

Torah, command not to “Add to”

In Deuteronomy 4:2 we are told not to add commandments to those of the Torah, yet in Judaism, and in the Messianic movement today, we have many people who follow traditions of men that some claim are “commanded,” or at least authorized by God. I am confused.

Why do many non-Jewish Believers in the Messianic community, think that they can widely reject a majority of Jewish interpretations of the Torah, and associated tradition?

Much of what one encounters in the views of various independent Messianics, is a great deal of significance given to a passage of the Torah like Deuteronomy 4:2. Within this verse, Moses tells the Ancient Israelites, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (NASU). The primary emphasis of this commandment, more than anything else, is that God Himself was the only One who can tell the people of Israel what to do and not to do. This is most serious given the overall message of Deuteronomy opposing idolatry and sexual immorality in the Promised Land, which the people are preparing to enter.¹ A noticeable number of non-Jewish, Messianic individuals, also think that Deuteronomy 4:2 quantitatively rules out *any* Jewish tradition from being recognized as a legitimate expression of Torah observance, to be followed by (any of) God’s people.

However, if we were to hold to a strict interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:2, then this likely means that when situations arise which require the faith community to make judgments on various issues or circumstances that are not directly or indirectly addressed in the Torah, or any part of Scripture, that *any decision* could possibly be acceptable. In the independent Messianic community today this has led to many interpretations of the Torah that are foreign to mainline Judaism, and can be quite offensive to our Jewish brethren. It can lead to everyone doing what he or she feels is right (cf. Judges 17:6; 21:25), with confusion about what to do often abounding. (Even various evangelical Christians on the outside wonder about what they witness.)

It can be irresponsible to strongly assert that traditions are not at all commanded by God, when the Torah itself later says that if a matter arises within Israel, that His people are to follow the rulings of the priests and judges who He has recognized as occupying positions of authority:

“If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses. So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is *in office* in those days, and you shall inquire *of them* and they will declare to you the verdict in the case. You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the LORD chooses; **and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you. According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left**” (Deuteronomy 17:8-11, NASU).

The clause of interest is *al-pi ha’Torah* (עַל־פִּי הַתּוֹרָה), “According to the tenor of the law” (YLT),² which is given to those needing a definite judgment issued regarding a matter.

Some would make the argument that *every Rabbinical ruling* made in Orthodox Judaism today needs to be followed by the Messianic community, but this definitely goes too far. At the same time, though, Deuteronomy 17:11 does give a wide degree of authority to those in religious leadership that needs to be considered—as at least with what we should consider to be a **consultative authority**. Many within today’s Messianic Judaism believe that

¹ Consult the author’s article “The Message of Deuteronomy.”

² “according to the mouth of the law” (LITV); “According to the sentence of the law” (KJV).

its Torah observance should parallel the major *halachic* matters that bind the broad Jewish community together (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform). This would include when it celebrates the appointed times, including *Chanukah* and *Purim*, how we would dress in a congregational environment, how we generally eat kosher, and other traditions that are beneficial to the community. Of course, there is internal variance witnessed in Messianic Judaism, just as there is variance among Jewish sects today.

If a person in the independent Messianic movement has never been exposed to Messianic Judaism, or if someone is naturally predisposed to “do his own thing” (or even worse, “buck the system”) and not respect an established order, then it should not be surprising to see a strong impetus to develop applications of the Torah that are foreign to Judaism.

The instruction in Deuteronomy 17:11 is that God’s people are to “Act according to the law they teach you and the decisions they give you. Do not turn aside from what they tell you, to the right or to the left” (NIV). We should not believe that what is implied here is a blind obedience to the ancient rulings left by all of the Sages and Rabbis of Judaism. Messianic Believers have to ultimately evaluate their rulings against the canonical Word of God, to see if something aligns with the spirit of the Word, as most major rulings relate to ethical value judgments that the Scriptures may not directly address. With all things, we have to see whether it parallels God’s written Word, and enhances our relationship and walk with Yeshua. There are clearly things that have come down through history that can deter our walk with Him, but then there are many things that can enhance it. Each of us must use proper discernment and consideration.

What is perhaps most important more than anything else is that the rulings anticipated by Deuteronomy 17:8-11 have to be made by recognized, qualified spiritual leaders of the community. The Torah is designed to be lived out in a community, as opposed to an exclusive “one-on-one” basis between oneself and God. A prime example of this witnessed today, is that when you see kosher-for-Passover food items, they often say “consult your rabbi” on the packaging. This indicates in some way that there is debate over whether or not an item is kosher for Passover, and that the ultimate determination should go to your local rabbi, who can evaluate what your personal circumstances are.

This can be a difficult concept for many who come from evangelical Christian backgrounds to accept, because many are often not used to their pastor making “rulings” on what Believers should do or not do concerning God’s commandments. Many non-Jewish Believers are taught in church that our relationship with God is just between us and Him. While this is *ultimately* true, each of us is also in covenant with other members of the faith community. Just like many probably went to a pastor for spiritual guidance, prayer, counseling, or just help regarding an issue, and took his advice and followed it, so do the rulings of the Rabbis apply. Just as we would expect a pastor to be anointed by the Lord and for his words to carry authoritative weight, so can the rulings of the Rabbis.

Of course, as with all things, we should never follow the opinions of a Christian pastor blindly, nor should we ever follow the rulings of the Jewish Rabbis blindly, either. We have to test everything against God’s Word, to make sure that it aligns with the character of our Heavenly Father, and we have to see if it is something that enhances our walk with Him, rather than takes us away from Him. More than anything else, we have to deal with things on a case-by-case basis, and recognize the fact that there is a great deal of “grey” when it comes to interpretation and application. In today’s emerging Messianic community, hopefully we can find a proper balance between Scripture and tradition, where neither is considered unimportant.³ We should also pray to have good local Messianic leaders be raised up by the Lord, who can issue sound decisions for their own communities and the issues they face (cf. Matthew 16:19).

³ For a further discussion of related topics, consult the author’s exegetical paper on Matthew 23:2-3, “Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?” in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.