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Messianic Believers and Religious Symbols

Throughout much of human history, and certainly present within our modern era, **religious groups have been known by religious symbols**. If any of us think in terms of words like Judaism, Christianity, or Islam—we almost immediately conjure up images of a Star of David, the cross, and the crescent moon. Today’s broad Messianic community, which looks to its shared Jewish and Christian heritage, certainly has some kind of association with common Jewish symbols such as the *menorah* or Star of David, as well as the Christian cross and fish. Various religious symbols and ritual objects, some of which are specified to be used in Scripture, others of which are derived from Scripture, and some which derive from tradition—are all encountered in some form or fashion across the Messianic movement. Some people display specific symbols in their home, some people wear religious jewelry, and other people make use of some specific, tactile objects, in their spiritual experience.

A huge issue, surrounding the main religious symbols present in both Judaism and Christianity, involves one’s approach to the Second Commandment: “You shall not make yourself a carved image nor any likeness of that which is in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the water beneath the earth” (Exodus 20:4, ATS). Prohibitions are issued surrounding *pesel v’kol-temunah* (פסל וְכָל־תְּמוּנָה), “no carved likeness and no image” (Alter), “a carved-image or any figure” (Fox),¹ or “any graven image, or any likeness” (KJV). The God of Israel decrees, “You shall not worship them or serve them” (Exodus 20:5), *lo-tish’tachveh l’hem v’lo ta’av’deim* (לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם).

Images intended for veneration, representing terrestrial or extra-terrestrial beings or forces—whether they are made of precious metals, stone, wood, or some other object—are forbidden. A major reason for this, would not only be to counter how human beings might think that they can control an image or object of their mortal making, somehow manipulating a supernatural being or force—but ultimately thinking that a human man or woman is superior to such a supernatural being or force. Even with some recognition that the God of Israel is the One True God, creating an image of Him to venerate, very much trivializes His own

¹ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 369.

declaration, “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me’” (Isaiah 44:6; cf. Revelation 1:17). To try to reduce an Eternal God to an image of human craftsmanship, can very much cause people to actually think of Him in lesser terms than their own limited, mortal selves.

That not all three-dimensional images or sculptures are prohibited, and may be employed for other uses, is seen in how the Ark of the Covenant was to have two cherubim placed above its mercy seat: “You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat” (Exodus 25:18). In the Tanach, these *keruvim* (כְּרֻבִים) angels “stand sentinel over the way to the tree of life in Eden (Gen. 3:24; cf. Ezek. 28:14, 16) and also flank or support the throne of God (Pss. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16). Wooden images of them, overlaid with gold, and with wings outspread, were set over the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:18-20; 37:6-9; Num. 7:89; I Sam. 4:4; I Kings 6:23-28; 8:6-7)” (*IDB*).² The cherubim, though, are of a unique category, given their place in the Scriptures. A three-dimensional sculpturing of the cherubim, while being used in worship of God in the Tabernacle and Temple, were not themselves to be worshipped.

There are images that have been employed by God’s people, **not for veneration**, but for identification. Religious symbols for identification and association of persons with a faith tradition—while always in danger of being venerated inappropriately—cannot be said as being quantitatively forbidden in principle. It has to be recognized, though, that while common Jewish symbols like the Star of David, or the basic Christian image like the cross, have been used in many different forms by both the Jewish Synagogue and Christian Church for some kind of identification as God’s own—they have also been used by many in the occult. Yet, various occultic uses of a six-pointed Star of David or a cross of some shape, does not automatically provide a reason for it to never be used at any time; a more fair-minded background analysis of these symbols is required. One’s approach regarding religious symbols can get out of control very quickly, lest all of a sudden we stop using all written language, because every letter of every human alphabet has at some times been used for perverted intentions³—and written language has certainly been used in many ungodly and profane ways!

Today’s Messianic movement uses religious symbols, with congregations and ministries using mostly Jewish, but as well as some Christian, signs, to associate with their mission and purpose. Some of these religious symbols provoke positive, but some provoke negative, reactions from people. We all need a fair-minded look at some of these symbols, seeing what a variety of mainline Jewish and Christian sources have actually said, *before* listening to some of the misinformation that can so widely circulate, often branding common symbols like the Star of David or cross as being “utterly pagan,” and needing to be completely removed and never spoken of again.

² T.H. Gaster, “Angel,” in *IDB*, 1:131.

³ Do consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Hebrew, Letter Pictures.”

This chapter offers summaries of the major object symbols present in traditional Jewish practice: the *mezuzah*, *tefillin* or phylacteries, and *tzitzits* or fringes/tassels. More common Jewish symbols, which evoke religious, national, and political associations with past Jewish history and the present State of Israel, are the *menorah* and Star of David. The common Christian symbols such as the cross and the fish, while not frequently employed in the open decor of today's Messianic movement, are still things that we will all encounter. A proper approach, toward all of these religious symbols, is needed by today's Messianic Believers. Just like issues of personal dress and grooming, the subject matter of religious symbols can stir a degree of tension among us—and one which definitely needs to be lessened!

The Mezuzah

When one walks into a Jewish synagogue, or the home of an observant Jew—and certainly many Messianic congregations and Messianic homes—a *mezuzah* (מְזוּזָה) will most often be placed on the doorpost of the main entryway, as well as on many other doorposts inside of the building. In the view of Ronald L. Eisenberg of *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, “A mezuzah is the distinctive mark of a Jewish home.”⁴ Indeed, Jews of many varieties from the Orthodox to Conservative and Reform, and even a number of non-religious, will often have some form of a *mezuzah* gracing the entrance to their house or apartment. *Mezuzot* are seen all over modern Israel, including, for the traveler or tourist, the entrance to many hotel rooms.



Today, although with strong commonality with what was employed in ancient times, the *mezuzah* is basically a small case of some sort, affixed to the righthand doorpost, containing a parchment of Hebrew writing from the Torah. The term *mezuzah* itself, is defined by the *Jastrow* lexicon as “the inscription on the door-post (a slip of parchment containing Deut. VI, 4-9, a. XI, 13-21).”⁵ Yet, the term *mezuzah* is not a post-Biblical term, but a Biblical one, appearing in the Torah, and simply means “door-post, gate-post” (*BDB*).⁶ While the term *mezuzah* is now frequently taken to apply to the small case and parchment attached to the doorpost, it does specifically appear in the Deuteronomy 4:6-9 and 11:13-21 instructions, in which God’s people are commanded to affix His Word to their doorposts:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your

⁴ Eisenberg, 580.

⁵ *Jastrow*, 754.

⁶ *BDB*, 265.

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forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house [*al-mezuzot beitekha*, בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ עַל-מְזוּזוֹת] and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

“It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the LORD your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil. He will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you. You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates [*al-mezuzot beitekha u’vish’arekha*, בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ עַל-מְזוּזוֹת], so that your days and the days of your sons may be multiplied on the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens remain above the earth” (Deuteronomy 11:13-21).

The instruction, “Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:9, NIV), has a long history of application, which has come down to modern Jewry not just in the form of a small case with a parchment of Scripture inside of it—but has served to visibly declare to the world that their home is guided by God’s Word, as well as having contributed a diverse Jewish artistic expression. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* offers a rather lengthy summary of what the present *mezuzah* one is likely to see is, and some of the significant traditions and customs involved with it:

MEZUZAH (מְזוּזָה; doorpost), small parchment (from the skin of a clean animal) on which are inscribed the first two paragraphs of the *Shema (*Dt.* 6.4-9, 11.13-21). The parchment is rolled tightly and placed in a small case, many of which have a small aperture through which the word *Shaddai* (Almighty), inscribed on the back of the scroll (homiletically explained as an acronym for *shomer delatot Yisra’el* [guardian of the doors of Israel]) can be seen. This seems to confirm the *mezuzah*’s original apotropaic purpose. *Mezuzot* are affixed to doorposts in the home in accordance with the prescription in *Deuteronomy* 6.9. Only a qualified scribe (**sofer setam*) may write a *mezuzah*, and it is to be written with the same care used in the writing of a Torah scroll. The *mezuzah* is nailed in a sloping position (the top pointing inward; the bottom outward) on the upper right-hand doorpost of the entry to the home and each of its rooms used for human habitation. The sloping position was a compromise reached by *Rashi, who held that it should be vertical, and by his grandson, *Ya’aqov ben Me’ir Tam, who maintained that it should be horizontal. In ancient times a hollow was constructed in the doorpost, and the *mezuzah* was placed inside. A special blessing is recited when securing the *mezuzah* to the door. While some interpret *mezuzot* as protective *amulets, the *mezuzah* has

also been described as the sanctification of the home by the continual reminder of God's omnipresence. Among pious Jews, it became customary to kiss the *mezuzah* upon entering or leaving a room. *Mezuzot* are to be checked twice every seven years to confirm their continued fitness. For *Karaites, the *mezuzah* is optional and consists of a plate in the shape of the two tablets of the Torah without any script. Rabbi *Me'ir ben Barukh of Rothenburg wrote, "No demon can have power over a house upon which the *mezuzah* is affixed." Names, verses, and figures were added by mystics and kabbalists, but Moses *Maimonides insisted upon not tampering with the text. The *mezuzah* case has been one of the objects of Jewish ritual artistic expression, especially since the eighteenth century. For example, in North Africa *mezuzot* covers were elaborately embroidered, and in the center appeared the name of the woman who embroidered the cloth or the recipient. Today, *mezuzot* are often carried or worn around the neck as charms.⁷

Eisenberg adds how "These biblical passages are traditionally written on 22 lines, equal to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The parchment is rolled up and enclosed in a wood or metal case, since it has the status of a Torah scroll and cannot be touched directly."⁸ He further describes, "*Mezuzot* must be inspected periodically (twice in seven years) to ensure that the writing is still readable."⁹ Beyond the Deuteronomy 4:6-9 and 11:13-21 instructions, the association with affixing the Word of God to the doorposts, is how the blood of the lamb was to be applied to the Israelites' doorposts during the Exodus (Exodus 12:7, 22).

There is some variance as to the application of where a *mezuzah* is to be placed, with the Torah only stating, "inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 11:20, NJPS), The Message offering the slight paraphrase, "Inscribe them on the doorposts and gates of your cities." According to *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, "Although synagogues and public dwellings are exempt from the commandment, as they are not ordinary dwellings, it has become customary to attach *mezuzot* to their entrances....In the Diaspora, affixing the *mezuzah* may be deferred for 30 days after entering a rented dwelling, while in the Land of Israel the custom is to attach it immediately."¹⁰ Eisenberg also notes, "The commandment to affix a *mezuzah* applies only to permanent structures and not to temporary or casual places, such as a sukkah...a camping tent, or an automobile."¹¹ There are also guidelines widely observed, involving the homes in which it would be required to affix a *mezuzah*. As is summarized by George Robinson's *Essential Judaism*,

⁷ "mezuzah," in R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Widoger, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp 460-461.

⁸ Eisenberg, 580.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 581.

¹⁰ "mezuzah," in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, 527.

¹¹ Eisenberg, 582.

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- the room into which it enters must be at least four cubits (two yards) square, and must have a ceiling;
- the doorway must be at least forty inches high and sixteen inches wide, must have doorposts on either side and a lintel, as well as doors that open and close, although even a doorway without a door should have a *mezuzah* affixed;
- the doorway must be for ordinary dwelling, for human dwelling and “dignified” dwelling (a toilet or a bathroom, for example, does not have a *mezuzah* affixed);
- the dwelling must be a permanent one; and
- gateways leading to a Jewish home, if they are tall enough and have a lintel and doorposts, should also have a *mezuzah*¹²

Customarily, just as touching the Torah scroll during the *Shabbat* service is intended to honor it, the *mezuzah* will be touched as a sign of honor by those entering or existing a doorway that has one attached. But, it is to be recognized how during the Middle Ages, there were some Jews who thought that the *mezuzah* would be able to ward off evil spirits, and it is also true that some practitioners of Jewish mysticism or the Kabbalah, have also given the *mezuzah* some undue influence.¹³ A much more healthy approach is witnessed in the Talmudic account of the Jewish proselyte Onklelos, a relative of the Roman Emperor Titus, who used the presence of a *mezuzah* on his doorframe to testify of his faith in Israel’s God:

“So Caesar sent another troop after him. He said to them, ‘Don’t get involved with him in any way at all.’ When they had seized him and were going along, he saw a mezuzah that was fixed to a doorpost, and he put his hand on it, and said to them, ‘What is this now?’ They said to him, ‘You tell us.’ He said to them, ‘Under ordinary circumstances a mortal king dwells inside, and his servants guard him outside. But as to the Holy One, blessed be He, his servants are inside and he keeps them from the outside, as it is said, “The Lord shall guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for ever more” (Psa. 121:8). They, too converted to Judaism, and Caesar sent no more troops” (b.Avodah Zarah 11a).¹⁴

Messianic Jewish observance of affixing a *mezuzah* to the doorposts—be it of one’s home, synagogue, or various other places—tends to very much be honored along the lines of traditional Judaism.¹⁵ Messianic Jewish congregations will certainly have a *mezuzah* affixed to their entrance, as well as to various other major doorways inside their assembly building. Concurrent with this, writings witnessed from the One Law/One Torah sub-movement essentially follows the same philo-traditional Messianic Jewish approach to the *mezuzah*.¹⁶ Beyond this, in the more independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots sectors, there is variance on how to observe the instruction of Deuteronomy 4:6-9 and 11:13-21. In his 2007 resource, *Mezuzah: You Shall Write Them upon the Doorposts of Your House and upon Your Gates*, Toby Janicki discusses some of his personal transition toward a traditionally Jewish approach to the *mezuzah*

¹² Robinson, 52.

¹³ Eisenberg, 581.

¹⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

¹⁵ Consult the summary offered by Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, pp 89-96.

¹⁶ Tim Hegg, *Introduction to Torah Living* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), pp 168-169.

instruction, away from some of the atraditional (but not necessarily anti-traditional) techniques observed in the Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement:

“I have a sincere desire to obey God and follow His Torah. But the traditional way of observing the mezuzah didn’t satisfy me. So over the years, my family and I have tried various innovative ways of fulfilling this commandment.

“One time we bought a small bronze plaque that had Scriptures on it in Hebrew and English. It was designed so you could read the words each time you passed by it.

“While we were having a house built, my family and I drove to it when only the frame was up. With a black permanent marker we wrote the Hebrew word *shema* (‘hear’) on every doorpost. I often wondered what the builders must have thought!

“Many in the Hebrew Roots community seem to put up walls against anything to do with rabbinic tradition. While it is true that we need to question things that are not in Scripture, we also need to realize that many traditions can be to our benefit....

“Although the mezuzah is only a tiny piece of the Torah puzzle, it has the ability to bring a sense of unity. Throughout the world the mezuzah is a sign of a God-fearing home. When the traditional method is practiced, it resonates a sense of consistency and identity worldwide. It can be a symbol of connectedness with other Torah-observant believers, as well as with the Jewish community at large.”¹⁷

Although in my Messianic experience, I have seen alternative means of observing the Deuteronomy 4:6-9 and 11:13-21 instructions—ranging from some kind of plaque being placed on one’s doorframe, to a doorframe actually being surrounded by paneling with Hebrew and English Scripture carved into it—on the whole the basic traditions surrounding the *mezuzah*, do tend to be broadly followed by those in the more independent sectors of the Messianic community.

While some people feel more free than others to be creative with the direction to affix God’s Word to the doorframe of the home, some might choose to see the Torah instruction from which the *mezuzah* traditions have been taken, as only being symbolic or figurative, and not literal. Some might take “write them on the doorframes of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:9, CJB), as only pertaining to remembering the Word of God as being the authority or direction of one’s home and the affairs of society. While doubtlessly true, archaeological evidence from First Century Israel, including the Qumran community—the time period contemporary to that of Yeshua—does indicate that *mezuzot* were employed by Second Temple Judaism.¹⁸ Even with a diversity of perspectives present, quotations from Jewish literature from the broad Second Temple era, certainly indicate the presence of the *mezuzah* as a physical, ritual object to be employed:

¹⁷ Toby Janicki, *Mezuzah: You Shall Write Them upon the Doorposts of Your House and upon Your Gates* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2007), pp 1-2, 3.

¹⁸ Cf. Michael A. Grisanti, “Mezuzah,” in *EDB*, 893; “mezuzah, as an archaeological object,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 428.

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“...on our gates and doors he has commanded us to set up the ‘Words,’ so as to be a reminder of God...” (*Letter of Aristeas* 158).¹⁹

“They are also to inscribe the principal blessings they have received from God upon their doors, and show the same remembrance of them upon their arms; as also they are to bear on their forehead and their arm those wonders which declare the power of God, and his goodwill toward them, that God’s readiness to bless them may appear everywhere conspicuous about them” (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.213).²⁰

“And thou shalt write them upon the doorposts, and affix them to the lintels of thy house, and upon thy gates” (Targum Onkelos on Deuteronomy 6:9).²¹

“Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from the recitation of the *Shema* and from [the obligation to wear] phylacteries, but are obligated to the [recitation of] the prayer, and to [post] a *mezuzah* and [to recite] the blessing over the meal” (m.*Berachot* 3:3).²²

It is most fair to deduce that the home in which Yeshua of Nazareth was raised did have some sort of a *mezuzah* affixed to its entrance.²³ But while the history of Second Temple Judaism attests to a literal application of the Deuteronomy 4:6-9 and 11:13-21, the figurative application of this symbol—recognizing the authority of the Word of God for the home and for society—is hardly lost on religious Jews. In the commentary provided in *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, a massive traditional Jewish resource for the English-speaking world, it is asserted for the canting of the *Shema*,

“[This is done] By means of the *mezuzah*, placed in a metal or glass case, and fixed to the door-post on one’s right when entering a house or room in the house. It contains the first two paragraphs of the *Shema*. The word שׁדַּי [*Shaddai*], ‘Almighty,’ written on the back of the parchment, is made visible by means of a small opening in the case. The *mezuzah* is a symbol of God’s watchful care over the house and its dwellers. It is a solemn reminder to all who go out and in, that the house is a Jewish home, devoted to the ideals of the *Shema*.”²⁴

A spiritual importance of the *mezuzah*, along with the *tefillin* or phylacteries, and *tzitzits* or fringes/tassels (addressed further), is noted in the Talmud:

“R. Eliezer b. Jacob says, ‘Whoever has boxes containing prayer parchments on his heads and boxes containing prayer parchments on his arms, show fringes on his garments, doorpost markers containing Torah-statements on his doors — all this

¹⁹ R.J.H. Shutt, “Letter of Aristeas,” trans., in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 23.

²⁰ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 117.

²¹ [BibleWorks 9.0: Targum Onkelos on the Pentateuch](#).

²² Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 6-7.

²³ Cf. Janicki, *Mezuzah*, 9

²⁴ J.H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, revised (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960), 121; cf. the useful observations of Janicki, *Mezuzah*, pp 11-16 and the need to be reminded of the importance of God’s Word.

strengthens him against sinning, as it is said, "A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Qoh. 4:12), and further, "The angel of the Lord camps around about them that fear him and delivers them" (Psa. 34:8)" (b.*Menachot* 43b).²⁵

In terms of what the *mezuzah* can represent for Believers in Israel's Messiah, Barney Kasdan draws attention to Yeshua's word in John 10:7-10, about Him being the door or the gate:

"So Yeshua said to them again, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'" (John 10:7-10).

Kasdan offers some excellent thoughts in his book *God's Appointed Customs*:

"Although there is no specific reference in the New Testament to the custom of affixing a *m'zuzah*, there are a number of interesting principles that would apply to it. For example, Yeshua affirmed the truth contained in the *m'zuzah*. When Yeshua was asked by a rabbi which command he considered to be the most important, he responded with the passage contained in the *m'zuzah*...{quoting Mark 12:29; referencing Deuteronomy 6:4-5}...

"The words of Yeshua become more meaningful in light of the significance of doorways and gates in Jewish culture. As he explained to his disciples...{quoting John 10:7-10}...

"The door or gate was vital. It was the place of entry to find protection. Likewise, it was the place through which to enter to receive the provision of the shepherd or landowner. As an entry into Jewish property, the door and gate would have been marked as dedicated to God by the custom of the *m'zuzah* (see Deuteronomy 6:9).

"Yeshua used the symbolism associated with the *m'zuzah* to point out that he was the entrance to the Father. While many people might believe that faith in Yeshua leads to restrictions, Yeshua actually asserted that those who follow his ways will find the fullest measure of life. What could be more fulfilling than walking in the perfect will of the Father, as taught by the Jewish Messiah? The symbolism of the *m'zuzah* (i.e., the blessings of walking in God's commandments) is perfectly understood in light of Yeshua being the gate that leads to spiritual life.

"For those who are already believers in the Messiah, there is a further lesson to be gleaned from the custom of the *m'zuzah*. The small container marks a house that is dedicated to following God. Likewise, believers in Yeshua are called a spiritual house that is dedicated to the glory of God. Saul alluded to this in his letter to the Gentile believers in Ephesus when he said...{quoting Ephesians 2:19-22}....

"The message of the *m'zuzah* is simple yet powerful. Is the home dedicated to the glory and service of God? More importantly, have the people opened the doors of their hearts to allow the Messiah to dwell with them daily?"²⁶

²⁵ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

²⁶ Kasdan, *God's Appointed Customs*, pp 94-95.

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For Believers in Yeshua, Kasdan rightly directs us, quoting Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.” While the presence of the *mezuzah* is to be a visible reminder of the authority of the Word of God for one’s home, and an affirmation of how society is to be guided by its principles—the presence of the *mezuzah* should also beg the question of those who see it, whether or not they have invited the One who embodied Scripture perfectly in His actions, into their lives.

There are additional issues that have been raised regarding the *mezuzah*, particularly in our mixed Messianic movement, composed of both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers. In his 2012 book *God-Fearers: Gentiles & the God of Israel*, Janicki makes a point to emphasize that today’s Messianic movement should enforce a more-or-less clear distinction between Jewish people and the nations, and addresses the issue of whether or not non-Jews should even have a *mezuzah*. In his general estimation,

“[P]utting up a mezuzah on your doorpost when you live in a rural or backwoods area really doesn’t pose an issue of blurring lines of distinction. Instead, it can often spark the curiosity of visitors and be a great discussion starter. If, however, you live near or in a Jewish community in a major metropolitan area, it can make it appear to other Gentiles and Jews that you are Jewish. In cases like these, it might be better to place the mezuzah on the inner side of the doorpost of one’s house so it is not visible from the street. This way one can participate in the mitzvah but not blur the lines of distinction that thus respect Jewish sensitivities.”²⁷

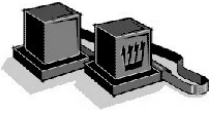
Those who would advocate for a much more inclusive Messianic community, predicated on common faith in Yeshua being primary to natural human distinctions—persons such as this writer—would see very little issue from the Holy Scriptures with non-Jewish Believers, in principle, placing a *mezuzah* on their doorpost in obedience to Deuteronomy 4:6-9 and 11:13-21. This does not mean, however, that placing a *mezuzah* on the front doorpost of one’s house or apartment is always wise. Indeed, non-Jews having a *mezuzah* in an area with many Jewish people, might communicate something to one’s neighbor that can complicate relations, as their Jewish neighbors might think that they are targets for “Christian conversion.” At the same time, a non-Jewish Believer having a *mezuzah* might actually help relations with Jewish neighbors, as they might see someone who stands with them as a friend, stands with the State of Israel, and stands against anti-Semitism, thus stirring positive conversations and allowing trust to develop.

There are more practical reasons as to why today’s Messianic people, non-Jewish or Jewish, might not choose to always have a *mezuzah* on the front doorpost, inside or outside the door of one’s house or apartment. Depending on the neighborhood in which you reside, there might be reports of violent anti-Semitic activity, caused by either white supremacist or Islamic groups. Even if anti-Semitic

²⁷ Toby Janicki, *God-Fearers: Gentiles & the God of Israel* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 104-105.

activities are relatively absent, an elaborate or ornate *mezuzah* might communicate to passers-by—no different than a luxury car parked in front a house might also—that your house is an excellent target for burglary. Only you, in your neighborhood, can decide whether it is better to place the *mezuzah* on the front door, inside the door, only on the back door, only on the doorframes inside the house, or not at all. There are certainly reasons, for example, for people not to have Bible-quoting bumper stickers on their cars, wear religious jewelry, or wear some quote of Bible-quoting clothing. Discretion and discernment do need to be employed, in affixing a *mezuzah* to the door of your home.

Tefillin (Phylacteries)



One of the most misunderstood religious symbols, although certainly derived from Biblical commandments, and surely present in the Second Temple Jewish world of Messiah Yeshua, are *tefillin* (תפילין),²⁸ also often known by the Greek-derived term phylacteries (sing. *phylaktērion*, φυλακτήριον). The *tefillin* are a set of two leather boxes, one for the arm and hand (the opposite of whether the user is right or left handed), and one for the head, containing four Torah passages written on parchment, which subsequently surround the main Biblical instructions from which this practice is based:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me.’ Moses said to the people, ‘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. And nothing leavened shall be eaten. On this day in the month of Abib, you are about to go forth. It shall be when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall observe this rite in this month. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and nothing leavened shall be seen among you, nor shall any leaven be seen among you in all your borders. You shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.” And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. Therefore, you shall keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year” (Exodus 13:1-10).

“And when the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and has given it to you, you shall set apart for the LORD every first issue of the womb: every male firstling that your cattle drop shall be the LORD’s. But every firstling ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born male among

²⁸ Cf. *Jastrow*, 1687.

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your children. And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the LORD brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my sons.' And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the LORD freed us from Egypt" (Exodus 13:11-16, NJPS).

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates'" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

"It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the LORD your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early and late rain, that you may gather in your grain and your new wine and your oil. He will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Beware that your hearts are not deceived, and that you do not turn away and serve other gods and worship them. Or the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and He will shut up the heavens so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its fruit; and you will perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you. You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your sons may be multiplied on the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens *remain* above the earth" (Deuteronomy 11:13-21).

A huge component to religious Jews, who wrap *tefillin* during prayer, is not just to remember the power and significance of the Word of God, but it is also to very much remember the Exodus, and how the Lord Himself led Israel out of Egypt with His own hand and arm. In the view of Eisenberg's *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, *tefillin* convey forth "the first two passages of the *Shema*, which express the Jewish belief in one God, the acceptance of divine kingship, the concept of reward and punishment, and the responsibility to observe all the commandments."²⁹ The Talmud lists the *tefillin* among religious symbols such as the *mezuzah* and the *tzitzit* or fringes/tassels, as a means of religious preservation:

²⁹ Eisenberg, 382.

“Our rabbis have taught on Tannaite authority: Precious are Israelites, for the Holy One, blessed be he, has surrounded them with religious duties to protect them: boxes containing prayer parchments on their heads and boxes containing prayer parchments on their arms, show fringes on their garments, doorpost markers containing Torah-statements on their doors” (b.Menachot 43b).³⁰

So important has the employment of *tefillin* been for Jewish religious practice over the centuries, that the Talmud actually records a Rabbinic view that God Himself wears them:

“Said R. Abin bar Ada said R. Isaac, ‘How do we know on the basis of Scripture that the Holy One, blessed be he, puts on phylacteries? As it is said, “The Lord has sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength” (Isa. 62:8). “By his right hand” refers to Torah, as it is said, “At his right hand was a fiery law for them” (Deu. 33:2). “And by the arm of his strength” refers to phylacteries, as it is said, “The Lord will give strength to his people” (Psa. 29:11). And how do we know that phylacteries are a strength for Israel? For it is written, “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon you and they shall be afraid of you” (Deu. 28:10)” (b.Berachot 6a).³¹

Many who are evaluating the Biblical instructions, from which the practice of *tefillin* are derived, are not too likely to think that God actually wears *tefillin*. But, recognizing this sentiment in Jewish history is important, so we do not just dismiss it off hand, as some sort of vain human tradition. Donning *tefillin* is considered to be quite significant to observant Jews, not just in honoring Biblical directives to bind God’s Word on the hand and forehead, but also because of the significant effort made to produce *tefillin*, and the necessary time it takes to set aside and employ them in prayer. The following summary, on both the production of *tefillin* and their customary usage, is provided from *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*:

TEFILLIN (“phylacteries”). Two small quadrangular black leather boxes (or *batim*, sing. *bayit*) containing four biblical passages which the male Jew from the age of 13 wears on the left arm (*shel yad*) and on the head (*shel rosh*) during the weekday MORNING SERVICE.

Originally, the *tefillin* were worn throughout the day and there are sources which attest to women wearing them as well (*Er.* 96a). The Bible does not describe *tefillin* nor offer instruction regarding how they are to be made; the details were specified by the rabbis (*Men.* 34a-37b).

The *tefillin* consist of parchments which are taken from the outermost hide of a ritually fit (KOSHER) animal, inscribed with permanent black ink and placed in a square box upon which is written the Hebrew letter *shin*. The boxes have a wider base and an opening through which the straps pass. The strap of the head is tied with a knot in the shape of the Hebrew letter *dalet* and that of the arm in the shape of the letter *yod*. These three letters *shin*, *dalet*, *yod* combine to form one of the names of God, *Shaddai*.

³⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

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The injunction to wear *tefillin* is found in four passages in the Bible (Ex. 13:1-10, 11-16; Deut. 6:4-9; 13-21). These are written by a SCRIBE on one piece of parchment and inserted into the box for the arm and on four separate pieces of parchment for insertion into four parallel compartments for the head. The biblical portions define the foundations of Judaism in terms of God's unity and the acceptance of Divine rule, as well as God's PROVIDENCE and faith in the world's REDEMPTION, as symbolized by the EXODUS from Egypt. Thus, the act of binding oneself with *tefillin* serves as a regular reminder to the Jew to be bound up in service to God, with the heart, mind, and might.

Tefillin are worn daily for the Morning Service and are removed on the New Moon at the beginning of the ADDITIONAL SERVICE. They are not worn on the Sabbath nor on major festivals since these holidays are deemed adequate reminders in themselves of the Jew's responsibility to God. They are also not worn on the first day of MOURNING, by a groom on his wedding day, by a leper, or by one who has been excommunicated. On TISHA BE-AV, they are worn for the AFTERNOON instead of the Morning Service.

A discovery at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea has revealed considerable variations in first-century custom concerning the order and additions to the four basic paragraphs of the *tefillin* (some included the TEN COMMANDMENTS). Although in the second century there was uniformity regarding the texts, two different traditions persisted concerning the order of the paragraphs. In the Middle Ages, these differences took the form of a dispute between RASHI and his grandson Rabbenu TAM, which certain pious Jews, including some Ḥasidim and Oriental Jews, resolved by donning two sets of *tefillin* each morning—one according to Rashi, the other according to Rabbenu Tam—in order to be certain that they were following the precept properly. *Tefillin* are to be examined once every seven years by a scribe.

Abraham GEIGER, the 19th-century REFORM pioneer, claimed that *tefillin* were originally pagan amulets and created a precedent for their exclusion from Reform worship which lasted until their reappearance in the most recent prayer book (*Gates of Prayer*, pp. 48-49). Their use, however, was advocated by Leopold ZUNZ and remain a part of the CONSERVATIVE daily Morning Service. They have been taken up by some Jewish feminists as a symbol of equal religious status; they base themselves on certain precedents in Jewish tradition. For example, the sages say that Michal (SAUL's daughter) wore *tefillin* and they did not protest (*Er.* 96a).³²

While the Hebrew term for *tefillin* is derived from the term *tefillah* (תְּפִלָּה) or "prayer," which is hardly surprising considering the fact that *tefillin* are mainly used by religious Jews during traditional prayer times—there is disagreement as to how *tefillin* started being called "phylacteries." The entry for *phulaktērion* (φυλακτήριον) in *Thayer* reflects the view that the term "phylacteries" was adopted because these leather boxes were used as amulets to ward off evil spirits:

"The Jews gave the name of φυλακτήρια [*phulaktēria*] (in the Talm. תְּפִלִּין, *prayer-fillets*, German *Gebetsriemen*; (cf. O.T. 'frontlets')) to small strips of parchment on which were written the following passages from the law of Moses, Exo. 13:1-10, 11-16; Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21, and which, enclosed in little cases, they were accustomed

³² "tefillin," in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, pp 755-756.

when engaged in prayer to wear fastened by a leather strap to the forehead and to the left arm over against the heart, in order that they might thus be solemnly reminded of the duty of keeping the commands of God in the head and in the heart, according to the directions given in Exo. 13:16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18; (cf. Josephus, Antiquities 4, 8, 13). These scrolls were thought to have power, like amulets, to avert various evils and to drive away demons (Targ. on Cant. 8:3); hence, their Greek name."³³

At the same time, in a more neutral classical sense, *phylaktērion* means "a fortified place provided with a garrison, a station for a guard or garrison" (Thayer).³⁴ The term phylacteries could just as well mean "guard," and the related verb *phulassō* (φυλάσσω), "to watch, to keep watch," appears in "the Septuagint times too many to count for שמר [shamar]" (Thayer),³⁵ as it does in Psalm 119:168: "I kept [phulassō; Heb. MT: shamar] your commandments and your testimonies, because all my ways were before you, O Lord" (NETS). The very purpose of wrapping *tefillin* is for the faithful to remember to guard and keep God's Instruction.

There is, to be certain, a basic process and procedure employed in wrapping *tefillin*. For the most part, Orthodox and Conservative Jews today use *tefillin* for their morning service. Robinson's *Essential Judaism* summarizes,

"*Tefillin* are worn for the daily morning service in Orthodox and most Conservative synagogues. However, they are not worn on Shabbat or Festivals because keeping the Sabbath and the Festivals are already a sign of God's covenant, so a further reminder is deemed unnecessary. (They are also not worn on the first day of mourning or by a groom on his wedding day.)

"The donning of *tefillin* is a somewhat complicated affair; it is recommended that the first couple of times you put them on, get the help of an experienced *davener*. After putting on your *tallit*, but while still standing, place the *tefillin* on the muscle of the left forearm so that it is facing your heart and recite the blessing, which concludes 'v'tzivanu l'haniakh *tefillin*/commanded us to put on *tefillin*.' Tighten the strap and wind it seven times counterclockwise around the forearm below the elbow. (This is the Ashkenazi custom; in Hasidic and Sephardic *minhag*, you face the knot on the arm away from you and wind clockwise.) Making sure that the black strap is outside, now wind the remainder around the palm of the hand. Now take the head *tefillin* (also called the *shel rosh*) from the bag, unwind the straps, remove the case, and place it upon your head. Before you adjust the straps, remove the case, and place it upon your head. Before you adjust the straps, recite the blessing (which concludes 'v'tzivanu al mitzvat *tefillin*/commanded us regarding the mitzvah of *tefillin*') and the statement *Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*/Blessed is the name of God's glorious sovereignty forever. Adjust the *shel rosh* so that it is above the forehead, lying above your hairline and centered between the eyes. The knot should be resting at the base of your skull, the straps over each shoulder down the front of your chest. Now unwrap the strap on your hand from your palm, wind it three times around your middle finger. The remainder of the

³³ Thayer, 659; also Eisenberg, 385.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

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strap is wrapped around the ring finger and then around the palm. While doing this, one recites a passage from Hosea, 'I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in kindness and mercy; I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know Adonai.'

"Removing the *tefillin* is simply a reversal of putting them on. Unwind the arm strap from your fingers, rewind it about the palm. Remove the *shel rosh* and wrap it up neatly, then wrap the strap around your palm and forearm and slip it off. Wrap up the *tefillin* neatly and put them both away in their bag. It is customary to kiss the *tefillin* when taking them out of the bag and putting them away."³⁶

The custom of wrapping *tefillin* is not that commonplace within the daily prayer activities of many of today's Messianic Jews, although there are some trends which indicate that this is changing, with more open to the tradition. Many Messianic people, especially non-Jewish Messianic people, take the Torah instruction, "it shall be a sign on your hand and circlets between your eyes, that through strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:16, Alter), as being figurative and not literal. How is *l'totafot* (לְטוֹטְפוֹת), "for a memorial" (Jerusalem Bible-Koren), "and a headban" (Keter Crown Bible), or "and a symbol" (Common English Bible) to be approached? Are the instructions (Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 13-21) only to be approached from the perspective of God's Word being symbolically remembered in human thought (head) and action (hand)?

In the Second Temple era, as recorded in the Talmud, it can actually be noted how even though they disagreed on much, both the Pharisees³⁷ and Sadducees³⁸ apparently agreed that the command to bind God's Word on the hand and forehead was literal. The Karaites would be a later Jewish sect that considered the instructions from which *tefillin* are derived to be entirely metaphorical. As Reform Judaism arose in the mid-to-late Nineteenth Century, *tefillin* or phylacteries were widely viewed as just being an outdated ancient ritual object, with little or nothing to teach modern Jews about holiness—although Reform Judaism by the end of the Twentieth Century started to have a much more positive disposition toward them.

The Torah instructions about God's Word being a sign on the hands and between the eyes, being viewed figuratively and not literally, is not entirely without some Tanach basis, as there are statements appearing in the Hebrew Bible to be taken in such a way. Song of Songs 8:6 declares, "Put me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm." The admonition of Deuteronomy 8:11, to remember God's Word, is not to forget it: "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am

³⁶ Robinson, pp 25-26.

³⁷ "[If] one shapes his phylactery round, it is a danger, and there is no [fulfillment] of the commandment (M3:9C). One may say that we have already learned this, for the rabbis learned: Square phylacteries are a halakhah to Moses from Sinai" (b.Megillah 24b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

³⁸ "This question did a Boethusian ask R. Joshua the Grits dealer, 'How on the basis of Scripture do we know that phylacteries may not be written on the hide of an unclean animal? Because it is written, 'that the Torah of the Lord may be in your mouth,' meaning, of that which is permitted to your mouth. But if that is the proof, then they also should not be written on the skin of carrion or terefeh beasts!'" (b.*Shabbat* 108a; *Ibid.*).

commanding you today.” Proverbs 1:8-9 is widely taken as being metaphorical: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching; indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck” (Proverbs 1:8-9; also 6:20-21).

Some of an interpreter’s approach to the Hebrew *l’ot ‘al-yadekha v’hayu l’totafot bein einekha* (לְאֹזֶת עַל-יָדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ), “as-symbol on hand-of-you and-they-must-be as-bands between eyes-of-you” (Deuteronomy 6:8, Kohlenberger),³⁹ concerns how the Hebrew preposition *l’* (לְ) is designated.⁴⁰ The preposition *l’* is usually translated as either “as” or “for,” “as” lending support to more of a figurative meaning, and “for” lending support for a literal meaning. The instruction of Deuteronomy 6:9 following regarding *‘al-mezuzot* (עַל-מְזוּזוֹת), “upon doorpost,” is a bit clearer, employing the preposition *‘al* (עַל), “on” or “upon.” Recognizing the need to interpret Deuteronomy 6:8 and 9 together—and although he does support various JEDP presuppositions surrounding the composition of the Torah—Jeffrey H. Tigay directs readers on how literal symbols are an important feature of the Book of Deuteronomy, and that literal *tefillin* are very much a legitimate application of this instruction. He states,

“[Deuteronomy] ordains the precept of *mezuzah* (6:9...) and it preserves the injunction to wear fringes on one’s garments (22:12; cf. Num. 15:37-41). It opposes only symbols that were too anthropomorphic or that had actual or potential idolatrous associations...Concrete, visible symbols are important, and it may be that just as Deuteronomy advocated the precepts of fringes and *mezuzah*, which serve as reminders of God’s commandments, it advanced the precept of *tefillin* for the same purpose.”⁴¹

The need to surely apply a figurative application of the instructions, from which the literal *tefillin* are derived, is absolutely imperative! God’s people are to remember what God’s Word communicates to them about their minds or thinking, and their hands or actions. But one cannot just dismiss the value in literally donning *tefillin* or phylacteries. That the custom of employing phylacteries in Jewish prayer was present several centuries before the ministry of Yeshua is non-disputable. *Tefillin* are mentioned in mainline Jewish sources of the Second Temple era:

“He also strictly commands that the sign shall be worn on our hands, clearly indicating that it is our duty to fulfill every activity with justice, having in mind our own condition, and above all the fear of God” (*Letter of Aristeas* 159).⁴²

“They are also to inscribe the principal blessings they have received from God upon their doors, and show the same remembrance of them upon their arms; as also they are to bear on their forehead and their arm those wonders which declare

³⁹ Kohlenberger, 1:502.

⁴⁰ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp 110-115 list a number of categories by which the preposition *l’* could be approached.

⁴¹ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 443.

⁴² Shutt, “Letter of Aristeas,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, 23.

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the power of God, and his goodwill toward them, that God's readiness to bless them may appear everywhere conspicuous about them" (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.213).⁴³

"And you shall bind them as written signs upon thy left hand, and they shall be for tephillin upon thy forehead over thine eyes" (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Deuteronomy 6:8).⁴⁴

There is certainly abundant archaeological evidence from Second Temple Judaism,⁴⁵ including from Qumran,⁴⁶ that *tefillin* or phylacteries existed.

While there are many people in today's Messianic movement who are favorable, or at least friendly, toward the practice of wrapping *tefillin* or phylacteries—there are many others who are not. The common rejection of using *tefillin* or phylacteries, for any kind of personal prayer, is often disputed from the basis that Yeshua the Messiah spoke against them in His criticism of the Pharisaical leaders:

"All their works they do to be noticed by men. They make their *tefillin* wide and their *tzitziyot* long" (Matthew 23:5, TLV).

Did Yeshua decisively speak against wrapping *tefillin*/phylacteries in this verse? In His criticism of the Pharisaical leaders, Yeshua also criticized these individuals for their wearing of tassels or *tzitziyot*. Yet, elsewhere we see that Yeshua Himself wore fringes attached to the corners of His garments (Mark 6:56; Luke 8:43-44).

Yeshua's word of Matthew 23:5 is clear: "They do everything to be observed by others" (HCSB). Yeshua is actually witnessed to have criticized these Pharisees for the manner in which they wore *tzitzits* and wrapped *tefillin*, in order to draw attention to themselves. The Messiah did not say that the custom of wrapping *tefillin* or phylacteries was wrong and ungodly; the Messiah was instead ruling against their misuse. In his 2010 resource, *Tefillin: A Study on the Commandment of Tefillin*, Janicki is right to conclude that the issue in Matthew 23:5 is the *halachah* or application of how *tefillin* were being employed, concluding that Yeshua employed them Himself:

"In Matthew 23:5, Yeshua talks about both the commandment of *tzitzit* and the commandment of *tefillin*. Even though he criticizes those who lengthen their *tzitzit*, he himself wears *tzitzit*. The same logic applies to *tefillin*. Just as he criticized those who broadened their *tefillin*, he, nevertheless, wore *tefillin* himself. Therefore he legitimizes the literal interpretation of *tefillin*. The issue in this verse is not whether *tefillin* should be worn but rather a halachic opinion on how they should be worn."⁴⁷

While a slight argument from silence, Janicki's further conclusions about Yeshua and His Disciples employing *tefillin* do need to be weighed:

⁴³ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 117.

⁴⁴ [BibleWorks 9.0: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch](#).

⁴⁵ R.L. Omanson, "Phylactery," in *ISBE*, 3:864-865; Ruth Santinover Fagen, "Phylacteries," in *ABD*, 5:368-370.

⁴⁶ "tefillin, archaeology of," in *Dictionary of Judaism in Biblical Period*, 621.

⁴⁷ Toby Janicki, *Tefillin: A Study on the Commandment of Tefillin* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2010), 12.

“If he was against wearing tefillin, did not wear them, or if his disciples did not wear them, it would have invited criticism from his opponents. They would have had grounds for lodging an accusation against him as they did regarding the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath and his healing of people on the Sabbath. He would have been compelled to explain his break with tradition, and we could certainly expect to find the matter mentioned in his ongoing arguments with the religious leaders. The fact that there is no such discussion indicates that there was no issue, but that in daily practice, he and his disciples bound tefillin in the manner that Jewish men ordinarily did.”⁴⁸

I have no issue with asserting how Yeshua, His Disciples, or figures like Paul, employed *tefillin* or phylacteries during their own personal prayer times. What can probably be disputed, is how many Jews of the Second Temple period always wore *tefillin*, as many of the highly religious probably did wear *tefillin* at more than just set prayer times. There are certainly Messianic Jews today who recognize the practice of wrapping *tefillin* as a legitimate interpretive option of how to have God’s Word placed upon the hand and forehead. It is an exercise that can direct one’s attention upon God’s Word in a very focused and disciplined manner. In his *God’s Appointed Customs*, Kasdan offers a useful approach:

“The custom of *tefillin* was well established before the first century. Since the New Testament was written by Jews about Jewish topics, one would expect there to be mention of this very traditional element of the religious community. There is actually only one mention of the *t’fillin* (Greek *phylacteries*) in the New Testament, which is found in the words of Yeshua.

“As he was exposing the corruption and hypocrisy of some of the religious leaders of his day, Yeshua said....[quoting Matthew 23:4-5]

“The fact that Yeshua was not outright condemning the use of *t’fillin* or *tzitziyot* has been shown...[in my examination] on the fringes. Since Yeshua certainly wore the *tzitziyot* himself (see Matthew 9:20), he was speaking only against the *abuse* of this God-given custom. The same can be implied concerning the use of *t’fillin*. If Yeshua perfectly kept the Law, one can assume that he would have followed this Jewish custom as well. However, when man-made confusion was added to the custom of God, the Messiah stepped in with the proper rebuke.”⁴⁹

Written material, from the One Law/One Torah sub-movement, also tends to be very positive toward the usage of *tefillin* for Messianic Believers. As Tim Hegg states in his *Introduction to Torah Living*,

“The meaning of the *tefillin* is obvious. The hand or arm is the symbol of one’s strength, and the head of one’s life. The Torah, the commandments of God, and His will is to govern our life and our actions. Everything we do is to reflect a submission

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp 13-14.

⁴⁹ Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, 146.

to HaShem. This is to follow in the footsteps of Yeshua who Himself declared that He only did what the Father wanted (Jn 8:29)."⁵⁰

While in Messianic Judaism, a more *tefillin*-friendly demeanor has been seen over the past two decades, the issue of non-Jewish Believers and *tefillin* can get a little tense. Writing in 1996, Kasdan concluded the rather general and slightly open-ended, "The custom of *t'fillin* is biblically based as well as spiritually rich. Messianic Jews and like-minded Gentiles may choose to wear *t'fillin* if they feel that it would be a blessing to their spiritual life."⁵¹ Indeed, letting Messianic people essentially decide for themselves, on whether to wrap *tefillin*, is the basic position offered here.

There was a prohibition present in Second Temple Judaism on the selling of *tefillin* or phylacteries to non-Jews: "And they do not sell them stocks, neck-chains, ropes, or iron chains, scrolls, phylacteries, or *mezuzot*. All the same are the gentile and the Samaritan" (t.*Avodah Zarah* 2:4).⁵² Customarily, in the centuries since the fall of the Second Temple, the practice of wrapping *tefillin* has been viewed by Judaism as something exclusive to the Jewish people and proselytes to Judaism.⁵³ In Janicki's 2010 resource, intended for a broad Messianic audience, he describes his view of how he does not believe that non-Jews in today's Messianic movement have to wrap *tefillin*. As a non-Jew himself, though, he does so mainly in private, but does not recommend it for most people. It might be fair to say that his thoughts on non-Jews and *tefillin* do represent a fair number of those in the present Messianic Jewish movement:

"Gentile believers have been grafted in to the nation and are now, spiritually, a part of the commonwealth of Israel [Romans 11; Ephesians 2:12-13]. This status may put them into a different category than the Gentile outside of Messiah to which the rabbis...direct[ed] their halachic rulings. Needless to say, the rabbinic world does not acknowledge Gentile faith in Yeshua as a factor in their decisions. In Messiah there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Galatians 3:28). Yet, this verse does not eliminate the physical distinction between Jew and Gentile any more than it does between male and female. While we are all one in Messiah, all have their different roles...

"As a Gentile myself, I wrap *tefillin* on a daily basis and find much spiritual benefit in carrying out this biblical practice, not as a commandment incumbent upon me but as a private choice I have made to exercise a spiritual discipline in my daily prayer life. Not that it makes me more spiritual than others, but I personally find great blessing in the ritual and all the symbolism it offers. Yet, at the same time that does not mean that I would encourage or even want to see every Gentile believer to do so as well. There are many factors a Gentile should consider first, such as the practice of his local Messianic community and his motivation for taking on the mitzvah. Our Master particularly warns against wearing *tefillin* for the sake of religious pretense. A Gentile believer, who [in my view] is not

⁵⁰ Hegg, *Introduction to Torah Living*, 168.

⁵¹ Kasdan, *God's Appointed Customs*, 148.

⁵² Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 2:1266.

⁵³ Cf. J. Janicki, *Tefillin*, pp 39-40.

obligated to the mitzvah, may find it difficult to keep religious pretense (or at least the perception of it) out of the picture, particularly if wearing them publicly. At the very least, it is important that non-Jews see the mitzvah of tefillin as Jewish territory and defer to Jewish sensitivities. We Gentiles in Messiah need to respect our Jewish brothers and sisters who might not see the commandment as applicable or appropriate for non-Jews. For some Gentiles who want to keep the commandment, this may mean choosing not to wear them in a public prayer setting....{quoting Mathew 6:6}

"I hesitate to recommend tefillin for Gentiles. A non-Jew who chooses to bind tefillin can regard the ritual as a wonderful sign of his adoption into the commonwealth of Israel and the infilling of the Holy Spirit. It's a beautiful connection with Messiah—an act of imitation of the Master. But it can quickly become a stumbling block for the Jewish world and something that brings identity confusion to the Gentile believer. Gentiles who want to bind tefillin may want to consult with their local Messianic rabbi for advice and guidance on the issue."⁵⁴

Many of Janicki's points about non-Jewish Believers being sensitive to Jewish concerns, and some of their own motivations surrounding wrapping *tefillin*, should be well taken. Non-Jewish Believers should not just rush down to the Western Wall in Jerusalem and begin donning *tefillin*, or even to one's local non-Messianic synagogue for their designated times of prayer, without some sense of how this could create some unnecessary problems. Using *tefillin* or phylacteries for private prayer, or even various congregational prayer times at one's Messianic fellowship in a small group, should be far less of an issue.

The issue of whether non-Jewish Believers should employ *tefillin* in their personal prayers, is notably tied to another issue debated: that being whether females should use *tefillin*. Almost all of the Messianic discussion over non-Jews using *tefillin* will just assume that only males are those who are going to do it. However, the issue of females wearing *tefillin* has been especially piqued over the past few decades, as many females in both Conservative and Reform Judaism will and do wrap *tefillin*.⁵⁵ Much of this does involve a Talmudic belief that Michal, daughter of King Saul, among others, employed *tefillin* and was not rebuked for it:

"'Michal the daughter of the Kushite [Saul] put on phylacteries, and the sages did not stop her, and the wife of Jonah went up on the pilgrim festivals, and the sages didn't stop her.' *Now, since they didn't stop her, therefore they maintain that the putting on of phylacteries is a positive commandment that is not dependent on a particular schedule [and women are obligated to those commandments]'* (b.Eruvin 96a).⁵⁶

Eisenberg adds, "the daughters of the great medieval scholar Rashi...wore tefillin. In modern times, some women have begun to wear traditional tefillin or those of their own design."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp 41-42.

⁵⁵ Cf. Isaacs, 234.

⁵⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

⁵⁷ Eisenberg, 386.

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While there are many Conservative and Reform Jewish females who will employ *tefillin* or phylacteries, those in today's Messianic movement are more likely than not, going to be very negative toward this. Janicki himself, in a 2014 blog, concludes, "[I] tend to be more traditional in [my] approach to Torah and feel that the Orthodox approach helps maintain the biblical distinction and roles of men and women."⁵⁸

Contrary to much of the complementarianism of today's Messianic movement, being an egalitarian—and as one who favors an inclusive faith community for Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, and both men and women—I personally have no issue, in principle, with all of today's Messianic males and females employing *tefillin*. I believe in a Body of Messiah where common faith in the Lord, and what He has done for us, is primary to the distinctions that exist among people. The practice of employing *tefillin* is deeply rooted within the themes of the Exodus, something which affects both the Jewish people and those of the nations (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1). As Exodus 13:14, 16 directs,

"When in the future your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall answer, 'By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery...It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt'" (NRSV).

For the most part, those who choose to employ *tefillin* or phylacteries are going to do so in times of private prayer, in their own homes—and do so in broad alignment with Conservative and Reform Jewish *halachah*. Non-Jewish Messianics, knowing that wrapping *tefillin* can create some tension with some Messianic Jews, can indeed keep what goes on in their private prayer time as something confidential between them and the Lord. Every time I have employed *tefillin* in prayer, I have done so in the privacy of my own home or office.

The very purpose of taking the time in the morning, and binding a physical, ritual object like the *tefillin* or phylacteries, is so that a man or woman of God can be disciplined and focused in prayers and entreaties to the Lord. Because of the time it takes to follow the procedures and protocol of employing *tefillin* in personal prayer, and much of the traditional liturgy it involves, it can be very fulfilling. I have personally owned a pair of *tefillin* since 2002. I do not regularly use them in my times of personal prayer and reflection, but there have definitely been seasons of my life when I have had to focus my attention very highly and specifically on the Lord, and employing *tefillin* has afforded me a very regimented prayer time for significant times of transition.

Many Messianic people see the Torah instructions from which the practice of donning *tefillin* are derived, and will opt for a figurative, and not a literal application. Indeed, very few Messianic people I know have ever wrapped someone else's *tefillin*, much less have their own pair. (Many, seeing the value of *tefillin*, just do not want to invest the money, as they do tend to be very expensive.) If you

⁵⁸ Toby Janicki (2014). *Can Women Wear Tzitzit and Tefillin?*, 27 January, 2014. *First Fruits of Zion*. Retrieved 11 November, 2014, from <<http://ffoz.org>>.

adhere to these instructions as mainly, if not entirely, being figurative—**than be sure that you consciously keep God’s Word in your mind and on your hand, in what you think about and what you do.** Also recognize, though, that some people certainly learn through physical rituals. Leave others the option to employ *tefillin* in their prayer times, and be sure to pray that the Lord uses this procedure to reveal Himself in a very special way to your fellow Messianic Believers, or Jewish people who need to be shown the need for their Messiah.

Tzitzits (Fringes or Tassels)



Anyone who has been to a Jewish synagogue on *Shabbat*, and many Messianic congregations for that matter, has encountered *tzitzits*, or more likely encountered *tzitzits* on a *tallit* or prayer shawl. Perhaps if one lives in a metropolitan area with a large Jewish community, one has also encountered or seen an Orthodox Jewish man or boy with fringes extending from around his waistline. The employment of some kind of fringe or tassel on a four-cornered garment, undoubtedly connects people to the past and to the Ancient Near East. The employment of the tassel or fringe as a kind of status symbol should not go unnoticed, especially given David’s strong apprehension about cutting off the corner of Saul’s robe when he was sleeping (1 Samuel 24:5-6).⁵⁹

Many would classify the *tzitzits*, fringes or tassels, along the lines of Biblical dress and grooming, yet it cannot be denied how the *tzitzit* actually has a very significant religious and spiritual quality. As the Torah instructions detail, the purpose of the *tzitzits* is for the wearer to look upon them, and be reminded of the importance of God’s commandments:

“The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue. It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, so that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your God. I am the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the LORD your God’” (Numbers 15:37-41).

“You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself” (Deuteronomy 22:12).

⁵⁹ “It came about afterward that David’s conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul’s robe. So he said to his men, ‘Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD’s anointed’” (1 Samuel 24:5-6).

There is no dispute in the three major branches of Judaism today—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—about the literal nature of *v'asu l'hem tzitzit al-kanefei b'gedei'hem* (וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל-פְּנֵי בְּגָדֵיהֶם), “that they shall make themselves tzitzis on the corners of their garments” (Numbers 15:38, ATS). The *tzitzit* is mainly a “**tuft, fringe, tassel**” (CHALOT).⁶⁰ While there are degrees of variance present over the application of this instruction, the commandment regarding *tzitzits* or fringes/tassels, is something that is observed in the broad Jewish tradition. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* offers a basic summary of how *tzitzit* is approached and employed in much of Judaism today:

TSITSIT (צִיצִית), fringes attached to the four corners of garments. *Numbers* 15.37-41 commands that a blue thread be added to the *tsitsit* at the four corners to remind the Israelites of the commandments and prevent them from going astray. The mnemonic and preventative roles have been a matter of speculation. Some modern scholars have suggested that the law in *Numbers* evolved as the theological rationalization of an originally common ornamentation. The fringes have also been explained as a sign of rank or dignity, an emblem of Israel's status as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. Ancient Near Eastern art shows figures with fringes decorating corners or ends of seams of garments. Mesopotamian documents reveal that fringes (Akk. *sissiktu*) on garments were considered extensions of the person and could represent him in legal acts and magical rituals. Since modern dress rarely includes four-cornered garments, a special one (known as *tsitsit*, *arba' kanfot* [four corners], or *tallit qatan* [small **tallit*]) is worn during the day by observant male Jews (including boys) beneath the outer clothing. In Haredi circles, the custom of wearing the *tsitsit* over the outer clothing is gaining ground. The fringes are attached to this four-cornered garment with a hole in the middle, through which the head is placed. A blessing is recited when putting on the *tsitsit*. The *tsitsit* consists of four long strands drawn through a small hole about one-and-a-half inches from the corner. The two parts of the strands are tied together by a double knot. The longest strand (*shammash*) is then wound seven, eight, eleven, and thirteen times around the other seven halves of the four threads. A double knot of the *tsitsit* should not be less than eleven-and-one-half inches.⁶¹

The interjection that the *tzitzits* or fringes specified in the Torah were not a practice unique to Ancient Israel, but were actually in some form common on some Ancient Near Eastern forms of clothing, certainly can be used to support the thought that the *tzitzit* is to connect the wearer to the past. One feature of the *tzitzit*, specified in Numbers 15:38, is that it is to have *petil tekheilet* (פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת), “a cord of blue,” “a thread of blue” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren), “a thread of turquoise wool” (ATS), or even “an indigo twist” (Alter). The term *tekheilet* (תְּכֵלֶת) is defined in standard lexicons along the lines of “violet, i.e. violet thread and stuff” (BDB),⁶² or “**purple wool**” (CHALOT).⁶³ *Jastrow* includes the description, “purple-shell, a bluish or cerulean dye,

⁶⁰ CHALOT, 306; also *Jastrow*, 1280.

⁶¹ Victor Hurowitz, “Tsitsit,” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 707.

⁶² BDB, 1067.

⁶³ CHALOT, 390.

purple-blue wool esp. the purple-blue thread used for the show-fringes.”⁶⁴ As recorded in the Talmud, there was a special dye, taken from a small mollusk or sea snail, from which the bluish *tekheilet* was taken for the *tzitzit*:

“Said Abbaye to R. Samuel b. R. Judah, ‘As to the blue thread, how do you dye it?’ He said to him, [Following Cashdan:] ‘We bring the blood of the hillazon-mollusc, along with other ingredients, and put them together in a pot and boil them. Then we take a little out in an egg shell and test it on a piece of wool, and throw away what remains in the egg shell and burn the wool’” (b.Meachot 42b).⁶⁵

The blue or *tekheilet* used for the *tzitzit* does bear some significance, certainly for how *tekheilet* is associated in the Torah and Tanach for the garments of the Levites, as well as royal garments of authority:

“They shall also make the ephod of gold, of blue [*tekheilet*] and purple and scarlet material and fine twisted linen, the work of the skillful workman” (Exodus 28:6).

“[A]nd the sash of fine twisted linen, and blue [*tekheilet*] and purple and scarlet material, the work of the weaver, just as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Exodus 39:29).

“Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue [*tekheilet*] and white, with a large crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced” (Esther 8:15).

There is certainly some Rabbinic discussion in the Talmud regarding the importance of the *tekheilet*:

“It has been taught on Tannaite authority: R. Meir would say, ‘Why is blue singled out among all the colors for use in the show fringes? Because blue is like the sea, and the sea is like the firmament, and the firmament is like the throne of glory: “And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone” (Exo. 24:10), and “The likeness of a throne is the appearance of a sapphire stone” (Eze. 1:26)’” (b.Menachot 43b).⁶⁶

The association of the *tzitzits* or fringes with the priesthood is further highlighted in view of how mixtures like that of wool and linen were prohibited for the clothing of normal, civilian Israelites (Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:11). Yet, it is to be witnessed how *tzitzit* were often produced by a mixture of wool and linen, especially in light of how tapestries for the Tabernacle (Exodus 26:1) and garments of the priests (Exodus 28:6) were often of mixed fabrics. The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Deuteronomy 22:11-12, paraphrasing the instruction, reflects how the *tzitzit* could be a mixed fabric:

“You shall not clothe nor warm yourselves with a garment combed (carded) or netted, or interwoven with woollen and linen mixed together. Nevertheless on a

⁶⁴ Jastrow, 1668.

⁶⁵ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

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robe of linen thread you may be permitted to make fringes of woollen upon the four extremities of your vestments with which you dress in the day.”⁶⁷

It should not go unnoticed how today, in most Jewish settings, the *tzitzit* worn are all white or off-white. Much of this relates to the formula for the traditional dye for the *tekheilet* or blue, being widely lost in Jewish history. Eisenberg, in describing many of the traditions and customs associated with the *tzitzit*, summarizes how,

“This blue was made from an expensive dye that was extracted from a sea snail (*chilazon*) by a few families on the Mediterranean coast (Men. 42b). After the destruction of the Second Temple, the secret of obtaining this exact shade was lost, and the use of the blue thread in the fringes was discontinued. Recently, some claim to have discovered a close relative of the snail, and *tallitot* with blue fringes are now available. The blue stripes now woven into many *tallitot* symbolize this ancient *tekheilet*.”⁶⁸

While there are certainly going to be continuing discussions and debates among religious Jews as to the validity of whether some have rediscovered the right formula from antiquity for the *tekheilet*—the falling out of seeing *tzitzits* with a thread of blue, and seeing all-white *tzitzits* up until very recently, is entirely due to the forces of history. In his Numbers commentary, Jacob Milgrom offers the following useful explanation, for why all-white *tzitzits* have been seen in post-Second Temple Judaism:

“*Tsitsit* have undergone many changes in Jewish practice, and a brief review of their history is indicated. The requirement of the violet cord was suspended in rabbinic times (Mish. Men. 4:1; Num. R. 17:5). The Jewish community following the two Roman wars was so impoverished that many could not afford even the one violet-dyed cord required for each *tsitsit*. Moreover, the dye industry apparently declined and the *tekhelet* became scarce (Men. 42b). To be sure, a cheap counterfeit violet had been developed from the indigo plant but the rabbis disqualified it as *tekhelet* (Sif. Nu. 115; BM 61b, Men. 42b-43a). These factors contributed to the suspension of the violet cord requirement, and since then *tsitsit* have been totally white.”⁶⁹

Mainly those, who believe that the formula for *tekheilet* has been rediscovered, tend to be Jewish religious sects associated with groups like the Temple Mount Faithful, who would obviously need *tekheilet* for a reconstituted Tabernacle and a rebuilt Third Temple, for purposes beyond those of the *tzitzits*. While there are other Jews who find the *tekheilet* blue offered by these organizations intriguing, to say the least, Messianic groups tend to be the most excited about it, often thinking that it is a sign that the return of Yeshua is nearing. What cannot go unnoticed, though, is how there are a variety of Messianic people, who think that Rabbinic rulings from the post-Second Temple era, at least allowing for all-white *tzitzit* without a blue cord, were widely wrong. In his 2011 resource, *Tzitzit: You shall make yourself tassels on the*

⁶⁷ BibleWorks 9.0: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch.

⁶⁸ Eisenberg, 380; also Toby Janicki, *Tzitzit: You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your garment* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2011), pp 43-44.

⁶⁹ Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 412.

four corners of your garment, Janicki makes the following, useful observations, responding to this thought:

“Some might feel that this means that the rabbis’ ruling overrode the commandment to have a thread of blue in the *tzitzit* and is therefore abolishing the Torah. Rather, the sages upheld the Torah by prohibiting the use of counterfeit *techelet*. They knew that people would be inclined to use substitutions, but substitutions do not fulfill the commandment and they cheapen the meaning of true *techelet*. Other people might attempt to purchase the true *techelet* at extreme expense and hardship, or worse yet, be tempted to purchase the imitation *techelet*, thus violating the Torah. Therefore, they ruled to protect both the authenticity of the commandment and human dignity; they felt it was better to do half of the *mitzvah* correctly rather than to do all of it incorrectly.”⁷⁰

There are, going back to ancient times, different traditions present in how the threads of the *tzitzit* were to be tied. The two major tying patterns of the fringes or tassels witnessed today, in the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish communities, are associated with various Jewish traditions of gematria, where Hebrew letters represent certain numerical values, and thus the number of knots tied in the *tzitzit* is supposed to communicate something to the wearer about God’s commandments. Eisenberg offers the following summary from his *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*:

“There are eight threads (four doubled over as they are drawn through the perforation in the garment) on each of the four corners of the tallit. Thus the total number of threads is 32, the numerical value of the Hebrew word ‘*lev*’ (heart). Since the Pentateuch respectively ends with a *lamed* (ל) and begins with a *bet* (ב), the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* can be compared to the entire Torah.

“In each collection of eight threads, one is longer than the rest and is wound around the remaining seven threads in either of two different ways. Among Ashkenazic Jews, there are four series of rings of 7, 8, 11, and 13 windings, respectively. The sum of these numbers equals 39, the numerical value of the Hebrew words ‘*YHVH echad*’ (God is one). Thus when looking at the fringes, one is constantly reminded of the fundamental Jewish principle of monotheism. Among Sephardic Jews, the pattern of windings is 10, 6, 5, 6, numbers that, respectively, represent the letters in ‘*YHVH*.’

“The Rabbis noted that the numerical value of the Hebrew word ‘*tzitzit*’ (fringes) is 600. When combined with the eight threads and five knots on each fringe, this adds up to 613—the precise number of *mitzvot* in the Torah. Thus by looking at the fringes we are to ‘recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them’ (Num. 15:39).”⁷¹

It is safe to recognize how until the destruction of the Second Temple, for sure, *tzitzits* or fringes/tassels were attached to most regular Jewish clothing worn throughout the day. But, as clothing style developed, and Jews in the Diaspora found themselves wearing clothing adapted to new environments and climates, the

⁷⁰ Janicki, *Tzitzit*, 43.

⁷¹ Eisenberg, pp 380-381.

four-cornered *tallit* (טלית) emerged as a separate garment.⁷² Some of the adaptation for the fringes or tassels to be mainly worn on a *tallit* or prayer shawl, within the confines of one's home or synagogue—and not necessarily all of the time—was most probably due to anti-Jewish actions in the Middle Ages.⁷³ With the exception of many in the Orthodox Jewish tradition today, most in the Conservative and Reform Synagogue—and by extension the Messianic Jewish community—observe the command to wear fringes or tassels by employing the *tallit* at various times of private prayer and corporate worship. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* offers a basic summary of how the *tallit* (Ashkenazic *tallis*) is approached and employed in much of Judaism today:

TALLIT (טלית), four-cornered cloth with fringes (cf. *Nm.* 15.38), worn as a prayer shawl during the Shaḥarit and Musaf services. It is called *tallit gadol* (large *tallit*) to distinguish it from the *tallit qatan* (small *tallit*), or **tsitsit*, worn beneath the outer garments. The *tallit* is donned before the **tefillin* are put on (on those days when *tefillin* are worn). After the recitation of a special blessing, the *tallit* is wrapped around the head and then dropped to the shoulders. The *tallit* must be at least large enough to cover the head and upper body of a youngster. In some areas, particularly in eastern Europe, only married men wore the *tallit*. Sephardim wear it from the age of *bar mitsvah*, as do Jews of German descent, and this has become a widespread practice. The *tallit* should be made of wool with wool fringes attached, but it may be made of other fabrics, in which case the fringes must be made of the same fabric. Today, prayer shawls are often made from silk. Unless an alternative is unavailable, a linen *tallit* should not be used. "To glorify the *mitsvah*," some prayer shawls have a band (*'atarah*) across the top. At the Minḥah and Ma'ariv services, only the officiant wears a *tallit*; on Yom Kippur worshipers wear their prayer shawls at all five services; and on Tish'ah be-'Av, the *tallit* is worn at the Minḥah service instead of the Shaḥarit service. Priests called to give the **Birkat ha-Kohanim* cover their heads and hands with their *tallit*. Women are exempt from wearing the *tallit* because the commandment is related to a specific time, but in recent years, it has become the practice for many non-Orthodox women to wear a *tallit*. The biblical prescription ordains that a blue thread be added to the fringes, but although some Hasidic sects still attach a blue thread, most Orthodox Jews do not, since the proper process for making the blue dye (**tekhelet*) is still unclear. The *tallit* is usually decorated by several stripes running from top to bottom near the ends. This design and the blue color of the thread inspired the pattern of the Zionist banner, which was later adopted as the flag of the State of Israel.⁷⁴

Robinson's *Essential Judaism* further elaborates on some of the main protocol typically observed when employing the *tallit*, which during morning prayers is put on first before the *tefillin*:

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp 379-380.

⁷³ Cf. Kasdan, *God's Appointed Customs*, 125; also the summary provided by Janicki, *Tzitzit*, pp 11-17.

⁷⁴ Peter Lenhardt, "Tallit," in *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 668.

"The final paragraph of the *Sh'ma* is a passage from Numbers 15:38 instructing the Israelites to wear fringes on any four-cornered garment as a reminder of Adonai's commandments. Male Orthodox Jews, even small boys, will wear an undershirt (*tallit katan/small tallit*) with four corners and fringes (*tzitzit*) from the moment he awakens until he undresses at night. Most Jewish men (and many Jewish women in Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, and even some Modern Orthodox congregations) will wear a prayer shawl, a *tallit gadol/large tallit*, at morning services, *musaf*, all day on Yom Kippur (even into the evening), and for *minkhah* at Tisha b'Av, in recognition of this *mitzvah*....

"Usually a *tallit gadol* will have an embroidered neckpiece to indicate where the collar is. The neckpiece is called the *atarah/crown* and is there, in part, to strengthen the fabric at the point at which it will bear the most strain. To put on a *tallit*, one holds it spread out in both hands with the neckpiece at the top, then recites the blessing....

"If you have borrowed another congregant's *tallit* for only a few minutes, it is not necessary to recite the blessing; however, if you are wearing a *tallit* that belongs to the synagogue and will have it on for an extended period of time—say the length of the morning service—you should recite the blessing. Many worshippers like to cover their heads with the *tallit* while reciting the blessing, fulfilling the commandment by 'wrapping' themselves and taking a moment for quiet meditation on the significance of this commandment. The *tallit* should be draped over the shoulders, hanging down from the front of the body so that the *tzitzit* lie at the four corners or directions around the person.

"Like priests in the Temple in Jerusalem who wore turbans to mark their awareness of the presence of the Almighty, a Jew who wears a *tallit* adds a sense of formality and solemnity to prayer. At the same time, wearing a *tallit* helps one to feel sanctified in the service of God. Putting the *tallit* over one's head during the *Amidah* allows a worshipper to experience both the public and private nature of Jewish prayer simultaneously.

"In traditionally observant congregations, it is the *minhag* for many to press the fringes to the eyes and to kiss them three times during the recitation of the last section of the *Sh'ma*, when saying the word *tzitzit*. When the Torah comes past your seat during the *hakafah*, you may extend your *tzitzit* to touch it, then kiss them. When called to the Torah to read the blessings, it is customary in most congregations for you to touch the *tzitzit* to the place in the scroll where the reader will begin, and then to kiss them, and to repeat this gesture where the reader finishes."⁷⁵

There is, for certain, a diversity of styles for the *tallit*, as witnessed across the Jewish spectrum. Traditionally, the four-cornered *tallit*, ranging from the size of a scarf to the size where most of the body can be covered, tends to be all-white or off-white with either blue or black stripes. Of course, there are many other styles of *tallits*, with their design often imbued with some degree of symbolism for various Jews, beyond them being aesthetic or artistic. As Eisenberg describes,

"It is typically made of wool, though cotton or silk may be used. Some have black or blue stripes, the number and pattern of which have mystical significance. As

⁷⁵ Robinson, pp 23-25.

a color of mourning, the black stripes may serve as a visual reminder of the loss of the Temple. Today, some *tallitot* are made of various colors, inspired by kabbalistic symbolism or aesthetic preference. Most Jews wear only a small, scarflike tallit, since the biblical commandment specifically refers to the wearing of the tzitzit, not the tallit itself. However, others prefer large *tallitot* that cover most of the body, so as to qualify as a ‘garment’ on which the fringes may be hung (Deut. 22:12).⁷⁶

Beyond the likelihood of different styles of *tallits*, conveying certain religious symbolism to different Jewish sects, is how there is also some certain social associations to be made in today’s Judaism with the *tallit*.⁷⁷ The Torah instruction of Deuteronomy 22:12 regarding *tzitzit*, precedes a reference to “If any man takes a wife...” (Deuteronomy 22:13),⁷⁸ and so it is thought among many that the *tallit* should only be used by married men. Certainly, outside of any synagogue services, wearing *tzitzits* on a *tallit katan*, will often denote an Orthodox level of Torah observance. Many Messianics who wear *tzitzits*, outside of a congregational environment, are unaware of this social feature, and what it might communicate to Conservative and Reform Jews, in particular.

Over the past several decades, the issue of females wearing the *tallit*, and hence *tzitzits*, has become especially pronounced, and is today widely common in Conservative and Reform Judaism. Females wearing the *tallit* has often been opposed on the basis of Deuteronomy 22:6 and the *tallit* traditionally being a man’s garment, although women wearing *tzitzits* is something that has been witnessed in Jewish history, as seen in the record of the Talmud:

“Judah would put show fringes onto the aprons of the women of his household. Every morning he would recite the blessing, ‘...who has commanded us to wrap ourselves around in fringes.’ But since he put them onto the aprons of the women of his household, it must have regarded it as a religious duty that does not depend upon the advent of a particular point in time to become operative, so why does he say such a blessing every single morning?” (b.Menachot 43a).⁷⁹

From the Torah itself, much surrounds the perspective one takes regarding the opening line of Numbers 15:38: *dabeir el-b’nei Yisrael* (דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). In its most literal sense, this would be “Speak to the sons of Israel” (LITV), although Jewish versions in English do not tend to render *b’nei Yisrael* as “sons of Israel,” perhaps implying only males, but instead have the more inclusive: “the Children of Israel” (ATS, Keter Crown Bible, Fox⁸⁰) or “the children of Yisra’el” (Jerusalem Bible-Koren), “the Israelite people” (NJPS), or “the Israelites” (Alter).⁸¹ Given how *b’nei Yisrael* is frequently employed in the Torah to refer to the whole, sometimes broad population of the community, to limit this to only male Israelites would not at all seem textually appropriate. With *b’nei Yisrael* approached from the perspective of it being either

⁷⁶ Eisenberg, 378.

⁷⁷ Isaacs, pp 222-223.

⁷⁸ Cf. Ibid.

⁷⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

⁸⁰ Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 736.

⁸¹ The CJB, as a Messianic version, also has “the people of Isra’el.”

“children of Israel” or just “Israelites,” many find a strong textual validation for females being permitted to wear *tzitzits*. On the whole, though, today’s Messianic community would not seem to demonstrate an official “friendliness,” as it were, to women wearing *tzitzits* and *tallits*,⁸² even though it can be encountered in some places.

Generally speaking, today’s Messianic Jews will fall somewhere within how Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews observe the commandments to wear *tzitzits* or fringes, with a preference often demonstrated for the application for the latter two. Some of today’s Messianic Jews wear the tassels or fringes with a cord of blue, but others do not. Beyond this, from the writing witnessed within the One Law/One Torah sub-movement, would be a style of observance consistent with the broad Jewish practice as well.⁸³

That Yeshua the Messiah Himself wore fringes or tassels on His own garments is widely and properly acknowledged in the Messianic world.⁸⁴ The actual term employed in the Greek source text of the Gospels is *kraspedon* (κράσπεδον), often rendered by the English “fringe” or “tassel,” but notably defined by a lexicon like *BDAG* as, “*tassel* (צִיִּצִית [*tzitzit*]), which an Israelite was obligated to wear on the four corners of his outer garment, acc. to Num 15:38f; Dt 22:12.”⁸⁵ The CJB (and also the TLV) is a notable Messianic version that makes reference to the Hebrew *tzitzit*:

“A woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years approached him from behind and touched the *tzitzit* on his robe” (Matthew 9:20, CJB).

“They begged him that the sick people might only touch the *tzitzit* on his robe, and all who touched it were completely healed” (Matthew 14:36, CJB).

“Wherever he went, in towns, cities or country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the *tzitzit* on his robe, and all who touched it were healed” (Mark 6:56, CJB).

“[She] came up behind him and touched the *tzitzit* on his robe; instantly her hemorrhaging stopped” (Luke 8:44, CJB).

Of particular importance is how it is not generically the edge of Yeshua’s clothing that sick or infirm persons reached out for; sick or infirmed persons reached out toward the *tzitzit* extruding from the edge of Yeshua’s clothing. It is to be recognized, though, that in His negative admonitions to the Pharisaical leaders, Yeshua did condemn their method of using them (as well as their method of using *tefillin*)—but given Yeshua’s own wearing of the *tzitzits* or fringes, His word of

⁸² Cf. Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, pp 126, 130; Janicki, *Tzitzit*, 47 and his reference to “Jewish men”; *Can Women Wear Tzitzit and Tefillin?*, 27 January, 2014. *First Fruits of Zion*. Retrieved 11 November, 2014, from <<http://ffoz.org>>.

⁸³ Hegg, *Introduction to Torah Living*, pp 165-167.

⁸⁴ Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, pp 128-129, Janicki, *Tzitzit*, pp 19-23.

⁸⁵ *BDAG*, 564.

Matthew 23:5 cannot at all be taken as a dismissal of the value of wearing *tzitzits* or fringes:

“Everything they do is done to be seen by others; for they make their *t’fillin* broad and their *tzitziyot* long” (CJB).

In his 2011 publication on *Tzitzit*, Janicki draws some useful conclusions on the sort of fringes or tassels that the Lord Yeshua could have employed:

“[T]he Master’s *tzitzit* would have been attached to a four cornered blanket-like sheet that he would have worn throughout the day except in the house or during strenuous labor. He would have worn this over his linen tunic-like garment (*chaluk*). His *tallit* would have most likely been made of wool, possibly even with stripes running along two of the ends. The Master would have worn this either over his shoulder or doubled over like a sheet. It is also possible, based on the expensive seamless under-tunic he wore (John 19:23), that the Master owned a finer quilt style of *tallit* that the scholars and sages wore.”⁸⁶

Just as the issue of females employing *tallits* and *tzitzits* has arisen in the Jewish community, and has now been widely received by Conservative and Reform Judaism—certainly related to this would be whether non-Jewish Messianic Believers should employ *tallits* and *tzitzits*, being as they are, a part of the Messianic movement. Writing in 1996, in his *God’s Appointed Customs*, Kasdan as a Messianic Jewish writer draws out the prophetic importance of the *tzitzits* or fringes/tassels, in how people from the nations will seek out Israel’s God and the Jewish people. He states,

“To this day, the *tzitziyot* remind Israel that God has consecrated the Jewish people to himself. It seems that in the last days even the nations will have a greater appreciation of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. In seeking the faith of the God of Israel, many non-Jews will reach out in a rather unusual way.”⁸⁷

Zechariah 8:23 is quoted as an important Tanach reference: “Thus said the LORD of Hosts: In those days, ten men from nations of every tongue will take hold—they will take hold of every Jew by a corner of his cloak and say, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (NJPS). Kasdan further asserts how non-Jewish Believers can indeed wear a *tallit* and *tzitzits*, but fairly advises how observing this does not all of a sudden make them “Jewish,” meaning that their ethnicity and background somehow totally changes:

“The non-Jews...enjoy the spiritual blessings purchased by the Messiah. If a Gentile believer chooses to wear a *tallit*, this can be a beautiful statement of his faith in the God of Israel. In a Messianic Jewish worship service, such a practice can be a positive testimony of the Gentile believer’s stand with the Jewish people...Once again, it is a question of personal conviction that must be sincere. However, care should be taken not to confuse the issue by thinking that a *tallit* is going to transform a Gentile into a Jew.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Janicki, *Tzitzit*, 20.

⁸⁷ Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, 127.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

In his 2011 publication *Tzitzit*, obviously having to factor in the significant number of non-Jewish Believers who have entered into the Messianic movement since the late 1990s, Janicki goes into some of the Rabbinic discussion about non-Jews wearing *tzitzit*, where some sources are more permissible and open-minded about it than others.⁸⁹ Some of the major prohibition present in Judaism about a non-Jew wearing *tzitzit* involves one imitating a Jewish person, and using a false action as a means to accuse him of a crime. As it witnessed in the Talmud,

“Our rabbis have taught on Tanmaite authority: He who purchases from an Israelite in the marketplace a garment that already bears show fringes — lo, the blue thread is assumed to be validly dyed. If he purchases it from a gentile, or a merchant, it is valid. If he buys it from a common person, it is assumed to be invalid, and that is so even though they have said, ‘Someone is not permitted to sell to a gentile a garment that bears show fringes unless he removes the threads that belong to it.’ What is the operative consideration? Here they explained it: because of what a whore might say [if she got it, with fringes, from a gentile in exchange for her services; she might then use it in evidence against a Jew]. R. Judah said, ‘It is a precautionary ruling, lest on a journey a Jew join a gentile wearing it, and the latter kill him.’ [The Jew would assume the other was also a Jew and so would trust him, and the other would kill him unawares.]” (b.Menachot 43a).⁹⁰

Janicki is one, like many in the Messianic movement, who does hold to various complementarian presuppositions on distinctions among God’s people—and with this does not believe that non-Jewish males have to necessarily observe the Torah instruction on *tzitzit*, although he does believe that Jewish males have to observe it. He does, however, think that some non-Jewish males can observe the Torah instruction on *tzitzit* voluntarily. In his deliberations on this, he makes a number of important observations on how in the more independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots sectors, one will find people keeping the Torah commandments of Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12, in ways that sit very much outside of normative Judaism:

“As a non-Jewish follower of the Master myself, I have chosen to implement the practice of tzitzit in my life. Although the tzitzit for me as a non-Jew are not obligatory, I find the discipline rewarding. Its symbolism gives me a sense of solidarity with Israel and the Jewish community. At the same time I realize that, for Gentiles, the practice of tzitzit can be fraught with pitfalls...

“[Consider] the case for the Hebrew-roots Gentile who goes out into public wearing the signs of Jewish identity. Too many times, well-meaning Gentile believers in Messiah take a mitzvah such as tzitzit and run with it. Whether it’s adding crazy colors to the tzitzit, attaching them to one’s belt loops or key chains, wearing them without a head covering, or even using them to convince themselves and others that they are Jewish, it comes across as disingenuous and, frankly speaking, silly looking...

⁸⁹ Janicki, *Tzitzit*, pp 47-49.

⁹⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

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"I'd like to offer a few guidelines to help prevent...pitfalls. First and foremost, if a Gentile decides to take on the practice of tzitzit, it should be done in the traditional manner, with sensitivity to the rulings of the rabbis. Judaism has preserved rich and beautiful traditions in the *tallit gadol* and the *tallit katan*. Gentile believers like myself would be foolish to try and reinvent the wheel. Rather, it would behoove us to honor the family that we have become a part of.

"Second, a Gentile believer who wears a *tallit katan* throughout the day would be well served to tuck in his tzitzit so they are out of sight and not attracting attention. It also might be best to reserve the use of a *tallit gadol* for the privacy of his personal prayer time. As we have stated, tzitzit are a visible sign to both the world and other Jews that one is Jewish (and for that matter practicing Orthodox Judaism). Wearing them visibly can be like false advertising, and it communicates disrespect for the Jewish people. The Jewish community generally perceives Gentiles wearing tzitzit or praying with a *tallit gadol* in public as offensive. It looks like deception to Jews, and to non-Jewish believers, it looks something like kids playing cowboy—dressing up Jewish. Additionally when Gentiles wear visible tzitzit and do things that violate Orthodox tradition it can be a stumbling block rather than an opportunity to witness to the Jewish people as some might think. While I do not want to be dogmatic, non-Jews who take up this mitzvah should consider keeping its observance private, tucking their tzitzit in, and refraining from wearing a *tallit gadol* during public services....

"For Gentile believers, when the mitzvah of tzitzit is observed in a manner sensitive to greater Judaism and in a manner that preserves distinction, it can be a beautiful reminder of who they are in Messiah and of his call to righteous living. Non-Jews are free to embrace this mitzvah, but they are not less in the eyes of God if they choose not to do so. If you are a Gentile considering the mitzvah of tzitzit, it might be best to seek the council of one's local Messianic Jewish rabbi before deciding whether or not to apply this mitzvah."⁹¹

In much of the broad Messianic movement, including Messianic Judaism and not limited to just the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement—there is considerable variance with how the Torah instruction regarding *tzitzit* is employed. There is certainly an Orthodox Jewish level of observance present among some, who employ the *tallit katan* during the daytime and the *tallit gadol* during prayer times and worship services. Most Messianic Jews follow the lead of Conservative and Reform Judaism, with the *tzitzit* worn on the *tallit* during *Shabbat* services, and perhaps also during various private prayer times. Many of these will also have *tzitzit* with the *tekheilet* blue from Israel, but some will have a more common synthetic blue.

No sector of the broad Messianic movement has been unaffected by the significant sub-culture of *tzitzits* that has emerged. The most common manifestation of this has been seen among those who wear white and blue-synthetic fringes on belt loops. There have been many other usages of *tzitzits*, beyond that of them being attached to some form of clothing, in an atypical manner. I have personally seen fringes attached to the backpack someone was wearing, any form of jacket or vest worn, people putting *tzitzits* on a diaper-like garment for their dogs, as well as heard

⁹¹ Janicki, *Tzitzit*, pp 50, 51-52.

stories about houses having white and blue ropes attached to their four corners. Some of these admittedly are the extreme exception.

Most important to be aware of is how there has been a large cottage industry that has developed, with various multi-colored *tzitzits* with a synthetic blue cord present. Some of these *tzitzits* are white, with a synthetic blue cord, *and* perhaps even a synthetic red cord to presumably represent the blood of Yeshua. Other types of *tzitzits* are even more creative, appearing in multiple colors of the rainbow. Yet, unless *tzitzits* are either white with the *tekeilet* cord of blue, or all white/off-white, they stand outside of the window of what would be recognized as legitimate Torah *halachah* by most of today's observant Jews.

When it comes to the issue of today's Messianic movement, and what is rightly classified as a religious symbol in the *tzitzit*, I myself identify with the philo-traditional camp. I am not really pleased when I see anyone wearing homemade fringes on beltloops, as I think this does more to provoke unnecessary mocking and complications, than it does to honor the Torah instruction. I have certainly been through a phase when I did this myself, but when in the presence of non-religious Jews, this would create more challenges than not in establishing a friendship or relationship of sorts.

Being in the philo-traditional sector when it comes to *tzitzit* does not mean—that while recognizing the value in the Orthodox Jewish application of the Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12 instruction *for them*—that I would be among those who would practice it. To wear *tzitzits* or fringes/tassels all the time, could mean that to my Reform Jewish neighbors that I would be identifying with the values of the Orthodox Jewish community—with which I largely do not. I would think it perfectly legitimate to instead follow the standard Conservative or Reform practice of wearing *tzitzit* on a *tallit* or prayer shawl, during *Shabbat* services on Saturday and in private times or prayer, to fulfill the Torah instruction. Fewer problems arise when non-Messianic Jews see individuals wearing a *tallit* at a worship service, with traditional liturgy employed and the Torah scroll canted from, than perhaps in any other setting.

While I believe that Messianic Jewish men observing the Torah instruction on *tzitzit*, in wide conjunction with Conservative or Reform Jewish norms, is indeed appropriate—issues regarding non-Jewish Believers and women wearing *tzitzit* are not going away. As an egalitarian who believes that today's Messianic movement should be inclusive, I certainly think that the *b'nei Yisrael*, the “children of Israel” or “Israelites” referenced in Numbers 15:38, includes both males and females, and I have no issue in principle with females employing the *tallit* and *tzitzit* as the Conservative and Reform Jewish movements now allow. Similarly, given how *b'nei Yisrael* in the Torah is a frequent reference to the entire assembly of people, of both native Israelite and sojourner alike,⁹² there should be little difficulty for non-Jewish

⁹² Obviously, this is contingent on context and usage. R.J.D. Knauth, “Israelites,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, 453 points out how, “within the laws placed at Mount Sinai, beyond the general designation of the collective congregation of the ‘children [sons] of Israel [Heb. *b'nai Yisrael*, בני־יִשְׂרָאֵל],’ a

Messianics to likewise honor the instruction on *tzitzit*, in a manner consistent with their fellow Messianic Jewish brethren and the wider Jewish community. In observing the commandment to wear *tzitzit*, there are always localized congregational issues of protocol that one must consider as well, though, which you will have to evaluate for yourself.

Menorah

Among all of the religious symbols common to either Judaism or Christianity, it is safe to say that the employment of the *menorah* (מְנוּרָה) as an object or image with which people may identify, is probably the least controversial. The origins of the *menorah*, the seven-branched lampstand or candelabra, reside directly in Scripture, as a special lampstand was to be present among the significant implements in the Tabernacle and Temple. As Moses was directed by God in the Torah, and is further recorded regarding its being formed,



“You shall make a Menorah of pure gold, hammered out shall the Menorah be made, its base, its shafts, its cups, its knobs, and its blossoms shall be [hammered] from it. Six branches shall emerge from its sides, three branches of the Menorah from its one side and three branches of the Menorah from its second side; three cups engraved like almonds on the one branch, a knob and a flower; and three cups engraved like almonds on the next branch, a knob and a flower—so for the six branches that emerge from the Menorah. And on the Menorah shall be four cups, engraved like almonds, its knobs and its flowers. A knob shall be under two of the branches from it, a knob under two of the branches from it, and a knob under two of the branches from it—for the six branches emerging from the Menorah. Their knobs and branches shall be of it; all of it a single hammered piece of pure gold. You shall make its lamps seven; he shall kindle its lamps so as to give light toward its face. Its tongs and its spoons shall be of pure gold. Of a talent of pure gold shall he make it, with all these vessels. See and make, according to their form that you are shown on the mountain” (Exodus 25:31-40, ATS).

“He made the Menorah of pure gold, hammered out did he make the Menorah, its base and its shaft, its cups, its knobs, and its flowers were from it. Six branches emerged from its sides, three branches of the Menorah from its side and three branches of the Menorah from its second side; three cups engraved like almonds on one branch, a knob and a flower; and three cups engraved like almonds, a knob and a flower on the next branch—so for the six branches that emerge from the

distinction is regularly made between the ethnic Israelite (brother, native, Hebrew, etc.) and the ethnic ‘alien’ living within the congregation or envisioned as later living within the land of Israel.”

Many places where the sons/children of Israel or Israelites are addressed, it is to the mixed community of natives and sojourners alike. Other places, attention needs to be fairly given to where there are differences, especially as the sojourners in Ancient Israel had once been outsiders who later entered into the community.

For some further observations, consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Torah Keeping for the *Gerim*/Sojourners in Ancient Israel.”

Menorah. And on the Menorah were four cups, engraved like almonds, its knobs and its blossoms. A knob was under two of the branches from it, a knob was under two of the branches from it, and a knob was under two of the branches from it—for the six branches emerging from it. Their knobs and branches were of it, all of a single hammered piece of pure gold. He made its lamps seven, and its tongs and spoons of pure gold. Of a talent of pure gold did he make it and all its utensils” (Exodus 37:17-24, ATS).

It is later recorded how ten *menorahs* were present in the inner sanctuary of the First Temple, built by Solomon (1 Kings 7:49; 2 Chronicles 4:7). In the construction of the Second Temple, though, it is to be recognized how there was only one *menorah* (1 Maccabees 1:21; 4:49). During the post-exilic period, the *menorah* took on much more symbolic significance. The direction of Isaiah 42:6 and Israel being *l'or goyim* (לְאוֹר לְגוֹיִם) or “a light to the nations”—something seen in the mission of the Messiah and His Apostles (Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23)—can be at least represented by the function of the lampstand in the Tabernacle/Temple, expelling light into darkness. The *menorah*, possessing spiritual importance, is seen in the prophecies of Zechariah 4:2, 10-11, as it is to represent the dealings of God in the world. As is described in the *ISBE* entry for “Lampstand,”

“When the temple was rebuilt *ca.* 515 B.C. the sanctuary was outfitted with only one lampstand, of a form which apparently differed from that of the earlier lampstands. It was at this time, if not before, that the temple *mēnôrâ* began to be understood as having cosmic significance. Zec. 4, written near the end of the 6th cent. B.C. as the temple was beginning to be reconstructed, describes a vision in which the temple sanctuary is perceived as God’s heavenly court in which there is a golden lampstand with a bowl on top and seven lamps (vv. 2, 11); the lamps are said to be the eyes of the Lord (v. 10).”⁹³

The *menorah*, as the lampstand prescribed for the Tabernacle and Temple, has doubtlessly had both spiritual and political significance throughout the Biblical period, and throughout post-Second Temple Jewish history down to the present day. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* offers a fair summation of the importance of the *menorah*:

MENORAH (מְנוֹרָה; candelabrum). The design of the *menorah* was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. It consisted of seven branches, three on each side of the central shaft, each of which was ornamented with carvings of almond-blossom cups, divided into a knop and flowers. (A depiction of a *menorah* was discovered on the wall of a villa from Second Temple times in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem.)

The Tabernacle Menorah, formed from one ingot of gold, was situated in front of the veil on the south side of the Tabernacle (*Ex.* 25.31-40, 26.36, 40.24). In Solomon’s Temple, there were ten golden candelabra in the large hall of the Temple, five to the right and five to the left of the entrance to the Holy of Holies (*1 Kgs.* 7.49). These were destroyed by the Babylonians (*2 Kgs.* 24.13) and do not

⁹³ R.H. Smith, “Lampstand,” in *ISBE*, 3:70.

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appear in Ezekiel's vision of the Temple (*Ez.* 41.14). The Arch of Titus in Rome depicts what purports to be the Menorah of the Second Temple. It has a double-octagon base, but recent research has proved almost conclusively that this is an imaginative reconstruction since the Temple Menorah stood on three legs. Reproduction of the Temple Menorah or its use outside the Temple was forbidden. After the destruction of the Second Temple, traces of the Menorah disappeared, although legends abounded. The first-century philosopher *Philo interpreted the symbolism of the *menorah*, linking it to the seven planets, the cyclic quality of life, and the concept of time. The seven-branched *menorah* became one of the most familiar Jewish symbols and is frequently found in synagogue decorations and tombs from the first century CE on. In Kabbalah, the *menorah* symbolized the tree of life, and its seven branches were held to represent the planets, the firmament, and the days of Creation. The eight-branched Hanukkah candelabrum (*hanukkiyyah*) was modeled after the Temple Menorah. The Talmud forbids any attempt to replicate the Menorah of the Temple, and few three-dimensional examples are found in Jewish art before modern times. During the Emancipation, many Jews found the *menorah* too particularistic, and it was replaced by the **magen David* as the central Jewish symbol. The *menorah* reemerged as a Zionist symbol, and the relief on the Arch of Titus was copied in the emblem of the State of Israel.⁹⁴

Throughout Second Temple times, and even into the Middle Ages, the *menorah* was a symbol widely used by Judaism and Jewish people, certainly because of its Biblical origins, but also because of its national importance as a symbol of the Kingdom of Israel—or even of a future restored Messianic Israel. The *menorah* was among many objects from the Second Temple, taken to Rome after the siege of Jerusalem by Titus. The famed Arch of Titus that still stands in Rome has a depiction of the victory procession, and in it what many scholars consider to be an inaccurate depiction of the Temple *menorah*. Eisenberg states from his *JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*,

“After the destruction of the Second Temple, the menorah was taken to Rome. On the inside of the Arch of Titus, which commemorates the Roman victory over Judah, is a carved replica of a menorah being carried in a triumphal procession by defeated Jewish slaves. Although most scholars believe that this was not the original menorah because of its base, observant Jews refuse to walk under the Arch of Titus because it symbolizes the end of Jewish self-rule and the beginning of almost two millennia of exile.”⁹⁵

There is endless debate not only among those in the Jewish community, but especially among those in the Messianic community, over the fate of the Temple *menorah* taken to Rome. Most frequently one will hear claims about the Vatican holding this *menorah* deep in its vaults, perhaps as some religious-political leverage to extend influence over holy sites in Israel, or to be brought out by the future antimessiah/antichrist. The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* offers a much more tempered thought, in stating, “The fate of the menorah is unknown. Tradition

⁹⁴ Shalom Paul, “menorah,” in *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 456.

⁹⁵ Eisenberg, 579.

relates that during the sack of Rome in 410 C.E., the menorah was thrown into the Tiber River near where the modern synagogue now stands.”⁹⁶ Speaking entirely for myself, and recognizing how throughout history the spoils of war made of precious metals never stay intact, I would interject that the Temple *menorah* taken to Rome was probably melted down and minted into gold coins or gold bars, many centuries ago. Whatever *menorah* or lampstand will be employed, in a restored Tabernacle/Temple in Jerusalem, will have to be something newly crafted. Interestingly enough, though, the *menorah* represented on the seal of the modern State of Israel—while recognized to be archaeologically inaccurate—was taken from the relief on the Arch of Titus, as a means of recognizing how the exile of the past was ended:

“After the establishment of the State of Israel, the official symbol of the State centered around the seven-branched *menorah*. The design corresponded with the one engraved on the Arch of Titus in Rome. This choice, in spite of the availability of a large number of other forms known from archeological finds, expressed the desire to symbolize the national revival as the antithesis of the destruction and exile of the past” (*The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*).⁹⁷

Recognizing the *menorah* among the accoutrements present in the Tabernacle and Temple is important, because Jewish tradition present in the Talmud widely prohibits the replication of homewear in the style of the Tabernacle/Temple furniture:

“And it has further been taught on Tannaite authority: A person may not {have} a house in the model of the Temple, or a porch in the model of the Temple porch, or a courtyard in the middle of the Temple courtyard, or a table in the model of the Temple’s table, or a candelabrum in the model of the Temple candelabrum. But he may make one that has five, six, or eight branches, but he may not make one with seven, even though it is of metals other than the ones used in the Temple” (b.*Menachot* 28b).⁹⁸

The *chanukiah* is a notable, nine-branched—but not seven-branched—*menorah*, employed for the eight days of *Chanukah*. While based on the *menorah* in the Temple, a *chanukiah* is not exactly the same. For the most part, aside from educational purposes—such as producing a scale model of the Tabernacle and Temple for students—there is a widespread Jewish discouragement to reproduce Tabernacle and Temple-styled objects for common home use.

For today’s English readers of the Bible, the Hebrew *menorah* (מְנוֹרָה) is frequently rendered as “lampstand,” and is noted by HALOT to have both religious and home uses: “menorah, **lampstand, light**...in the house...[and]...in the tabernacle and in the temple.”⁹⁹ That the Hebrew term *menorah* can be used to represent any lampstand, with any number of arms or branches, can go overlooked by today’s Messianic people. Frequently, when we think of the term *menorah*, we only think of

⁹⁶ “menorah, representation of,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 423.

⁹⁷ “menorah,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, 521.

⁹⁸ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

⁹⁹ HALOT, 1:600.

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the lampstand to be used in the Tabernacle or Temple. The Greek term *luchnia* (λυχνία) was used in “the Septuagint for מְנוֹרָה [*menorah*]; a (candlestick) lampstand, candelabrum” (Thayer),¹⁰⁰ but context in the Apostolic Scriptures for certain, determines whether an actual *menorah* as was used in the Tabernacle or Temple, or a generic lampstand (cf. 2 Kings 4:10), is in view. The famed word of Yeshua, “Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, so that those who come in may see the light,” would obviously speak of a generic lampstand, and not of a *menorah* as in the Tabernacle/Temple. *EDB* describes what a generic lampstand would involve for much of the Biblical period, also noting the significance of a lampstand for religious purposes:

“Although lamps might be put on a shelf or niche, they were frequently set on a separate lampstand (Heb. *měnhôrâ*; 2 Kgs. 4:10; Gk. *lychnia*; Matt. 5:15). Some lampstands were single-stemmed and held only one lamp while others featured several branches on the pedestal....As with the lamp, most biblical references are to lampstands intended for cultic usage.”¹⁰¹

Yet, even with the presence of a generic lampstand employed in some of the significant admonitions of Yeshua (i.e., Matthew 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33), there are references via *luchnia* to the *menorah* employed in the Tabernacle and Temple, in the Apostolic Scriptures. This especially includes various references to the “lampstand(s)” appearing in Revelation. *IDB* details,

“Apart from a single reference to the tabernacle menorah in Heb. 9:2, and casual mention of household lampstands (Mark 4:21), lampstands in the NT are confined to the book of Revelation, where they have a symbolic function. The seven churches of Asia are represented by seven lampstands, among which ‘one like a son of man’ (the Church) walks (Rev. 1:12-20). The church at Ephesus is threatened with the removal of its lampstand if it fails to repent (Rev. 2:5).”¹⁰²

Indeed, recognizing the association of Believers with God’s Temple and the *menorah* includes a valuable lesson, as the redeemed are to be conduits of His light and grace to a world darkened by sin. Yet as the assembly at Ephesus was admonished by the Lord, “Therefore, remember where you were before you fell, turn from this sin, and do what you used to do before. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your *menorah* from its place—if you don’t turn from your sin!” (Revelation 2:5, CJB).

¹⁰⁰ Thayer, 384.

¹⁰¹ Michael D. Guinan, O.F.M., “Lampstand,” in *EDB*, 787.

¹⁰² L.E. Toombs, “Lampstand,” in *IDB*, 3:66.

The Star of David

The Star of David, more properly and formally the Shield of David or *Magen David* (מגן דָּוִד), is a symbol that today is immediately associated with Judaism and the Jewish people, as well as with the modern State of Israel. The origins of the Star of David are not entirely clear, as it does not directly originate from the Biblical period, but rather as a symbol present in the post-Second Temple era.¹⁰³ In *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, Eisenberg describes how while the hexagram was present as a Jewish symbol in ancient times, it was not until the Middle Ages and afterward that it became widely associated with Judaism. Interestingly enough, the six-pointed star was also used in various Christian settings at one point:



“A popular symbol in Europe and the Middle East since ancient days because of its geometric symmetry, the earliest known Jewish use of the hexagram was on a seal from about the sixth century B.C.E. In the synagogue at Capernaum in Israel (second or third century C.E.), the hexagram appears as a decorative design on a stone frieze, which also features the pentagram (five-pointed star) and the swastika (another ancient symbol). During the Middle Ages, hexagrams appeared frequently on seals and in churches but rarely in synagogues or on Jewish ritual objects. Indeed, from antiquity until after the Renaissance, the menorah...rather than the hexagram was the primary symbol of Judaism.”¹⁰⁴

There is certainly some interesting discussion surrounding the six-pointed star, the Star of David as it has become commonly known, as a Jewish symbol. Different geometric shapes and forms have certainly borne significance for the identity and practices of religious groups, as well as secret cults, for millennia. There is little denying the fact that the six-pointed star has had importance inside and outside of Judaism, for various inappropriate means and values.¹⁰⁵ But, would the usage of the six-pointed star by Jewish mystics or Kabbalists, for example, totally invalidate this as a symbol to be employed for ethnic and social identity? It is hard to avoid that many have thought that the Star of David is actually an occultic symbol. However, geometric shapes as seemingly innocent as a circle or a square, certainly have significance to those who compose the occult, every bit as much as the hexagram. The Jewish people mainly identifying with is called the Star of David, apparently emerged at a time when something that could be employed in direct contrast to the Christian cross needed to be seen. As noted by *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*,

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¹⁰³ “star, six pointed, representation of,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 601.

¹⁰⁴ Eisenberg, 575.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Robinson, pp 380-381.

did Christianity. It had the advantage over the traditional *menorah* as being less particularistic (the latter was connected with the Temple worship)."¹⁰⁶

The Magen David, the Star or Shield of David, can be traced to have a past from antiquity as a more-or-less neutral decorative symbol, to later being used by mystics and Kabbalists *as well* as appearing on Jewish heraldry, to by the more modern period being a Jewish national symbol to differentiate out Jewish communities from their Christian neighbors. *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism* offers a thorough entry on the Magen David, describing how various groups used, or in some cases misused, the six-pointed star:

MAGEN DAVID (lit. "shield of David"). Hexagram or six-pointed star form by two superimposed equilateral triangles. This figure was often used in Europe and the Near East for decoration, possibly with a magical connotation, as early as the Bronze Age. It first appeared on a Jewish seal from the seventh century BCE found at Sidon. Although the hexagram is commonly displayed on artifacts and buildings from the Second Temple period by Jews and non-Jews alike (including the third century CE Capernaum synagogue where it is found next to a pentagram and a swastika), it had no particular Jewish significance and is completely absent as a Jewish symbol during Hellenistic times. It appeared on some synagogues in Germany during the 13th and 14th centuries, and in medieval Hebrew manuscripts, but without indication of a particular name or meaning. It was also widespread on amulets and *mezuzot* and in magical Hebrew texts of the later Middle Ages.

The term *magen david* can be traced back to the geonic period, when it is associated with a popular magical alphabet; it reappeared in the 12th century in a Karaite work by Judah Hadassi and among the HASIDÉ ASHKENAZ. It also occurs as a designation of God in the third benediction after the prophetic (HAFTARAH) in the synagogue. The hexagram is first identified as the "shield of David" in a 14th century kabbalistic work written by the grandson of NAHMANIDES. An alternative tradition links the term with the seven-branched candelabrum (MENORAH) which became a powerful talisman in the 16th century.

Between the 14th and 18th centuries, the symbol was widely used by Jewish and non-Jewish printers and found its way into some coats-of-arms. It appeared on the flag of the Jewish community of Prague and on their official seal. Other Jewish communities, including Vienna (1655) and Amsterdam (1671), began to put the symbol on their seals. In Eastern Europe it was found as an ornamentation on ritual objects from 1643 on.

Within kabbalistic circles, the "shield of David" became the "shield of the son of David," the MESSIAH, and was popular among the followers of SHABBETAI TSEVI as their esoteric symbol of the vision of REDEMPTION.

As Jews of the ENLIGHTENMENT entered the mainstream of society in the 19th century, they chose the *magen david* as their identifying symbol in contradistinction to the Christian use of the crucifix. From Central and Western Europe, the "Jewish star" traversed the entire Jewish world to become a unifying symbol, appearing on synagogues and Jewish communal institutions, seals and letterheads, ritual objects and personal items.

¹⁰⁶ "Magen David," in *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 434.

The *magen david* was adopted by the Zionist movement during the First Zionist Congress (1897) and appeared that year on the first issue of *Die Welt*, Theodor HERZL's Zionist journal. Subsequently, it was chosen as the central figure on the blue and white flag of the State of Israel, although the older, more authentic Jewish emblem of the *menorah* appears on the state seal. For Franz ROSENZWEIG, the symbol represented his philosophy of Judaism as articulated in *The Star of Redemption* (1921), in which each point of the star represents an essential element of his thought: Creation, Redemption, Revelation, Humanity, World, and God.

The Nazis used the Jewish star on a yellow "badge of shame" to single out millions in the process of mass murder. A red *magen david* in Israel corresponds to the Red Cross in Western countries.¹⁰⁷

It is safe to recognize that the six-pointed star, or what has more widely become known as the Star or Shield of David, has a mixed history. It would seem most improbable that this was an actual symbol used by either King David or King Solomon for national identification, but not impossible that a six-pointed star, among other symbols, were used as decorations for their palaces, or even parts of the ancient Temple complex. The Star of David has certainly been used by the Jewish Kabbalah, but at the same time it has also been used as a secular symbol for the Jewish people. That the six-pointed star does not always have to be associated with the occult or mysticism, would have been apparent in some of the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1923), who thought that the Star of David possessed something important in describing the relationship between the Creator and humankind. As noted by Robinson's *Essential Judaism*,

"Each of the points of those triangles represents a part of a tripartite relationship on which reality rests. In the upper triangle, we find God, the World, and Man; the lower triangle represents Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. God makes the World through Creation. God chooses Man through Revelation. Man, moved by God, redeems the world. Place these two triangular relationships one upon the other and you have the Star of Redemption."¹⁰⁸

Rosenzweig's personal philosophy involving the Star of David, to be sure, is entirely subjective. It does at least demonstrate, though, how the six-pointed star can represent something entirely other than Medieval spiritism or witchcraft. Certainly today, **the** major reason why the Star of David is identified with the Jewish people and State of Israel, is how the yellow six-pointed star was forced upon European Jews living within Nazi-occupied areas. Eisenberg appropriately describes, "During the Holocaust, the Nazis selected the yellow star as a symbol of Jewish identification to be worn on the garments of all Jews. After the war, Jews turned this badge of humiliation and death into a major symbol of the newly established state of Israel."¹⁰⁹ So today, the symbol of the Star of David—regardless of if one views it as a neutral geometric shape *or* as something a bit nefarious—has become a symbol of Jewish resilience and opposition to not just oppression, but near annihilation.

¹⁰⁷ "Magen David," in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, pp 489-490.

¹⁰⁸ Robinson, 438.

¹⁰⁹ Eisenberg, pp 576-577.

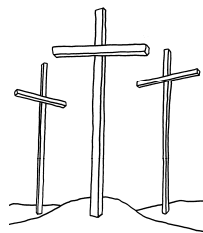
In today's Messianic movement, Messianic Jews will uniformly denounce any attempt by those who would make the six-pointed star or Shield of David, into something occultic or demonic, as being anti-Semitic. Thankfully, even in the more independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots sector—aside from its many challenges—claiming that the Star of David is something inappropriate for God's people to identify with, is not seen, given the presence of many Israeli flags at their popular events. Of course, with anyone employing any religious symbol—especially on clothing or jewelry—caution and discretion should be advised.

Those who may try to attach an exclusively sordid association with the six-pointed star, may make an appeal to the martyr Stephen's word, in recalling the history of Ancient Israel, "And you took up the tent of Moloch, and the star of the god Rephan, the figures which you made to worship; and I will remove you beyond Babylon" (Acts 7:43, RSV). Here, Stephen made a quotation from the Septuagint rendering of Amos 5:26, "You even took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Raiphān, models of them which you made yourselves" (NETS). Some will actually claim that *to astron tou theou [humōn] Rhaiphān* (τὸ ἄστρον τοῦ θεοῦ [ὁμῶν] Ῥαιφάβ), "the star of the god {your} Rhaiphān," is actually the six-pointed Star of David. A fair number of academic authorities, in contrast, are agreed that this star is not some symbol, but rather is astral, most probably being the Planet Saturn, which the Israelites inappropriately venerated at one point.

BDAG, noting the proper name *Rhaiphān* (Ῥαιφάβ), defines it with "Rephan, *Rompha*, a deity worshipped by some Israelites, put by the LXX in Am 5:26 in the place of קִיּוּן [*Kivun*] (=Saturn..."¹¹⁰ It is to be recognized that a slightly different name appears in the Hebrew of Amos 5:26, *Kivun* (קִיּוּן), "(portable) **pedestal** or **carrier** (for images); but usu. vocalized *kêwān*, name of astral god Saturn" (*CHALOT*).¹¹¹ Apparently, "The erroneous Greek form appears to have resulted from the mistaking of כ [kaf] for ר [resh], and the transliteration of ו [vav], probably taken as consonantal פ [phi]. Rephan or Kaiwan, clearly an astral deity, is the Babylonian name for Saturn" (*IDB*).¹¹²

The Cross

On the whole in the religious world today, the cross has become almost universally recognized as a symbol that identifies people with Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth, as the One who was sacrificed for the sins of humanity, and subsequently resurrected from the dead. As seen in both the Apostolic Scriptures and classical antiquity, the *stauros* (σταυρός) was mainly "a pole to be placed in the ground and used for capital punishment, *cross*" (*BDAG*),¹¹³ which came in a variety of forms, ranging from a standard t- shape to an x-shape, as the process of executing



¹¹⁰ BDAG, 903.

¹¹¹ CHALOT, 156.

¹¹² F.W. Beare, "Rephan," in *IDB*, 4:36; cf. "Rephan," in *ISBE*, 4:138; "Rephan," in *EDB*, 1120.

¹¹³ BDAG, 941.

someone by crucifixion was to essentially suffocate them slowly and painfully—being literally “hung out” for public humiliation and shame.

Today’s broad Messianic community has a somewhat unsure relationship with the symbol of the cross, for a variety of reasons. Some feel that with a widely Jewish or Hebraic orientation, Messianic people need to identify more with symbols such as the *menorah*, *mezuzah*, or the Star of David. Others feel that the cross has a great deal of religious “baggage,” as it were, associated with it, from centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and injustice done to the Jewish people, using the cross as an implement—and that when today’s Messianic people emphasize the sacrifice of Yeshua, alternative terminology should be employed. Still, there are some who feel that the symbol of the cross should be integrated, on some level, with the identification of the Messianic movement with its Christian spiritual heritage, in concert with the Star of David representing its Jewish spiritual heritage. And, there are others who consider the cross to be a completely pagan symbol, which has no place in the assembly.

How are Messianics to appropriately approach the symbol of the cross? A useful description of the cross is provided by the *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*:

“A torturous instrument of Roman execution and a *symbol of Christ’s atoning death (Lat. *crux*; Gk. *stauros*). Crucifixion was a most reviled and shameful means of death for criminals (cf. Deut 21:23) but it became a symbol of Christianity due to the atoning death of Jesus on a Roman cross at Golgotha, outside of Jerusalem (Gal 3:13). In Christian symbolism the Latin cross has a longer vertical arm (†) while the Greek cross has arms of equal length (+). The use of the cross as a symbol was gradual, not to be found in the *catacombs except perhaps for the cross pattern of the *dome of heaven in the *cubicula* (perhaps making a connection with Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32).”¹¹⁴

There are, to be sure, many forms and derivations of the basic symbol of the cross, seen in a diverse array of Christian churches and culturally Christian traditions the world over. In more customary spiritual terms, the symbol of the cross serves to represent Yeshua’s agony and death for sinners. Yeshua directed His Disciples the ever-critical word, “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (Mathew 10:38).¹¹⁵ The cross, in the words of the Messiah, is hardly some instrument of adornment or decoration for the buildings where His followers meet, or some piece of elaborate jewelry that people wear; the cross is a way of life, that can lead to a person giving up his or her own self unto death, as the cost of emulating Him. The cross, in no uncertain terms, as a means of following the Messiah, is something that is to be an offense to the world at large. *IDB* offers the following useful summary, for people to gauge how the cross has been approached by sincere Christian people wanting to follow the Messiah:

“As a physical object, Jesus’ cross is, of course, mentioned in all four gospels (Matt. 27:32ff; Mark 15:21ff; Luke 23:26; John 19:17ff), and also at Phil. 2:8; Heb. 12:2.

¹¹⁴ Brett Scott Provance, *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 44.

¹¹⁵ Also Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27.

To the orthodox Jew it was inevitably a stumbling block or scandal (Gal. 5:11), for Christians declared that Israel's long-hoped-for Messiah had indeed come, only to be thus ignominiously executed at Roman hands. To Gentile pagans, likewise, such a proposition was foolishness. As Paul acknowledged, it could not be understood by worldly wisdom (I Cor. 1:17-18). So it became the occasion for persecuting the followers of Christ (Gal. 6:12). Precisely here, however, lay the paradox of Christian belief. Christ's death on the cross brought salvation for Christian hope (Col. 2:14; cf. Eph. 2:16), and hence was the basis for Christian hope (Col. 1:20). Therefore, it was, for Paul, the only ground on which he might boast (Gal. 6:14). Thus the cross, with all its offensiveness, became the supreme symbol of the new faith."¹¹⁶

Many Messianics have been hesitant to use terms like "cross" or "crucifixion" for any number of reasons. The Complete Jewish Bible, for example, uses the term "execution-stake" instead of cross, and it is not uncommon to also hear the term "tree" being used. While these are perfectly acceptable alternatives to the more common terms "cross" or "crucify," it by no means negates them. While no one is forcing Messianic people to use a cross as a logo for, or in, their congregation or ministry, or to wear a cross as a religious symbol, much of the Messianic movement, sadly, has an immature attitude when it comes to the symbol of the cross.

Many Messianic Jews, for whatever reason, are offended by the symbol of the cross. Perhaps some of this is due to historical Christian abuses of the Jewish community done in the "sign of the cross," but the same can be said of just about any religious symbol. While we should be sensitive to those who may not always like the term "cross," the Apostle Paul himself writes that "we preach Messiah crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:23). For Believers in Yeshua, the cross is a bittersweet symbol of the pain and suffering that the Lord endured for us.

History fully attests that many criminals in the Roman Empire were crucified upon some kind of a cross. It was an extremely brutal, humiliating, and painful way to suffer and die. It was intended to serve as a public warning to others not to infuriate the Roman state:

"Under the Roman Empire, crucifixion normally included a flogging beforehand. At times the cross was only one vertical stake. Frequently, however, there was a cross-piece attached either at the top to give the shape of a 'T' (*crux comissa*) or just below the top, as in the form most familiar in Christian symbolism (*crux immissa*). The victims carried the cross or at least a transverse beam (*patibulum*) to the place of the execution, where they were stripped and bound or nailed to the beam, raised up, and seated on a *sedile* or small wooden peg in the upright beam. Ropes bound the shoulders or torso to the cross. The feet or heels of the victims were bound or nailed to the upright stake. As crucifixion damaged no vital organs, death could come slowly, sometimes after several days of atrocious pain" (*ABD*).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Pierson Parker, "Cross," in *IDB*, 1:745.

¹¹⁷ Gerald G. O'Collins, "Crucifixion," in *ABD*, 1:1208-1209.

Messianic Believers and Religious Symbols

When it is observed that Simon of Cyrene was impressed to carry the cross of Yeshua (Matthew 27:22; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26), this could have only been the main beam on which the arms would have been spread out, such a beam being subsequently attached to an upright pole that had already been used for previous executions.

Vassilios Tzaferis offers a rather long, but excellent summary, about some of the history, usage, and agony involved with crucifixion:

“...Many people erroneously assume that crucifixion was a Roman intention. In fact, Assyrians, Phoenicians and Persians all practiced crucifixion during the first millennium B.C. Crucifixion was introduced in the west from these eastern cultures; it was used only rarely on the Greek mainland, but Greeks in Sicily and southern Italy used it more frequently, probably as a result of their closer contact with Phoenicians and Carthaginians.

“During the Hellenistic period, crucifixion became more popular among the Hellenized population of the east. After Alexander died in 323 B.C., crucifixion was frequently employed both by the Seleucids (the rulers of the Syrian half of Alexander’s kingdom) and by the Ptolemies (the rulers of the Egyptian half).

“.....

“The traditional method of execution among Jews was stoning. Nevertheless, crucifixion was occasionally employed by Jewish tyrants during that Hasmonean period. Alexander Jannaeus crucified 800 Jews on a single day in 88 B.C.

“At the end of the first century B.C., the Romans employed crucifixion as an official punishment for non-Romans for certain legally limited transgressions. Initially, it was employed not as a method of execution, but only as a punishment. Moreover, only slaves convicted of certain crimes were punished by crucifixion. During this early period, a wooden beam, known as a *furca* or *patibulum* was placed on the slave’s neck and bound to his arms. The slave was then required to march through the neighborhood proclaiming his offense. This march was intended as expiation and humiliation. Later, the slave was also stripped and scourged, increasing both the punishment and humiliation. Still later, instead of walking with his arms tied to the wooden beam, the slave was tied to a vertical stake.

“Because the main purpose of this practice was to punish, humiliate and frighten disobedient slaves, the practice did not necessarily result in death. Only in later times, probably in the first century B.C., did crucifixion evolve into a method of execution for those convicted of certain crimes.

“Initially, crucifixion was known as the punishment of slaves. Later, it was used to punish foreign captives, rebels and fugitives, especially during times of war and rebellion. Captured enemies and rebels were crucified *en masse*. Accounts of the suppression of the revolt of Spartacus in 71 B.C. tell how the Roman army lined the road from Capua to Rome with 6,000 crucified rebels and 6,000 crosses. After King Herod’s death triggered a minor rebellion in Judea in 7 A.D., Quintilius Varus, the Roman Legate of Syria, crucified 2,000 Jews in Jerusalem. During Titus’s siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Roman troops crucified as many as 500 Jews a day for several months.

“In times of war and rebellion, when hundreds and even thousands of people were crucified within a short period, little if any attention was paid to the way

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crucifixion was carried out. Crosses were haphazardly constructed, and executioners were impressed from the ranks of Roman legionaries.

"In peacetime, crucifixions were carried out according to certain rules, by special persons authorized by the Roman courts. Crucifixions took place at specific locations, for examples, in particular fields in Rome and on the Golgotha in Jerusalem. Outside of Italy, the Roman procurators alone possessed authority to impose the death penalty. Thus, when a local provincial court prescribed the death penalty, the consent of the Roman procurator had to be obtained to carry out the sentence.

"Once a defendant was found guilty and was condemned to be crucified, the execution was supervised by an official known as the *Carnifex Serarum*. From the tribunal hall, the victim was taken outside, stripped, bound to a column and scourged. The scourging was done with either a stick or a *flagellum*, a Roman instrument with a short handle to which several long, thick thongs had been attached. On the ends of the leather thongs were lead or bone tips. Although the number of strokes imposed was not fixed, care was taken not to kill the victim. Following the beating, the horizontal beam was placed upon the condemned man's shoulders, and he began the long, grueling march to the execution site, usually outside the city walls. A soldier at the head of the procession carried the *titulus*, an inscription written on wood, which stated the defendant's name and the crime for which he had been condemned. Later, this *titulus* was fastened to the victim's cross. When the procession arrived at the execution site, a vertical stake was fixed into the ground. Sometimes the victim was attached to the cross only with ropes. In such a case, the *patibulum* or crossbeam, to which the victim's arms were already bound, was simply affixed to the vertical beam; the victim's feet were then bound to the stake with a few turns of the rope.

"If the victim was attached by nails, he was laid on the ground, with his shoulders on the crossbeam, which was then raised and fixed on top of the vertical beam. The victim's feet were then nailed down against this vertical stake.

"Without any supplementary body support, the victim would die from muscular spasms and asphyxia in a very short time, certainly within two or three hours. Shortly after being raised on the cross, breathing would become difficult; to get his breath, the victim would attempt to draw himself up on his arms. Initially he would be able to hold himself up for 30 to 60 seconds, but this movement would quickly become increasingly difficult. As he became weaker, the victim would be unable to pull himself up and death would ensue within a few hours.

"In order to prolong the agony, Roman executioners devised two instruments that would keep the victim alive on the cross for extended periods of time. One, known as a *sedile*, was a small seat attached to the front of the cross, about halfway down. This device provided some support for the victim's body and may explain the phrase used by the Romans 'to sit on the cross.' Both Irenaeus and Justin Martyr describe the cross of Jesus as having five extremities rather than four; the fifth was probably the *sedile*. To increase the victim's suffering, the *sedile* was pointed, thus inflicting horrible pain. The second device added to the cross was the *suppedaneum*, or foot support. It was less painful than the *sedile*, but it also prolonged the victim's agony. Ancient historians record many cases in which the victim stayed alive on the cross for two or three more days with the use of a *suppedaneum*. The church father Origen writes of having seen a crucified man who survived the whole night and the following day. Josephus refers to a case in which three crucified Jews survived on the cross for three days. During the mass

crucifixions following the repression of the revolt of Spartacus in Rome, some of the crucified rebels talked to the soldiers for three days.”¹¹⁸

When we consider this scholastic description of crucifixion, it portrays exactly what Yeshua did for us. Yeshua’s crucifixion on a cross at Golgotha (Calvary) in the vicinity of Jerusalem was an historical fact. **You can stand rest-assured that the traditional view of Yeshua being executed on a Roman cross is generally accurate,** even though it was by no means something elaborate or glorified as some Christian portrayals may make it. Crucifixion was common in the First Century world.¹¹⁹

But what about some of the Messianic Jewish hesitancy one may find to use terminology like “cross” or “crucify”? This is something that cannot go unrecognized, and any of us—especially non-Jewish Believers who are a part of the Messianic movement—need not be caught using a term like “cross” in the wrong place around Jewish people. *All of us need to be careful about the words we use.* The basic hesitancy toward Messianic Jewish Believers using the symbol of the cross, or even using the term “cross,” is summarized by Paul Liberman, in the early Messianic Jewish work *The Fig Tree Blossoms: The Emerging of Messianic Judaism*:

“[A] point of confusion is that Jewish people assume that all non-Jews of western culture are Christians. Since they are Jewish from birth, they assume one becomes a Christian the same way. Most Jews do not understand that many people go to church and masquerade as Christians but lack the supernatural awakening necessary to become true followers of the Messiah. Since Jewish people are unable to make such a distinction, they take it for granted that all who attend church are believers in the New Covenant. They assume that spiritual viewpoints are determined according to what family a person is born into. It seldom occurs to traditional Jews that it is possible to have a personal encounter with God. Once it is recognized that Jewish people lump together all those under the Catholic and Protestant institutional umbrellas, it is easier to understand why symbols, such as the cross, are distasteful and oppressive to them. Inquisitions, holocausts, and social discrimination reinforce their view. Before Jews can distinguish between true believers and nominal church members, they must have had a personal encounter with God. Yet how can they obtain such experience if believing Gentiles constantly confront them with alien symbols, which prevent them from giving the New Covenant fair evaluation? In order to get a fair hearing, it is reasonable to expect the believer to go out of his way to avoid offending Jewish people. Remember, for almost 2,000 years these church symbols have only driven Jewish people further from their God. The Messianic Jew directs his efforts toward removing these obstacles. He has a built-in incentive to do so. His family and friends haven’t gotten into God’s program yet. So he carefully tries to remove

¹¹⁸ Vassilios Tzaferis, “The Archaeological Evidence for Crucifixion,” in Molly Dewsnap Meinhardt, ed., *Jesus: The Last Day* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2003), pp 95-100.

¹¹⁹ For a further review, consult the sub-section “The Crucifixion and Death of Yeshua,” in the author’s article “The Last Seder and Yeshua’s Passover Chronology,” appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

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roadblocks to understanding. For this reason, discussion emphasizes the scriptural Jewishness of these seemingly Gentile concepts.”¹²⁰

These points should be very well taken, as a person needs to always understand the unique needs, perspective, and history of an audience one intends to impact with the good news of the Messiah of Israel (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20-22). In this case, using an alternative such as “Yeshua was sacrificed on the tree for our sins,” comes across to skeptical Jews much better than “Jesus was crucified.” Still, it does have to be fairly recognized that as the Messianic movement has advanced since the 1960s and 1970s, that there is not a total phobia present over terminology like “cross” or “crucified.” Indeed, the 2011 release of the Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (TLV), includes the terminology of “cross” and “crucified,” unlike the Complete Jewish Bible which preceded it. Its glossary, in fact, includes an entry for the verb “crucify”:

“A very cruel form of execution practiced by the Romans, reserved for the worst crimes. It involved nailing or binding the criminal’s hands and feet to a cross, on which the criminal hung until he died. (Matthew 20:19; Mark 15:20; John 19:10; Acts 2:36; Hebrews 6:6).”¹²¹

The more mainstream of the Messianic community expresses hesitancy to use the terminology “cross” and “crucify,” because of the challenges it can present to presenting Jewish people with the good news—not because Yeshua was somehow not executed on a Roman cross. More fringe elements, of the Messianic community and/or Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, are much less friendly to the symbol of the cross—not because of any Jewish sensitivities—but because of the claim that the cross is an entirely pagan symbol. It is especially claimed that the cross, or forms of the cross, are a widespread symbol of the sun and of sun worship in the Ancient Near East.¹²²

No one can deny that certainly as a geometric form a cross symbol could represent the sun or solar deities. Concurrent with this, there has probably not been enough temperance present on the part of many Christians, employing the cross as a religious symbol—most especially seen in the Roman Catholic crucifix, with a three-dimensional depiction of the Messiah being executed on it, as a crucifix would sit within the orbit of violating the Second Commandment. Unfortunately, though, at least one resource that has widely circulated throughout the Messianic community (which I have personally witnessed since 1999), the book *Come Out of Her, My People* by C.J. Koster, actually concludes that the cross could be the mark of the beast:

¹²⁰ Paul Liberman, *The Fig Tree Blossoms: The Emerging of Messianic Judaism* (Kudu Publishing, 2012). [eBook for Amazon Kindle].

¹²¹ *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011), 492.

¹²² C.J. Koster, *Come Out of Her, My People* (Northriding, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 1998), pp 29-34; Richard Rives, *Too Long in the Sun* (Charlotte: Partakers Publications, 1998), pp 137-142.

Also some of the observations present in *Vine*, 138.

“What is the ‘mark of the beast’ of which we read in Rev[elation]...a mark on people’s foreheads and on their right hands?...Different interpretations have been given to the ‘mark of the beast,’ and also the cross has been suggested.”¹²³

If true, these are blasphemous statements designed to trivialize the sufferings that our Lord experienced for us.¹²⁴ The fact that Yeshua was crucified on a cross, does not necessarily make the cross a “holy symbol,” per se. The cross is, first and foremost, an instrument of death. When Yeshua says “take up your cross and follow Me” (Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), He means that you must follow Him to the point of dying or being martyred—an unpopular subject in just about any religious venue.

It is also important to note that if Yeshua had been executed as solely a Jewish criminal, then He would have been stoned. But Yeshua was not stoned; He was executed by the Romans. This is because the sin of the *entire world*—and not just the Jewish people—was responsible for His death. **We are the ones responsible for Yeshua’s crucifixion, and we should not try to trivialize His death.** Crucifixion is one of the most painful and humiliating forms of execution that humans have ever devised, and those who would try to make Yeshua’s death something that it was not are on extremely dangerous ground.

Today’s Messianic movement does not at all have to widely use the symbol of the cross, especially given the many injustices that have occurred to the Jewish people by supposedly Christian people. Today’s Messianic movement does need to have a mature attitude, though, toward the symbol of the cross as it was used in the First Century world, and the manner by which the Messiah of Israel was sacrificed for the sins of fallen humanity.

The Fish



The *ichthys* (ἰχθύς), derived from the Greek term for “fish” (ichthyology is the scientific discipline of studying fish), is a very common Christian symbol employed today, particularly on popular jewelry, and most especially as a car icon. Among many in the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots sector, the *ichthys* has frequently been targeted as being connected with ancient pagan symbols or idols involving veneration of fish.¹²⁵ However, the *ichthys* or fish tends to have much less controversy associated with it in Messianic settings, than does the Christian cross. The term “fish” or *ichthys* (ΙΧΘΥΣ) is traditionally thought to be a Greek acronym representing Yeshua the Messiah. As detailed by the *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*,

¹²³ Koster, 34.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 holds to the apparent position that the Messiah was only impaled upon an upright stake, contrary to the widespread academic examination of how Roman criminals were executed upon some kind of a t-shaped or x-shaped cross.

¹²⁵ Koster, pp 41-42; Rives, pp 142-143.

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“Early symbol of Jesus Christ. The letters of this word were taken to stand for the first letters of five words describing Christ: *Iēsous* (Jesus) *Christos* (Christ), *Theou* (of God), *Huios* (Son), *Sōtēr* (Savior). Thus: ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.’”¹²⁶

That the symbol of the *ichthus* or fish has mixed origins is fairly stated by the *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*. It is asserted how an association of Yeshua with fish is somewhat natural, given the Gospels’ record of some of His original followers being fishermen, and the going out to declare the good news depicted in terms of fishing. Yet at the same time, it is also recognized how symbols of fish were used in the contemporary paganism as signs of fertility:

“An ancient Christian symbol. Fish feature predominantly in the *Gospel narratives, with a number of the original disciples being fishermen (Mt. 4:18-22) and fish being used in parables and other lessons (Mt. 7:10; 13:47; 17:27). In ancient Christian symbolism the fish usually refers to Jesus (*see* ΙΧΘΥΣ) and thus is present in Christian *iconography (e.g., the *catacombs). Because they were born of the waters of *baptism, Christians could be thought of as ‘little fish,’ following in the manner of Jesus, the ΙΧΘΥΣ (Tert., *Bapt.* 1).

“Representations of banquet meals in ancient Christian catacomb art include fish, perhaps anticipated in the linguistic and conceptual parallels between the Gospel feeding stories and the *Last Supper (Mk 6:32-44; 8:1-9; 14:22-25; Jn 6:4-14; cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 13.21; *see also* bread). Even among ancient pagan tombs there are representations of fish, an obvious symbol of life and fertility, and often associated with Near Eastern mother goddesses (especially *Syrian). It was likely at times a meal for the dead. In fact, the multiplication of the loaves and fish has a distinct aspect of the chthonic and of fecundity about it (*see* hero cult)...”¹²⁷

It is hardly surprising that a geometric symbol as two intersecting arcs would be used to some degree, by ancient paganism. It is also hardly a surprise that symbols of fish of many varieties would be used as objects of worship, as the Second Commandment explicitly forbids not just idolatrous images of land animals, but also sea creatures. Still, one can wonder about the association of the symbol of a fish with the emerging Christianity of the late First and early Second Centuries C.E. There is sufficient Gospel usage of the fish—not only with the vocation of some of the original disciples, but also with the purpose to declare the good news—for one to recognize that an association with some image of the fish, is not irregular. The *IDB* entry for “fish” makes the interesting observation,

“Jewish artists and craftsmen made a limited use of the fish...Doubtless, in some cases the fish was employed as a conventional decorative detail; in others, the past association of fish with various cultic practices may have established it popularly as a kind of talisman.”¹²⁸

The fish noted as a Jewish symbol prior to Yeshua should not go unnoticed. Yet, the fish as a Jewish symbol is stated to have had mixed uses, some as ornamentation,

¹²⁶ Donald S. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), pp 105-106.

¹²⁷ Provance, *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*, pp 59-60.

¹²⁸ W.S. McCullough, “Fish,” in *IDB*, 2:273.

and others with some inappropriate spiritual importance. The further entry in *IDBSup* on “Fishermen (NT),” is more evenly balanced, in its mention of fish as a Christian symbol, used broadly in the Ancient Near East, Hellenism, and Judaism:

“Christian symbols derive their meaning from the symbolism of ancient Near Eastern and Greek cultures, channeled to Christianity in part through Judaism. The NT includes the parable of the fish net (Matt. 13:47-50) and stories of the miraculous fish catch, with (Luke 5:1-11) and without (John 21:1-14) the commission to the disciples to catch human beings. A connection of fish with the Eucharist is especially apparent in the Markan accounts of the feeding of the multitudes (6:30-44; 8:1-10). In the latter half of the second century, fish figures, the angler, and the ΙΧΘΥΣ ACROSTIC...appear as Christian symbols. Believers are represented as fish ‘caught’ (brought to life, cf. Luke 5:1-11) through baptism, and the apostles—subsequently also bishops and popes—are portrayed as fishers of persons. There is also reference to the gospel as fishing for fish in a sea of sin (or the world) and to the catch as divine judgment in history (as often in the OT) or at the end of history.”¹²⁹

Once again, some association with a symbol of the fish—especially given Yeshua’s famed word, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19, NRSV; cf. Mark 1:17), is hardly unjustified. While it does not go unrecognized how the two arcs representing a fish were not unused by ancient paganism, the frequent association of the *ichthus* with emerging Christianity in the early Second Century, is often explained on the grounds that that Believers could identify themselves in a surreptitious way to one another, without attracting the attention of the authorities. A short article entitled, “What is the origin of the Christian fish symbol?,” by Christianity Today, summarizes what this often means to your sincere, modern evangelical Believer:

The Greek word for fish is “ichthys.” As early as the first century, Christians made an acrostic from this word: Iesus Christos Theou Yios Soter, i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The fish has plenty of other theological overtones as well, for Christ fed the 5,000 with 2 fishes and 5 loaves (a meal recapitulated in Christian love-feasts) and called his disciples “fishers of men.” Water baptism, practiced by immersion in the early church, created a parallel between fish and converts. Second-century theologian Tertullian put it this way: “we, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthys, Jesus Christ, are born in the water.”

Greeks, Romans, and many other pagans used the fish symbol before Christians. Hence the fish, unlike, say, the cross, attracted little suspicion, making it a perfect secret symbol for persecuted believers. When threatened by Romans in the first centuries after Christ, Christians used the fish {to} mark meeting places and tombs, or to distinguish friends from foes. According to one ancient story, when a Christian met a stranger in the road, the Christian sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, both

¹²⁹ W.H. Wuellner, “Fishermen (NT),” in Keith Crim, ed., *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 339.

believers knew they were in good company. Current bumper-sticker and business-card uses of the fish hearken back to this practice.

Critics of the fish symbol either decry it as tacky tokenism or point out that the fish still carries baggage from the days when pagans used it to represent fertility or, more specifically, the female reproductive organs. Though I agree that ichthys symbols in phone-book ads seem to commercialize faith, I don't find the pagan argument compelling. No symbol means the same thing to all people at all times. That early Christians succeeded in transforming an already powerful symbol proves their interpretive creativity, not their ignorance or a tendency to syncretism.¹³⁰

Some in the Messianic movement, but most especially the Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, would argue that the symbol of the *ichthus* or fish is entirely pagan, and they would dismiss any usage of it by Second Century Believers as a symbol of subterfuge as instead being syncretism. Certainly by the Second Century C.E., many of the Believers were trying to “Christianize” elements of Greco-Roman paganism, in order to make Messiah faith more palatable to their neighbors. Yet, there is probably enough useful reasons for the *ichthus* to have been used as a secretive symbol for Believers one to another, for its employment to have not been facilitating any syncretism.

That there are many Messianic Believers in our faith community today, who have very little issue with the *ichthus*, is seen in the widespread employment of what has often been called the Jerusalem Seal—a combination of the *menorah*, Star of David, and fish—believed by some to be the identifying symbol of many of the early Jewish Believers in the Land of Israel.¹³¹ Whether this was an ancient symbol, or is more of a synthesis of traditional Jewish and Christian symbols to be employed by a Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Messianic movement—it does demonstrate how the *ichthus* as a symbol for Yeshua and His mission, is positively viewed by many Messianic people.



¹³⁰ Elesha Coffman. (2008). *What is the origin of the Christian fish symbol?*, 08 August, 2008. *Christianity Today*. Retrieved 23 November, 2014, from <<http://christianitytoday.com>>.

¹³¹ This is especially argued by Reuven Efraim Schmalz, and Raymond Robert Fischer, *The Messianic Seal of the Jerusalem Church* (Tiberias, Israel: Olim Publications, 1999).

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 13

1. What has been your overall experience in terms of today's Messianic movement and standard Jewish and Christian religious symbols? How does one strike a balance between the Second Commandment and the employment of religious symbols?
2. Summarize the Biblical and traditional significance of the *menorah*.
3. Summarize the Biblical and traditional significance of the *tefillin*/phylacteries.
4. Summarize the Biblical and traditional significance of the *tzitzits* or fringes.
5. Summarize the Biblical and traditional significance of the *menorah*.
6. What do you think about the origins of the Star of David (*Magen David*)? Do you consider it a geometric symbol of Jewish nationalism, or a symbol from the occult?
7. How have today's Messianics approached the symbol of the cross and the method of Yeshua's execution? How do you approach the symbol of the cross and the method of Yeshua's execution?
8. How do you approach the symbol of the *ichthus* or fish, and the mission of the Messiah?