

ADVANCED DISCIPLESHIP COURSE: SESSION 5

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Key Current Challenges for the Messianic Jewish Movement:

There are a number of major areas of discussion among the leaders of the Messianic Jewish movement. These areas are not in any particular order:

- 1) The prevalence of congregations that deny the deity of Yeshua;
- 2) The rise of Messianic congregations with a traditional Jewish identity and that are teaching closer alignment to rabbinical Halakhah (the Oral Law);
- 3) The continuing challenge of reaching Jewish people with the Gospel;
- 4) The future of the Jewish identity of Messianic congregations ;
- 5) The cultural differences of the Israeli Messianic movement with the North American and international Messianic streams.

Here are some thoughts on these topics which I have heard being raised as these topics were discussed in meetings among Messianic leaders:

The rise of Messianic congregations that deny the divinity of Yeshua is probably more widespread in Israel. However, the growing problem we'll face in the future is congregations that will drift toward this view because the leaders are either poorly trained in Christian theology or unable to integrate their Jewish views of Yeshua with traditional Trinitarian theology.

The IAMCS has recently produced a book called *The Non-Torah: Exposing the Mythology of Divine Oral Torah*. The whole purpose of this publication is to argue against the Oral Torah as a reliable source of faith or practice by Messianic Jews. Apparently this book was directed toward problems with one particular former member of the IAMCS, however, it raises the issue for the entire movement since the UMJC does have numerous congregations and leaders whose life practice and study are deeply associated with ancient rabbinical teachings and scholarship.

The failure of our congregations to reach the next generation with the Gospel has been a critical problem throughout the evangelical world generally. However, a rising number of believers among the Millennials have revived our hope of a new emerging leadership for the future Messianic Jewish movement. The UMJC has worked hard toward encouraging and supporting those who are considering a career in ministry and now has 18 leaders who have passed through its programs (K-20) to meet the future needs of our movement.

1) The divinity of Yeshua:

The UMJC statement on the identity of Yeshua - "Yeshua is the incarnation of the Divine Word through Whom the world was made, and of the Divine Glory through Whom God revealed Himself to Israel and acted in their midst. He is the living Torah, expressing perfectly in His example and teaching the Divine purpose for human life. Yeshua is completely human and completely divine."

The historic attempts to compromise on the divinity are based on sincere objectives:

- to ameliorate the passage of Jewish people into a positive Yeshua attitude in preparation for them coming to faith;
- to overcome the strictest objections of Jewish people who wish to study the possibility that Yeshua is the Messiah;
- to immediately satisfy the demands of the vast majority of Jewish people who insist that the Messiah can't be divine
- to maintain purity of the Jewish identity of Yeshua and untainted from Hellenistic thought.

The resulting perspective of those who have followed this path:

- Yeshua's miracles are either negated or become vague signs of mystery;
- Yeshua's identity as a human consigns him to a narrow place as rabbi;
- His authority as the Messiah of Israel is minimized and he takes equal status with the leaders of other religious movements: Gandhi, Buddha, Mohammed.

In order to claim genuine heartfelt faith, He must, ultimately be "my Lord and my God" (John 20:28) as per Toma's confession. But in the larger sense of our worship, he must be fully understood in unity with the Father. The next generation of believers can not experience the changed heart of salvation.

So how do we formulate a perspective that is consistent with the Shema as our confession of faith? Here is one considered answer:

If in any way Jesus as the Son is outside the sphere of God's *echad* – whether as a godly man 'adopted' by God and elevated to the highest place; or as a supernatural, 'divine agent', maybe even the first-born of all creation, come down from heaven as a man – in either case Yeshua the Son remains outside the *ehad* of God and compromises his uniqueness, exclusiveness and indivisible unity. Quite simply, within a Jewish frame of reference, the risen Lord Jesus can be worshipped with HASHEM only if in some ontological sense he operates within the oneness of God, i.e., is divine. Y/H/W/H shares his glory with no one; worship/service is reserved exclusively for him alone. Only in this light can we fully appreciate – and account for – the first church co-opting one of the strongest statements of exclusive monotheism in all the Tanakh, Isaiah 45.23, and applying it verbatim (from the LXX) to Jesus in Philippians 2.10-11, an early hymn of exaltation. But note the concluding words, which are typically Jewish in their tension-yet-balance: "Jesus the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

From, *ONE GOD & LORD* by Dwight A. Pryor[1] © 2003 by Dwight A. Pryor, from *Mishkan* 39 (2003).

The problematic area here is the relationship of Messianic Jewish theology to a Trinitarian perspective (God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, "three in one"). While Messianic Jews agree on Yeshua's Jewishness, atoning work and resurrection, his relationship within the Godhead of YHWH/ELOHIM as understood in the Jewish Scriptures is not settled. Richard Harvey identifies five streams here:

- 1) **Theocentric Christology:** this is an orthodox or classic Christian perspective based on the systematic theologies of the Protestant Reformation. The emphasis here is the full divine nature of Yeshua, so that “the Son” is not a lesser divine figure than “the Father.” There is little engagement with Jewish sources.
- 2) **Pre-incarnate Messiah:** This argument focuses on the identity of Yeshua as Messiah emphasizing his fulfillment of the traditional Scriptural prophecies of the Jewish Bible. This proof-text view is closer to what is now considered an outdated apologetic approach to the Scriptures which largely dismiss Jewish arguments and interpretations. He derives a concept of the Trinity from other Jewish Bible texts.
- 3) **Recontextualized Nicene Christology:** Many of the major Messianic teachers favour an approach where support for the traditional Trinitarian formulation comes from Jewish sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, widely known intertestamental Jewish writings or specific teachings of Yeshua, including those from Revelations. Added to this is the insistence that this Christology be framed with more Jewish terminology. All this is in contrast with the former Hebrew Christian view which insisted that there could be no accommodation with monotheism and a trinitarian perspective.
- 4) **Jewish Mystical Christology:** The use of Jewish mystical concepts to approach an understanding of Yeshua that expresses a divine character or identity was originally used by Christian students of the Jewish Kabbalah in the pre-Reformation era of the Renaissance, for example Pico della Mirandola (1463-94). This stream of thought continued to be used outside of mainstream Christian thought until it was taken up by some wings of the Hebrew Christian missions in the 19th century. A key source here was the 17th century Jewish believer, Johann Christian Jakob Kemper of Uppsala. A contemporary approach to similar sources has emerged in Israeli Messianic Jewish circles.
- 5) **The Hidden Messiah of Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism:** This is one of the most complex theological arguments, demanding a completely new perspective that draws both from Jewish mystical traditions and the more critical 20th century theological examinations of traditional trinitarianism to develop an incarnational theology that sees Yeshua indwelling the Body of Messiah and the suffering people of Israel. This is not yet a wholly realized Christology and Kinzer accepts that a whole new way of approaching the divinity of Yeshua.

Summary: Rethinking Trinitarian Christology demands both a reinterpretation of classic Christian thinking in a Jewish perspective with biblical integrity, theological consistency and an adept sensitivity to the Jewish identity of Yeshua. [See Chapt. 5, Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*.]