

Tradition, Role that it plays

What role, if any, do you believe tradition should play in our examination and application of Scripture, particularly the Torah?

There is a wide variance of opinion in the emerging Messianic movement relating to what role, if any, tradition should play as we study and apply the Bible in our daily lives. This is particularly true regarding our individual pursuits of a Torah obedient lifestyle. How we follow the commandments of the Torah is a huge issue, and often the Torah itself gives us no explanation(s) of how various commandments are to be kept. The two basic options available at our disposal are to (1) develop our own opinions and applications of commandments, or (2) consult the traditional opinions and applications of commandments as developed by Judaism.

The classification of how much tradition should be followed by Messianics today can probably be listed under three broad categories: (1) staunch traditionalists, (2) anti-traditionalists, and (3) philo-traditionalists. **Staunch traditionalists** would be those who follow Jewish tradition without any hesitation and who may consider extra-Biblical works like the Mishnah and Talmud to be at the level of inspired Scripture. This would include those trying to emulate an Orthodox Jewish and/or Chassidic style of *halachah* in the Messianic community. **Anti-traditionalists**, in stark contrast, are those who want nothing to do with any kind of mainline Jewish tradition. This could include those who believe in following the Karaites, and/or insist on usage of the Sacred Name. Anti-traditionalists are often against practices like men wearing the *tallit* and *kippah* (*yarmulke*), wrapping *tefillin*, and celebrating holidays like *Chanukah* or *Purim*, and while promoting forms of “Torah observance” may actually appear to be anti-Semitic. **Philo-traditionalists** make up the centrist view between the two. This would include those who have a high respect for Jewish culture and tradition, and generally follow a Torah observant lifestyle quite consistent with Conservative Judaism, tempered by the fact that we live in a modern world. Philo-traditionalists value works like the Mishnah and Talmud, but do not consider them superior to the Tanach or Apostolic Scriptures. **Our ministry very definitely falls into the philo-traditionalist camp.**

The debate over “tradition” in the Messianic movement today is not going away. Most often, the argument against employing Jewish tradition and culture in one’s personal *halachah* is going to come in the form of statements like, “You don’t want to trade Church traditions in for Synagogue traditions.” While it is absolutely true that we want to have a Scripturally sound faith, based on the Bible first, the fact of the matter remains that the Bible does not often tell us *how* to apply commandments in our lives, and we will face life situations that the Biblical text does not directly or indirectly address. Many hermeneutical systems employ tradition and history to be used when it is clear that Scripture does not address something.

It is very true that Yeshua the Messiah spoke against tradition when it invalidated the Word of God, and took people away from weightier matters of the Torah like love, mercy, and respect for others. Yet at the same time, socio-historical studies in the Gospels are revealing more and more that Yeshua’s theology was closer to the Pharisees than any of the other sects of First Century Judaism, and that He indeed kept many of the traditions and customs extant in the culture of His day. The Apostle Paul urged the Corinthians to “maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2, NRSV), and studies in the Jewish background of his teachings are likewise revealing more and more that he continued to be a Pharisee long after his coming to Messiah faith (Acts 23:6). The independent Messianic movement today cannot dispense with the reality that while speaking against tradition when it annuls Scripture, Yeshua nevertheless lived out and followed much of the tradition of His time. This speaks to our ever-present need to be studying the Gospels and examining each event of His life on a case-by-case basis, employing the right background information.