

The Contours of Jewish Evangelism

The original mission and purpose of the Messianic movement has always been to provide a venue for Jewish outreach, evangelism, and Israel solidarity. While reaching diverse groups of people with the good news or gospel message of salvation is not easy, no matter what one's intended audience, the Apostolic Writings (New Testament) give ample testimony of how many Jewish people *in the First Century* were resistant to the news that the Messiah of Israel had arrived. So great was the agony of a figure like the Apostle Paul, that he actually wished himself accursed, to see his own flesh and blood redeemed:

"I tell the truth in Messiah—I do not lie, my conscience assuring me in the Ruach ha-Kodesh—that my sorrow is great and the anguish in my heart unending. For I would pray that I myself were cursed, banished from Messiah for the sake of my people—my own flesh and blood" (Romans 9:1-3, TLV).

While corporately in the First Century, and even until today, the Jewish people have largely dismissed Yeshua of Nazareth as the anticipated Messiah—it is not as though this has not been without a purpose. Paul noted that there has always been a remnant of Jewish Believers, himself being among them (Romans 11:5). He also detailed how "If their trespass means riches for the world, and their impoverishment means riches for the nations, how much more will their fullness mean!" (Romans 11:12, Kingdom New Testament). If a widescale Jewish dismissal of Israel's Messiah means a massive salvation of those from the world at large—**how great will it be when a concentrated salvation of the Jewish people is witnessed?** There are complications to this taking place, however, notably as it involves the behavior of the wild olive branches, non-Jewish Believers in Israel's Messiah, grafted-in to Israel's olive tree (Romans 11:17-21). History is replete that rather than being moved with mercy and compassion and understanding for Jewish people, who need the salvation of Yeshua (Romans 11:31), arrogance, disdain, discrimination, persecution, and even terrible atrocities have been committed by far too many of those "claiming Christ."

Every Messianic congregation or assembly, whether it is in Israel, North America, or elsewhere, is going to have some vehicle for Jewish outreach and involvement in the local Jewish community. Obviously each Jewish community is different. Here in the United States, the Jewish community in the Northeast, South Florida, Southern California, or other urban centers, is going to be a little different than the Jewish community in North Dallas, where my local congregation of Eitz Chaim is located. But regardless of how large, how small, how established, or how conservative or liberal one's local Jewish community is—there are significant contours and facets which those who are a part of a Messianic

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congregation need to be aware of, when involving themselves in Jewish outreach. Jewish Believers for certain need to be involved in Jewish evangelism, as they testify not only to the salvation they possess in Yeshua—but most especially how believing in Yeshua does not mean an abandonment of one's Jewish heritage or traditions. Likewise, non-Jewish Believers should also be involved in Jewish evangelism, as non-Jews in today's Messianic community can not only be used by the Lord to provoke Jewish people to faith in Messiah Yeshua (Romans 11:11), but as those who have joined in common cause and unity with Jewish Believers, as a tangible sign that past centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and discrimination are indeed something in the past.

How do any of us “evangelize”?

In contemporary evangelical Protestantism over the past half century or so, there have been scores of different methods which Believers have employed, to genuinely reach out to others with the good news. Many of us have been involved in some form of local outreach, where we have handed out tracts, or have knocked on doors, asking people about where they stand in their relationship with God. Some of these evangelistic tools and methods have taken labels such as “the Romans road,” “the Four Spiritual Laws,” “Evangelism Explosion,” or quite possibly even “The Purpose Driven Life.” But as we are probably all aware, not all of these methods work indefinitely, and some of them do not have a lasting impact—as a number of people who make a profession of faith, may not necessarily get plugged into a local assembly and network of Believers.

While we have probably all seen some of the successes and failures of customary Protestant methods of evangelism over the past three or four decades—Jewish outreach and evangelism tends to be something completely different from passing out tracts on a street corner. ***Jewish evangelism is innately tied in with long-term relationship building.*** History has borne out far too many examples of where Jewish populations were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism, likely involving confiscation of property, expulsion from one's home, and perhaps even the threat of death. Even Protestantism, which on the whole has been far more tolerant and respectful for Judaism, has widely expected that Jewish people who come to faith in Jesus the Messiah cease being Jewish, start being Christian, and should find themselves fully assimilated into Western Christian culture.

Consequently, with a great deal of anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish, or at least apathy toward Judaism present—when the issue of Yeshua of Nazareth is raised—seeing Jewish people truly receive the Messiah into their lives, tends to hardly be an instantaneous process. While we all might want to see the same kind of dynamic teaching and salvation present at *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Acts 2), because of too many of the forces of past history, Jewish evangelism is often a long term process. You might think that this would, of course, only be necessary if one is reaching out to Orthodox Jews who have developed opinions on the Tanach and Messianic expectation—but it even involves liberal Jews, who are nominally to non-religious, but whose Jewish identity and values are very strong. *Does receiving Yeshua mean an abandonment of one's Jewish heritage, and a betrayal of one's ancestors?*

When you get involved in Jewish evangelism, you should expect to have many meetings with an individual or family. Many of these meetings are not going to involve discussions of one's religious faith, but instead establishing trust, as you get to know a Jewish person, learn about their family history and story, how they see the world, how they see Israel, how they respond to anti-Semitism and discrimination against them, and eventually what they think of Yeshua of Nazareth at least as an historical figure. Sometimes, per the adage "so they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16, TLV), the greatest testimony of a Messianic Believer to a Jewish person is going to be in tangible actions of being their friend, helping them out, standing in solidarity with them and with the Jewish community, and being a beacon of support and stability in their life. *It might take a very long time to see your Jewish friend or Jewish neighbor be open to the good news of Messiah.*

The Terms We Use, and Communicating Well to Jewish People

All of us at some point in our lives have been told that **words mean things**. How we communicate in an ever-changing and interconnected world, is vitally important. A term or phrase can mean something positive to one group of people, and can be taken as a striking insult by another group of people. In ministry today, if a speaker tells an audience "God is raising up men in this hour to serve Him," half of your audience has been immediately lost. If a speaker tells an audience, "God is raising up men and women" or "God is raising up people," then the real message about how this is taking place can then be communicated to everyone present.

Have you ever wondered what Paul meant by saying, "To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews" (1 Corinthians 9:20, NASU)? Frequently, 1 Corinthians 9:19-21 has been interpreted from the perspective that in declaring the good news, Paul would frequently change his behavior and actions, in order to do what was necessary in order to have a hearing. Was Paul a chameleon, flip-flopping around different First Century audiences in the Mediterranean? Not only this, but did Paul really not think his Jewishness was that important? While it is absolutely true that one's identity in Yeshua the Messiah and His work on the tree overrides all human achievements (Philippians 3:4-10), Paul did see value in Judaism and in his Jewish heritage (Romans 3:1-2).

So what did Paul mean when he said "To the Jews I became as a Jew"? The categories of 1 Corinthians 9:19-21 are hardly exhaustive, as there were many more groups of people Paul and company encountered in the diverse Roman Empire. It can be validly concluded that "I became as," means that Paul rhetorically identified with an audience he was tasked with declaring the good news to. *How do you best communicate the gospel to a particular group of people?* In the First Century C.E., identifying with the Jewish people involved far more than just understanding the story of Ancient Israel in the Torah and Tanach; it involved understanding the difficulties of the return of the Jewish people from Babylon exile, the fallout of the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E., Judea as a province of the Roman Empire, and the struggles of a massive Diaspora Jewish community in the Roman Empire that faced discrimination and threats from polytheism.

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In the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, we should be able to easily deduce that "To the Jews I became as a Jew" would mean more than having a good understanding of Ancient Israel from the Tanach and Second Temple Judaism; it is something that involves complicated histories and diverse Jewish communities. What happened after the fall of the Second Temple? How has Roman Catholicism historically treated the Jewish people? How has Protestantism historically approached the Jewish theological tradition? What were some of the terrors perpetuated upon Jews during the Middle Ages? What were the pogroms of the Russian Empire? How and why did the Holocaust happen? What are present Christian attitudes to the existence of the State of Israel? These questions, and many more, are involved in what it means to place oneself in the position of a modern Jewish person, who needs the good news of Israel's Messiah.

Ever since the early beginnings of the modern Messianic Jewish movement, in late 1960s and early 1970s, there have been various lists composed of words common to today's evangelical Protestantism—which while meaning many positive things to most of today's non-Jewish Believers, can be quite offensive to Jewish people you are trying to develop a relationship with. Biblical Hebrew has approximately 3,500 words; Biblical Greek has approximately 5,500 words; modern English has approximately 150,000 words. There are legitimate alternatives that can be employed by today's Messianic people, instead of the more standard words or terms employed in "Christianese." While it is a process, particularly for non-Jewish Believers called by God into the Messianic movement, there are a number of terms which you need to be aware of, that do not facilitate Jewish evangelism too well. If you are ever called to speak in front of a Messianic congregation to give a testimony or issue a prayer, the following are some terms you need to really not be using:

Jesus is not the original name of the Messiah of Israel, but is instead an English transliteration of the Greek *Iēsous* (Ἰησοῦς), itself a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *Yeshua* (יֵשׁוּעַ), meaning "He is salvation" (Matthew 1:21). The name "Jesus" is hardly pagan, and there were many Jews in the Diaspora who actually bore the name *Iēsous* (Colossians 4:11). While it was perfectly acceptable in the First Century C.E. for Jewish Believers in Yeshua to call the Messiah *Iēsous* in a Greek-speaking context, with *Iēsous* as the Septuagint title of the Book of Joshua—calling the Messiah Jesus in Jewish settings in the Twenty-First Century is quite complicated. Throughout history, persecution has been inflicted upon the Jewish people using the name Jesus (or its derivative forms). When many of today's Jews hear the name Jesus, they hardly think of a First Century Jewish Messiah, but instead as a figure who has been frequently responsible for enacting great tragedies upon the Jews. Today's Messianic Jewish movement uses the name **Yeshua** (also frequently spelled Y'shua) for the Messiah.

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Christ is a title derived from the Greek *Christos* (Χριστός) meaning “Anointed One,” the equivalent of the Hebrew *Mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ) or Messiah. While *Christos* does appear in the Greek Apostolic Writings, its post-First Century usage as a title has been more widely employed than Jesus, in fact, in the discrimination and persecution of Jewish people by religious authorities. Today’s Messianic Jewish movement uses the title **Messiah**.

Christian, derived from *Christianos* (Χριστιανός) was originally a term of ridicule, or a slur, issued against the Believers in Antioch (Acts 11:26; see NRSV which has “Christians” in quotation marks). Today there are so many denominations, sects, sub-sects, and groups which use and employ the terminology “Christian,” that it is inappropriate to assume that the title “Christian” automatically means that one is a born again Believer. There are actually some today who have stopped using the terminology “Christian,” and instead will call themselves a “Christ follower” or “disciple of Christ.” Today’s Messianic people should similarly see no problem when calling themselves a **Messiah follower** or **disciple of Messiah**. When using terminology such as “Christian” or “Christianity,” it should be in reference to religious systems and institutions; **Messiah faith** or **Biblical faith** should not be referred to as Christianity. It is also most appropriate, given how many Jews associate the term “Christian” with Roman Catholicism and its non-Biblical to pagan traditions, to today not readily employ the terminology “Judeo-Christian,” but instead “Judeo-Protestant.”

The **cross** (and similarly the verb **crucify**) was the means by which Yeshua the Messiah was sacrificed for the sins of humanity by the Romans. But the cross has also been used as a symbol and banner of significant persecution by religious authorities, toward the Jewish people, for centuries. A frequent alternative employed for the term cross in today’s Messianic movement is **execution-stake**, as seen in David H. Stern’s Complete Jewish Bible. Messianic people will also frequently speak in terms of Yeshua being “nailed to **the tree**” (cf. Acts 5:30). A new alternative that can employed for cross would be **wooden scaffold**, as the very purpose of this form of ancient execution was to openly display the condemned, humiliating one before the public.

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A **church** in the minds of many Jewish people, and for that matter many contemporary evangelicals, is a building with a steeple and stained glass windows. For others, the term church is not associated with the people of God, but instead religious institutions (or even principalities). The Greek term *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) frequently translated the Hebrew *qahal* (קָהָל) throughout the Septuagint, *qahal* itself often referring to the community of Ancient Israel (i.e., Deuteronomy 31:30). Many theologians today have recognized some of the complications of speaking of the people of God in terms of it being the “church,” and so there are specialty English versions today which more properly translate *ekklēsia* as **assembly**, such as Young’s Literal Translation or The Interlinear Bible by Jay P. Green. Today’s Messianic movement very much dislikes it when its local faith community is referred to as a “church,” and so one’s local body should instead be called a congregation, assembly, or fellowship. (Many will employ the Yiddish *shul*, meaning school.)

Throughout a diverse array of Protestant traditions, to be sure, **baptism** for the people of God, has been approached from any number of different vantage points. The English verb baptize is derived from the Greek verb *baptizō* (βαπτίζω), but the term baptism, even from just an evangelical Protestant perspective, has a great deal of socio-religious baggage associated with it. Very early on, today’s Messianic Jewish movement began employing more theologically neutral terminology such as **water immersion** or **immerse** (as would be seen in Bibles such as the Complete Jewish Bible or Tree of Life Version). Many Jewish people, when hearing the terminology “baptize,” do not think of ritual immersions in water taking place, with their origins found in the purification rituals of the Tanach. When many Jewish people may hear the terminology “baptize,” they think of forced baptisms of Jewish people by Roman Catholic authorities throughout history, with the intention of them abandoning their Jewish heritage and traditions.

Many people do not see a problem with using the terms **convert** or **conversion**, describing the turning of people to Messiah faith. To many Jewish people who need to hear the good news, however, describing it in terms of “conversion” would mean that they would have to abandon their Jewish heritage and the great virtues of Jewish religion, to embrace another faith. *The Messianic Scriptures are clear that the First Century Jewish Believers did not abandon Judaism.* While one may be tempted to use convert as a neutral term—certainly as it is in many non-religious contexts—it is much better to employ terminology such as **turn** or **turning**, as in “the turning of the nations” (Acts 15:3, PME).

The proper name of God in the Tanach is composed of the Hebrew consonants *yud* (י), *hey* (ה), *vav* (ו), *hey* (ה) or יהוה, often represented in English as either **YHWH** or **YHVH**. Today's Bible scholars often think that it was originally pronounced as something close to either Yahweh or Yahveh. In most English Bibles, the Divine Name is rendered as "the LORD" in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS, going back to the Second Temple convention of not speaking the Divine Name aloud. In the time of Yeshua, the Divine Name was only spoken aloud by the high priest on *Yom Kippur* (m.*Yoma* 6:2). Yeshua and the Apostles observed the standing Jewish practice of their day, by frequently using Hebrew titles such as *Adonai* (אֲדֹנָי) or *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) for the Supreme Being, their Greek equivalents being *Kurios* (κύριος) and *Theos* (θεός)—the equivalents of our English titles Lord and God. Many Orthodox Jews today use the title *HaShem* (שֵׁם), meaning "the Name," to refer to God. Unfortunately, the Sacred Name Only movement has infiltrated the Messianic movement via its literature and Bible versions, as it insists that one must affluently speak the Divine Name YHWH/YHVH in order to be truly saved. Speaking the Divine Name, at a main function of one's Messianic Jewish congregation, is going to create great challenges in presenting Jewish people with the good news—as they will most probably be offended and feel insulted, given the great sanctity with which Judaism has approached it. **When in doubt, speaking of God as "God," is entirely appropriate.**

Approaching Messianic Prophecy

Integral to being involved with Jewish outreach and evangelism, is having some knowledge of the prophecies which foretell of the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah. Most Messianic congregations have regular teachings or classes on the Messiahship of Yeshua of Nazareth, which relate to prophecies from the Tanach (Old Testament). There have also been lengthy analyses produced, ranging from Michael Brown's five-volume *Jewish Objections to Jesus* series to *Isaiah 53 Explained* by Mitch Glaser. It is critical that each of us has a cursory understanding of how many Messianic prophecies have been approached across time: from Second Temple Judaism to later Rabbinical Judaism, as well as to evangelical Protestantism and the modern Messianic Jewish movement. Eventually as you develop relationships with Jewish people—even if many of them are non-religious—the question of whether Yeshua of Nazareth is indeed the anticipated Redeemer from the Tanach Scriptures, will arise.

How should any of us approach prophecies which speak of Yeshua of Nazareth? 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 direct, "For I also passed on to you first of all what I also received—that Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (TLV). I once encountered a teacher who, in fact, denied Yeshua as the Messiah because he could not find a direct prophecy which spoke of the Messiah being raised on the third day. Too many of us, as Western people, are inclined to think that all prophecies of the Messiah to come are predictive in nature. Too often having binary minds that think in 0s and 1s, we are conditioned to approach Messianic prophecy as one predictive prophecy *equaling* one fulfillment, and so forth. Of course, it should be understood that there are indeed many predictive prophecies which foretell of the arrival of the Messiah Yeshua and His death

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for us (i.e., Micah 5:2; Daniel 9:23-25; Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; Psalm 22; Isaiah 53:5-7), but there are other factors involving Yeshua's Messiahship which must be approached more thematically or typologically (i.e., Hosea 6:2; 11:1). These often involve the identification of Yeshua the Messiah with the nation of Israel, embodying the hopes and aspirations of Israel and its kingdom. What has happened to Israel, or what has happened to significant figures in Israel's history (i.e., Moses, David), have been to some degree repeated in the life and ministry of Yeshua of Nazareth.

An ongoing feature of continued study and research in Messianic theology definitely involves a refinement of our understanding and approach to Yeshua's Messiahship. As the Messianic Jewish movement grew throughout the 1970s and into the 1990s, the Jewish anti-missionary movement also grew. Mainly made up of Orthodox Jews, the anti-missionary movement specifically targets Messianic Jewish Believers, in order to see them deny Yeshua as the Messiah. Frequently Jewish anti-missionaries will appear at Messianic Jewish conference events, or perhaps will even visit your own local congregation. Prominent Messianic Jewish evangelistic organizations tend to be those best equipped to handle some of the customary arguments of the anti-missionaries. Yet it also needs to be recognized that since the 1990s, as many more non-Jewish Believers have been directed into the Messianic movement, that the anti-missionary movement has been targeting many of these people as potential proselytes to the Synagogue. The Jewish anti-missionary movement affects everyone who is involved with declaring the good news that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel.

Theological and Historical Complications

Having some handle on the Messianic prophecies of the Tanach is not going to be enough, in order to reach out with the good news to your Jewish friends and neighbors, as there are theological and historical complications you need to be conscious of. Some significant theological impediments toward reaching Jewish people, with the good news, include the errant Christian theologies of supersessionism and dispensationalism. Supersessionism is more commonly known as **replacement theology**, the idea that since the Jewish people have corporately rejected the Messiah, that God has rejected His people Israel, and has transferred the promises He gave to Israel to a new, independent "Church" entity. Prophecies in the Tanach which speak to the restoration of Israel in the end-times are not to be taken literally, but are instead to be allegorized as signs of spiritual bounty for the faith community. **Dispensationalism**, while rightly affirming God's continued fidelity to His promises with Israel and the Patriarchs, wrongly tends to divide up God's Word, believing that in the present with the widescale Jewish rejection of Yeshua, that God has presently put Israel aside and is working through the non-Jewish Christian Church. This will only change until the pre-tribulation rapture has taken place, and then God once again resumes His program with Israel. For non-Jewish Believers involved in Jewish outreach, these two extremes are to be avoided by stressing oneself as a fellow member of Israel's Commonwealth (Ephesians 2:11-13), who is actively interested and involved in the restoration of Israel's Kingdom (Acts 1:6).

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More historically, significant impediments are present when non-Jewish Believers mainly, but also some Jewish Believers raised in minimally religious families, assume things about Judaism, Jewish tradition, and Jewish culture *without doing any research*. Time and time again, people in today's Messianic movement have been caught saying inappropriate things about "the Rabbis" or "the Talmud," without ever having read or consulted what such Rabbis or what the Talmud has actually said. Perhaps in the diverse array of ancient Jewish literature there are incorrect statements made, and incorrect conclusions drawn, about a whole host of issues (among the many things which are correct), but misunderstanding and miscommunication occur when people are unwilling to give others a hearing. It is unfair and inappropriate to make conclusions about Judaism and Jewish history, without having done some homework first!

Yeshua the Messiah issued the ever-imperative word, "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22, TLV). Each of us in today's Messianic movement needs to recognize how unique and distinct the Jewish people are, as the bearers of the Messiah (Romans 9:5) to the entire world. Jewish outreach and evangelism is not something easy—and your Messianic congregation and venue is different than someone else's—**but it is absolutely vital for each Messianic person to be contributing to this cause in some way!**