

**INTRODUCTION
TO THINGS MESSIANIC**

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

J.K. McKee



Introduction to Things Messianic

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Cover photos: Istockphoto

Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries

P.O. Box 850845

Richardson, Texas 75085

(407) 933-2002

www.outreachisrael.net

www.messianicapologetics.net

originally produced by TNN Press 2012 in Kissimmee, Florida

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Table of Contents

Introduction	ix
1 Introduction to Things Messianic	1
2 When Did “the Church” Begin?.....	13
3 Is Messiah the Termination of the Torah?.....	23
4 What Does “Under the Law” Really Mean?	35
5 You Want to Be a Pharisee.....	55
6 The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation	79
7 Adopting a Messianic Lifestyle	99
8 Basic Messianic Apologetics.....	105
9 Is Sunday “the Lord’s Day”?	117
10 Introducing the Biblical Appointments	139
11 To Eat or Not to Eat?	145
12 Sacred Name Concerns	169
13 The Assurance of Our Salvation.....	189
14 The End-Times: What Should We Expect?	207
About the Author.....	227
Bibliography	229

Abbreviation Chart and Special Terms

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that 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.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
 AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
 Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
 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*
 BKCNT: *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*
 BKCOT: *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*
 C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
 CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
 CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*
 CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)
 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)
 Heb: Hebrew
 IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
 ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
 IVPBCC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
 Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
 KJV: *King James Version*
 Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)
 LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
 LS: *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott)
 LXE: *Brenton's English translation of the Septuagint*
 LXX: *Septuagint*
 m. Mishnah
 MT: *Masoretic Text*
 NASB: *New American Standard Bible* (1977)
 NASU: *New American Standard Update* (1995)
 NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)
 Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
 NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
 NIV: *New International Version* (1984)
 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)
 REB: *Revised English Bible* (1989)
 RSV: *Revised Standard Version* (1952)
 Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
 Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
 TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
 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*
 WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*
 YLT: *Young's Literal Translation* (1862/1898)

Introduction

One of the most critical elements of our faith is the need to be growing and maturing and moving forward. Where we are today in our faith needs to be different from when we were first born again and received salvation. Our goal needs to be striving for full compliance with Holy Scripture, and we need to be willing to accept the truth, regardless of what anyone says. We need to be open to the will of God in our lives, and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit. We need to follow the life example of Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ), who was the perfect embodiment of love and compassion, but at the same time kept His Father's commandments perfectly. While He is surely the Source of our righteousness (Philippians 3:9), He is also our example of obedience to emulate (John 14:15; 15:10).

Those of us who have entered into the Messianic movement and live a Messianic lifestyle have had to keep these principles in mind as we have been seeking the Lord and His righteousness. The Messiah tells us that "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). He also admonishes us to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). If we truly wish to have the best possible relationship with God that is attainable, then we will love Him "with all [our] heart, with all [our] soul, and with all [our] resources" (Deuteronomy 6:5b, ATS). We will put the Lord first in our lives and have the assurance that He will direct our paths and show us what we are to do.

Seeking God is not always an easy task. When a person enters into the Messianic movement from an evangelical Christian background, one can quickly discover that a substantial amount of today's Christian thought is "incomplete" when it comes to the Messiah, His ministry on Earth, how He lived His life, and how His Disciples lived their lives. Yeshua the Messiah came to restore the Kingdom to Israel, He was a Torah observant Jewish Rabbi who followed the Law of Moses and taught from it, and the First Century Jewish Believers likewise followed the Torah as their Instruction after His ascension into Heaven. The New Covenant is the promise of God writing His Law onto the hearts of His people by His Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27).ⁱ

This runs contrary to what many in contemporary Christianity may teach or believe, as they think that the Messiah abolished the Law. Many Christians believe that the only applicable or relevant Scriptures today are the "New Testament" or Apostolic Writings. Many, unfortunately, do not have a Torah foundation for their faith and do not realize that it is imperative to understand the Tanach (Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, in order to understand the Messianic Scriptures.

ⁱ Cf. Romans 11:27; Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17.

Introduction to Things Messianic

But in our day and age as we may be approaching the return of the Messiah, many Believers have been led to study their Hebraic Roots and reevaluate some of the things they have been taught in the past. The Holy Spirit has convicted many people that the Torah is indeed for them, that they are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, and that they have a call on their lives to truly live as Yeshua lived. Admittedly, those of us who have committed ourselves to this walk of faith must fully place ourselves in the hands of the Lord. However, it is safe to say that none of us suffer from having a stagnant faith—as we are being continually challenged to dig deeper into the pages of Scripture, pray and meditate on the Word, and seek to know God unlike we have ever known Him before! Hopefully, this is evidenced in our lives by a positive lifestyle change that will impact others with the truth of the gospel via our good works (Ephesians 2:8-10).

This study, *Introduction to Things Messianic*, is a compilation of articles from the designed to compliment our book *Hebraic Roots: An Introductory Study*. They were originally posted in a series of e-mail teachings during Spring 2004, and have since been edited to use in a Bible study format (and, updated for this 2009/2012 printing).ⁱⁱ This publication is geared to be an introduction to the Messianic movement, but is intended to be much more detailed and theological than that previous work. This publication is rather technical in some places, but is still broad-sweeping in the wide array of content it addresses. This publication can also be used as an excellent primer to other publications available from Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics.

My personal motivation for being in the Messianic movement is the fact that I want as much of God as I can get. I will not settle for just doing what is “minimally required” for entry into the Kingdom, but I honestly want to please my Father because I love Him. I want to emulate the Messiah as much as I can and I genuinely want to be a positive impact on others. It is my sincere hope and prayer that this publication gives you a good, detailed introduction to the Messianic movement and what we are all about. I hope you have a heart-felt desire to seek more of God and to know Him and serve Him the best way that you can!

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

ⁱⁱ In particular, with references to additional publications and articles that our ministry has produced, or other resources we can recommend for further consultation.

Introduction to Things Messianic

In studying the Bible, many Christians unfortunately find themselves only reading the New Testament or the Apostolic Scriptures. Although these important Scriptures speak of the gospel message, testify to the works of our Lord Yeshua (Jesus), and speak of issues that the First Century Believers had to contend with, these writings comprise less than one-third of the Bible. Those whose focus is almost *exclusively* in this part of the Bible can have an unbalanced approach to our Creator and His plan for the ages.

Although the Messianic Scriptures were written in Greek,¹ their very nature is Hebraic. The man who authored more than half of these writings was the Apostle Paul, a Rabbinical scholar who studied with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:5), a revered sage of Judaism to this day (b.*Megillah* 21a).

Our Messiah Himself was a Hebrew, as are many of His expressions and sayings. Consider the following examples:

“If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matthew 5:29).

“The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23).

The above quotations are just two examples of the Hebraic nature of our Savior’s teachings. In theological studies they are generally referred to as Hebraisms or Semitisms in the Biblical text. For centuries, scholars have debated verses such as those above. Many have been confused. Do they require such a literal viewpoint that demands a physical “plucking out of eyes”? Not at all. To a First Century Jew, the eye can mean more than just an organ with which one sees. It can be a person’s mind, emotions, will, or good sense, depending on the context. There can be a very deep meaning to Yeshua’s statements when one understands

¹ There is the belief among some in the Messianic movement that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew. This view, however, is not based in historical fact. For a further analysis, consult the author’s workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

Introduction to Things Messianic

that there is an Hebraic nature behind them. This is where the Messianic movement steps in and where a First Century Jewish perspective of the Scriptures is crucial.

Although the Messianic movement is composed of people from many theological traditions: largely Conservative and Reform Judaism, and evangelical Christianity, the emphasis concerning the Hebraic Roots of our faith in the Messiah is very important concerning the times in which we live. Several decades ago, if one uttered the name “Yeshua,” very few would have known who, or for that matter, what the person was talking about. However, many Christians today are aware of the fact that *Yeshua* (ישוע) is the original Hebrew name of the Messiah.² Why has this come about? **Because many now realize the fact that understanding the Hebraic Roots of our faith is important.**

Why is it important to understand the distinctive Hebraic Roots of our relationship with God? Yeshua the Messiah is returning to Jerusalem and the gates of New Jerusalem are named after the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Revelation 21:10-12). The Apostle Paul himself says that if you are in the Messiah, you are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12) or the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). Our faith in Messiah Yeshua is undeniably connected to Israel and to the Jewish people, because it did start as a sect of Second Temple Judaism (cf. Acts 24:14). Knowing about the origins of our faith is imperative if we are to return to truly having an “Apostolic” theology.

Knowing about “things Messianic” and distinctively Hebraic is the first step toward new enrichment of our faith from Genesis to Revelation. By understanding the Hebraic origins of our faith, many of the obscure parts of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) begin to become clear and take on a new depth, as we consider their background and the lifestyle practices of the first Believers in Yeshua. They lived out the missional expectations of the Tanach or Old Testament in evangelizing the ancient world (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 4:6; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6), something that we are to surely continue today.

“The Church” (*Ekklesia*)

Many Christians believe that “the Church” started at Pentecost following Yeshua’s ascension into Heaven. They believe that “the Church” is a group of chosen ones separate from Israel, and perhaps that it is not important to really study the Tanach or Old Testament, because it does not directly apply to “the Church.” The Biblical truth is that the called out body of God’s chosen existed long before this time.

The word “church” never appears in the Greek texts of Scripture. The word commonly translated as such comes from *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία). LS defines *ekklēsia* as “an assembly of the citizens regularly summoned, the legislative assembly” and “in N.T. the Church, either the body, or the place.”³ In the Apostolic Scriptures *ekklēsia* is used

² The most public usage of the name “Yeshua” I have seen to date was during Pastor Rick Warren’s prayer at the inauguration of President Barack Obama, 20 January, 2009.

³ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 239.

as a term to define the Body of Messiah, and thus by extension, is rendered as “church” in most English translations of the New Testament. *TDNT* remarks that “Since the NT uses a single term, translations should also try to do so, but this raises the question whether ‘church’ or ‘congregation’ is always suitable, especially in view of the OT use for Israel and the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic... ‘Assembly,’ then, is perhaps the best single term, particularly as it has both a congregate and an abstract sense, i.e., for the assembling as well as the assembly.”⁴ This Christian resource says that “assembly” would be the best, consistent translation for the word *ekklēsia*.

The Septuagint (LXX), the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, frequently translates the Hebrew word *qahal* (קָהָל), or assembly/congregation, as *ekklēsia*. *Qahal* is a Hebrew term for “assembly” or “congregation” used in the Tanach, which almost exclusively refers to Israel. *TWOT* tells us, “usually *qāhāl* is translated as *ekklēsia* in the LXX.”⁵ When the Jewish Apostles used the Greek word *ekklēsia*, often rendered as “church” in our English Bibles, they did not see the *ekklēsia* as a separate assembly or group of people away from Israel. They considered the *ekklēsia* to be Israel, and the non-Jewish Believers to be “fellow heirs” (Ephesians 3:6) with them. It is not surprising by any means that one of the definitions given for the word *ekklēsia* does in fact include “Israel.” *Thayer* states that “in the Sept. [*ekklēsia* is] often equiv. to קָהָל, the assembly of the Israelites.”⁶ It is unfortunate that *ekklēsia* in most Bibles has been translated as “church,” whereas it would be best rendered as either “assembly” or “congregation.”⁷

It is important to know that the *ekklēsia* or assembly of God’s chosen has always existed. The Holy Spirit being poured out at Pentecost was a fulfillment of prophecy, recorded in both the Tanach (Old Testament) and the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament). But the events that occurred on this day did not start a “new group of elect.” Pentecost, in actuality *Shavuot* (שָׁבוּעוֹת) or the Feast of Weeks—one of the Biblical festivals specified in Leviticus 23—is one of the commanded times of ingathering in the Torah or Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 16:16). The Apostle Peter attested that what occurred when the Holy Spirit was poured out was a fulfillment of prophecy:

“[B]ut this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,’ God says, ‘THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL

⁴ K.L. Schmidt, “*ekklēsia*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 397.

⁵ Jack P. Lewis, “*qāhāl*,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:790.

⁶ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 196.

⁷ Two Christian translations that render *ekklēsia* as “assembly” include Young’s Literal Translation and the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green.

Do note that the English term “church,” while not being the best rendering for *ekklēsia*, is not a word of pagan origins. Consult the FAQ entry on the Messianic Apologetics website “Church, word of pagan origin.”

Introduction to Things Messianic

SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT and they shall prophesy. AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED” (Acts 2:16-21).

The events at Pentecost/*Shavuot* were expected in Joel 2:28-32:

“It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth, blood, fire and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.”⁸

So did the *ekklesia*, or assembly of God’s elect, begin at Pentecost/*Shavuot*? All the Book of Acts says is that there was a fulfillment of prophecies in Joel that will be fully completed in the Last Days. Interestingly enough, the martyr Stephen tells us that “the Church” (meaning, God’s elect) actually existed much earlier at Mount Sinai. In the KJV, he is recorded as saying, “This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in **the church in the wilderness**⁹ with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us” (Acts 7:37-38). The so-called “Church Age” did not begin in 30 C.E. Yeshua the Messiah only speaks of this age and the age to come (Matthew 12:32, 13:49; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30), meaning the future Messianic Kingdom.

In reference to the Hebraic Roots of our faith, it is important to remember that the Apostles and the early Believers in the Messiah were not at all foreign to the Hebrew Bible. Numerous references to “the Scriptures” in the Apostolic Writings (New Testament) are referring to the *Torah*, *Nevi’im*, and *Ketuvim*—or the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings: the Tanach/Tanakh (תנ"ך). The Gospels, Epistles, and many of the other Messianic Writings had yet to be canonized or even written when “the Scriptures” were referred to or appealed to by the Apostles.¹⁰ When Paul wrote Timothy, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16), it was the Tanach or Old Testament of which he was specifically speaking.¹¹

⁸ There is still obviously future fulfillment to be expected with this prophecy. Consult the author’s article “What Happened to Our Eschatology?” appearing in *When Will the Messiah Return?*

⁹ Grk. *tē ekklesia en tē erēmō* (τῆ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ).

¹⁰ Acts 17:2, 11; 18:24, 28; Romans 15:4; 16:26; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

¹¹ Walter C. Kaiser considers this verse to be “One of the strongest statements on the authority and use of the Old Testament Scriptures” (*The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008], 354).

As we have previously mentioned, Paul was a Rabbinical scholar fluent in the Tanach, and when witnessing to fellow Jews in the Synagogue he would have tried to show them how Yeshua fulfilled the prophecies and prophetic patterns seen in His life from the Hebrew Bible. Acts 17:2 records how it was Paul's frequent ministry technique to reason with his Jewish brethren on the Sabbath, proving to them from the Scriptures that Yeshua was the Messiah: "And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures."

It is also important to note that prior to 70 C.E., the year the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, what we commonly call "Christianity" today was a legal religion in the Roman Empire as Rome considered it to be a sect of Judaism which was exempt from worshipping Caesar. However, as the *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* explains, "Jewish Christians (Messianic believers) were considered to be a sect (Acts 24:5) of Judaism. But, after A.D. 70, all Christians were on their own; they were recognized as separate from Judaism."¹² After that time, the assembly of Believers steadily distanced itself from its Hebraic Roots. Much of this was created by Roman anti-Semitism, and was coupled by the Synagogue authorities ejecting many Believers in Yeshua.¹³

What we know today as "Christianity" originated from First Century Judaism and has changed tremendously since then. Our faith in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) at its very core is Hebraic. The Messiah, Yeshua, is an Israelite and is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:4-5). He is coming to reign from Jerusalem, not Rome as some Catholics might believe or Salt Lake City as Mormons may espouse.

So why should we study the roots of our faith? You cannot have a house without a foundation. The foundations of the *ekklesia* pre-Pentecost are definitively Hebraic. It is crucial to understand the worldview that Yeshua, the Apostles, and the early Believers in the Messiah had, so we can more fully understand Scripture as it was originally composed: God-inspired from an Hebraic world view.

The Jerusalem Council

In the very early days of the community of Believers following Pentecost or *Shavuot*, the vast majority of the Believers were Jewish. Later, however, the gospel message began to spread beyond the borders of the Land of Israel. Israel, of course, was to be a light to the nations, and God's conduit by which He would save the

¹² Spiros Zodhiates, ed., "Galatians," in *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, NASB (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1994), 1548.

¹³ Consult the benediction against heretics, actually seen in the Jewish siddur until this very day (Joseph H. Hertz, ed., *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, revised [New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960], 283; Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Nusach Ashkenaz* [Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984], 107), and a summary of early Christian remarks toward the Jewish people seen in "Jew, Jews," in David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp 374-378.

Introduction to Things Messianic

world. Israel's Kingdom could only be restored by the whole world knowing about the greatness of Israel's God, and its Messiah, Yeshua.¹⁴

As many God-fearing non-Jews came to faith in the Messiah, things changed substantially. There was debate among many of the Jewish Believers whether these non-Jews had to be circumcised, becoming Jewish proselytes or converts, and then receive the Messiah (Acts 15:5)—or whether they could receive Him directly and then grow in their faith. It caused a great stir as many believed that circumcision and observance of the Torah or Law of Moses had to precede the salvation experience. Acts 15 records the decisions made by the Jerusalem Council as the *goyim* (גוים) or *ethnē* (ἔθνη), “the nations,” were coming to faith in the Messiah:

“The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?’” (Acts 15:6-10).

Before the Council issued its ruling, Peter restates what has occurred. Previously in Acts 10:9-16, the apostle was shown a vision of a sheet with animals on it considered unclean by the Torah's standards. Peter is told three times to “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” (Acts 10:13), and he responds with, “No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (Acts 10:14, RSV). This passage is usually interpreted as meaning that God annulled the dietary requirements of the Torah or Law of Moses. However, Peter himself gives the appropriate interpretation of his vision *that has nothing to do with meat*:

“And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and *yet* God has shown me that **I should not call any man**¹⁵ unholly or unclean’” (Acts 10:28).¹⁶

In Acts 15:6-11, Peter testifies that the nations have been made clean by the blood of the Messiah, can receive the same Holy Spirit, and must come to redeeming faith in the same way as Jewish Believers. He also emphasizes that “a

¹⁴ “[I]t is clear that ‘Israel as a light to the nations’ is no peripheral theme within the canonical process. The nations are the matrix of Israel's life, the *raison d'être* of her very existence” (Duane L. Christensen, “Nations,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 4:1037).

¹⁵ Grk. *mēdena...anthrōpon* (μηδένα... ἄνθρωπον); or “any human being.”

¹⁶ The Mishnah says in m.*Ohalot* 18:7, “Dwelling places of gentiles [in the Land of Israel] are unclean” (Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988], 980), and as such Jews in the Second Temple period did not often voluntarily associate themselves with others.

The Greek term *athemitos* (ἀθέμιτος), used in Acts 10:28, in most Bibles is rendered as “unlawful.” It does not mean unlawful in the sense of something against the Torah. It pertains, rather, “**to not being sanctioned, not allowed, forbidden**” (Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 850), relating to custom or opinion, as opposed to something that is Biblical law.

yoke...which...our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15:10, NIV) should not be put upon them, implying that *legalistic* or mandatory observance of the Law of Moses involving circumcision for salvation and/or for acceptance among the Believers was not necessary. James the Just, half-brother of Yeshua, issued the following ruling for the new-Jewish Believers:

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:19-21).

Four requirements were given to the new non-Jewish believers in order for them to congregate with Jewish Believers in the Messiah:

1. Abstinance from pollutions of idols
2. Abstinance from fornication
3. Abstinance from things strangled
4. Abstinance from blood

Briefly summarized, Believers from the nations were to avoid idols, fornication (sexual immorality), meats that were not butchered in a proper method (Deuteronomy 14:2-20), and blood (Deuteronomy 12:23-25).

Why were the non-Jews coming to faith told to observe these four things?

“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21).

The new, non-Jewish Believers, in observing the four stipulations, would be cut off from their old pagan spheres of influence—and find themselves a part of a community, along with their fellow Jewish Believers, where the declaration of the Law of Moses every week would be taking place. James recognized that the salvation of the nations was a major part of God’s restoration of the Tabernacle of David (Acts 15:15-18; cf. Amos 9:11-12, LXX). This would surely have to involve God writing His Torah onto the hearts of His people by His Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27), something which could begin with the essentials that the Jerusalem Council ruled were necessary for the new, non-Jewish Believers (cf. Acts 15:23-29).

In Ephesians 2:11-16, the Apostle Paul writes that non-Jews who come to faith in Yeshua have been made a part of the Commonwealth of Israel:

“Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision,’ *which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Messiah Yeshua you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which*

Introduction to Things Messianic

is the Law of commandments *contained* in [dogma],¹⁷ so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.”

Paul says that those who were “separate from Messiah” were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” (Ephesians 2:12, RSV), but that through the sacrifice of the Messiah He will make the two into “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV/CJB). Ephesians 2:15 tells us that “God through the cross... put to death the enmity,” or sin which has been atoned for through the sacrifice of the Messiah which once separated God the Father from humanity. All Believers in Yeshua are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel.

Believers from the nations were, however, warned by the Apostle Paul not to boast or speak against the Jewish people as the natural branches of Israel’s olive tree. As Paul attests, “do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, *remember that* it is not you who supports the root, but the root *supports* you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either” (Romans 11:18-21). No one is to boast against the Jewish people, because if God can break off natural branches from Israel’s olive tree in order to save wild branches of the nations, He can certainly break off the wild branches. The Jewish people, as Paul is clear, have an irrevocable calling that must be honored (Romans 11:29).

The roots of our faith come from Israel and ultimately Yeshua, the Root. Non-Jewish Believers who had once been separate from Israel have nothing to boast about (Romans 11:17-22), but they need to respect those who hold the oracles of God (Romans 3:2). The Jerusalem Council ruled that there was no difference between Believers of different ethnic backgrounds in the Lord, as all are a part of the same body and must be welcome (cf. Galatians 3:28), showing mutual honor to one another. From that Israel comes our Divine Savior, the Messiah Yeshua.

Roman Catholicism Takes Its Toll

What we have described concerning the Jerusalem Council is somewhat different than what is often taught in mainstream Christianity. Born again Believers are a part of the community of Israel via their faith in Israel’s Messiah. It is important to note that there is no reference in Scripture that the First Century Believers dispensed with the Torah or Law of Moses, including the seventh-day Sabbath, the appointed times of Leviticus 23,¹⁸ and the kosher dietary laws. Rather,

¹⁷ Grk. *dogma* (δόγμα); most likely relating to “something that is taught as an established tenet or statement of belief, doctrine, dogma” (BDAG, 254).

This is examined further in the author’s commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*, as “the religious Law of commandments in dogmas” is explained to actually be man-made regulations responsible for erecting the dividing wall in the Second Temple, contrary to the Temple being a place for all to come and commune with God (i.e., 1 Kings 8:41-43; Isaiah 56:6-7).

¹⁸ Consult the author’s article “Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?”

in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) it is made clear that legalistic observance of the Torah via a conversion to Judaism was not a salvation requirement, and that no person would gain salvation by keeping commandments. *Yeshua does come first*, with the Torah second as a part of following Him and growing in holiness.

But if the First Century *ekklēsia* was very Hebraic, how did we get to where we are today? Presumably, these Believers did not celebrate mainstream Christian practices such as “Sunday church” or the holidays of Christmas and Easter (at least as we currently know them).

History records that following the First Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., the institutional Church began passing legislation prohibiting the keeping of the Sabbath and the Biblical festivals.¹⁹ (This is an indication that even up until the Fourth Century there were some pockets of Believers who were keeping, or at least nominally keeping, these practices.) When “Christianity” was made a legal religion in the Roman Empire by Constantine, syncretism was largely practiced by the clergy, meaning Biblical concepts were often merged with pagan customs. It ultimately resulted in the widescale merger of Church authority with political authority, and the Roman Catholic Church was formed as a consequence.

Following the fall of Rome in 476 C.E. to the Visigoths, the Dark Ages began. During this period, Europe experienced one of the worst times in human history, which the Roman Catholic Church dominated. One risked death by simply possessing a written copy of the Holy Scriptures, and disease and plague were rampant. Europeans were also some of the most uneducated people in the known world (especially when compared to Jews and Muslims) as the Roman Catholics held most Biblical, historical, and philosophical documents solely in their possession. Of everything that was taught and believed, the most dangerous was that the Catholic Church held that eternal life or salvation only came through participation in its sacraments. The pope was believed to have the authority on Earth to give people exemption from Divine punishment, or condemn them eternally.²⁰

The Reformation

We should truly believe that the Reformation, which began in the early 1500s, was an act of God. German monk Martin Luther could not reconcile the Biblical concept of “the just shall live by faith” with the Roman Catholic teaching of salvation via the Church’s sacraments. History records that his Ninety-Five Theses or protests against the Catholic Church began the phenomenon we now call the Protestant Reformation. From that point onward men and women of God began to read their Bibles and question Roman Catholic tradition.

¹⁹ Council of Antioch (341 C.E.), Canon 1; Council of Laodicea (363 C.E.), Canon 29.

²⁰ The author recommends you consult Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), and Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), for a fair analysis of early Church history.

Introduction to Things Messianic

The two primary goals of the Reformers were (1) to purge the Church of non-Biblical Roman Catholic practices, and (2) to present the general populace a copy of the Scriptures in their native languages. During this time famous English translations such as the 1599 Geneva Bible and 1611 King James Bible were produced. The Biblical realization that salvation came by grace through faith alone, and not by actions prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church, was also reestablished. Certainly, the Reformers did not agree on everything, and many different Protestant sects did arise. But, had it not been for what they did, we would certainly *not* be where we are today.

When we review the current Messianic movement, one must realize that the Reformation accomplished much, although there are still areas of Biblical theology that need to be reformed. The Reformation showed us that the practices of Roman Catholic ritual confession, praying to the saints, Mary veneration or worship, and belief in purgatory, were non-Biblical. A few in the Messianic movement believe that the Protestant Reformation was a failure because Protestants still observe some Roman Catholic practices. However, would we be better off if the Reformation had not occurred? Are we not building upon the theology of those who have gone before us—both Jewish rabbis *and* various Christian theologians? *Today, we benefit from access to Jewish literature and resources that the early Reformers did not have access to.*²¹

What has the Messianic movement today achieved?

The Messianic movement today was originally started by Jews who were Believers in Messiah Yeshua as an evangelistic outreach to fellow Jews. Many of today's Messianic congregations, however, have a mixed group of constituents, including Jews who have received Yeshua as the Messiah, and others from diverse Christian backgrounds wanting to enrich their faith. Overall, the Messianic movement has been responsible for awakening many Christians to the truly Hebraic origins of their faith.

There are, however, distinctive differences between your average Messianic congregation and your standard church setting. Just as there are many types of evangelical Christian churches, there are a wide variety of Messianic congregations.

One of the most obvious differences between a Messianic congregation and your average church is that Messianics typically assemble or hold services on a Friday night or Saturday in remembrance of the Biblical Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Depending on what region of the world in which you live, a congregation can be very much like an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, or similar to a standard church setting, with all the variance you can imagine in between. (Most Messianic congregations are actually like a Conservative-Reform Jewish synagogue.) Use of

²¹ And for that same matter, access to the lands of the Bible, secondary historical data and resources, and disciplines like archaeology, largely arising in the mid-to-late Nineteenth Century.

Consult K.A. Kitchen, *The Bible In Its World: The Bible & Archaeology Today* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977).