

New Wine, Old Wineskins

I really do not get the “Messianic movement.” Jesus said that He came to bring us all new wine, and told us that you can’t put new wine in old wineskins. The old way of Judaism has been replaced by the new way of Christianity.

There should be absolutely no doubting the fact that the terminology “new wine in new wineskins,” while derived from specific places in the Gospels, has taken on a life of its own in contemporary Christianity—particularly, charismatic Christianity. It is not uncommon to hear statements made by charismatic Believers, to the effect that we need to “drink the new wine of the Holy Spirit,” even though such a remark is not to be found anywhere in Scripture. On the contrary, Ephesians 5:18 communicates, “do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit” (NASU). Recognizing that “new wine in new wineskins” is definitely taken from Yeshua’s teachings, it is important for us as Bible readers to evaluate the context where this appears, so we can derive an appropriate interpretation and application.

Statements made by Yeshua about “new wine in new wineskins,” to be necessarily contrasted to “old wine in old wineskins,” appears in all three Synoptic Gospels:

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear results. No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins *as well*; but *one puts* new wine into fresh wineskins” (Mark 2:21-22, NASU).

“But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do *people* put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved” (Matthew 9:16-17, NASU).

“And He was also telling them a parable: ‘No one tears a piece of cloth from a new garment and puts it on an old garment; otherwise he will both tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled out, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old *wine* wishes for new; for he says, “The old is good *enough*”’” (Luke 5:36-39, NASU).

All readers of Mark 2:21-22; Matthew 9:16-17; and Luke 5:36-39 should be agreed that the analogy is made about something old being unable to be repaired. It does not do any good to try to patch up an old garment that has been torn, with a new patch, as a greater tear will take place. More importantly, if new wine is placed into an old wineskin, and the new wine begins to ferment, because the old wineskin has already been stretched to capacity, the old wineskin will break. The point to be taken from both examples is that something will be lost, and that something else has to be done.

There have been quite a few interpreters of Mark 2:21-22; Matthew 9:16-17; and Luke 5:36-39, who have drawn the conclusion that the Messiah says that a new Christianity cannot be placed into an old Judaism. This new Christianity has hence replaced Judaism, the Law of Moses, and the rigidity of keeping commandments and various external rituals. To a wide extent, this view is very difficult to hold to, precisely because when we read a greater selection of Scripture passages, we can see that the Messiah’s purpose was not to abolish Moses’ Teaching, but rather to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17-19; Luke 16:17). Still, it is fair to draw the conclusion that the new wine, needing to be placed into new wineskins, does represent how Yeshua has brought something new onto the scene.

What is different about Yeshua the Messiah, which is to be associated with the new wine? This will principally be seen by evaluating what is given to us in the surrounding context, where the analogy of “new wine in new wineskins” has been given.

Mark 2:21-22; Matthew 9:16-17; and Luke 5:36-39 are preceded with Yeshua being questioned as to why He chose to associate Himself with tax collectors and sinners, and then being questioned why He and His Disciples do not fast, when some others do fast:

“And it happened that He was reclining *at the table* in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Yeshua and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, ‘Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?’ And hearing *this*, Yeshua said to them, ‘*It is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’ John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, ‘Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?’ And Yeshua said to them, ‘While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day’” (Mark 2:15-20, NASU).

“As Yeshua went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector’s booth; and He said to him, ‘Follow Me!’ And he got up and followed Him. Then it happened that as Yeshua was reclining *at the table* in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Yeshua and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw *this*, they said to His disciples, ‘Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?’ But when Yeshua heard *this*, He said, ‘*It is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: “I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE [Hosea 6:6],” for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’ Then the disciples of John came to Him, asking, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?’ And Yeshua said to them, ‘The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast’” (Matthew 9:9-15, NASU).

“After that He went out and noticed a tax collector named Levi sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ And he left everything behind, and got up and *began* to follow Him. And Levi gave a big reception for Him in his house; and there was a great crowd of tax collectors and other *people* who were reclining *at the table* with them. The Pharisees and their scribes *began* grumbling at His disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?’ And Yeshua answered and said to them, ‘*It is* not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.’ And they said to Him, ‘The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the *disciples* of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink.’ And Yeshua said to them, ‘You cannot make the attendants of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you? But *the* days will come; and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days’” (Luke 5:27-35, NASU).

Mark 2:21-22 and Luke 5:36-39 are then followed with Yeshua being asked about why He presumably “breaks” the Sabbath:

“And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads *of grain*. The Pharisees were saying to Him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And He said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar *the* high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for *anyone* to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?’ Yeshua said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:23-28, NASU).

“Now it happened that He was passing through *some* grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating *the grain*. But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And Yeshua answering them said, ‘Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?’ And He was saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath’” (Luke 6:1-5, NASU).

Those readers of what is witnessed in Mark 2:21-22; Matthew 9:16-17; and Luke 5:36-39, and what appears in its wider context—perhaps only armed with a cursory or basic knowledge of Second Temple Judaism—should be able to easily deduce what “new wine in new wineskins” communicated to those who originally heard, or later read it. This has absolutely nothing to do with a new Christianity replacing an old Judaism. Rather, Yeshua referenced “new wine in new wineskins” in relationship to His own teachings, ministry methods, orthopraxy, and *halachah*. The way Yeshua did things, as He associated Himself with tax collectors and sinners, as He reached out to those disenfranchised persons others would dismiss, why He and His Disciples did not fast as did some others, and what He permitted His Disciples to do on the Sabbath—were different than some of His other contemporaries.

The analogy of the new wine, not being contained by the old wineskins, should be taken to mean that Yeshua’s new teachings/orthopraxy/*halachah*—a definite feature of His fulfillment of the Torah and mission given to Him by the Father—cannot be contained by older methods of teaching/orthopraxy/*halachah*. If replacement of the Torah of Moses and Judaism were truly something in view, then Yeshua would have surely asked something like: “Why drink wine when you can have strong liquor?”¹ We do not see such a replacement mentioned here. How wine ferments still stands as a common frame of reference. **Methods of doing things and conducting oneself as a servant of the Lord**, representative of the new wine that needs to be placed into a new wineskin, to ferment and mature *and* not be lost, **are specifically what is in view**—not the fact that the Lord expects His people to obey His commandments.²

When Yeshua’s reference to “new wine in new wineskins” is properly read with the wider context in mind, replacement of an old Judaism for a new Christianity is not what is witnessed. Rather, what are witnessed are old, outdated and unuseful ways of conducting oneself as a religious person, which need to naturally give way to the Messiah’s methods and example of service and action. While debates over the right way of *how to do things* are affluent throughout the Jewish theological tradition, they are surely not devoid from the many centuries of Christian theological reflection and debate, either. Older ways of doing things can become stale and ineffective, needing a reforming, or even prophetic voice, to come on the scene and offer a new approach that can meet the concerns of others who need to be touched by the gospel. In all likelihood, the observation of Yeshua in Luke 5:39, “no one, after drinking old *wine* wishes for new; for he says, “The old is good *enough*,” is a statement **on the resistance to change** by people when it is necessary. When old methods of service to God and ministry need to give way to new methods, there is frequently a high degree of disregard for it.

If it were encouraged in more sectors of the contemporary Christian Church, to read “new wine in new wineskins” **in context** with what is stated in the surrounding Gospel text, then perhaps more people would be tuned in to how the issues regard Yeshua’s style of ministry service. If replacement of God’s Law or His commandments were really the issue, then wine and wineskins would have been contrasted to some other beverage or food product. This is not what we see, and it is most unfortunate how “new wine in new wineskins” has been able to get out of control as a sound bite, used by those who should be reading their Bibles a little more intelligibly.

¹ Luke 1:15 does make a reference to *sikera* (σίκερα) or “strong liquor,” indicating that something stronger than just fermented wine was present in the First Century world.

² This is where it needs to be recognized how the Greek term *exesti* (ἔξεστι), “defined as either “*it is allowed, it is in one’s power, is possible*” (LS, 273), or “perhaps also “*it is proper, permitted*” (CGEDNT, 64), is better rendered as either “permitted” or “permissible” in places such as Mark 2:24, 26 and Luke 6:2, 4. As it regards Sabbath keeping, the issue would be over disagreements of Sabbath practice, not the general relevance of the Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12).