

Some Assorted Articles On Studying the Scriptures

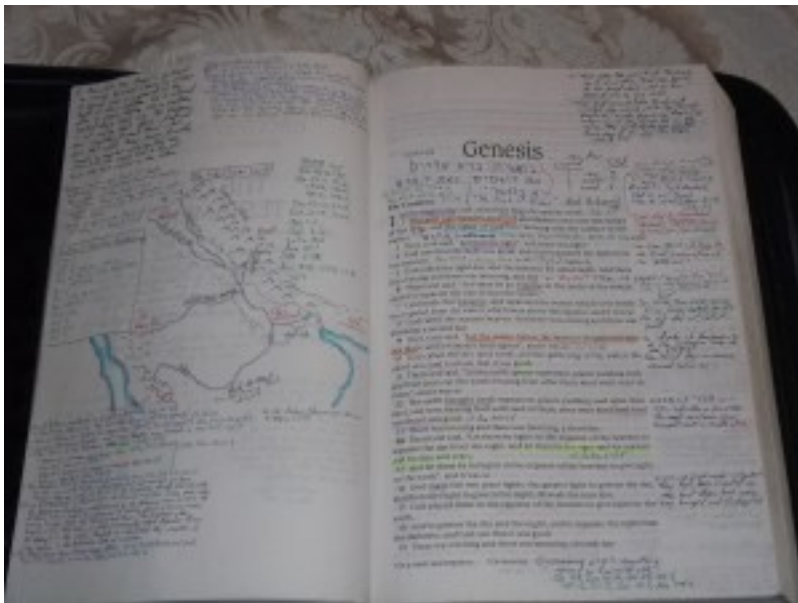
by Rabbi Michael Bugg

Why You Need a Wide-Margin Bible

In the Middle Ages, knights carried not just one sword, but a variety of swords and other weapons, each with its own use, such as a mace or battle axe for use against foes with heavy armor, a lance for charging on horseback, a dagger for close-in fighting, and a sword for general use. The diligent Christian or Messianic Jew needs just as wide a selection of his primary weapon, the sword of the Word of God: Study Bibles for quick-reference, thinlines for easy transport, interlinears for deeper study of the languages, and a variety of translations to compare and contrast. But just like a medieval knight, every believer needs that sword that goes everywhere with him, the one that is really and truly his. For serious students, I firmly believe that this should be a wide-margin Bible with his own personal notes.



The Zondervan Wide-Margin NASB has been my personal sword for five years now. Cambridge makes a series of wide-margin Bibles [that includes the NASB](#) and the ESV, but unfortunately they insist on making them with two columns, which means that your notes on the inside column are always going to be crunched at best. To my mind, a good wide-margin Bible needs to have just a single column, so that you can always (or nearly always) put the note you're writing directly next to the relevant verse.



In that respect, the layout of the Zondervan is perfect for a wide-margin Bible: The font is relatively large (equivalent to Times New Roman at about 9.5 points) and very easy to read even for my less-than-perfect vision. There's no need to crowd notes on the inner margin as with a two-column format. Each verse starts on its own line, with verse numbers set in bold to indicate new paragraphs. The result is that most verses have at least an inch or two of waste space, which I often use to write in my own cross-references. Poetry is set into stanzas, which gives you even

more space for those passages.

There's an additional half-inch of white-space at the top and bottom of the page which I use for quoting longer passages from various commentaries and other books. The beginning of each book also has about three inches of whitespace around the name of the book, which gives you a fair amount of room to write down introductory notes about the book itself. Since each book begins on a new page, there is additional space at the end of many books, as well as sixteen blank pages left in the back. If you use the right pens and write small, that's an immense amount of room for notes.

So, for example, I have the map of the Antediluvian world as best I could reconstruct it in the picture above, and on the right is a timeline I created to show when the various kings and prophets lived. I'll be honest and admit that this chart was cribbed almost entirely from the [ESV Study Bible](#) (another favorite resource I'll have to review someday), but with a few added details that I personally found interesting.

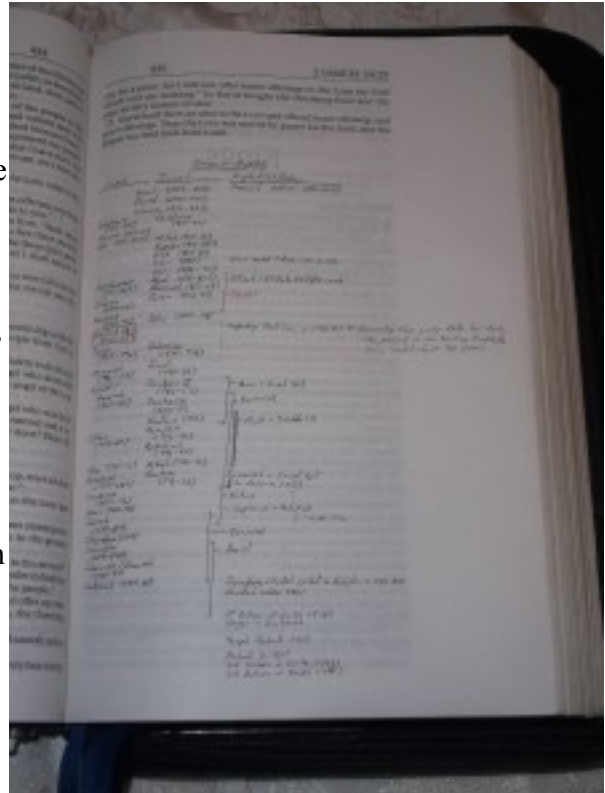
I have only one nit to pick with this Bible, and that is that it has no cross-references, not even for passages from the Old Testament quoted in the New (which are marked by small caps). I didn't mind, but if the editors had seen fit to put a set of decent cross-referencing on the inner margins, I would call this the perfect note-taking Bible. As is, just be aware that you'll be putting in a few hours of looking up and jotting down cross-references up-front.

Those of you who like the KJV would probably enjoy the [Note Taker's Bible](#) (reviewed [here](#)). I have to admit that had the bookstore I bought my Zondervan in had this in stock, I would have very likely picked it up instead.

The reason, by the way, that I don't like the KJV is not primarily the old language, but rather the fact that the KJV translators relied too much on the Latin Vulgate when they had difficulty with the Hebrew. As wonderful as the poetry of the KJV is (and I'll be the first to admit that I love the ring of the prophetic books in the older English), I need accuracy more than poetry to really study. But for those who love the KJV and want to start keeping your notes in your Bible, you'll probably find this version to be right up your alley.

So why aren't I linking to any Messianic versions? Simply put, because the Messianic movement is so new and so divided that we haven't produced either yet. I have some hopes for the upcoming [Messianic Jewish Shared Heritage Bible](#), but there are still some translation issues (that I'll deal with in an open email in the near future) and it only has a basic version so far. Even with my personal quibbles, let them put out a good, solid wide-margin version, and I'll pick it up and start transferring notes in a heartbeat. In the meantime, I'll stick with the NASB and ESV—while I love the *Complete Jewish Bible* as a study resource (particularly when paired with Stern's *Jewish New Testament Commentary*), I don't believe that any paraphrase can ultimately serve the serious student.

Of course, what I wish I could find is the New Covenant equivalent to the Artscroll Tanakh. Artscroll puts the English on the left and the Hebrew on the right and includes nice wide margins (though not, I think, actually intending us to write in them). Why on earth don't Christians care as

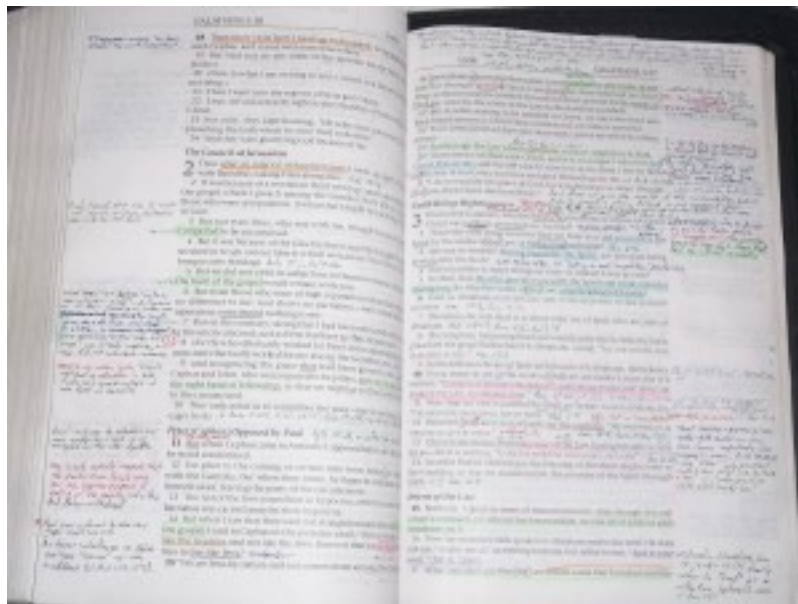


much about having the Greek as Jews do about having the Hebrew? Oh, you can find Greek New Testaments—but not with a translation paired with it. You can't blame the publishers, not when the demand for even basic wide-margin Bibles is so low. In the meantime, I've got my wide-margin, and my Nook carries both Hebrew and Greek versions as well as the ESV Study Bible. If I can just find some good lexicons, I'll never be without the resources on-hand to do a bit of study no matter where I am.

Okay, so I've gone all over the map on this post talking about various Bibles, but I've not actually answered the question: Why *do* you need a wide-margin Bible? Here are my top five reasons:

1. While a good study Bible is worth its weight in gold, a good study Bible can also lull you into believing that the notes and commentary it provides are always right, killing your initiative to dig in deeper yourself. A good wide-margin Bible, on the other hand, invites you to continually dig deeper.
2. All of us have favourite books or sections that we tend to return to again and again. Blank pages in a wide-margin Bible have a way of calling to you and getting you to study areas that you never have before.
3. Writing things down, and being forced to carefully pick and choose what and how to write them down due to space constraints, actually improves your ability to remember those details later on.
4. As useful as the Internet is for finding various odd facts, you don't want to be dependent on it for all of your Bible study. A storm (or EMP) could knock out the power—and do you really want to lack access to your Bible and everything you've learned about it in the middle of an emergency?
5. Much like a long-kept journal, there's a way in which a wide-margin with all of its notes ceases to be just a book and becomes an extension of who you are. Because (barring the use of correction tape) the notes you put there are there forever, you can actually see your personal growth in the Scriptures over time, how questions you once had were answered, how your theology has evolved, and so on.

And of course, there's always my unofficial reason #6. When you've had the same wide-margin for several years and you open it up in a discussion and other people see this:



Well, let's just say that it gives you a sense of accomplishment and might just provoke them to jealousy enough to want to dig into their own Bibles as well.

Shalom.

The Three “I”s: Inspiration, Interpretation, Implementation

I recently read Eung Chung Park's *Either Gentile or Jew: Paul's Unfolding Theology of Inclusivity*, a somewhat dry book which contains some interesting observations about some of Paul's letters and the rabbinic writings about Gentile converts into Judaism, but which is hampered by two major problems: 1) The whole book is the lead-in to a punchline that the Church needs to “re-examine” issues of gender and sexuality, and 2) it really doesn't take the Scriptures seriously.

It's the latter problem that I really want to get into in the next series of posts. Park is clearly from the liberal school of Biblical scholarship, which should have been destroyed over a century ago by the work of Sir William Ramsay. That is to say, Park accepts uncritically the belief that the books of Acts and Luke (and, one assumes, the other Gospel accounts, though they don't enter prominently into this book) were written sometime in the Second Century CE, and that they are rife with inaccuracies. Sir Ramsay came from a similar school of thought, and spent two years in Anatolia trying to disprove Luke's account. He could not. In fact, he found so many confirmations of Luke's fine details that he became a Christian and wrote numerous books in defense of the faith, including *Pictures of the Apostolic Church: Studies in the Book of Acts*.

Why do liberal schools of Biblical criticism keep flailing around the coffin a century after the good knight put a stake through their heart? While the unwillingness to accept the traditional Biblical narrative does, perhaps, lead to digging deeper into the Greek than many who are convinced of Biblical inerrancy might, Park's work is so full of caveats, ifs, ands, and buts that I developed a severe strain of the superior rectus from rolling my eyes so much. It is obvious that Park doesn't believe in the inspiration of Scripture, but rather treats Scripture as the words of men about God rather than the Word of God, and therefore subject to being rewritten or ignored at will by the “prophets” of the ivory tower.

I've had a couple of students fall into this trap. It is, after all, easier to be politically correct if one can ignore the words of Scripture.

This isn't just a Christian phenomenon, either. I recently read *The New Rabbi* by Stephen Fried. It's primarily an account of how one of the largest synagogues in North America, Har Zion, went about seeking a replacement for retiring rabbi Gerald Wolpe, one which reveals the mistakes made and how they were overcome. In the process, it grants the reader a marvelous glimpse into not only synagogue politics (which really aren't much different from church politics), but also synagogue life. In one aside, the author mentions how Rabbi Wolpe's son gave a sermon in the wake of an archaeological expedition that had failed to find evidence of the Exodus. Rather than addressing the fact that they were looking in the wrong spot (Mt. Sinai is *not* in the Sinai Peninsula), the younger Rabbi Wolpe gave a sermon about re-evaluating the Jewish faith in light of the lack of evidence that Fried simply discusses for the controversy it caused.

For my part, I am more than happy to stand on the fact that the entire Bible, as it was originally delivered in its original languages, is the Inspired Word of God. Why? Simply put, because prophecy is my passion, and men talking about their ideas about God cannot prophesy.

But what do we really mean when we say that “all Scripture is God-breathed”? Does this mean that

every single word was directly dictated by the Holy One to His prophets, who took the function of copyists? Or does it mean, as [the Chaos and Old Night blog](#) affirms, that only the general, overall message is inspired, but that the authors might have gotten some small, incidental details wrong? Is all Scripture inspired in the same way, or are there different levels of interpretation?

And once we have understood the manner of Scriptural inspiration, how do we interpret this Inspired Text? Literally or allegorically? Do later books override earlier books, or do we seek to reconcile the whole? How much do we factor in the Jewish predilection for hyperbole when interpreting prophecies of God's judgment? Is there only one true way to interpret Scripture, or are there many ways?

And once we have interpreted the Scriptures, how do we internalize it to our lives? How do we apply it? When we, as Messianics, claim that the Torah is still God's rule for our lives, do we really mean that we are supposed to keep all 613 commandments? How do we apply passages and commandments about Temple worship to our lives?

This series on the Three "I"s is intended to be pretty open ended and may go back and forth among the "I"s depending on how the Spirit leads. Hopefully it will help to explain to some of my Sunday brethren where we as Messianics come from in regards to our theology.

Inspiration and Authority

In Christianity, Scriptural inspiration is pretty much a binary proposition: It's either inspired or it ain't. And if it's inspired, it must all be inspired equally, right? After all, "All Scripture is inspired by God (lit. "God-breathed") and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2Ti. 3:16f).

In this mindset, whatever Scriptures were given last are actually given the greatest weight and authority. Since all Scriptures are inspired equally, it follows that whatever came last is God's final word on the matter. Thus the writings of Paul are curiously sometimes given greater weight than the words of Yeshua Himself. [Rabbi Derek Leman](#) noted this early in his walk with Yeshua, and found it curious.

And indeed, we should find it curious—and dangerous. It is the core mistake that opens the door to all manner of false prophets and apostles. After all, if God could come along and override what He had said in the days of Yeshua's disciples, why couldn't He do it again in our own day?

Judaism has a more layered approach to Scriptural inspiration: The most foundational level of Scripture, and that which carries the highest authority, is the Torah, followed by the prophets, followed by the writings (the psalms, proverbs, and some of the latter historical books). This does not mean that the "lesser" books are less inspired or less revered—the Song of Solomon was called the Queen of the Tanakh by Rabbi Akiva, for example—but it does mean that a "lesser" book cannot be read in such a way that overrides a more authoritative book, though they will, of course, help us to grow in our understanding of those more authoritative books.

The Scriptures themselves suggest such a layered approach to inspiration and authority. When the authority of Moses was challenged by Aaron and Miriam—a priest and a prophetess, respectively—the Holy One answered them:

The LORD came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the Tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. He said, "Hear now my words. If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known to him in a vision. I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so. He is faithful in all my house. **With him**

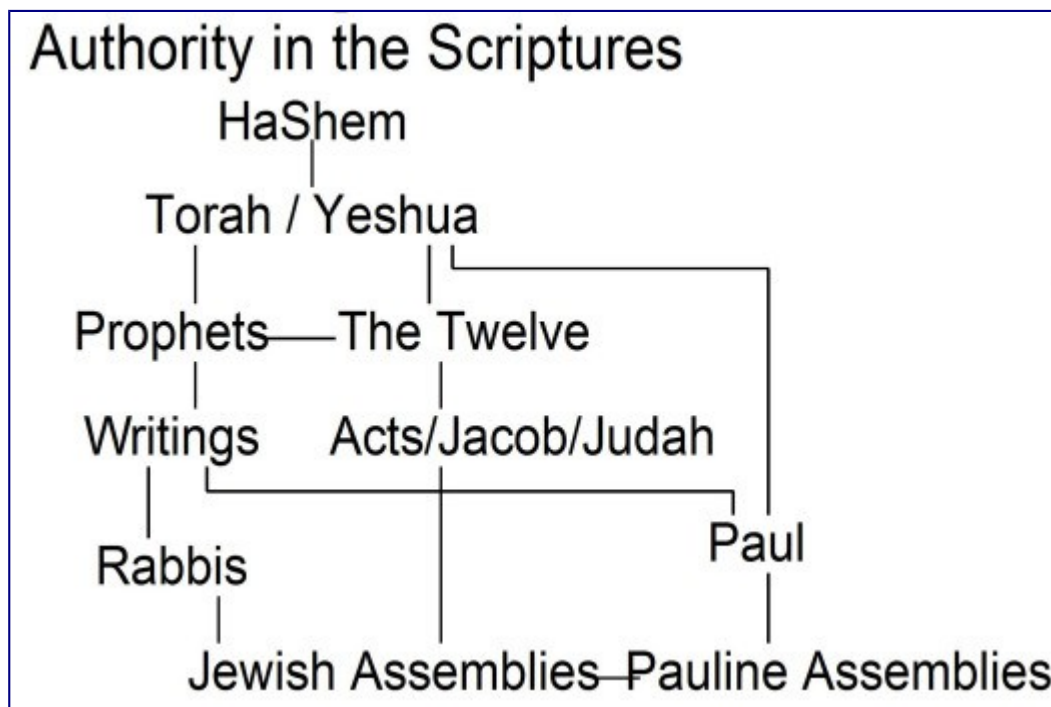
I speak mouth to mouth, even plainly, and not in riddles; and he sees the LORD's form. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses?" (Num. 12:5-8)

In other words, the things that the later prophets only knew by riddling verse and difficult-to-comprehend visions, Moses was given clearly. Therefore, if we think we see a contradiction between the Torah and a later prophet, we are to assume that we have misunderstood the later prophet's riddling vision, not the Torah's plain presentation of the Holy One's will. Ergo, when we see Jeremiah and Amos declaring that God despises the Feasts, we should not interpret this as a change in the Law, but as a response to the misuse of the Feasts by men of uncircumcised hearts.

The New Covenant Scriptures have a similar three-fold structure: At the top level of authority are the Gospel accounts, the words, deeds, and teachings of the Prophet like Moses—indeed, of the very Word and Torah made incarnate. The second two levels, the equivalent of the Prophets and Writings, are somewhat more difficult to discern, but for the sake of illustration, let us suggest that the Revelation and the letters written by original members of the Twelve (1-3 John, 1 & 2 Peter) would stand in the place of the Prophets and the other Epistles, written by those who were not chosen as among the Twelve (Paul, Acts, Hebrews, James, and Jude) would stand in the place of the Writings.

Of course, our nice, neat categories begin to experience difficulties when we begin comparing the Tanakh to the Sh'lechim (the writings of the Emissaries, or Apostles; i.e., the New Testament). On the one hand, all of the Apostolic authors cite the Torah and the previous prophets for direction and authority; that would suggest that they stand in a position of lesser authority. On the other hand, the Twelve—like Moses—were taught "mouth-to-mouth" by the Sh'khinah of the Holy One in their midst. That would suggest that they too were more than prophets, having received plainly what the prophets received only in imagery (John 16:25-29, Php. 2:6-8).

Regardless of how one understands the precise relationship between the Twelve and the Prophets, one thing is clear: While Rabbi Sha'ul, aka the Apostle Paul, was very clear that his own call and authority was not given to him by the Twelve (Gal. 1:1), nevertheless, his calling and authority was certainly not greater than theirs. Or, to put it in an org chart:



My Christian brethren might wonder why I put the Jewish Assemblies under the Rabbis in authority. Simply put, because we are taught in Scripture to do so. Yeshua Himself told us to follow the rulings of the Pharisees (Mat. 23:3), and when Paul writes, “Let every soul be in subjection to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those who exist are ordained by God” (Rom. 13:1), do we think for one moment that he meant only the pagan, Roman authorities, and not the duly-appointed authorities of the Jewish people?

Therefore, if one is going to call one’s self a Messianic Jew and say that he or she considers himself or herself part of the Jewish people, then that person must be willing to follow Jewish societal and authoritative norms as long as those norms do not contradict the Scriptures, whether those held universally by our people or those given to us by the Messiah and His immediate disciples. This does not mean that we regard the rabbis on par with Inspired Scripture, but that we recognize their authority as given by Scripture.

Only when we recognize the correct lines of authority that the Holy One has given us can we avoid the errors of the last two thousand years in which Paul has become the last word on any subject and Paul’s writings were seen as setting the authority of the earlier Scriptures aside in favor of a “new law.” When, on the other hand, we look at Paul as one having only a derived authority, and that less than the previous Scriptures, we realize that he cannot have contradicted or changed the Torah without himself being an apostate and heretic—and therefore, we interpret his writings in such a way that compliments and explains the earlier Scriptures rather than conflicting with an annulling them.

Interpretation in Judaism

An old Christian adage states, “When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest you end up with nonsense.” This sounds like good advice on the surface; the only problem is that it’s not Biblical. There are numerous instances in the New Testament where the Apostles very deliberately interpreted passages from the Tanakh in ways that defy a “plain sense” interpretation.

For example, Matthew 2:15 ascribes Hosea 11:1 as a Messianic prophecy even though a plain-text interpretation that takes the context into account makes it clear that the prophet had the whole nation in mind, even pointing out our later idolatry. Does this mean that Matthew was in error? Not at all! Rather, he was looking beyond the surface of the text to make the point that Messiah’s life encapsulates all of Israel’s history, even to the point that He too went down to Egypt before being called out again—only where Israel sinned and failed, Yeshua succeeded in perfection!

The Rabbinic ways of interpreting the Scriptures are deeper and, to the Western mind, less intuitive than Christian hermeneutical rules. The rules that the rabbis have followed have been variously enumerated, expanded, and reordered, from R. Hillel’s Seven Rules, to R. Ishmael’s Thirteen, to the Thirty-Two Rules of R. Eliezer b. Jose ha-Gelili. R. Hillel’s probably best describe the methods of First Century Pharisaic Judaism, and so are listed here:

1. ***Kal V’chomer (Light and Heavy)*** - This is what is known in Latin as an *a fortiori* (“from greater strength”) argument. That is, something that applies in a lesser case will have all the greater strength in a more important case. Yeshua often used this principle often saying, “How much more . . .” to present the “heavy” side (cf. Mat. 7:11, 10:25, 12:12; Luke 11:13, 12:24 and 28; Paul also uses this argument in Rom. 11:12 and 24; 1Co. 6:3 and 9:9).
2. ***G’zerah Shavah (Equivalence of Expressions)*** - What applies to a word, root, or phrase in one passage applies equally to it in another, even when they are not thematically or contextually linked. To understand the book of Revelation it is vital to understand *G’zerah Shavah*. The author of Hebrews also makes use of this rule in establishing the continuance of the Sabbath in

chapters 3-4, equating “rest” in Psa. 95:11 with the Sabbath rest.

3. ***Binyan Ab Mikathub Echad (Building up a “family” from a single text)*** - When a principal is found in several passages, what applies to any one of them applies to all. For example, from the repeated requirement for blood sacrifice in the Torah, the author of Hebrews notes, “apart from shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22).
4. ***Binyab Ab Mishene Kethubim (Building up a “family” from two or more texts)*** - A principal derived from relating two texts may then be applied to other texts. Matthew may be the master of using this rule, as noted earlier, discerning a Messianic prophecy out of the fact that both Israel and the Messiah are called God’s Son.
5. ***Kelal Uferat (General and Particular)*** - A general principle may be restricted by a particularization of it in another text; conversely, a particular rule may be expanded into a general principle. For an example of the former, Yeshua restricts the principle of resting on the Sabbath so that it does not prevent showing mercy by noting that David was allowed to eat the Bread of the Presence and that the priests continue their ministry of intercession for Israel even on the Sabbath (Mat. 12:1-7). For an example of the latter, Yeshua expanded love for one’s neighbor to include even one’s enemies in numerous instances, including the Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
6. ***Kayotze Bo Mimekom Akhar (Analogy made from another passage)*** - Two passages may seem to contradict until interpreted through a third, which may have general if not specific points of similarity with the original two. This rule is actually employed regularly by Christian scholars when, for example, reconciling the various accounts of Yeshua’s life and especially the last week.
7. ***Davar Hilmad Me’anino (Explanation obtained from context)*** - This one seems obvious, but to the rabbis this meant the total context of all of Scripture in addition to the specific context of the passage. It also means that the proximity of two passages to each other can affect our understanding of them. The most important part of this principle for the New Covenant disciple is that every quote and allusion from the Tanakh by an Apostle or Messiah Himself must be looked up and studied in its original context in order to properly understand the author’s point.

In Romans 3:1-2, Rabbi Sha’ul writes, “Then what advantage does the Jew have? Or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Because first of all, they were entrusted with the oracles of God.” In other words, only by studying the Scriptures with Jewish eyes can we really understand them. This is not a genetic advantage, but a cultural one that can be learned by one of Gentile birth or forgotten by the assimilated Jew.

In our next post, we will look at the multilayered nature of Scripture, and how a given passage may have many meanings rather than just one.

Levels of Paradise

In addition to the [the seven general principles of interpretation set forth by R. Hillel](#), it is understood by the rabbis that a single passage usually has more than a single valid interpretation: “There are seventy faces to the Torah: Turn it around and around, for everything is in it” (Num.R. 13:15). In the middle ages, the rabbis created an acronym as a mnemonic to describe four possible levels of interpretation: *Pardes* (a garden or orchard, i.e., “Paradise”). This acronym describes the four main ways of interpreting the Scriptures:

Pashut (“to spread out” or “make a road”): This is the simplest and plainest interpretation. For

example, in the *Akedat Yitzchak*, the narrative of Abraham’s “sacrifice” of Isaac [that we spoke of earlier in this blog](#), the *pashut* is simply what the story says: That God tested Abraham’s faith by having him offer up his long-promised son in sacrifice, and that Abraham passed the test. The *Pashut* of Scripture must be understood first to provide a “road through the wilderness” that will keep one from getting lost as one goes deeper.

Remez (a “hint” or allusion): A *remez* is a hint of something deeper in the text, usually marked by something unusual, like a strange action, a misspelled word, or some other anomaly that can’t be explained in the *P’shat*. In the *Akedat*, we see that hint in Abraham’s confident statement to Isaac, “God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:8) as well as in his naming of the place of sacrifice, “*HaShem Yireh*; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mountain the *Lord* is seen” (v. 14). Abraham knew that he was acting out prophecy. And indeed, two thousand years later, God offered His own Son as an offering on that very same plot of land, offered Himself as a Lamb in Isaac’s—and everyone else’s—place, and on the Mount of the Lord the Holy One was indeed seen and our redemption was provided. That prophetic fulfillment is an example of a *remez*. We can understand it only by cross-referencing the key words wherever they appear in Scripture: The Lamb of the *Akedat* brings to mind the Passover lamb, the one who is silent as a lamb in Isa. 53:7 . . . and ultimately, Yeshua, the Lamb of God.

Drash (“to follow,” “to dig,” or “to seek and ask”) or midrash (“teaching” or “learning”): This is the homiletic meaning, the way the passage can be applied to our own lives. In the *Akedat*, the *midrash* of the story is that we can trust God completely. Abraham knew that the Eternal One had made a promise that through Isaac a great nation would be born (Gen. 17:19), so if He commanded Isaac to be killed, then He would just have to resurrect Isaac to fulfill His promises. Abraham was so certain that God would do exactly as He said that he was willing to trust Him even with the life of his son. “For he had concluded that God could even raise people from the dead! And, figuratively speaking, he did so receive him” (Heb. 11:19, CJB).

A *midrash* may be developed by building a story around a seemingly innocuous detail in the text. For example, in Exodus 20:18 typically reads, “And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings . . .” The actual Hebrew words mean “voices” and “fires (as if from torches)” respectively. The rabbis, asking why the people heard multiple voices, what it meant that we *saw* the voices, and what the fires were there for, envisioned the Eternal One speaking His commandments and covenant in all the languages of the world, His voice striking the mountain like a hammer on an anvil, and the sparks flying off to settle on each individual Israelite. The parallels to the account in Acts of the Shavuot (Pentecost) after Yeshua’s Resurrection are clear (see Exo.R. 5:9; b. Shabbat 88b; see also Lancaster, *Mystery*, pp. 128-135).

Sod (the mystical meaning): This is esoteric interpretation, the mystical conjecture, the hidden meaning. The *sod* is almost always found in a coded form, like the oft-abused equidistant letter sequences (the so-called “Bible codes”) or in comparisons between the numerical value of different words.

There is a danger in pursuing the *sod* interpretation if one abandons the plain text in pursuit of mystical conjectures. A true *sod* would never contradict the plain Scriptures, nor will a true *remez* or *drash*—they will only deepen our understanding and will be confirmed by a *pashut* elsewhere, just as the prophetic type of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is confirmed in the plain interpretations of the latter prophets, and fulfilled by the plain interpretation of Messiah’s work on the cross. For the most part, one is far better off seeking the plain meanings, the hints of deeper things (e.g. the prophetic types), and the personal applications of the Scriptures than in seeking non-confirmable mystical conjectures, and those are what we will focus on in this volume.

Understanding that a given Scripture can have multiple levels of meaning brings a fresh insight to the discussion about which view of Revelation is correct. A few years ago, this author had the pleasure of interning at an internationally-known apologetics ministry. Those within came from a wide variety of theological opinions and backgrounds, from pre-millennialist to amillennialist, Arminian to Calvinist. During a casual conversation with one of the senior members, a well-known speaker in his own right, the subject of prophecy came up, and he said something that rang true long before I learned anything of Jewish hermeneutics: “Michael, to be honest, I think that when Christ finally does come back, we’ll find that all three viewpoints will have turned out to be true.” Perhaps he was just trying to avoid an argument, but his words struck me and still strike me as profound.

In the West, we think of time as linear and of prophecy as simple prediction-and-fulfillment. But in the Hebrew and other Ancient Near East cultures, they think of time as circular—not in an ultimate sense, as in Hinduism, but in the sense that things have a tendency to repeat—and of prophecy as the fulfillment of a pattern.

So then, let’s consider a prophecy that there should be little debate on, 2 Sa. 7:12-16:

And when thy [David's] days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be My son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But My mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

So, does this prophecy refer to Solomon, or to the Messiah? The answer is both.

Solomon followed his father David, built a house for the Holy One’s Name, and God established his kingdom. When he committed idolatry, God punished him “with the rod of men”—specifically, the sword of Hadad the Edomite (1 Ki. 11:14) and Jeroboam the son of Nebat (v. 26). But God did not take Israel from him as He did Saul, but waited until Solomon had passed and his son had taken the throne, and even then He took away only the northern kingdom (vv. 11-13). And so David’s line continued on the throne.

Yeshua also followed His father David. He is building a spiritual house for the Holy One’s Name in the Ekklesia (1 Pt. 2:5) and will also build a physical Temple for the Millennium (Ezk. 40-48). While He never committed iniquity Himself, He became sin for us so that by His stripes, administered by the rod of men, we could be healed. And though the Father’s mercy departed from Him for a brief time as He hung on the Cross, it did not depart forever as it did from Saul, nor was the Kingdom taken from Him—on the contrary, by His eternal life, the throne of David is forever secure.

Examples abound: Isaiah prophecy of a child whose birth would be a sign of the Eternal One’s fidelity to the house of David (Isa. 7:14ff) was fulfilled both in the near term by the prophet’s own son, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (ch. 8), but it also looked forward to the birth of the Messiah, who fulfilled the prophecy in even more literal detail (e.g., being born of a virgin, being called “God With Us”) and went on to fulfill parts of the prophecy that Maher did not (chapters 9-12, which should not be removed from the stream of thought begun in chapter 7).

Prophecy may even refer to past events which prefigure future ones. We are all familiar with prophetic types, as when Abraham “sacrificed” his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah, or Joseph was sold by his brothers as dead only to be made king over them. Or consider Matityahu’s (Mathew’s) use of Hos. 11:1 in Mat. 2:15. Consider the prophecy in context:

When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt. As they called them, so they went from them: they sacrificed unto Baalim, and burned incense to graven images.

Was Matthew wrong to quote this as a Messianic prophecy, as Jewish anti-missionaries claim? Or did he perhaps engage in a legitimate bit of “newspaper exegesis,” seeing that the Messiah, just like Israel, had gone down into Egypt for safety in a time of trouble, only to come back out to the Land God had promised Abraham? In doing so, Matthew shows us the connection between the Messiah and Israel, one that cannot be broken.

In fact, numerous of the Psalms which are quoted in the NT as Messianic prophecy were originally written by David to describe his own situation. In many cases, a highly poetic and allegorical description of David’s situation, like Psalm 22, describes the betrayal and crucifixion of Yeshua in excruciating and literal detail.

Therefore, I actually agree with the preterist and historicist that the Olivet Discourse actually do prophecy of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. I even leave open the possibility that the Apocalypse looked backward (being written [over twenty years later](#)) to the Temple’s destruction even as it looked forward to the eschaton. I also agree with the historicist that the Revelation has within its scope the last 2000 years of Church history.

Where I disagree with both is that it ends there. Therefore, preterism and historicism are not so much wrong as they are incomplete. The chiefmost gripe I have with each is not in what they assert, but in what they deny: That the Eternal One has yet a place for “Israel of the flesh” in His plan, despite the evidence of our times and the testimony of Scripture; that He will keep *all* of His promises to the letter; and that there will indeed be a time of great testing for all of the children of Abraham, both the natural seed and those adopted into the Messiah, before Yeshua’s bodily return to physically rule over the earth.

Survival and Community in Jewish Thought

One of the Messianic movement’s *raison d’etres* is the belief that one cannot truly understand the Scriptures without understanding them within their original Jewish context. That is to say, since the Lord Yeshua and all His first disciples and apostles were Jews of the first century, they lived, spoke, and wrote with Jewish idioms, using Jewish exegetical (interpretive) methods, and from within a Jewish worldview. While their writings were distributed in Greek, they nevertheless *thought* in Hebrew and Hebraisms.

However, while we take that as axiomatic, we don’t always do a good job of conveying just what it means to “think like a Jew”—in particular, a Jew of the first century, since Jewish culture (as with all other cultures) has changed somewhat over the last two millennia. In this series of articles, I am indebted to J.P. Holding, webmaster of the [Tektonics](#) website (which I mentioned in my last post), as well as to D. Thomas Lancaster, author of *The Restoration* and *King of the Jews* (both available from Beth HaMashiach’s website [here](#)).

Holding draws a number of key points of comparison [between Japanese and Biblical culture](#): Group-oriented identity and morality, an honor-based culture, a circular view of time, an emphasis on client/patron relationships, and the importance of ritual (and by extension, racial and cultural) purity. This stands in direct odds with our Western ideals of rugged individualism, guilt-based morality, linear view of time, an emphasis on free and equal friendships, an egalitarian rejection of the notion of purity in any group. That’s not to say that our culture is necessarily *wrong* on these points, but that it is so radically different from the culture the Bible was written from and to that we can very easily

misunderstand the nuances of what it is trying to say or why the Apostles made certain rulings.

The first two pieces of baggage that we must leave behind as Christians in the West is our plenty and our individualism. The fact is that we live in a truly blessed nation in a truly blessed time, on that is probably unique in history. We have plenty of food, no lack of leisure time, and (in theory, if not always in practice) an acknowledgement of “universal” rights.

Compare that to the situation of one living in the ancient world, whether Jew or Gentile: One good famine could lead to the starvation of hundreds of thousands. Only the Jews had the concept of a “weekend”—everyone else worked every day except for sporadic festivals (and many had to work even on those) just to hold down a job and make ends meet. And there were no universal rights, only the privileges afforded by belonging to various groups. Indeed, without the protection of a group, such as a family, town, nation, guild, or religion, a man had no protection at all and would swiftly find himself ruined and even dead.

Let’s take Sha’ul (Paul) for an example: On one occasion, he and his companion were flogged without a trial, and by virtue of their Roman citizenship could force the apologies of the town’s leaders (Acts 16). On another occasion, he invokes his citizenship to prevent a soldier from beating him (Acts 22:25f). Had he not had citizenship (which was not a given; one had to pay a large sum to be a full citizen, as opposed to a subject, in those days), the authorities could have scourged him without a thought.

As a result, where we have the luxury of being individualistic, concentrating on individual rights, happiness, and destiny, the ancients were collectivists, concentrating on the survival, destiny, and honor of their groups. (The importance of honor in the ancient world will be dealt with in the next part of this series.) When the High Priest sanctioned Yeshua’s death by saying, “Now consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” (John 11:50), we might think that opportunistic and cruel, but to his audience, concerned as they were with the survival of Judea rather than the survival of any one man, his words were the simplest of wisdom.

Suddenly, this puts a whole new light on the Apostles’ teaching that they would accept Gentiles as full members of the then-Jewish Messianic Community based simply on their belief in Yeshua, imposing “no other burden” than that they “abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20).

First, understand the radical nature of what they were proposing. In the ancient mind, either you were a part of the group, or you were a potentially-dangerous alien. Imagine having a neighborhood full of children who need protection, and suddenly a creepy-looking stranger moves in. Might you not watch him with a special caution, especially if you had no means to conduct a background check? That’s the kind of caution the ancients had—the survival of the community took precedence over that of outsiders. The exception to this would be if a member of the community decided to grant “guest-status” to said outsider (we’ll come back to this in another article).

If you were not born into the group, but wanted to enter it, you had to submit to living your life in every way that they did for an extended period of time to gain their trust, and then undergo a ritual which formally bound you to the group **before** they would accept you as a member and offer you the group’s protection. (This might be compared the the hazing and ritual tests many college fraternities force their members to undergo today.) This made it very difficult for God-fearers, Gentiles who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but who had not (yet, in many cases) undergone circumcision and become fully Jewish proselytes. The Jews were given special privileges by the Roman Empire: They were permitted not to work on the Sabbath, for example (though many mocked them and called them lazy for it) and to forgo Emperor-worship. God-fearers lacked that protection, and if they refused to participate in the standard pagan rites of their family, town, and/or guild, they

could wind up lacking any protection at all!

What the Apostles did was to turn that on its head: No longer did they force someone to earn, by their works, the group's acceptance and protection. Instead, they accepted as full members any Gentile who was willing to accept Yeshua as Lord and who gave up idolatry (which is what the four stipulations in Acts 15 are designed to do), granting them the immediate protection of the group—a group which they not only saw in temporal terms, but in spiritual terms as well. In the eyes of the ancients, that was an utterly absurd thing! That was precisely why there was dispute in the early Jewish Church over whether members should be circumcised before being accepted: They were afraid of losing the group's identity and of letting potential enemies in. And yet, moved by the *Ruach* (Spirit), that's exactly what the earliest believers in Yeshua did, thus demonstrating their love for their neighbors as themselves.

This is not to say that they did not expect that once within the Community, the new believers would never progress beyond simply avoiding idolatry. For example, Acts 15 says nothing about forcing new believers to honor their parents, yet Paul tells the Ephesians (the very ones to whom he had just emphasized that salvation is by faith, not by works), “Honor your father and mother; (which is the first commandment with a promise)” (Eph. 6:2). Clearly, there was an expectation of growth and keeping God's commands after entering the Community—the Apostles just didn't want the motivation for the obedience to be wrong (i.e., fear of being cast out of God's Kingdom), and they were willing to let the Spirit work on people at their own pace.

Understanding the importance and emphasis on the community, group, and/or family in the ancient's life is just the start. In the next part of this series, we'll be looking at the importance of honor to the Bible's audience.

Honor and Obligation

There are two broad categories into which the moral center of any culture can be classified: Honor-shame cultures, and guilt cultures. An excellent summary of the two can be found here: [Shame-Culture and Guilt-Culture](#).

The essential difference between the two cultures is very much along the same lines as that between a collectivist vs. an individualistic culture: In an honor-shame culture, a person's morality is defined by the group, and if one transgresses—or is even *thought* to have transgressed—that moral code by his peers, the person is shamed. In a guilt culture, such as our own, everyone is expected to have their own internal moral compass—their own conscience—and a person feels guilt when *they* believe they have violated that moral compass. If they are accused of something that they believe they have not committed, or that they believe is not wrong, the person is expected to defend themselves rather than to feel guilt or shame.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both. An honor-shame culture has the advantage that morality is not based on a person's emotional whim; however, while the desire to avoid being caught may lead a person to live the kind of life where no one would ever suspect them of dishonorable behavior, it can also lead to a cynical pragmatism, where anything is permitted as long as one doesn't get caught.

A guilt culture has the advantage that a person will try to avoid violating his conscience even in private, and would be expected to feel guilty even if not caught, but it has the disadvantage of submitting morality to the whim of the individual. “Follow your heart” is the mantra of the guilt culture, and if your heart says that there's nothing wrong with, for example, sleeping around, you should go do that guilt-free.

Holding provides the testimony of a Chinese Christian who describes growing up in just such an honor-shame culture [here](#).

The Bible is based upon and assumes knowledge of an honor-shame culture. However, it also introduces a new twist into the honor-shame culture: The realization that an omnipresent and omniscient God is watching us, and therefore we cannot escape the shame of our sins against His code. However, the response is based on shame, not guilt. When we read our own ideas of guilt and conscience back into the Scripture, we commit an anachronism and set ourselves up to misunderstand God's message to us.

For example, how many people have questioned whether six hours of agony on a cross could somehow counterbalance anyone's eternity in hell? In fact, as a result of this conundrum, many Christian authors will try to devise explanations for how Yeshua suffered an infinite amount spiritually on the cross. Such explanations are not only unnecessary, but miss the point entirely. There is a reason the Bible says that Yeshua despised not the pain of the cross, but its shame (Heb. 12:2). To quote [Holding](#):

[W]e believe that the issue can be resolved at a different level by understanding that it was not the pain, but the shame and degradation (of which, the pain, and the shedding of blood, was of course an integral part) that was the "payment" for our sins — and that this makes much better contextual sense of the doctrine coming out of an honor and shame setting . . . The issue turns now from one of quantity (amount of pain) to one of quality (honor versus shame). Jesus' divine identity made him a personal being due the highest honor by nature (what Malina and Rohrbaugh call "ascribed" honor, such as that one has by being born into a noble family) — not infinite of necessity, but the highest. . . .

So in conclusion on this tangent: The data would indicate that the primary focus of eternal punishment *is the denial of the honor accorded to those who reject God's offer of salvation*, and who bear themselves the shame and disgrace Jesus took in their stead. Therefore there is no inequality in the "suffering" — these persons have denied God His ascribed honor; they are denied in turn the honor that is given to human beings, who are created with the intent that they live forever in God's service, reigning with Christ and serving him.

They choose rather the shame and disgrace of serving their own interests; they are also shamed in accordance with their deeds (i.e., Hitler obviously has more to be "ashamed of" than, say, a robber baron). By denying their ascribed place in the collective identity of humanity, they are placed outside the boundaries, exactly as they desire to be and to the extent that their deeds demanded.

While I have posted some of the highlights of the article here, I believe that everyone should read it in its entirety, including the articles it links to. I happen to disagree with Holding on a number of issues, mostly involving eschatology, but his insights into the apologetic applications of truly understanding the culture of the Bible are extraordinarily valuable and must-reading.

Shalom.

[Common Mistranslations](#)

Let's face it: Rendering a fully accurate, nuanced translation from one language to another is a Herculean task at the best of times, even if the languages come from the same family tree; e.g., Italian to Spanish. The task is made ten times more difficult when you have to translate between two completely unrelated languages, like Koine Greek and English or (Heaven help you) Hebrew and

English. There's the constant tension between trying to translate the original author's words (which may cause shades of meaning to be lost) and their thoughts (which puts the translator in the seat of a commentator). Even doing amateur translations from Hebrew to English as practice, I've come to greatly respect the translator's job and appreciate the difficulties they face.

However, there are a number of translation errors that routinely pop up in Christian translations of the New Testament that are so obvious that even someone with absolutely no knowledge of the Greek, but using a program like e-Sword for ten minutes can pick them out. These outright errors are not ones that I've cherry-picked from one or two Bible versions, but are so ubiquitous that they might as well be universal. This seems particularly strange to me when each new version of the Bible claims in its introductory notes to attempt to be a faithful (to the best of its translator's ability) translation from the original Greek, and yet when it comes to the mistranslations that I will detail below, seem to do little more than quote or paraphrase the King James Version. I have also avoided discussing verses where there is room to debate the correct translation or some ambiguity that could lead to honest disagreement among scholars. These posts will only presents unambiguous, blatant errors.

Acts 21:20

Let me start with a passage that seems innocuous at first, but turns out to be very important. Here is how Acts 21:20 is translated by four major versions of the Bible:

KJV – And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest , brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe ; and they are all zealous of the law:

NIV - When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.

ESV – And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,

YLT – and they having heard, were glorifying the Lord. They said also to him, `Thou seest, brother, how many myriads there are of Jews who have believed, and all are zealous of the law,

The problem is that none of these are correct. The Greek word translated “thousands” here is *muriades* (μυριάδες), which means not “thousands,” but “*tens* of thousands.” If only “thousands” were intended, the word *chiliades* (χιλιάδες) would have been used instead. Each of these versions correctly translates *muriades* in Rev. 5:11. (Young's Literal Translation realizes the fallacy of translating the word as “thousands,” but dodges the point by transliterating *muriades* rather than properly translating it.)

So why, if the word so obviously means “tens of thousands” why do Christian translations consistently underplay the number of Jewish believers in the First Century by a whole order of magnitude? The answer is that the real number tends to undermine the standard Christian narrative about the New Testament, that “the Jews rejected Jesus, but the Gentiles accepted him.”

There are two ways of looking at this passage: Either Jacob (and the mistranslation of a perfectly good Jewish name into the very English “James” probably deserves its own article) and the elders are referring to the nominal population of Jerusalem and the surrounding villages, or they are referring to the numbers of believers who had made their pilgrimage for Shavuot.¹ If the former, then we've got a

¹ While it is not a given that the events of Acts 21:20-23:11 took place on Shavuot (Pentecost), we do know that Paul had been racing to arrive in Jerusalem in time for the Feast (Acts 20:16), so it is not too much a stretch to suppose that he either arrived on time or soon enough thereafter that many of the pilgrims still remained. (See also Acts 2:9-11, which details the far reaches of the world from which Jews would travel to make their pilgrimage.)

real problem, since Jerusalem had a nominal population of 60-80,000 during the 1st Century²—implying that a *minimum* of a quarter of its population believed in Yeshua. That would be devastating for the Christian narrative that “the Jews” rejected Yeshua, since if over a quarter of Jerusalem’s population believed in Him, this would far outstrip the percentages of Gentiles who came to believe anywhere else in the world.

However, it seems unlikely that Jacob was referring to Jerusalem’s nominal Messianic population, given that this took place during a pilgrimage feast³: Why would he not include the pilgrims in his number? This second option is equally devastating, but for a different reason. While it “thins the soup” somewhat, we note that the sacred Scriptures report to us that *all* of these tens of thousands of Jews from all over the world were *zealous* for the Torah.

It is sometimes assumed by those not familiar with Jewish circles that all Jews are as zealous for the Torah and keep it as strictly as the Orthodox (the successors to the Pharisees) do. Nothing could be further from the truth! The Orthodox today represent only 7% of the Jewish people. The remaining 93% is made up of Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and outright secular Jews. Likewise in the 1st Century, a Jew might be a Pharisee or an Essene, zealous for keeping the Torah according to the strictest possible standard, but in the Diaspora, he was far more likely to be a Hellenist, far more lax in both the Torah and the traditions and in most things following the ways of the Greeks. Indeed, as close-by as Galilee, the standards for keeping the Torah and the zealousness for its minutiae were far less than in Judea.⁴

This means that among Yeshua’s Jewish disciples, the level of Torah-observance went *up*, not down. They did not see the Law as something that they needed an escape from or which had been “fulfilled” by the Messiah so that they could now live as Gentiles. On the contrary, the coming of the Son of David instilled in them an even greater love and zealousness for the Torah. In short, the Jews of the 1st Century who became Nazarenes repented back to the Torah, not away from it. When we realize that they were not a tiny remnant, but perhaps in the neighborhood of 10% of the Jewish people, we have to ask a very simple, and devastating, question: What happened to all of these myriads of Jewish believers who were zealous for the Torah?

(Sadly, the answer is that they were persecuted and driven underground not only by the Jewish community, [but by the Church as well](#).)

When Paul returns to Jerusalem after many years abroad, he immediately reports in to Jacob, Yeshua’s brother, and the other elders. They are overjoyed to find out that his mission was so successful: In the council related in chapter 15, they had discovered in the prophecies that Gentile inclusion was a necessary prerequisite for the Messiah to return and restore the Davidic monarchy. But, they explained, there was a problem. A big one. “You see, brother, how many tens of thousands there are among the Jews (or Judeans) of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Torah. They have been informed about you, that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake [the Torah of] Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children neither to walk after the customs”

2 Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (JNTP, 1988), p. 301., citing pp. 10-15 in *Biblical Archeology Review* 4:2 (1978)

3 Paul had been in haste to arrive in Jerusalem in time for Shavuot (Pentecost; Acts 20:16). Technically, the narrative does not tell us whether he made it on time, though I tend to presume that he did. However, whether he arrived on time or shortly after the Feast ended, it is likely that the numbers of Jewish disciples of Yeshua would have remained elevated for some time after the Feast (as in Acts 4-6, in which provision had to be made for the many Greek-speaking, and hence foreign, Jews who remained in Jerusalem to receive instruction after that first, Spirit-filled Shavuot).

4 See Stephen M. Wylen, *Jews in the Time of Jesus* (Paulist Press, 1995), p. 64

(vv.:20-21). How ironic that Paul's opponents in the 1st Century and his devotees in the nineteen centuries since make the same accusation!

What is their solution? "We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them, and purify yourself with them, and pay their expenses for them, that they may shave their heads. Then all will know that there is no truth in the things that they have been informed about you, but that you yourself also walk keeping the Torah" (vv. 23-24). Paul agrees to their proposal (v. 26). Since the whole point of the endeavor is to show Paul's continued fidelity to the Torah, and since there is only one vow in Scripture that has anything to do with shaving the head, this must be a Nazrite vow (Num. 6:18).

Christian authors are understandably uncomfortable with this passage and its implications. For example, Adam Clarke remarks,

Had they done this in order to acquire justification through the law, Paul could not have assisted them in any measure with a clear conscience; but, as he did assist them, it is a proof that they had not taken this vow on them for this purpose. . . Besides, God had not yet fully shown that the law was abolished, as has already been remarked: he tolerated it till the time that the iniquity of the Jews was filled up; and then, by the destruction of Jerusalem, he swept every rite and ceremony of the Jewish law away, with the besom of destruction.

Matthew Henry in his *Concise Commentary* goes much farther, even accusing Paul and Jacob of sinning!

The apostles were not free from blame in all they did; and it would be hard to defend Paul from the charge of giving way too much in this matter. It is vain to attempt to court the favour of zealots, or bigots to a party. This compliance of Paul did not answer, for the very thing by which he hoped to pacify the Jews, provoked them, and brought him into trouble. But the all-wise God overruled both their advice and Paul's compliance with it, to serve a better purpose than was intended.

Both authors (and others that we could cite) miss the question that should drive our understanding of this event: Why exactly did Jacob and the elders choose a Nazrite vow as proof of Paul's fidelity? Surely his enemies would simply say, as some Christians do, that Paul was simply making a show in order to placate them!

The answer is deceptively simple: It was because Paul had already taken a Nazrite vow on his own, while traveling among the Gentiles, before he ever knew that there was a problem back home. In Acts 18:18, Luke suddenly mentions, in an almost off-hand way, in the middle of his travelogue, "He (Paul) shaved his head in Cenchreae, for he had a vow." Since Paul had taken his vow while traveling, completing his vow under Jewish law and helping four other Jewish disciples of Yeshua to complete theirs' would be the perfect refutation of his enemies' accusations. Paul had actually returned to Jerusalem with the intent of completing his vow: "Now after some years, I came to bring gifts for the needy to my nation, and offerings" (Acts 24:17). The word translated "offerings" in this verse (*prosphoras*) always refers to a sacrificial offering—such as the three animal sacrifices, grain offering, and wine oblation required to complete the Nazrite vow (Num. 6:14-15). By agreeing to help four other Nazrites, Paul had actually agreed to pay for a total of *fifteen* sacrificial animals. One hopes he was able to get a bulk discount.

Of course, due to the false rumor that Paul had brought Gentiles into the Holy Place (Acts 21:28), Paul was attacked and arrested, and was never able to complete his own vow. He evidently remained under it until his death. This may be why he had to persuade Timothy to "Be no longer a drinker of water only, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities" (1Ti. 5:23).

Jewish disciples were extraordinarily dedicated to their rabbis, even to the point of superseding their relationships with their own parents, and we see hints of just such a relationship in Paul's letters (1Ti. 1:2, 18; 2Ti. 1:2, 2:1). It is very likely that Timothy, without taking a formal vow, had decided that as long as Paul was constrained from drinking wine (Num. 6:4), he would not drink wine either, even to the detriment of his own health. This again proves the dedication Paul had to the Torah. A modern Christian would likely decide that God's grace permitted him to break his vow due to the unforeseen circumstances that had waylaid Paul, but to the Apostle to the Gentiles, such a flagrant and deliberate breach of the Torah's commandment was unthinkable.

When both properly translated and understood, Acts 21 provides such a rebuke to Christian attacks on Jews keeping the Torah that it provokes an almost panicked reaction from some Christian commentators—who are forced to side with Paul's enemies when they claim that he was indeed teaching Jews to forsake the Torah of Moses, not to circumcise our sons, and not to keep our traditions. But there's a terrible arrogance in the claim that those from the same culture and same time as the Messiah himself—many of whom heard his teaching with their own ears and saw his example with their own eyes—somehow misunderstood everything he had taught them.

The Book of Hebrews

The book of Hebrews has long been interpreted to be a kind of Galatians to the Jews, warning Jewish Christians not to go “back” to the religion of Judaism. For example, Albert Barnes writes in the introduction to his commentary,

The general purpose of this Epistle is, to preserve those to whom it was sent from the danger of apostasy. Their danger on this subject did not arise so much from persecution, as from the circumstances that were fitted to attract them again to the Jewish religion. . . . It was that of being affected by considerations like these, and of relapsing again into the religion of their fathers, and of apostatizing from the gospel; and it was a danger which beset no other part of the Christian world.⁵

Likewise, Matthew Henry's famous commentary introduces this book:

As to the scope and design of this epistle, it is very evident that it was clearly to inform the minds, and strongly to confirm the judgment, of the Hebrews in the transcendent excellency of the gospel above the law, and so to take them off from the ceremonies of the law, to which they were so wedded, of which they were so fond, that they even doted on them, and those of them who were Christians retained too much of the old leaven, and needed to be purged from it. The design of this epistle was to persuade and press the believing Hebrews to a constant adherence to the Christian faith, and perseverance in it, notwithstanding all the sufferings they might meet with in so doing.⁶

Indeed, nearly every Christian commentary assumes that Hebrews is a warning to Jewish Christians against keeping the Torah that defines what is that makes us Jewish. However, when we properly interpret two key verses, the whole argument comes apart.

Hebrews 4:9

KJV – There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.

⁵ *Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible*, introduction to the Book of Hebrews

⁶ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, introduction to Hebrews

NIV - There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God;

ESV – So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,

YLT – there doth remain, then, a sabbatic rest to the people of God,

The King James Version is the worse offender here, but while modern translations draw closer to the true meaning of this verse, they still miss the mark. The word commonly translated as “rest” or “Sabbath rest” is *sabbatismos* (σαββατισμος). Thayer’s Lexicon notes that the correct translation is “a keeping sabbath.” Likewise, Barnes’ writes in his Notes on this verse,

It properly means “a keeping Sabbath” from σαββατίζω *sabbatizō* – “to keep Sabbath.”

This word, not used in the New Testament, occurs frequently in the Septuagint; Exo. 16:30; Lev. 23:32; Lev. 26:35; 2Ch. 36:21; and in 3 Esdr. 1:58; 2 Macc. 6:6.

Indeed? If the meaning of the word is so plain, why obscure it behind the phrase, “Sabbath rest,” suggesting (as indeed many commentaries take it) that this rest is either optional, or else refers to a future “rest” after the return of Messiah (either the eternal state or the Millennium, depending on your eschatology)?

It is not difficult to understand. For at least nineteen centuries, after all, Christian doctrine has stated that since the seventh-day Sabbath is (allegedly) not commanded in the New Testament, then either it has been set aside as part of the old law or else has been superseded by a new sabbath given on the first day of the week in honor of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. If the correct translation of this passage were given, that argument would fall apart.

Here is how we would understand the passage if it were rendered correctly:

For if Joshua [Yeshua] had given them rest, he would not have spoken of another day [of rest] after that [in Psalm 95:7-11]. So there remains a Sabbath to keep (lit. ‘Sabbath-keeping’) for the people of God, for the one who has entered into [Messiah's] rest also rests (aorist tense) from his works as God did from his (Heb. 4:8-10) . . . For he has said elsewhere concerning the seventh [day], “And God rested on the seventh day from all of his works” (v. 4, quoting Gen. 2:2) . . . Therefore let us be diligent to enter that [Sabbath] rest [of the seventh day], so that no one will fall through the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 4:11).

As I noted in [Mistranslation Pet Peeves and the ISV](#), I actually got in touch with Dr. William Welty on this one. He agreed, reluctantly, and told me that the ISV would be amended to read, “There remains, therefore, a Sabbath rest for the people of God to keep . . .”

Now, does this mean that Christians of Gentile birth who fail to keep the Sabbath are under the condemnation of God as those who fell in the wilderness were (as we might suppose from the overall argument of Hebrews chapter 3-4)? Not necessarily. After all, Hebrews was written to, well, *the Hebrews*, those born and circumcised as Jews, not to Gentiles like the book of Galatians. While there is a Divine *invitation* for those Gentiles who wish to draw near to Israel and participate in her Sabbaths and sacrifices (Isa. 56:3, 6-7, quoted in Mat. 21:13, Mark 11:17, and Luke 19:46), there is also an argument to be made that certain commandments, like the Sabbath, are “signs” and cultural markers distinct to Israel (Exo. 31:13). Such commandments, many argue, are not and have never been required for Gentile Christians.

However, regardless of one’s stance on the “Jewish” commandments, the correct translation of Hebrews 4:9 makes it clear that there is no New Testament warrant for forbidding Jewish disciples of a Jewish Messiah from keeping the Sabbath, which is sadly how the Christian Church has interpreted this

book for literally thousands of years.

Let us move on to the second example.

Hebrews 7:12

KJV – For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.

NIV - For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also.

ESV – For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

YLT - for the priesthood being changed, of necessity also, of the law a change doth come,

While I fault the King James translators for getting this passage wrong, I believe that the ongoing propagation of the error that I will explain below has less to do with a conspiracy to change the Bible than with simple bias. After all, all Christians know, or think they know, that it is an obvious truth that the Law was changed with the coming of Christ. I've actually had some that I've engaged claim that to deny a change in the Law, which is to say the Torah, is tantamount to denying the work of Christ on the Cross.

However, regardless of what theological implications about the Law that one draws out of the Messiah's sacrifice, that's not what the passage actually says. The key words translated "changed" and "change" are *metatithemenes* (μετατιθεμενης) and *metathesis* (μεταθεσις). Both of these words indicate a transference, a change of place or location, not an alteration in an existing body or the switching out of one for another.

Different conjugations of both words are together by the author of Hebrews later in the book: "By faith Enoch was taken up (lit. "translated," *metatethe* / μετατεθη) so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken ("translated," *metatheseus* / μεταθεσεως) him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God" (Heb. 11:5, ESV). *Metathesis* is further used in Heb. 12:27 to denote a removal of those things which can be shaken (as in, moved, not destroyed) to make way for those things which cannot. In addition, *metatithemi* is used to indicate a transference of place in Acts 7:16 (Jacob's bones to Shechem), and a transference from the metaphysical "position" of true doctrine to a position falsehood in Gal. 1:6 and Jude 1:4.

So what's the difference? The translation as it stands in nearly all versions of the Bible implies that the Torah itself has been either severely altered or else swapped out for another law. This idea is untenable for several reasons. First and foremost, Yeshua himself claimed that he had not come to abolish the Torah, but to "fill" it—that is, to demonstrate its full measure and meaning (Mat. 5:17-19).⁷ Secondly, the Torah itself states that one cannot add to or take away from its commandments (Deu. 12:32). It goes so far as to state that anyone who attempts to change it, to "seduce you out of the way the LORD your God has commanded you to walk," no matter what signs or miracles they perform, is *de facto* a false prophet (ibid., 13:1-5).

⁷ Compare to Gal. 5:14, "For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This obviously cannot mean that if I love my neighbor as myself just once I have fulfilled the Law so as to see its mission fulfilled and it set aside—and then can punch him in the face and steal his wallet. Rather, Paul clearly intends for us to understand "fulfilling" the Law by love to our neighbor as an ongoing act. In the same way, Yeshua "fulfilled" (lit. 'made completely full') the Torah by demonstrating its full meaning. Since he insists that this fulfillment does not "abolish" the Law in any way, and even goes on to insist that one should keep and teach even the least commandments, we must understand his use of the term to be in agreement with Paul: While the Messiah certainly fulfilled the Torah to a degree that no other man ever could, this does not release us from the obligation to keep the commandments (cf. John 14:15, 1Jn. 5:3).

But moreover, even Hebrews itself mandates against such an interpretation. Just two verses after the verse in question (Heb. 7:14), the book reads, “For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.” If the Torah were really radically altered, or changed out for another law, why would this matter at all? Only on the context of the Torah still having the full weight of God’s authority does the author’s argument make any sense at all.

Understanding the Point of Hebrews

So what, then, is the point of the passage? Simply this: Hebrews was written at a time when the Temple still stood, but Yeshua’s followers knew by his own word that it was soon to fall (Mat. 24:2, Luke 21:6)—and it was not difficult for them to infer that this second destruction would last far longer than the seventy years of the first (see Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, and 28). To a Christian, this seems like no big deal, but to the early Jewish disciples, it was an almost inconceivable thought. We know that they were zealous for the Torah ([Acts 21:20](#)) and that many of them were even Pharisees (Acts 15:6, 23:6). To an observant Jew, the whole Torah is effectively one commandment (cf. Rom. 7:9-12); how then could they continue to keep the Torah if whole segments were about to be rendered impossible to observe by the coming judgment on Jerusalem?

The entire book of Hebrews was written to answer that question. In short, its answer is thus: The coming destruction of the Temple was anticipated, and the prophets, David in particular, foresaw a coming Anointed One who would be like Melchizedek, both a priest and a king. However, since this Messiah is, as prophesied, of the tribe of Judah, he could not possibly serve in the earthly Temple / Tabernacle, since that is reserved to the Levites (Heb. 7:14). However, even in the Torah it is made clear that the earthly Tabernacle was only a copy of a Heavenly reality. Therefore, to fulfill both Psalm 110 and keep the Torah, this High Priest of Judah serves in the Heavenly throne room—and he does so forever, having offered a perfect sacrifice that encompasses and surpasses all of the previous sacrifices!

Therefore, Hebrews’ author argues from logic, since there is a transference of the High Priesthood from Levi to Judah, there must be a corresponding transference in law (not “the” Law as commonly translated) as well. Since the author has appealed to logic, we must approach this logically as well: This is not to say that every commandment has been set aside by virtue of being transferred into the Heavenly realm. One cannot claim, for example, that since the Law has been transferred, adultery against one’s earthly wife is okay as long as one does not commit spiritual adultery against God!

Nor can one simply claim, as Christians are wont to do, that the “ceremonial” Law is what has been transferred, leaving us only the “moral” Law to follow. Quite aside from the fact that one cannot so easily separate the two (e.g., Is giving one’s servant the Sabbath off moral, or merely ceremonial?), as we have seen from the proper interpretation of Hebrews 4:9, there still remains a Sabbath for the people of God to keep—and therefore there still remain certain ceremonial observances for the disciples of the Messiah Yeshua that are not directly connected to the Temple sacrificial service.

To put it another way, since the author of Hebrews is focused on the “law” (Gr. *nomos*) of the Temple’s sacrificial service, we must limit our interpretation of just what “law” has been transferred along with Yeshua into the Heavenly Tabernacle to the Temple’s sacrificial service as well.

Many will object to limiting the language of Hebrews in this way. However, the logic is eminently sound—and is not restricted to the musings of Messianics. For example, John Calvin writes of Hebrews 7:12,

By the word Law, we understand what peculiarly belonged to Moses; for the Law contains the rule of life, and the gratuitous covenant of life; and in it we find everywhere many

remarkable sentences by which we are instructed as to faith, and as to the fear of God. None of these were abolished by Christ, but only that part which regarded the ancient priesthood.⁸

Simply by letting these two key passages speak for themselves as the plain Greek demands, we find that the book of Hebrews teaches almost precisely the opposite of what most Christians believe it to. Far from telling Jews not to “return” to their old faith, it actually provides the Scriptural and logical rationale for a post-temple Messianic Judaism.

Galatians 2:15-16

First, off-topic: Thank you to everyone who has sent words and prayers of support. The family is saddened for our own loss, but very much at peace with my grandmother’s passing. Now that I’ve had a bit of down-time, I’m looking forward to getting back into the swing of things.

Galatians is often a challenging book to deal with from a Messianic perspective, particularly for those of Gentile birth who find themselves loving the Torah and its cultural commandments such as Sabbath, the Feasts, etc. As a result, Galatians is probably the most marked-up book in my wide-margin Bible, surpassing even Revelation in terms of sheer density of the notes.

It turns out that many of the problems Galatians would appear to present for Messianic Judaism are actually the result of one mistranslation and a lack of transparency in the translation of a certain word. We’ll start with the mistranslation, which appears in Gal. 2:15-16:

KJV - We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

NIV – We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

ESV – We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

YLT - [W]e by nature Jews, and not sinners of the nations, having known also that a man is not declared righteous by works of law, if not through the faith of Jesus Christ, also we in Christ Jesus did believe, that we might be declared righteous by the faith of Christ, and not by works of law, wherefore declared righteous by works of law shall be no flesh.’

My first nit to pick is less a mistranslation than an interpolation in the Alexandrian text of the Greek word *de* (“and, or, but”) which is picked up on by the ESV, ASV, NASB, CSB, and several other translations (sadly, including the Complete Jewish Bible) which turns the straightforward statement, “We Jews . . . know that a man is not declared righteous by the works of the law” into a statement of comical surprise: “We are Jews . . . and yet we still somehow know that a man is not declared righteous

⁸ John Calvin’s *Commentary* to Hebrews 7:12

by the works of the law!” Only someone unfamiliar with the teachings of Judaism would think it surprising that a Jew would understand that the “works of law” (which we will explain in a minute) do not have the power to make one righteous before God.

The other problems in this passage (of which YLT does manage to escape from nearly all of them) are as follows:

1. Rendering *ean me* (εαν μη, “if not” or “unless”) as “but,” in the sense of “in opposition to.”
2. Rendering *pisteus Iesou Christou* (πιστεωσιησου χριστου) as “faith in Jesus Christ” when the preposition *en* (“in”) is entirely missing.
3. Rendering *ergun nomou* (εργων νομου) as “works of *the* law” instead of “works of law” when there is no definite article (“the”) in the original Greek.

Let’s break down the errors and look at how rendering them correctly would change the meaning of this passage.

“If not” vs. “But”

The Greek phrase *ean me* (εαν μη) is a very common one, appearing 49 times in 48 verses in the NT. It literally means “if not,” rather than “but”—that is, it sets up a complimentary statement, not a direct contrast. For just a few examples:

Mat. 5:20 – For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Therefore, if your righteousness surpasses the scribes and Pharisees, you will enter the kingdom of heaven.)

Mark 4:22 – For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed. (Therefore, if something is hidden, it will be revealed.)

Rom. 10:15 – How will they preach unless they are sent? (Therefore, if they are sent, they will preach.)

1Co. 8:8 – We are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do.

The *ean me* in Galatians serves the same purpose: “A man is not justified by works of law if not by the faith of Yeshua the Messiah,” but therefore may be justified—that is, declared righteous in the heavenly court—by works of law *through* the faith of Yeshua the Messiah. The common mistranslation sets these “works of law” in opposition to the faith, whereas the real meaning of the passage is that the works of law could not save us *without* the enduring faith of Messiah.

De Boer sheds some light on why so many translators render *ean me* as “but” instead of the more literal “if not”:

With this meaning the conjunction could be taken to imply that someone is not justified as a result of works of the law *unless* by way of “the faith of Jesus Christ.” In other words, “the faith of Jesus Christ” is compatible with, or complements, works of the law in the matter of justification. Given. v. 16c, where works of the law and the faith of Christ are regarded as mutually exclusive in the matter of justification, *ean me* must mean “but” for Paul himself, despite the pattern of his usage elsewhere (so most interpreters). . . In v. 16a, then, Paul is apparently appealing to a formula stemming from Christian Jews in which “works of the law” and “the faith of Jesus Christ” were regarded as compatible and complementary. Christian Jews, including the new preachers in Galatia, would have understood the ambiguous *ean me* as exceptive.⁹

9 Martinus C. De Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), p. 144

As well they should have, since Paul and Jacob both denied that Paul was teaching Jews among the nations “to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs” (Acts 21:21, [as detailed earlier](#)). But I fail to see why we should interpret the latter half of Gal. 2:16 in such a way as to contradict the plain meaning of the first half. In fact, there is no contradiction at all: Paul is saying that the works of law will not justify one in the heavenly court unless by the “faith of Yeshua” (which we will come to in a moment); therefore, he and Peter (“we”) have put their faith in Yeshua so that they might be justified by Yeshua’s faith (or faithfulness) rather than trusting (only) in their own works of law. While the emphasis is certainly on trusting in Yeshua, Paul is not saying that the works of law are bad or in opposition to the faith of Yeshua, only that they have no power in and of themselves to save.

But what exactly does “faith of Messiah” (or, if you prefer, “faith of Christ”) mean? The root word translated “faith” from the Greek is *pistis*. This word embodies just why the translator’s task is so difficult, because there is no one word in the English language that encompasses it. To give an idea of the breadth of meaning inherent in the word *pistis*, here are some excerpts from David M. Hay’s paper on the subject:¹⁰

Pagan writers commonly use *pistis* to mean “assurance” or “pledge” in the sense of a guarantee creating the possibility for trust regarding the truth of a statement or reliability of a promise. . . (p. 461) We may begin our investigation by noting that more than half of all Philo’s uses of *pistis* give it the sense of “evidence.” Closely related is his use of the term to mean “pledge.” I understand the latter English word to imply a desire on the part of the person giving the pledge to encourage confidence about some matter, ordinarily a promise about the future, in the mind of another individual. . . (p. 464f) Among the 195 occurrences of *pistis* in Josephus . . . we find 78 occurrences (40 percent) that may fairly be described as giving the term the sense of “objective evidence on which faith may be based” (p. 468, 469).

One might speak of sense data in general or of a particular empirical observation constituting *pistis* in the sense of “evidence”. . . Lawyers describe eyewitness reports as “conclusive proof” of their assertions . . . In the LXX, which uses *pistis* fifty-seven times, the “evidence” sense is generally absent. However, 2 Esdr. 20:1 (Neh. 10:1) uses the term to denote a written commitment made by Jewish leaders: “And regarding all these circumstances we make a firm covenant (δῶταθεμεταθασπιστιν, translating כרתים אמנה) and write it, and our leaders, Levis, and priests set their seal to it.” . . . (p. 461, 462)

Pistis is used to mean “confidence” (in men) in Ep. Arist. 37 and religious “faith” (or “loyalty”) in T. Levi 8:2 and T. Asher 7:7. In Sib. Or. 3:74, 584-85 and 5:285 it means “faith” or “trust” oriented toward either Beliar or God. (p. 462)

From his survey of the use of the word *pistis*, Hays comes to the conclusion:

My proposal for exegesis of Paul is that we should understand that the background for this “ground of faith” sense of the term lies in the widespread contemporary use of *pistis* to mean “pledge” or “evidence.” . . Jesus is a pledge or assurance from God which makes human faith possible. (p. 472) . . . Nowhere does the apostles plainly speak of Jesus as believing, trusting, or displaying *pistis* as “faithfulness.” Abraham, not Jesus, is held up as a model or precursor for Christians believers (Rom. 4:12, 24). (p. 474)

10 David M. Hay, “Pistis as ‘Ground for Faith’ in Hellenized Judaism and Paul,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 461-476, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3267114>

J.P. Holding, on the other hand, follows David A. deSilva's *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* in focusing on *pistis* as meaning both forensic evidence and a response of faithfulness:¹¹

[N]ote that in very few cases is this form of *pistis*, as meaning a proof, in view. The meaning does give us a clue as to the nature of other meanings. It is often used as a noun to refer to the Christian "faith" as a set of convictions. In far many more cases the meaning intended is in the sense of *faithfulness*, or *loyalty* as owed to one in whom one is embedded for service (in this case, the body of Christ).

This now leads to an expansion of the *pistis* concept as derived from deSilva. As deSilva shows, the relationship between the believer and God is framed in terms of an ancient *client-patron relationship*. As God's "clients" to whom he has shown unmerited favor (grace), our response should be, as Malina and Neyrey frame it, a "constant awareness" of prescribed duties toward those in whom we are indebted (God) and the group in which we are embedded (God's kin group, the body of Christ).

This "constant awareness" is the expression of our faithfulness of loyalty — in other words, this is our *pistis*, or faith. "Faith" is not a feeling, but our pledge to trust, and be reliable servants to, our patron (God), who has provided us with tangible gifts (Christ) and proof thereby of His own reliability.

There are some further considerations, with specific reference to the modern idea of a "personal relationship with Jesus" that is the modern staple of evangelism.

Given the above data, the actual description that fits an authentic faith is not a *personal* relationship, but a *patronal* relationship. Modern sentiments that call Jesus our "friend" and suppose that we ought to talk to God as to our best buddy are, in this context, clearly misplaced.

Paul himself uses at least two definitions of *pistis* in Galatians: He refers to Abraham's "faith" that Hashem would give him a son despite his advanced age in 3:6, but also quotes Hab. 2:4 in Gal. 3:22. This passage from Habbakuk is usually rendered, "The just shall live by faith," but in the original Hebrew actually means, "The righteous shall live by *his faithfulness*" (Heb. *b'emunato*, באמונתו), a loyalty that stood in contrast with the almost entirely faithless nation to whom Habakkuk spoke.

So when Paul speaks of the "*pistis* of Messiah," which definition makes the most sense? Is he saying Messiah had faith in God in the "belief" sense? While such a claim isn't exactly contrary to Scripture, it is far too weak to be complimentary of Yeshua. Rather, I would argue that while Hays is correct that Paul is setting forth Yeshua as the Holy One's pledge—the forensic evidence of God's grace, if you will—Paul's focus here is on Yeshua as the faithful minister of Hashem's charge, faithful even unto death, and that in the most humiliating manner the Roman world could provide: that of the cross.

What this comes all down to is that salvation is dependent on not simply "faith" as it is popularly conceived, but on four separate elements:

1. Messiah's faithfulness to both Hashem and his people Israel (and all who are grafted into Israel)
2. Messiah as the forensic demonstration of Hashem's grace; Yeshua's death being the "pledge" or

11 <http://tektonics.org/whatis/whatfaith.html>

downpayment on Hashem's salvation

3. Our faith, in the sense of "trust," in Hashem's promise, just as Abraham trusted Hashem's promise and was accounted righteous as a result.
4. Our faithfulness, our loyalty as a client to our patron, as a vassal to our King. This faithfulness is born from our trust, which we invest because of Yeshua's faithfulness serving as Hashem's pledge, but is ultimately empowered by the Spirit—which is why Paul says to the Ephesians (2:8f), "For by grace you have been saved through faith(fulness); and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Recognizing the unbreakable connection between faith and faithfulness in our response to Hashem's grace actually clarifies a number of Biblical difficulties. For example, if we are saved by faith apart from works (as the phrase is commonly understood), then why does Yeshua say,

"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.' . . . Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand." (Mat. 7:22-23, 26)?

And why does Jacob (James) insist that "faith without works is dead" (Jas. 2:17)? Don't such statements contradict the "true gospel of grace" preached by Paul? Attempts to reconcile such passages invariably stumble over an inability to define what a "true" faith is and should look like.

However, when we understand that "faith" and "faithfulness" are the same word, all such difficulties disappear. After all, one who truly trusts Hashem and his Messiah must, as a natural fruit, be faithful to him—and such faithfulness will be reflected in one's works. It is not that works save, but that works are the fruit of a salvation born of both faith and faithfulness.

But lest we fall into a modern form of legalism, let's be clear: Our faithfulness and loyalty is to a particular *King*, not a set of rules or even a set of creeds.

Recognizing this should give Messianics and Christians a feeling of freedom to test out even the most ancient creeds of our peoples in order to see if they are true and what their ramifications are without a fear that doing so will somehow lose them their salvation (or, if a Calvinist, somehow prove that they were never among the elect). After all, if one's salvation is rooted in a Person instead of a creed, testing all creeds to see if they are good are a proof of a love for and fidelity towards that Person rather than evidence that one is "losing faith" by one's questions.

On the other hand, recognizing the dual nature of *pistis* is a solemn warning against relying on a profession of faith and ritual baptism (Christianity's own "works of law") undertaken when one was young if one has since fallen away from walking with the Lord. Loyalty to the King *will* result in fruit—and if it does not, then the lack of an effect puts the supposed cause in doubt.

Is it possible to lose one's salvation? Yes, but not by committing one's 491st sin of the day. But if "those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away" from both faith and faithfulness to their King, "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame" (Heb. 6:6).

Putting the “the” in “the Law”

Does it look like too many “the’s” in that heading to you? It turns out that there are way too many “the’s” in the translations of Paul’s work too. Just to start with, there’s no “the” in “works of the law” in Gal. 2:16; the actual phrase is *ergun nomou* (εργων νομου), “works of law,” without the definite article.

I will be up-front and point out that the definite article is a slightly slippery animal in the Greek. While having a “the” (*ho, tou, tu*, etc., depending on the conjugation of the noun it’s attached to) always indicates the definite article, just because it’s missing doesn’t mean that it isn’t implied. So, for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses will attempt to claim that the correct rendering of John 1:1 should be, “In the beginning, the Word was with God (τον θεον, lit. “the God”) and the Word was [a] god (θεος, without the definite article). They have to imply the indefinite article “a” in “a god” because the Greek actually doesn’t have the equivalent.

The argument falls apart if one reads just a few verses later: “There was a man sent from God (θεου, again missing the definite article) whose name was John” (v.6). Should this be rendered “there was a man sent from *a* god whose name was John”? Of course not.

Clearly there is no necessity for “the” to appear before “God” to refer to the Eternal One. And doubtless most translators of the Greek would argue the same in the case of the missing “the” in “works of law”—as in the case of *Theos*, we know which law is being referenced, so what does it matter?

It matters because unlike *Theos*, the non-Pauline writers are very consistent in putting “the” before “law” (ὁ νομος) when they refer to the Torah, and very consistent in leaving it out when they are referring to a different law. The term “law” (*nomos*) appears 51 times in the Gospel accounts and Acts. On all but 5 occasions, it refers to the Torah and is prefaced with the definite article, “*the* Law.” Of the remaining five, two refer to the law of the Jews in the sense of their judicial authority (Acts 18:15 & 24:6) and once Paul is using it to refer to “our fathers’ law,” meaning both the Torah and the traditions which would later be codified in the Mishneh (Acts 22:3). The other two references in Luke 2:23-24 do admittedly refer to the Torah; however, they are immediately preceded in v. 22 by the characteristic “the Law” (*ton nomon*) and both refer to “[the] law of [the] Lord” (*nomu kuriou*). Either Luke believed this enough to make it very clear that he meant “the Law” or he means for us to read vv. 23-24 as telling us that Mary and Joseph were diligent in fulfilling both “the Law” and individual “ordinance[s] of the Lord.” Either way, we can see an utterly strict consistency in identifying the Torah as “*the* Law.”

That consistency vanishes when we come to the letters of Paul. Sometimes Paul says “the Law,” but very often he instead simply says “law.” Translators, assuming that they know what he means by *nomos*, simply append the “the” to it without thinking.

And this is the matter I spoke of when I said earlier that my complaint is about a lack of transparency in the translation. Certain translations, like the KJV, NKJV, and NASB, make a point of italicizing words that the translators have added in for the sake of making the sentence more readable in the English. For example, in Paul’s rebuke of Peter in Gal. 2:14b, the NASB renders it, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles, and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” The translator has added the words “*is it that*” in order to make the sentence flow properly in the English, but has italicized them to give his gloss of the Greek transparency for those who want to dig in deeper. I wholeheartedly appreciate this practice, and consider dropping it to be one of the few flaws in the ESV over the NASB.

However, while adding in the definite article to the word “law,” none of the aforementioned translations italicize it to alert the reader that they have done so. Though I am sure that the translators truly believe that the “the” is implied, by failing to note their interpolation into the text, they have robbed their readers of the opportunity to realize that there is a pattern to when Paul says “the Law”

and when he simply says “law.” Indeed, by only selectively noting interpolations in the text, they actually give a more false impression than those translations that don’t bother with the italics at all.

Earlier, we noted how the context of the word “law” in Hebrews 7:12 demanded that we understand it to mean a particular subset or aspect of the Torah rather than the whole Torah. What I did not emphasize then, but will do so now, is that the word “the” in Heb. 7:12’s “the law” is as interpolated as it is in Gal. 2:16—it doesn’t say “the Law” was changed but rather that there is “of necessity a transference in law (or ordinance)” in order to have a transference of the priesthood to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. In the same way, we must understand “works of law” here to refer not to the whole Torah but to a particular subset or aspect of the Torah.

To understand what Paul means by “works of law,” we need to understand the related phrase, “under law” (and not “under the law,” as it is rendered in nearly all translations) which first appears in 3:23, but is defined for us in 4:21-31. Paul begins that section with a question: “Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not listen to the Law (*ton nomon*)?” He then goes on to give an allegory (or midrash) about Sarah and Hagar, which he explains as meaning (v. 24), “these women are two covenants, one from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar.” Therefore, in Paul’s theology, to be “under law” means to be under the Sinaic covenant.

“Works of law” therefore are the particular aspects of the Torah’s commandments which set apart those under the Sinaic covenant, “to live as Jews” (2:14), with a special emphasis on circumcision (vv. 12, 3), but also including other ceremonial and purity commandments which set the Jew apart in the world, including the sabbaths and feasts (cf. Rom. 14:5-6, Col. 2:16).

The term “works of law” may actually have been a common one in Paul’s world. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls is one entitled, “These are some of the works of the Law (*ma’aseh haTorah*) of the Essenes,” which goes on to describe the practices of their particular sect, with a special eye to ritual and purification.¹² Indeed, there were many sects of Judaism in the 1st Century, and doubtless just as many different “works of the law.” Pity the poor Gentile trying to figure out just whose ritual he needed to follow in order to “really” enter Israel and secure a place for himself and his family in the World-to-Come! (For a long time, I thought this was the major issue behind Galatians, but more careful exegesis proved otherwise.)

Again, I’ll point out that the above conclusions are not simply those of a Messianic with an axe to grind against *sola fide*. N.T. Wright came to a similar conclusion in his own studies: “[James Dunn’s] proposal about the meaning of ‘works of the law’ in Paul – that they are not the moral works through which one gains merit but the works through which the Jew is defined over against the pagan – I regard as exactly right. It has proved itself again and again in the detailed exegesis; attempts to deny it have in my view failed.”¹³

We will return to the issue of which commandments are set up as cultural “signs” to set Israel apart at a later date, but for now what I will emphasize is that again, while Paul did not believe that these signs of the covenant had the power to save in and of themselves, he did not see them to be in opposition to the true Good News of Messiah, as the proper translation of Gal. 2:15-16 (especially seen through the lens of Acts 21) makes clear: “We Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, know that a man is not declared righteous [in Hashem’s eyes] by [ritual] works of [the covenant of] law except through the faithfulness of Messiah Yeshua. We have [therefore] believed in Messiah Yeshua so that we may be declared righteous by the faithfulness of Messiah and not by [ritual] works of [the

12 See <http://dustinmartyr.wordpress.com/2010/03/24/who-were-the-essenes-and-what-did-they-believe/> for a good, quick summary of their beliefs

13 N.T. Wright, “New Perspectives on Paul,” retrieved from http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_New_Perspectives.htm on May 26, 2013

covenant of] law, since by the [ritual] works of [the covenant of] law no flesh will be saved.”

Paul’s continued statement in v. 19 that, “Through law to law I died, that I might live to God” does not mean that Paul died to *the* Law, the Torah, but rather, “Through [really understanding the covenant of] law to [the covenant of] law I died.” Paul continued to be faithful to the strictest keeping of the Torah, but now did so through fidelity of the new covenant offered through the blood of Messiah rather than “the covenant which I [Hashem] made with their [Israel's] forefathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them” (Jer. 31:32).

So if, on the one hand, these works of law—the whole Torah of Moses, circumcision, and even the extra-Torah traditions (Acts 21:21)—were entirely compatible with trusting Yeshua as Messiah in the Jew, why does Paul seem to be so negative on Gentiles keeping them? The answer is that the Gentile disciples were being drawn away from the covenant with Messiah and depending on becoming Jewish by these “works of law” in order to be saved.

These early Christians had already turned in faith to Messiah and were cleaving to God faithfully in the face of persecution from the Imperial cult, the guilds, and even their own families. Hashem received their “vows” of faith and in turn demonstrated that he had already accepted them through Messiah by pouring out the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-47, Gal. 3:2)—and he had accepted them *as Gentiles*, not as Jewish proselytes, exactly as he had announced that he would through his servants the prophets (Isa. 11:10, 19:25, 49:6; Amos 9:11-12). However, this brought about the controversy described in Acts 15:1-6, where the Gentile Christians were being told, “That’s wonderful that you believe in God now, but if you really want to be part of the Holy People, you need to become Jewish like us.” They were being told to be “of works of law” rather than “of faith[fulness]”—that is, to depend on the ritual works that define a Jew rather than on faith in and faithfulness towards Messiah, who had already accepted them into his kingdom. They were being turned away from dependence on Messiah to dependence on Jewishness.

Does this mean that a person of Gentile birth who wishes to keep the Sabbath or the Feasts or kosher or whatever is therefore automatically putting himself “under law” and therefore outside of the covenant of grace? Not at all. Paul himself encouraged the Corinthians to keep the Passover (1Co. 5:8) and counseled tolerance between those who keep the Feasts and those who do not (Rom. 14:5-6)—both without distinguishing between Jew and Gentile. Moreover, Isa. 56:6-7 (which Yeshua himself quoted) contains a Divine invitation for Gentiles who wish to participate in the Sabbath and even participate in the Temple service. Insofar as a Gentile disciple could participate in Israel’s communal life without depending on being accepted, Paul had no objection. However, what I don’t think he ever could have anticipated was the degree to which his writings, meant to liberate the Gentiles to be able to figure out how to conform their own cultures to the framework of Scripture, would be used as a weapon to actively forbid Jewish disciples of a Jewish Messiah from continuing to live as Paul himself did—a Torah-observant Jew.

Shalom