

INTRODUCTION TO THINGS MESSIANIC

**An Introduction for Newcomers
to the Messianic Movement**

J.K. McKee

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.net

Introduction to Things Messianic

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Abbreviations and Special Terms

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
 AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
 ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
 Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
 Ara: Aramaic
 ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
 ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
 b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
 B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
 BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
 BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
 C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
 CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
 CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
 CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
 CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)
 CJSB: Complete Jewish Study Bible (2016)
 DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
 DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
 EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
 EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*
 ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
 Ger: German
 GNT: Greek New Testament
 Grk: Greek
 HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
 HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
 Heb: Hebrew

HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
 IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
 IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
 ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
 IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
 Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
 JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
 JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
 KJV: King James Version
 Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)
 LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green* (1986)
 LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
 LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
 LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
 LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
 LXX: Septuagint
 m. Mishnah
 MT: Masoretic Text
 NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
 NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
 NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
 NEB: New English Bible (1970)
 Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
 NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
 NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*

NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: New International Version (1984)
NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
OT: Old Testament
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version (2014)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)
WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

-8-

Basic Messianic Apologetics

College is supposed to be a time of great anticipation, growth, and change for a young adult. Many people enter college and believe that the four years they spend at a university will be the best four years of their life. They go there to learn and expand their minds, to get a degree, to mature as adults, and/or for the “experience.” Many people who go to college meet their future husband or wife. Others go to college to party.

But what about Christians in college? Just as there are many fraternities or sororities, so are there many Christian student fellowships and clubs at universities. The majority of these groups may actually be social clubs, and they only lightly emphasize a Believer’s growth. They provide a Christian alternative to what the world is offering to those of all denominations—at least that was what I was told, being Messianic.

I had no idea that when I entered the University of Oklahoma in 1999 that I would have had the experience that I did. For four years I was the lone ranger Messianic, literally. I did my best at first to enter into the Christian groups—because they were supposed to be welcoming to *all denominations*—but after finding out what I believed as a Messianic, many of these people *unwelcomed* me. Or, they would continually hound me with statements like “We’re not under the Law” or “We have a new covenant” or “We’re the Church,” after hearing some of what the Messianic movement was all about. The statement that was thrown at me the most was, “Who are you as a student to question the authority of the leadership? You haven’t taken Hebrew or Greek, have you?” When I told them that I was presently studying these Biblical languages as electives toward my degree, then they would feel intimidated and shut me out.

Introduction to Things Messianic

What I said was contrary to the leadership, in spite of the fact that I really did not “push” my beliefs. *My presence alone was enough.*

I suppose I must be the exception rather than the rule, because I did not fight back. I took the criticism and answered the questions I was asked based on Scripture, and in as positive and constructive manner as possible. My college time was a learning experience—and indeed a desert experience. If I had not been the Messianic on campus that I was, I would not be where I am today, which is hopefully trying to help instruct people within the Messianic community and refine the defense of our beliefs. I had a growing and maturing experience at college, but it may have not been what I had originally expected in my naïve days of 1999.¹

We Must Know What We Believe

Some of the most frequent questions I am asked from people are: **Why Messianic apologetics?** Why is it important? Why do all that hard work?

Apologetics is the field of study which defends our faith. For the most part, Christian apologetics focuses on the inspiration of Scripture, the Person of Yeshua/Jesus, and issues like Creation versus Evolution, abortion, homosexuality, and now transgenderism. Messianic apologetics is often substantially different.

Whereas Christian apologetics largely focuses on issues which deal with secularists, atheists, agnostics, and those *outside* the realm of Biblical faith—Messianic apologetics largely focuses on issues and theologies which deal with those *inside* the realm of Biblical faith. Much of what Messianic apologetics focuses on is defense of Messianic doctrines and lifestyle practices. For us, this would include things like understanding the plurality of God in an Hebraic context, the validity of the Torah in the post-resurrection era, what our relationship is to both Judaism and

¹ Due note that in contrast to my experience at the University of Oklahoma from 1999-2003, my post-graduate experience at Asbury Theological Seminary from 2005-2008 was much, much more positive. I was able to reconnect with my evangelical and Wesleyan heritage, learn valuable skills for studying the Scriptures, learn more about current trends in theology, and most significantly learn how to dialogue fairly as a Messianic with evangelical pastors and lay leaders.

My only regret during seminary was that as my abilities as a Bible teacher grew immeasurably, my own Messianic movement suffered immeasurably during the same period via a torrent of false teachings unleashed by various aberrant voices (i.e., Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, Karaite calendar, the Epistle to the Hebrews being uninspired, polygamy being a valid lifestyle). Some of my seminary experiences are discussed in Chapter 15, “My Family’s Messianic Experience: 1995-2002.”

Basic Messianic Apologetics

Christianity, and the understanding that the Lord is in the unique process of restoring the Kingdom to Israel, as asked by the Apostles in Acts 1:6.

Apologetics is a very broad area of study and Biblical research, but hopefully this gives you an idea about some of the subjects which it includes.

But even so, why is it important? Should not people just read their Bibles and have the Holy Spirit reveal them the truth? I wish it were that simple, but it is not. For centuries people have interpreted the Scriptures in a variety of ways. The way that one person or theologian interprets, and indeed translates Scripture, is different from another. This is true of Christians and Messianics. Just as there is an entire range of Christian denominations and groups, so is there now a large range of Messianic organizations and groups. Each is affected by how much, or how little, time and effort are invested in investigating God's Word. And, each is affected by the availability of external disciplines such as linguistic studies, textual criticism, archaeology, and relevant history and/or secondary literature. (Just pick up a technical commentary on a Biblical book and you will see what I am talking about.)

Hopefully, each one of us who spends a quiet time each morning in prayer with the Lord, and diligently studies the Word on a consistent basis, will be shown the truth for our lives and our relationship with Him. We will have the essential things we need to be saved and useful for God's Kingdom. *But essentials are only good enough to get started*, and more is definitely required. Many of us realize that there are people who do not see things the way we do. Because of this, we must engage in detailed study of the Scriptures, because today's Messianic people are often quite aware of how there are many who will point out—even vehemently—why they disagree with us, based in some interpretation or approach to a Bible passage or verse.

I am sorry to say that refusing to submit to detailed teachings or working on detailed teachings, surrounding Messianic theologies, has been a cause of considerable problems between Messianic and Christian people. Messianic and Christian people can indeed get into fights and disputes, often because Messianics *do not know* how to defend their beliefs. This is extremely problematic. The Apostle Peter emphatically wrote, "Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15, RSV).

God's people are admonished to be able to give a defense for the hope who is in us, Messiah Yeshua, and what we believe. While it may be true

Introduction to Things Messianic

that we cannot answer all the questions which are asked of us all at once, we must be diligent disciples of Yeshua and be continually searching the Scriptures for answers as proper students. This should enable us to come back and answer the questions properly with the right information—rather than get into a fight.

My testimony of graduating from college in 2003 was that I was able to live up to the admonition of 1 Peter 3:15. I took the criticism from my Christian peers of being a Messianic, and rather than criticizing them back, decided to do the research which would defend my Messianic walk of faith. Much of what I learned during that time has become an integral part of my personality and the mission I believe the Lord has for my life in ministry. Of course, the journey and the criticisms and the work never end, but I would like to offer you some basic keys of Messianic apologetics, so you can *properly* answer various criticisms you may receive.

What makes Messianics different?

Based on my field experience, the major differences between Messianics and Christians are going to come in regard to lifestyle practice. Messianic people keep the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, observe the appointed times of Leviticus 23, and they eat a kosher style of diet. These are the three areas where most of the controversy we can have with Christian people is usually found. In contrast, most Christians participate in Sunday Church, celebrate holidays such as Christmas and Easter, and they eat whatever they want. Discussions about other Torah practices like wearing *tzitzits* or beards usually do not gain the attention that the other things do, because even among Messianics their application is debated. One exception, for obvious reasons, might be circumcision.²

I have done my best **not to find issues of contention** with Christian people who are not ready to hear why I do what I do, the faith community I have been a part of for over a quarter century (since 1995), and how I live. People have got to be ready to hear what you have to say and only the Spirit of God can properly prepare them. *Everything must be in His timing.* There are some Messianic people who make an extreme issue of the “outward” commandments of the Torah and who try to draw attention to themselves, rather than let the Holy Spirit draw people in. As a sad consequence, there are other Messianic people who choose to ignore the Biblical admonitions regarding “outward” commandments. The challenge

² These finer areas of Torah observance are explored in the author's book *Torah In the Balance, Volume II*.

that always exists before maturing Believers is how to maintain an active faith, and one which does include outward observances, but at the same time is not going to be odious to others. We must learn how to be a living witness to others by our examples, rather than standing on the corner and shouting to everyone what makes us different. We have to focus on areas of commonality *first* (cf. Ephesians 4:1-6).

Our Heavenly Father directed Ancient Israel, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine” (Exodus 19:5, NASU). The Hebrew word for “beloved treasure” (ATS) here is *segullah*, which basically means “personal property” (TWOT),³ the KJV actually having, “peculiar people.” This can indeed be true, because when today’s Messianic people begin to adopt a Torah observant lifestyle and identify themselves as a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, they can certainly be considered peculiar. But notice that God’s people are *not* told to be “super hyper weird,” neither are God’s people told to be “like everyone else.”

What is to primarily distinguish God’s from the world is faith in Yeshua the Messiah and God’s love manifesting itself toward outsiders (cf. Galatians 6:2). Many Christians rightfully want to follow the Messiah. They want to “do what Jesus did.” Living the life of Jesus certainly involves living a life of self-sacrifice, mercy, and service to others. But it also involves being prompted to consider the lifestyle of Yeshua of Nazareth, the Jew. How many contemporary Christians think through this fully? Do they not know that Yeshua kept the Sabbath, celebrated the appointed times, and ate kosher? Do they not know that Yeshua wore a beard and *tzitzits*? Do they not know that Yeshua taught from the Torah? Those who are diligently seeking the Lord will eventually find all this out, and perhaps even make it a part of their lives in some way. But until then, there are some critiques that need to be answered.

When did the “New Testament” become the entire Bible?

Several times a year when I was in college, various evangelists would come to campus and hand out Bibles. But they would not hand out “Bibles,” per se, but rather copies of the New Testament with Psalms and

³ R.D. Patterson, “*segullah*,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:617.

Introduction to Things Messianic

Proverbs. You know, the pocket size editions. But they would always ask, "Sir, would you like a Bible?"

Perhaps one of the biggest areas of confusion between Messianic and Christian people can concern "the Bible." While we both consider the Tanach (Old Testament) and the Apostolic Writings (New Testament) to be inspired Scripture, Christians mostly focus on the latter. Many Messianics focus only on the former. Where is the problem here? **The problem is that it is all one Bible.**

What did Paul write Timothy? "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16, NASU). At the time this was written in the middle of the First Century, the only Scripture that existed was the Tanach or "Old Testament." There was no "New Testament." It was not fully written or collected. The Bible which the Disciples and the early Believers used was the Tanach.

For some reason, this does not seem to register with many people. And sadly, because many Christians do not have a strong foundation in the Hebrew Scriptures, their understanding of the Apostolic Scriptures is, at the least, incomplete. (In too many cases, though, one would be justified to call it "neutered.") Consider all the times that "the Law" is spoken about in the New Testament (i.e., Romans 7:1ff). How many times do people misunderstand what is being said, because they have never consistently studied the Torah?

But how many of today's Messianic people might make reverse mistakes? How many who study the Torah and Tanach on a regular basis, fail to take into consideration what the Apostolic Writings say on certain matters? How many people who identify as "Messianic," actually fail to consider many of the clarifications of Yeshua and the Apostles on things which are perhaps not as clear in the Tanach? Even more so, how many Messianic people may fail to study the New Testament, so they can at least answer the arguments of those who say that one's belief in the ongoing validity and relevance of Torah are error?

What is commonly called the "New Testament" is not the entire Bible. But at the same time, neither is the Tanach the entire Bible. They are both parts of the same inspired writings. How does the Christian saying go? *The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the*

Basic Messianic Apologetics

Old Testament revealed. It is all one Bible. We have to be balanced in our Scripture studies and take into account the whole council of God's Word.⁴

Ten Commandments or Ten Suggestions?

Both Messianic people and conservative evangelical Protestants alike, will agree that the foundational principles which should guide the lives and conduct of mature, born again Believers are the Ten Commandments. These "Ten Words," or *aseret ha'davarim* as they are called in Hebrew, were "written by the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18, NASU). As these ordinances were inscribed with the very *etzba Elohim*, it makes them extremely important. Notice what Deuteronomy 9:10 says about them:

"The LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God; and on them *were* all the words which the LORD had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly" (Deuteronomy 9:10, NASU).

God gave the Ancient Israelites the Ten Commandments in a blaze of fire, and in a setting which was both awesome and fearful. These ordinances, written in stone, were to form the foundation of the rest of the commandments that the Lord would give to Moses, and each aspect of the Torah is either directly or indirectly connected to one of them. The Ten Commandments are described as "the words of the covenant" (Exodus 34:28, NASU) which God made with His people. What do the Ten Commandments specify?

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall

⁴ Even while it upset me that when in college pocket sized New Testaments were being marketed as "the Bible," I would be remiss not to say that it upset me **much more** to see how many people would just throw away these pocket New Testaments as mere trash or rubbish. I even remember seeing a garbage can overflowing with them!

Introduction to Things Messianic

labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:2-17, NASU; cf. Deuteronomy 5:6-18).

The Ten Commandments, when reviewed by someone who has a strong, Spirit-led desire to obey God, are not burdensome principles to follow:

1. the Lord is to be the first priority of a man or woman's life
2. God's people are prohibited from making images which represent any object for worship
3. God's people are not to misuse God's name
4. God's people are to make the seventh-day, the Sabbath, a holy day
5. God's people are to honor their father and their mother (parents)
6. God's people are prohibited from committing murder
7. God's people are prohibited from committing adultery or fornication
8. God's people are prohibited from stealing
9. God's people are prohibited from lying
10. God's people are prohibited from coveting another person's possessions

Perhaps Messianics' only major difference as it regards the importance of the Ten Commandments, with many Christian people, is that we may believe, at times, that they are somewhat hypocritical in saying that the Ten Commandments are important, but they will not keep the seventh-day Sabbath. But we also have to look at it this way: there is a growing move of claiming "Christians" who oppose *any Biblical commandments*, including the Ten Words inscribed by the finger of God. This even includes a call for

Basic Messianic Apologetics

contemporary Christianity to “dehitch” itself from the Old Testament!⁵ Why? Because liberal perspectives have a major, growing foothold in modern Christianity.⁶

I recall all the way back in October 2003, how I was watching Larry King Live on CNN, and saw Bill Maher, formerly of the show Politically Incorrect, being interviewed. Maher did not hide the fact that he was both libertarian and agnostic, not being a fan of religion. He had an “anything goes” attitude, and believed that as long as what you did, did not affect or hurt him, then it would be acceptable. He commented on the then-present situation regarding the Ten Commandments monument in the Alabama state capital, saying that the Ten Commandments should not be there because the government cannot regulate religion. He said that the Ten Commandments were irrelevant as far as the U.S. government was concerned, because the government cannot legislate people to keep the Sabbath or to stop them from fornicating. The only relevant commandments, according to him, were the prohibitions on murder and stealing, and perhaps lying in a court of justice. So in his case, the Ten Commandments suddenly became Two-and-a-Half.

Many conservative evangelical Protestants have been concerned that the removal of the Ten Commandments from public places will bring God’s judgment on America. While many of us may agree with this to some degree, the sad truth is that a good number of these conservative Christians will not consider the greater problem which exists. Many pastors teach from the pulpit that the Law of Moses or the Torah has been abolished and that it is no longer necessary for Believers to follow, completely in all its respects, yet they will ardently protest in favor of the Ten Commandments. *This sends mixed signals.* Do you think that if mainstream Christianity taught that the Torah were important to study and follow today—and that the Old Testament included a moral and ethical code which God’s people need to recapture and appreciate—that

⁵ This is widely represented by the perspectives present in Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

Another problematic study which has emerged, which is likely to affect various Messianic people, is R.L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2019).

⁶ A similar problem for some, more conservative theological traditions, is advocating that Believers are to follow “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2), something believed to be totally separate from God’s Torah. This is a problem because one cannot understand the Messiah’s “Law”—often thought to be His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7)—without first understanding the Torah! The “law of Christ” mentioned in Galatians 6:2 should thus be best understood as “the Torah’s true meaning, which the Messiah upholds” (CJSB).

Introduction to Things Messianic

the *ekklēsia* would even be having some of the challenges it presently has? Do you think that Christians would argue about whether or not pre-marital sex or homosexuality were sin? Do you think that contemporary Christianity would have less, or more, clarity on how to help solve the problems of our fallen world?

The Ten Commandments are *not* Ten Suggestions, as some have said. They form the building blocks of the whole of the 613 Torah *mitzvot*. When mature Believers and disciples of the Lord have established their ethical foundation upon the principles of the Ten Commandments, then they should then be able to see the importance of many other of the Torah's regulations for the good conduct of God's people. The Psalmist exclaimed,

"So I will keep Your law continually, forever and ever. And I will walk at liberty [in freedom, NIV; Heb. *b'rechavah*], for I seek Your precepts. I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings and shall not be ashamed. I shall delight in Your commandments, which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, which I love; and I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalm 119:44-48, NASU).

This is what James the brother of Yeshua meant when he said,

"But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25, NASU).

Is one day off so bad?

It is unfortunate that one of the first things which critics of Torah observance attack, is our keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. May we assume that those who do not understand what *Shabbat* is have a very nominal understanding of the Torah, so as to not fully know what it is? Do Christian people who oppose keeping the Sabbath realize the significance, yet simplicity, of the commandment to abstain from work and labor for an entire day?

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day;

Basic Messianic Apologetics

therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11, NASU).

What does the Torah tell God’s people to do on the Sabbath? In the section which lists the Ten Commandments, it is simply stated not to do any work on the seventh day. God’s people are to rest just as God Himself rested after His creative acts were completed. The Hebrew verb *nuach* simply means “rest” (BDB).⁷ So what is so inherently wrong and immoral with taking off an entire day—especially if it is specified by the Word of God? Has rest suddenly become something evil and something to be avoided at all costs?

Many have apprehensions regarding *Shabbat* because they somehow associate the Sabbath as a forced time of “unwork,” with the thousands of Talmudic and Orthodox Jewish additions and dogmas which have been placed around the actual Biblical commandments regarding it (principally including: Exodus 20:9-11; 34:21; 35:3; Leviticus 23:3; Deuteronomy 5:15; Isaiah 58:13-14; Nehemiah 10:31). While many of the mainstream Jewish *Shabbat* traditions and customs can be helpful in determining what “work” is, many of them likewise can make the Sabbath into an unnecessary burden.

The major problem many Christians have regarding the Sabbath, seems to be the controversy between the seventh day and the first day. In past Christian history, Sunday or the first day of the week was believed to be the “Christian sabbath,” and was kept by many as a time of sincere rest. Yet, the Sabbath day being changed from the seventh day to the first day is not specified in Scripture. Many contemporary Christians today, though, do not keep a “Sunday sabbath,” believing the *Shabbat* was abolished along with the Torah. They often see Messianic people remembering *Shabbat*—but most especially not attending church services on Sunday—and may treat them as immature at best, but perhaps not truly brothers and sisters in faith. While there is certainly nothing wrong with worshipping God on Sunday, it is still not the Sabbath—and indeed the rest that *Shabbat* invites the people of God to consider, is the main reason why Messianic people find it to be anything but legalistic and burdensome!

⁷ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 628.

Introduction to Things Messianic

Two Versus [at Least] Seven Holidays

After being criticized for keeping *Shabbat*, the next thing which Messianics are often criticized for is remembering the Biblical holidays or *moedim*. How many have been asked by their Christian peers, “Don’t you miss your Christmas tree? Don’t you miss celebrating Easter?”

I really feel sorry for those who criticize Messianic people for celebrating the appointed times of Leviticus 23, because they do not know what they are missing. Christians who go to Sunday Church and who celebrate Christmas and Easter spend about two hours a week with God in a formal worship setting, and then celebrate only two major religious holidays. Today’s Messianic people get an entire day off with *Shabbat*, and depending on how you read Leviticus 23, get at least *seven* holidays:

What are these holidays? Here is a listing of them:

1. *Pesach*/Passover
2. *Chag HaMatzah*/Festival of Unleavened Bread
3. *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Feast of Weeks)
4. *Yom Teruah*/Day of Blowing (or *Rosh HaShanah*)
5. *Yom Kippur*/Day of Atonement
6. *Sukkot*/Feast of Tabernacles
7. *Shemini Atzeret*/Eighth Day of Assembly⁸

Is food anything I put into my mouth?

Some time ago (September 2002), I remember giving a public presentation, and a professor of religion was in the audience. After my presentation was over, he challenged me on my position that God’s Torah was to still be followed today. He said that “Jesus declared all foods clean” in Mark 7. I told him that pork and shellfish were Biblically not considered to be food. He told me that food was anything a person could gain “nourishment” from. *Really.*

What God’s people are permitted to eat and not eat is given by Him on the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, defining what He considers *okel* to be. He stated, “For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the

⁸ Of course, it is absolutely notable that the celebration of additional festivals, such as *Purim* or *Chanukah*, or modern Israeli holidays such as Israel Independence Day or Jerusalem Day, are seen in the Messianic community.

Basic Messianic Apologetics

earth" (Leviticus 11:44, NASU). God gave His people the dietary laws so that they might be holy unto Him. They are not burdensome when they are read with a heart which wants to be obedient and wants to please Him. Not eating certain things is not a huge sacrifice for Believers to make. In fact, a number of people have found that when beginning to abstain from meats classified as "unclean," that one may actually be healthier.

Jewish commentator J.H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain in the 1930s and 1940s, made the following valid observation in his *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*:

"Even as nothing that suggested the least taint could be associated with God, so it was the duty of the Israelites to strive, so far as it was attainable by man, to avoid whatever would defile them, whether physically or spiritually. Wherever men and women honestly strive after holy living, such striving carries its own fulfillment with it."⁹

Indeed, are mature men and women of faith, not to be striving for holy living? What is wrong with that? The Lord did direct, "be holy; for I am holy" (cf. 1 Peter 1:16). Certainly, there are greater sins in the Torah than eating unclean meats, such murder or adultery. Violation of the dietary laws for Ancient Israel did not carry any capital penalty. Yet, the dietary laws were given to tangibly teach God's people about His holiness, separating good things from bad things.

So what about the professor's words? *Is food anything that I can gain nourishment from?* I answer this question with a question: *Is food anything that I put into my mouth?*

Is wood food? Is the pen or pencil I have been chewing on food? Some people chew their nails, is that food? Some small children mistake "poopey" for chocolate. Does that make "poopey" chocolate and thus food?

The debate about whether one can gain nourishment from unclean meats such as pork or shellfish is best left to scientists. But Biblically it is not considered food, and do not assume that just because you have put something into your mouth that it is food. When you read Scripture and it talks about food, it should be interpreted through what is Biblically defined as food in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Unclean things should *never* be called "unclean food"—because they are *not food*! "Unclean meat" is a better term to use.

⁹ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 453.

Introduction to Things Messianic

But you are being so legalistic!

*I was unaware that following the instructions of our Heavenly Father given to His people in the Holy Scriptures was legalistic. When did being “legalistic” equate to being obedient? When God’s people follow the Scriptural directives not to commit murder, or not to lie, or not to commit adultery, or not to steal—are they being legalistic? Or is it because these are “moral” commandments in the Bible, that abiding by them does not make a person “legalistic”? Is it only keeping the “ceremonial” commandments which apparently makes a person “legalistic”? What is the difference? Did not James the Just, half-brother of the Lord, say, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10, NASU)?*

God’s people stumble in trying to obey the Torah, whether they have lied or eaten a piece of bacon. We are human beings, and we will all fall short of the Lord’s high and holy standard. That is why we need Yeshua as our Savior (cf. Romans 10:4, Grk.).

Legalists are those who say that you must do this or that—usually their way—for *salvation*. Today’s Messianic people do not follow the Torah and follow its commandments for salvation, as salvation is a free gift of God available through faith in Messiah Yeshua (Ephesians 2:8-9). We live a Messianic lifestyle, though, because it we believe it is the way Messiah Yeshua lived, and we believe we are to imitate His example of holiness. Salvation may be a free gift, yet God did create His people for demonstrating good works (Ephesians 2:10).

I sincerely hope I have given you some basic answers for those who may criticize your Messianic points of view. Whatever you do, be sure to respond to the criticism “with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15, LITV). Do not “attack back” or respond in the spirit in which you may find yourself criticized: “keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Messiah will be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:16, NASU). As our Lord said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, NASU). Be a good example to all you encounter, demonstrating His wisdom via your obedience (Deuteronomy 4:6)!

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 8

1. Describe your maturation experience, study of the Scriptures, and events God has used in your life to guide you in your pursuit of Messianic things.
2. Why is Messianic apologetics important?
3. How would you describe the similarities and differences between Christians and Messianic Believers?
4. What is the problem with *only* looking at the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) for spiritual guidance? Do Messianics ever make the reverse mistake of *only* looking at the Tanach (Old Testament) for spiritual guidance?
5. Describe in your own words the importance of the Ten Commandments for people of faith.
6. Understanding what the Sabbath is from the Scriptures, why do you believe that some Christians are opposed to honoring it?
7. Describe the advantages of celebrating the Biblical holidays, versus the traditional holidays often seen in today's Church.
8. What is food, defined Biblically?
9. Do you believe that obeying God is "legalistic"?
10. How do you intend to *properly answer* criticisms of your Messianic walk of faith?

Introduction to Things Messianic