
FAQ

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Tefillin

J.K. McKee revised 13 August, 2019

Do you believe that Messianics should wrap *tefillin* (phylacteries)?

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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* (תְּפִלִּין),¹ 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 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

¹ Cf. *Jastrow*, 1687.

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.”² The Talmud lists the *tefillin* among religious symbols such as the *mezuzah* and the *kizit* or fringes/tassels, as a means of religious preservation:

“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).³

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).⁴

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*.

² Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 382.

³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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).⁵

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 *phylaktērion* (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 [*phylaktēria*] (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 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."⁶

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*).⁷ 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 שָׁמַר [*shamar*]" (*Thayer*),⁸ 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

⁵ "tefillin," in *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, pp 755-756.

⁶ *Thayer*, 659; also Eisenberg, 385.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

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 mitzvot 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 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."⁹

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* (לְטַפֹּף), "for a memorial" (Jerusalem Bible-Koren), "and a headband" (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 Pharisees¹⁰ and Sadducees¹¹ 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 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" (also 6:20-21).

Some of an interpreter's approach to the Hebrew *l'ot 'al-yadekha v'hayu l'totafot bein einekha* (עַל-יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטַפֹּף בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ), "as-symbol on hand-of-you and-they-must-be as-bands between eyes-of-you" (Deuteronomy 6:8, Kohlenberger),¹² concerns how the Hebrew preposition *l'* (לְ) is designated.¹³ 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

⁹ George Robinson, *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), pp 25-26.

¹⁰ "[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*).

¹¹ "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 terephah beasts!" (b.Shabbat 108a; *Ibid.*).

¹² John R. Kohlenberger III, trans., *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:502.

¹³ 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.

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.”¹⁴

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).¹⁵

“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).¹⁶

“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).¹⁷

There is certainly abundant archaeological evidence from Second Temple Judaism,¹⁸ including from Qumran,¹⁹ 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*, Toby 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

¹⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 443.

¹⁵ Shutt, “Letter of Aristeas,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, 23.

¹⁶ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 117.

¹⁷ [BibleWorks 9.0: Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on the Pentateuch](#).

¹⁸ R.L. Omanson, “Phylactery,” in *ISBE*, 3:864-865; Ruth Santinover Fagen, “Phylacteries,” in *ABD*, 5:368-370.

¹⁹ “tefillin, archaeology of,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in Biblical Period*, 621.

tefillin. The issue in this verse is not whether tefillin should be worn but rather a halachic opinion on how they should be worn.”²⁰

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

“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.”²¹

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*, Barney 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 *kizkiyot* has been shown...[in my examination] on the fringes. Since Yeshua certainly wore the *kizkiyot* 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.”²²

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 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).”²³

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.”²⁴ 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).²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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

²⁰ Toby Janicki, *Tefillin: A Study on the Commandment of Tefillin* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2010), 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp 13-14.

²² Barney Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs: A Messianic Jewish Guide to the Biblical Lifecycle and Lifestyle* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1996), 146.

²³ Tim Hegg, *Introduction to Torah Living* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2002), 168.

²⁴ Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs*, 148.

²⁵ Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Tosefta: Translated from the Hebrew With a New Introduction*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 2:1266.

²⁶ Cf. Janicki, *Tefillin*, pp 39-40.

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 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.”²⁷

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*.²⁸ 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).²⁹

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.”³⁰

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.”³¹

²⁷ Ibid., pp 41-42.

²⁸ Cf. Ron Isaacs, *Kosher Living: It’s More Than Just the Food* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 234.

²⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

³⁰ Eisenberg, 386.

³¹ Toby Janicki (2014). *Can Women Wear Tzitzit and Tefillin?*, 27 January, 2014. *First Fruits of Zion*. Retrieved 11 November, 2014, from <<http://ffoz.org>>.

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 periods 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 adhere to these instructions as mainly, if not entirely, being figurative—**then 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.