). Deuteronomy 7:22-26 further details,

“The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to put an end to them quickly, for the wild beasts would grow too numerous for you. But the LORD your God will deliver them before you, and will throw them into great confusion until they are destroyed. He will deliver their kings into your hand so that you will make their name perish from under heaven; no man will be able to stand before you until you have destroyed them. The graven images of their gods you are to burn with fire; you shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, or you will be snared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. You shall not bring an abomination into your house, and like it come under the ban; you shall utterly detest it and you shall utterly abhor it, for it is something banned.”

In this case, we see some of the reasons why the Lord commands Ancient Israel to go and wipe out the inhabitant nations of Canaan—He does not want the Israelites to adopt their religious worship. Those who would flippantly accuse God of being “genocidal” do not often consider *why* He commands the Israelites to go in and wipe out those inhabitant nations. Deuteronomy 9:5-6 gives us the reason why:

“It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, **but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations** that the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Know, then, *it is* not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people.”

Here, it is plainly stated *ki b'rishat ha'goyim ha'eleh* (כִּי בְרִשְׁעַת הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה), “because of the wickedness of these nations” that God is going to exterminate them from the Promised Land. Before this word is delivered in Deuteronomy, this great wickedness has already been detailed in Leviticus 18, where the Lord says “You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, **nor are you to do**

⁵⁶ It must be noted here that in the Book of Exodus the Egyptians had ample warning from God before this significant judgment was dispensed upon them.

⁵⁷ BDB, 355.

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what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes” (Leviticus 18:3). This chapter primarily prohibits various sexual activities: males are not to have intercourse with their mothers (Leviticus 18:7) or sisters (Leviticus 18:9) or aunts (Leviticus 18:12-13), and both homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22) and bestiality (Leviticus 18:23) are strictly forbidden. Perhaps of most significance to the Israelites entering into Canaan is Leviticus 18:21: “You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.”

The worship of the Canaanite deity Molech was a most serious sin that the Ancient Israelites were not to fall prey to, and was something that was quite ancient even before the time of Moses. Molech worship usually involved child sacrifice, and while there was variation in how it was performed, “It is usually assumed that children were thrown into a furnace or fire as part of a ceremony, though whether they were killed or made insensitive is uncertain” (*ISBE*).⁵⁸ It is sometimes thought that the screaming cries of an infant burning alive were meant to be the worship of the deity. The brutal murder of innocent children to this god, and the utter corruption it brought to Canaanite society, are undeniably some of the reasons why God would have told Israel to move in and wipe them out. The Canaanites being wiped out **had nothing to do with the Israelites**; it had everything to do with themselves!

Unfortunately, the witness of the Book of Joshua is that not all of the Canaanites were able to be removed from the Promised Land,⁵⁹ and so the Patriarch Joshua admonished Israel before dying: “Be very firm, then, to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, so that you may not turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you will not associate with these nations, these which remain among you, or mention the name of their gods, or make *anyone* swear *by them*, or serve them, or bow down to them” (Joshua 23:6-7). The later testimony of 1&2 Kings shows that in failing to purge all of the ungodly influences from the Promised Land, the sin of Molech worship was a major factor in seeing the United Kingdom of Israel divide (1 Kings 11:7ff), and the kings of *both* the Northern and Southern Kingdoms did in fact offer their own children to the fire (2 Kings 16:3; 17:17, 31; 21:6; cf. 2 Chronicles 28:3).

It is very difficult for any of us to comprehend a loving God commanding His chosen people to utterly exterminate another people—especially today when we look back at a Jewish history complete with Hitler’s Holocaust. But apparently the sin of the Canaanites had been so abhorrent in the eyes of the Lord, that similar to the judgment issued upon Sodom and Gomorrah, the Israelites were to eliminate this influence from the Promised Land. And surprisingly enough, as we view these events within a much larger canonical context, eliminating the Canaanites as seen throughout much of Joshua may actually be *an example of God’s mercy*. It can be an example of mercy for the people, as Revelation 20:12 says the unrighteous condemned are to be judged “according to their deeds.”⁶⁰ They do not all receive the same degree of punishment in the Lake of Fire. So in the case of the Canaanites, by the Israelites eliminating them with occupying the Promised Land,

⁵⁸ R.K. Harrison, “Molech,” in *ISBE*, 3:401.

⁵⁹ Consult the entry for the Book of Joshua in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

⁶⁰ For a further discussion of this, and related issues, consult the publication *Why Hell Must Be Eternal* by J.K. McKee.

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they did in fact stop the Canaanites from receiving any further eternal judgment by Almighty God.

Our improvement for understanding the issue of Divine “genocide” can only take place by Messianics understanding the religious depravity of the Ancient Canaanites and their possible influence on the Ancient Israelites. When we can stop avoiding this issue and comprehend the deplorable practice of Molech worship and its child sacrifice, we can then understand how important the Torah’s regulations on wiping them out would have been. This was by no means the kind of worship that God wanted His chosen people to practice, but the sad testimony of later sections of the Tanach is that they *actually did*.⁶¹

Issue #7: Development and Advances of Gender Relations today

A significant part of the trajectory built into the Scriptures is the equalizing of the male and female genders (Galatians 3:28), and the wholesale avoidance of this issue is seen in the vast majority of the Messianic movement. In the opening chapters of the Torah, male and female are depicted as being fully equal in the Garden of Eden, yet as a consequence of the Fall such equal status became inevitably skewed. The man was made first,⁶² but was lonely and needed “a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18) or an *ezer kenegdo* (עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ). In its various forms, the root *a-z-r* (עזר) regards various functions of “help,” perhaps most significantly as its verb form is “Used approximately eighty times in the OT, ‘*azar* generally indicates military assistance” (TWOT).⁶³ The creation of the woman to help the man was not just as some “helpmate,” but rather to give the man a significant ally for the challenges he would face in life.

Eve had not been properly taught by her husband the full consequences of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and she was deceived by the serpent (cf. Genesis 3:1-6, 13). When Adam eats the forbidden fruit himself and is confronted by the Lord, he falsely thinks that he can blame his wife for handing it to him (Genesis 3:12). Even though man and woman are cursed by their sin, and are forced out of the Garden, the promise of redemption is provided (Genesis 3:15). But there is also a word given in that childbirth for the woman from that point would be quite painful, and as most Bibles render it, “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Genesis 3:16, NASU). It is often believed that this is Biblical justification for male dominance over women, who will just have no choice but to “desire” men.

⁶¹ For a further review of this debated topic, it might be useful to consider some of the perspectives present in C.S. Cowles, Eugene Merrill, Daniel Card, and Tremper Longman III, *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁶² God’s creation of the male first, and His own portrayal as male in Genesis, directly combated pagan teaching of the Ancient Near East (i.e., the Mesopotamian creation myth *Atrahasis*) where the first humans were birthed by a mother goddess. The Genesis 1-3 account runs completely contrary to this, as man and woman are made by the Lord *ex nihilo* or out of nothing (cf. Hebrews 11:3). Females must join with males in order to conceive a child, similar to how the womb-goddess must give birth. But from the Biblical point of view, God portrayed as male cannot give birth. On the contrary, He must create the first two human beings out of nothing. The male being made first by no means is an indication that females are somehow “worthless.”

⁶³ Carl Schultz, “עֵזֶר,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:660.

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The Hebrew text of Genesis 3:16 employs a rare word, *teshuqah* (תִּשְׁוָקָה), that the woman will possess. It is used only one other time in Genesis, when the Lord tells Cain, “sin is crouching at the door; and its desire [*teshuqah*] is for you, but you must master it” (Genesis 4:7).⁶⁴ Hamilton rightly comments, “the desire of the woman for her husband is akin to the desire of sin that lies poised ready to leap at Cain. It means a desire to break the relationship of equality and turn it into a relationship of servitude and domination. The sinful husband will try to be a tyrant over his wife. Far from being a reign of co-equals over the remainder of God’s creation, the relationship now becomes a fierce dispute, with each party trying to rule the other. The two who reigned as one attempt to rule each other.”⁶⁵ Far be it from this “desire” or “urge” (NJPS) being a good thing—it is a very bad thing! The husband, one who is physically stronger than the wife, will have no choice but to overpower her in such a situation. So clearly, knowing that Yeshua has now been sacrificed in fulfillment of the prophetic word to Eve that the Seed of the woman would bruise the serpent (Genesis 3:15), man and woman are to now be “one in Messiah Yeshua” (Galatians 3:28). **They are not to be locked in a bitter struggle against one another!**

The difficulty for many in understanding the remainder of the Torah is that it does depict Patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and later the Ancient Israelites, in a society that is dominated by men. In the past decade, significant parts of the Messianic world have found themselves entering back into that struggle of the woman wanting to dominate the man, and then the man forcibly ruling over the woman *and then shoving her into the corner*. Not enough men in our faith community understand that the Torah lays the first stepping stones back to the male and female equality, and shared responsibility, as originally experienced in Eden by Adam and Eve. Few are willing to discuss the fact that the work of Messiah Yeshua has inaugurated a new status of equality for the sexes. The condition as seen in Eden before the Fall is a condition that is to be seen in marriage relationships today, with a husband and wife in submission to one another as equal partners (Ephesians 5:21-28), with both guided by the Holy Spirit, in alliance with one another as they face the challenges of life.

When set against its ANE context, the Pentateuch actually lays forth some commandments that were absolutely radical for their time, affording women a wide array of considerable rights—and demanding some important things of men to respect them. The great civilizations of the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians, as well as the varied Canaanite city-states, all had religious practices focused around some kind of sexual rites. It is no surprise why proper sexuality between men and women plays an important part of the Torah’s instruction for Israel, not only for the women to be respected as human beings—but also for the men to control themselves.

The Lord asks males among His people not to have sexual relations during a woman’s menstrual cycle (Leviticus 20:18). While some might consider such a request to be burdensome, per our “sexually liberated” post-modernist world, this is actually quite respectful to the woman. The period of a woman’s menstruation is one of the most uncomfortable periods of the month for her. Far be it from sexual

⁶⁴ *Teshuqah* is more properly rendered as “urge” in the NJPS: “Yet your urge [*teshuqah*] shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16b).

⁶⁵ Hamilton, 202.

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intercourse being something that can be practiced *whenever couples want*, the Torah does place some restrictions on it so it can be a very rewarding, fulfilling, and indeed pleasurable time between a husband and wife. This is why Hertz is able to rightly assert, “While recognizing the sacred nature of the estate of wedlock, Judaism prescribes continence even in marriage...It categorically demands reserve, self-control, and moral freedom in the most intimate relations of life. It ordains the utmost consideration for the wife...throughout the monthly period.”⁶⁶

This particular sexual prohibition in the Torah forces the husband to actually respect his wife as a fellow human being and an equal person. Women are by no means to be treated as sex objects in the Torah, a venue by which a man is only to find physical fulfillment. Males in the Torah have a permanent reminder on their penises via their circumcision, as a sign of God's everlasting covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-11). While a sign that they are connected to the Patriarch, John Goldingay is right to remind us, “it does draw attention to the need for their sexual activity to be disciplined and dedicated to God....Men [often] fail in this realm of their lives” and thus “The covenant sign becomes the covenant indictment and the covenant shame upon men. It is a mark of failure as much as a mark of status.”⁶⁷ It is up to the man to determine whether the *ot b'rit* (אֹת בְּרִית) is a sign of honor or dishonor upon him.

Knowing the original condition of Adam and Eve before the Fall is very important, because the story that we see in the Torah is a steady progression back toward the equal status of the genders that was originally seen in Eden. The Torah does not at all treat women as simply property to be bought or sold. For an era where property could only be transferred to and from men, the daughters of Zelophehad went before Moses in the wilderness, as their father died without any sons. The Lord grants Moses the right to say, “If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter” (Numbers 27:8). The daughters were given the right to the *achuzat nachalah* (אֲחֻזַּת נַחֲלָה) or “hereditary possession” (Numbers 27:7). Ronald B. Allen makes the important observation, “The point seems to be that not only would they receive the property, they could transfer it to their heirs as well. Thus they share with the sons of the other fathers who were deceased. It is as though their father had had sons!”⁶⁸ Such rights were often unheard of among Israel's contemporaries during this period, unless one was a female member of a ruling family (and hence considered either divine or semi-divine).⁶⁹

Many Messianic men do rightfully show respect toward women, recognizing that the Torah requires husbands to treat wives with honor. They know that the sexual estate is something that must be kept in high regard, that a woman is to be treated with sensitivity during her menstruation time, and even that the Torah

⁶⁶ Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 491.

⁶⁷ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp 202, 203.

⁶⁸ Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in *EXP*, 2:943.

⁶⁹ An exception to this does appear in the Code of Hammurabi: “He may, however, transfer in writing a field, garden, or house, which he has acquired by purchase, and possesses, to his wife or daughter, or may assign for debt” (Davies, 39). It seems that women having these kinds of rights may be more of a Mesopotamian legal tradition than that seen among Israel's more immediate neighbors, reminding us that the Patriarch Abraham and his company did originate from this region, likely bringing with them some social customs that would later appear in the Torah.

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affords considerable inheritance rights to women. Yet even while acknowledging some kind of limited equality with females (or even a minimalist complementarian model), many Messianic husbands have taken the instructions of Numbers 30 as being some kind of “reserve powers” for them, *only* afforded to males. When it is believed that the male “headship” of a family means that the man has the final word (as opposed to the “head” [Heb. *rosh*, ראש; Grk. *kephalē*, κεφαλή] being the source like the *headwaters* of a river, as the Son comes from the Father, and Eve came from Adam),⁷⁰ this gets complicated. While husbands and fathers should surely be there to support their wives and children when mistakes are made by them, who is there to support the husband when he makes an egregious error? Is he on his own and alone?

Numbers 30:1-2 lays forth the requirement that if a man makes a vow to God, or some other kind of “binding obligation,” he must follow through on the commitment. Yet, the following instruction in Numbers 30:3-5 allows a father to cancel the word of his daughter should he hear it and not agree with it, which is later extended to her future husband (Numbers 30:6-9). This is followed by Numbers 30:10-14 which allows a husband to cancel the word of his wife, should he disagree. Widows or divorced women, however, are on their own with what they say, being accountable solely to themselves (Numbers 30:10).

Few of today’s Messianic men make the effort to place themselves in the position of the people living in Ancient Israel, to whom these instructions were originally given. Here, we plainly see that a wife is given the ability to make a vow to God, or commit herself (and by extension her household) to some kind of obligation. Allen indicates that this marks “the beginning of a movement to bring more personal freedom to women, but there are also numerous breaks applied here and there. This chapter is one of several that indicates that a change is in the works, even though the change is somewhat far off.”⁷¹ Very seldom would a woman in the Ancient Near East even be allowed to make a vow to a deity, much less be responsible for making agreements on behalf of her household (cf. Proverbs 31:13-17). The regulations that permit a husband or father to cancel the commitment of a wife or daughter were issued to protect females from undo harm against a social background whereby they could be easily taken advantage of as the physically weaker sex.

The challenge today in the Messianic world is that the instructions of Numbers 30 are sometimes used to place a great deal of undo pressure on wives, who in some cases are in fear of their husbands and what they say to them. This runs into problems, especially when women often have greater freedom and opportunities in conservative Jewish and evangelical Christian arenas when compared to the Messianic movement. Is the Messianic community unable to see that we are not living in the same kind of society as the Ancient Israelites? If a husband and wife *are truly experiencing oneness* in a marriage relationship, always communicating in dialogue with one another, being filled with God’s Spirit—especially given the restored status of equality via the work of Yeshua—then

⁷⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:3.

See the comments in Loren Cunningham and David Joel Hamilton, *Why Not Women? A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (Seattle: YWAM Publishing, 2000), pp 163-170.

⁷¹ Allen, in *EXP*, 2:958.

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extending the power of a husband to cancel his wife's words *should now* clearly be given to the wife who can cancel her husband's words, at the very least being able to counsel him. The significance of the Torah's instruction in Numbers 30 for ancient times remains intact, but the changes brought in by the Messiah now alter its application.

You have to remember that the bulk of the commitments a wife would have made in the context of Numbers 30 largely concerned a family's property. If a wife agreed to trade thirty high quality goats for twenty sub-standard sheep with another family, and the husband found out about it, clearly canceling the agreement would be in order. In a similar way, most wives who would cancel the words of their husbands today concern agreements that are made with incomplete information. If a husband commits himself and his wife to go to a dinner party on a certain evening, and the wife finding out about this knows that this conflicts with previous plans, can the wife cancel the commitment of her husband? In too much of today's Messianic community—no. And if the husband really makes an egregious commitment that will be harmful to the family (and its finances), should a wife just keep quiet and allow her husband to do something foolish because he is a man and she is not? In the Messianic community of tomorrow that I am working for, wives need not correct the mistakes of their husbands with fear. Just as a husband should be there to serve his wife, backing her up when she falters—**so should a godly wife be there to serve her husband, providing support for him as an ally when he falters!**

Recognizing the equality of males and females that the work of Yeshua has restored, especially in a Messianic movement dominated by men (and sometimes even by blatant chauvinism), is not going to be easy. Being Torah observant in this framework will force us to reevaluate the contextual situations of various Torah commandments, and see how the Torah's revelation began the process back to the oneness Adam and Eve were to experience in paradise. The process of inaugurating an egalitarian Messianic movement, where women are allowed equal responsibilities along with men, will not necessarily advance with our women demanding fair treatment from our men—but rather with *our men* demanding fair treatment of our women. While men such as myself may be harassed at first for demanding fair treatment of our women, perhaps even accused as being “feminists,” we have a responsibility to uphold the original example of Adam and Eve as something husbands and wives should strive to attain in their marriages.⁷²

“It will be righteousness for us...”

There are certainly *more* than seven frequently avoided issues that Messianics encounter in the Torah, but the issues that we have just examined are those which I know we especially cannot avoid any longer. I believe in the potential that the Messianic movement has to be a force for greater holiness and righteousness in the

⁷² The issue of Messianic egalitarianism is not easily addressed in a single article. Much more needs to be discussed over time. Consult the FAQ entry on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Women in Ministry,” and the relevant sections of the commentaries *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* and *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

You may be interested to read *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, ed. James R. Beck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), which summarizes some of the issues on the agenda that evangelical Christianity is currently struggling with—and the Messianic movement is soon to struggle with.

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world today, properly emphasizing a Torah foundation for our faith practice—but in order to be that force we **must have a more significant level of engagement with the Biblical text**. When controversial things arise, we cannot put our fingers in our ears or hide under our beds any more, acting as though the issues will go away. Instead, we need to realize that the Lord may have something to teach us about why Yeshua had to come die for us, and how salvation history (Ger. *Heilsgeschichte*) has steadily moved forward.

No single person can be redeemed via his or her obedience to the Torah. Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it quite clear, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Yet the following verse, Ephesians 2:10, is often not quoted: “For we are His workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” Good works, obedience to God’s Torah, are to follow the salvation experience as the New Covenant is enacted within the hearts of His people (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Hebrews 8:8-12) as part of the sanctification process. Having a mind empowered by the Holy Spirit will give us the reasoning capacity we need to sort through those apodictic areas of the Torah which never change no matter the circumstances, and those casuistic areas of the Torah which regulated ancient circumstances.

A few in today’s Messianic movement actually (and quite foolishly) believe that their Torah observance will merit them eternal life. Does not Leviticus 18:5 say, “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD?” The problem with this is not the declaration of Leviticus 18:5; it is that Leviticus 18 is concerned with proper sexual relations and the capital punishment enacted upon those who violate the prohibitions given. The promise of “life” concerns daily living within the sphere of God’s commandments—not some future promise of eternal life. If a person in Ancient Israel followed these commandments they would not merit the punishment of the death penalty and would thus “live”; more importantly the principle served is that if God’s commandments are followed, then a man or woman will experience a high quality of life lived out on Earth, within the sphere of His blessing.⁷³ This is to be contrasted with Habakkuk 2:4 which says “the righteous will live by his faith” in the Lord, as opposed to one who looks to man-made idols (Habakkuk 2:18-19), where eternal life in His presence *is* in fact the issue.

But what about Deuteronomy 6:24-25? If I perfectly keep the Torah will it not be righteousness to me? In Deuteronomy 6:24-25, one does find a statement of commitment made on the part of the Ancient Israelites. They declare before God, “So the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God for our good always and for our survival, as *it is* today. It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us.”

V. 25 is a bit more complicated, as the Ancient Israelites do say to the Lord *u'tzedaqah tih'yeh lanu* (וְצִדְקָה תִּהְיֶה לָנוּ), “and righteousness it is for us” (YLT) if they were to observe all of God’s commandments. To some people, this might present the opportunity that if one were to observe all of God’s commandments, then it is possible to be righteous on the basis of such Torah-keeping or Law-

⁷³ Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Leviticus 18:5.”

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keeping. Yet, if this is a possibility, then it is also notable that *nowhere in Biblical history* was Ancient Israel ever able to do this. The testimony of the Tanach (and even much of the Torah itself) is clear evidence that a fallen human person is **incapable of living up to the requirement of v. 25** (cf. Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Romans 3:10). This is why a Divine Redeemer, Yeshua the Messiah, is understood in Romans 10:4 to be the *telos...nomou...eis dikaiosunēn* (τέλος ...νόμουεις δικαιοσύνην) or “the goal of the Torah for righteousness” (author’s translation). Those desiring the righteousness the Torah requires of God’s people must look to Yeshua as the source (Philippians 3:9).

There is another view of Deuteronomy 6:25 which need not be overlooked. The Hebrew *tzedaqah* (תְּצַדִּיק) or “righteousness” has *corporate* dimensions that concern all of God’s people. Having *tzedaqah* in this case would not regard being individually “righteous” or “justified,” but simply being in covenant membership with the Lord and with other members of His community. *TWOT* explains some often overlooked aspects of this term,

“The covenant or theocratic aspect involves the nation of Israel, the covenant requires obedience to God by the nation and is the way of his people (Psa 1:1-6; Deut 6:25), a way of righteousness. God is righteous, under the covenant, when he delivers his people from trouble (Psa 31:1), their enemies (Psa 5:8), the wicked (Psa 37:6) and when he is vindicating Israel before her foes or executing vengeance on them (Jer 11:20). It is appropriate that Israel be assured of ultimate victory over her foes (Isa 54:14-17). In this last event the Lord is both righteous and the savior (Isa 45:21).”⁷⁴

From this point of view, the affirmation on Israel’s part in Deuteronomy 6:25, to keep the Torah’s commandments, could be a reflection on the fact that they will be identified as God’s people by their obedience to Him. By obeying God’s commandments, the Torah was to provide Israel with a society that was safe and prosperous and thus have “righteousness” or “justification”—a corporate identification of being His people and being preserved by Him. Yet, it is also true that in Biblical history, Ancient Israel often failed at this.

Any Messianic teacher today who says that individuals can be righteous just by keeping the Torah is ignoring the whole of Scripture. While the standard of obeying God perfectly is placed before us, it is not something that fallen man is capable of doing. This does not mean that such a standard should be ignored, **but it undoubtedly forces us to Yeshua because of our human incapacity to keep it perfectly.**

James 2:10 is a reflection on our innate human inability to perfectly keep God’s Torah: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all.” We have all done this at one point or another. James 2:10 is an affirmation that without God’s grace and mercy, *available to all via Yeshua*, human beings are indeed in one decrepit state. As we receive Yeshua’s salvation into our lives, we should then be able to understand the significant grace of God that has been demonstrated to us. We should not look for loopholes in regard to obedience to the Lord, but consider what Paul says, “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31, NIV). In “upholding the law,” we are required to be able students of God’s Word, and be

⁷⁴ Harold G. Stigers, “תְּצַדִּיק,” in *TWOT*, 2:754.

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sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit given any changes that have taken place via the unfolding plan of salvation history.

Sadly, it is in this area where much of the Rabbinical tradition has the Messianic movement flat beaten—and it does not even acknowledge Yeshua as Savior! The Jewish Synagogue is actually much better and more mature at recognizing exceptions in the Torah observance of a Jew, than the Messianic movement can be of recognizing exceptions among the Torah observance of its constituents. The Rabbinic principle of *Pikku'ach Nefesh*, for example, allows the Torah to be broken (save commandments against idolatry) when a person's life is at risk. It allows for doctors, police, firefighters, and military to work on the Sabbath—providing for the common safety. *Pikku'ach Nefesh* allows for people to buy medicine on *Shabbat* too. *Pikku'ach Nefesh* even allows for pork to be eaten when no kosher food is available, and a person needs sustenance to extend life (just think how many Jews in World War II survived the concentration camps).

Keeping God's Torah is not intended to merit a person eternal life, but is rather to teach us about His holiness: "The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, as He swore to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9). By understanding His Teaching, a follower can understand "what...the LORD require[s] of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). While it is quite en vogue in the Messianic movement to talk about Yeshua the Messiah as "the Torah made flesh"—this statement should not be made lightly, nor should it be some kind of ethereal remark about our Lord. **Yeshua embodied what the Torah is in His teachings and actions, and modeled for us how we are to be obedient to the Father.**

The Apostle Paul rightly recognized that he was not to have "a righteousness of my own derived from *the Law*, but that which is through faith in Messiah, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:9). This did not make the Torah unimportant as a standard of holiness or proper living (cf. Romans 7:12), but the Torah is completely ineffectual to make a person righteous. The source of a Believer's righteousness is Yeshua the Messiah and the redemption He provides. Obedience to God makes His people holy, and should empower them to perform His purposes in the world. *That is where the Torah comes into play for us as Believers.*

Remembering the Mission

Today's Messianic movement in the early Twenty-First Century does not often possess a coherent vision for the future, nor does it often have a coherent missiology. On the whole, we do not know where we are going, nor do we know how we would even get there were we to know where we are going. The mission for Ancient Israel as stated in Exodus 19:6, "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," prefaced by "for all the earth is Mine" (Exodus 19:5), is not something we commonly hear about in our Torah studies. We do not hear about God's ownership of the entire world, and how Israel was chosen to testify of Him to that world. We do not often inquire of the Holy Spirit how we can make a difference in a world that needs to hear of the salvation of Yeshua. We do not spend enough time wondering how we can be a *Kingdom of Israel maximized* to be

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all of the things He wants us to be, which will lead to the restoration of His people and the return of King Messiah.

We have come to a time where our emerging movement must now consider all of those difficult, frequently avoided issues seen in the Torah. The *two filters* that we must read the Torah through include not only (1) the First Century *halachah* of Yeshua and His Apostles, but also (2) the world of the Ancient Near East in which Moses' Teaching was originally given. As a faith community, it will be difficult for some of us to more readily consult ancient history in our reading of the Pentateuch, the role that *halachah* has played for the Synagogue, and asking ourselves whether various Torah commandments are apodictic or casuistic. Some people think that we, in fact, not only can *but should* return to the world in which the Torah was originally given. Others are keen to emphasize that there have been changes, and believe that we need to ask the question of how Yeshua and His Apostles would follow these commandments were they living among us as Jewish people today. *I personally advocate the latter.* Undoubtedly, a season of some tension will emerge for the Messianic movement as we sort through these, and many other things.

One of the biggest challenges that faces Messianic Biblical Studies is that many of our congregations and fellowships only address the weekly Torah portions. Too many do not even examine the weekly Haftarah reading, much less any other part of the Bible from Joshua-Revelation. ***This is a huge problem that has to stop.*** Addressing the weekly *parashah* is not the problem; ignoring other Scriptures and the totality of God's Word is the problem. The weekly *parashah* has to be placed within a much larger canonical context. While we often accuse our Christian brethren of only examining the New Testament, Messianics are often just as guilty for only examining the Torah. And when they do examine the Torah, how many of the important issues encountered in the Torah are avoided? Surely you will agree that these trends are not good and need to be remedied for the future.

We each need to remember that the Hebrew Tanach, perhaps more than any other document consulted in comparative religion, really demonstrates the base humanity of its chosen people.⁷⁵ When you only read about “the Land” in the Torah, take important notice of the fact that the Ancient Israelites as a corporate people *are never there*. When they do finally get into the Promised Land as seen in Joshua-2 Kings, we immediately see what happens: “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6; 21:25). I believe that the enemy has wanted the Messianic movement *to purposefully stay away* from the remainder of the Tanach so that it will fail to see what happens when the Torah's instructions—specifically some of those frequently avoided issues—are not taken seriously. The Messianic movement is here to fill in a huge gap in today's spirituality—not make the gap wider! The Lord is waiting for a mature Messianic movement to emerge that can fulfill a great calling.

While it is good that a Messianic movement has arisen desiring Believers to see that the Torah has great benefits for study and teaching—we **can never be blind to the fact that the arrival of Yeshua has inaugurated some new things.** If we forget this, then we run the serious risk of damaging our unique testimony as a faith

⁷⁵ This is not to say that the Apostolic Scriptures do not demonstrate the baseness of humanity, just that its genre as Gospels and Epistles does not as easily allow for expressing it as do the histories of the Tanach.

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community that sits between the great theological traditions of both the Jewish Synagogue and the Christian Church. We have a Jewish theological heritage of *halachah* which recognizes that changes in Torah application take place because of the natural passage of time. And, we have a Christian theological heritage that has rightly upheld the sacrifice of Yeshua as being essential to one's salvation. We need to learn to walk the tightrope between these two sectors with great precision and balance.

The Messianic movement needs to be very cognizant of its testimony in the days in front of us, as theologically we are outnumbered by both the Rabbis of Judaism and the theologians of Christianity. *Our Father has surely stuck us in a unique place*—a unique place for us to make a difference to two (not just one!) groups of people. People will be scrutinizing us, seeing if we can truly balance a life of faith in Messiah Yeshua in proper obedience to the Father's commandments. People will be wanting to see if we are really living lives of positive spiritual change, and they will be watching us closely to see if we fall. Our Torah obedience must not only be a reflection of a great spiritual change within us as individuals, but corporately must begin to manifest itself as **we are molded into a unique group of people maximized** by the empowerment of God's Spirit as His Kingdom is restored on Earth.

The Jewish people need to be shown an example of Torah obedience that will provoke them to jealousy for faith in Yeshua (cf. Romans 11:11). Christians need an example of Torah obedience that will show them that their widescale dismissal of the Old Testament in today's generation has not been to their advantage, and that the Church has been suffering greatly from it. Doing this with hearts and minds guided by God's love, knowing that the Bible is often not as simplistic as we have been led to believe it is, is not impossible for the Messianic movement—but it will probably take some time to implement.

In the short term, working through some of the frequently avoided issues of the Torah will be difficult, especially given the dynamics that will be changing in the Messianic community in the next decade of the 2010s. In the long term, as our level of engagement with the Scriptures improves—and we are able to join into the wider conversation—we will at last begin to see that “restoration of all things” (Acts 3:21) come to pass. We can then be a mature, well-informed, and discerning Messianic movement where God's people have a healthy view of both His Law *and* all of the Bible, and we can be all the things that Yeshua has modeled for us (cf. 1 Timothy 6:3-5).

I would encourage you to not avoid various issues you encounter in the Torah any longer. The Torah forms the foundation of the rest of the Bible, and as Paul rightly said, “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). Without understanding God's revelation in the Torah, we will not understand the Prophets, Writings, Gospels, or Epistles. But equally so, our understanding of the Torah will be incomplete without those further Scriptures. All of the Bible forms the continual unveiling of God's plan of salvation history. As the Messianic movement intends to play a role in that salvation history, let us be those who can work through those difficult issues, and be men and women “who have insight [that] will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and [will be] those who lead the many to righteousness” (Daniel 12:3). **There does exist a great deal of work up ahead for the Messianic movement**, and it is my

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prayer that we are all up to it! Let us have available answers for when the difficult questions are asked.