

Basic Messianic Apologetics

by J.K. McKee posted 01 December, 2003 www.tnnonline.net

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

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

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

I suppose I must be the exception rather than the rule, because I did not fight back. I took the criticism and answered the questions I was asked based on Scripture, and in as positive and constructive a spirit as possible. My college time was a learning experience—and indeed a desert experience. If I had not been the Messianic on campus that I was, I would not be where I am today, which is hopefully trying to help instruct the Messianic community and refine the defense of our beliefs. I had a growing and maturing experience at college, but it may have not been what I had expected in my naïve days of 1999.

We Must Know What We Believe

Some of the most frequent questions I am asked from people are: Why Messianic apologetics? Why is it important?

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

Whereas Christian apologetics largely focus on issues that deal with secularists, atheists, agnostics, and those *outside* the realm of Biblical faith Messianic apologetics largely focuses on issues and theologies that deal with those *inside* the realm of Biblical faith. Much of what Messianic apologetics focuses on is defense of Messianic doctrines and lifestyle practices. For us, this would include things like understanding the Godhead in an Hebraic context, the validity of the Torah for Believers, and the understanding that the Lord is presently restoring all Israel.

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

But even so, why is it important? Should not people just read their Bibles and have the Holy Spirit reveal them the truth?

I wish it were that simple, but it is not. For centuries upon centuries people have interpreted the Scriptures in a variety of ways. The way that one person or theologian interprets, and indeed translates Scripture, is different from another. This is true of Christians and Messianics. Just as there is an entire range of Christian denominations and groups, so is there now a large range of Messianic organizations and groups.

Hopefully, each one of us who spends a quiet time each morning in prayer with the Lord, and diligently studies the Word on a consistent basis, will be shown the truth. But even so, many of us realize that there are those who do not see things the way we do. We must engage in detailed study and analysis of the Scriptures, because we know as Torah observant Messianic Believers, that there are many who do not see things the way we do.

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

We are admonished to be able to give a defense for the hope who is in us, Messiah Yeshua, and what we believe. While it may be true that we cannot answer all the questions that are asked of us, we must be diligent disciples of Yeshua and be continually searching the Word for answers. This enables us to come back and answer the questions properly—rather than get into a fight.

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

What makes Messianics different?

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

I have done my best not to find issues of contention with Christians who are not ready to hear why I do what I do and how I live. People have got to be ready to hear what you have to say and only the Spirit of God can properly prepare them. Everything must be in His timing. There are some Messianics who make an extreme issue of the “outward” commandments of the Torah and who try to draw attention *to themselves*, rather than let the Holy Spirit draw people in. As a sad consequence, there are other Messianics who choose to ignore the Biblical admonitions regarding “outward” commandments. The challenge that exists before us is how to maintain an active faith, and one that indeed does include outward observances, but at the same time is not odious to others. We must learn how to be a living witness to others by our examples, rather than standing on the corner and shouting to everyone what makes us different.

Our Heavenly Father tells us in Exodus 19:5, “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine.” The Hebrew word for “beloved treasure” (ATS) is *segulah* (סְגֻלָּה), which basically means “personal property” (*TWOT*).¹ The KJV actually says “peculiar people.” This is indeed true, because when you begin to adopt a Torah observant lifestyle and identify yourself as a part of

¹ R.D. Patterson, “סְגֻלָּה,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:617.

Israel, you will be considered peculiar. But notice that we are *not* told to be “super hyper weird.” Neither does it say that we are to be “like everyone else.”

Ultimately, what is to distinguish us from the world is our faith in Yeshua the Messiah. Many Christians rightfully want to follow the Messiah. They want to “do what Jesus did.” But how many of them think through this fully? Do they not know that Yeshua kept the Sabbath, celebrated the appointed times, and ate kosher? Do they not know that Yeshua wore a beard and *tzit-tzits*? Do they not know that Yeshua taught from the Torah? Those who are diligently seeking the Lord will eventually find all this out. But until then, there are some critiques that need to be answered.

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

Several times a year when I was in college, Christian evangelists would come to campus and hand out Bibles. But they would not hand out “Bibles,” per se, but rather copies of the New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs. You know, the pocket size editions. But they would always ask, “Sir, would you like a Bible?”

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

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

For some reason this does not seem to register with many people. And sadly, because many Christians do not have a strong foundation in the Hebrew Scriptures, their understanding of the Apostolic Scriptures is, at the least, incomplete. Consider all the times that “the Law” is spoken about in the New Testament. How many times do people misunderstand what is being said, because they have never consistently studied the Torah?

But how many of us make reverse mistakes? How many of us who study the Torah and Tanach fail to take into consideration what the Apostolic Writings say on certain matters? How many of us fail to consider many of the clarifications of Yeshua and the Apostles on things that are perhaps not as clear in the Tanach? Even more so, how many of us fail to study the New Testament so we can at least answer the arguments of those who say that our Torah study and observance are in error?

What is commonly called the “New Testament” is not the entire Bible. But at the same time, neither is the Tanach the entire Bible. They are both parts of the same inspired writings. How does the Christian saying go? *The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.* It is all one Bible. We have to be balanced in our Scripture studies and take into account the whole council of God’s Word.

Ten Commandments or Ten Suggestions?

Both Messianics and conservative Christians alike will agree that the foundational principles which should guide our lives are the Ten Commandments. These “Ten Words,” or *aseret ha’devarim* (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים) as they are called in Hebrew, were “written by the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18). As these ordinances were inscribed with the very *etzba Elohim* (אֶצְבַּע אֱלֹהִים), “the finger of God,” it makes them extremely important. Notice what Deuteronomy 9:10 says about them:

“The LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God; and on them were all the words which the LORD had spoken with you at the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.”

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

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:2-17; cf. Deuteronomy 5:6-18).

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

1. The Lord is our #1 priority.
2. We are prohibited from making images that represent any object for worship.
3. We are not to misuse God's name.
4. We are to make the seventh-day, the Sabbath, a holy day.
5. We are to honor our parents.
6. We are prohibited from murdering.
7. We are prohibited from committing adultery or fornication.
8. We are prohibited from stealing.
9. We are prohibited from lying.
10. We are prohibited from coveting another person's possessions.

Perhaps our only major difference as it regards the importance of the Ten Commandments, with Christians, is that we believe that they are somewhat hypocritical in saying that the Ten Commandments are important, but they will not keep the seventh-day Sabbath. But we also have to look at it this way: there is a growing move of Christians who oppose *any Biblical commandments*, including the Ten Words inscribed by the finger of God. Why? Because liberals have a major foothold in modern Christianity. Liberal theology largely advocates that the commandments of the Torah were but Ancient Israel's “cultural response” to God.

Recently (October 2003), I was watching Larry King Live on CNN and saw Bill Maher, formerly of the show Politically Incorrect, being interviewed. Maher does not hide the fact that he is both a Libertarian and an agnostic. He has an “anything goes” attitude and believes that as long as what you do does not affect or hurt him then it is acceptable. He commented on the (then-present) situation regarding the Ten Commandments monument in the Alabama state capital, saying that the Ten Commandments should not be there because the government cannot regulate religion. He said that the Ten Commandments were irrelevant as far as the U.S. government is concerned, because the government cannot legislate people to keep the Sabbath or to stop them from fornicating. The only relevant commandments, according to him, were the prohibitions on

murder and stealing, and perhaps lying in a court of justice. So in this case, the Ten Commandments have suddenly become Two-and-a-Half.

Many conservative Christians are concerned that the removal of the Ten Commandments from public places will bring God's judgment on America. While many of us may agree with this, the sad truth is that a good number of these conservative Christians will not consider the greater problem that exists. Many pastors teach from the pulpit that the Law of Moses or the Torah has been abolished and it is no longer necessary for Believers to follow, yet they will ardently protest in favor of the Ten Commandments. This sends mixed signals. Do you think that if mainstream Christianity taught that the Torah was important to follow that we would even be having this debate? Do you think that Christians would argue about whether or not pre-marital sex or homosexuality were sin?

The Ten Commandments are *not* Ten Suggestions, as some have said. They form the building blocks of the 613 Torah *mitzvot*. When we have established our Torah obedient faith on the Ten Commandments, we then see the importance of many other of the Torah's regulations for our lives. The Psalmist tells us, "So I will keep Your law continually, forever and ever. And I will walk at liberty [in freedom, NIV], for I seek Your precepts. I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings and shall not be ashamed. I shall delight in Your commandments, which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, which I love; and I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalm 119:44-48).

This is what James the brother of Yeshua means when he writes, "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:25).²

Is a day off so bad?

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

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11).

What does the Torah tell us we are to do on the Sabbath? In the section which lists the Ten Commandments, we are simply told not to do any work on the seventh day. We are to rest just as the Lord rested after His Creation was completed. The Hebrew verb *nuach* (נָח) simply means "rest" (BDB).³ So what is so wrong with taking off an entire day—especially if it is mandated by the Word of God? Has rest suddenly become something evil and something to be avoided at all costs?

Many have apprehensions regarding *Shabbat* because they somehow associate the Sabbath as a forced time of "unwork," with the thousands of Rabbinical additions which have been placed on the commandments regarding it. While many of these Rabbinical comments are helpful in determining what "work" is, many of them likewise can make the Sabbath into an unnecessary burden.

² For a further examination of the Ten Commandments, consult chapters 7-17 of the author's book *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*.

³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 628.

The major problem seems to be the controversy between the seventh-day and the first day. Many people who keep a “Sunday sabbath” are simply unwilling to follow Scripture and instead are set in their tradition. They unfortunately give into peer pressure.

Two Versus [at Least] Seven Holidays

After being criticized for keeping the Sabbath, the next thing that Messianics are often criticized for is celebrating the Biblical holidays. How many of us have been asked by our Christian peers, “Don’t you miss your Christmas tree? Don’t you miss celebrating Easter?”

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

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

1. *Pesach*/Passover
2. *Chag HaMatzah*/Festival of Unleavened Bread
3. *Shavuot*/Pentecost (Feast of Weeks)
4. *Yom Teruah*/Day of Blowing
5. *Yom Kippur*/Day of Atonement
6. *Sukkot*/Feast of Tabernacles
7. *Shemini Atzeret*/Eighth Day of Assembly⁴

Is food anything I put into my mouth?

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

What we are permitted to eat and not eat is given to us on the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Our Heavenly Father tells us, “For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth” (Leviticus 11:44). He gave us the dietary laws so that we might be holy unto Him. They are very simple when we read them with a heart that wants to be obedient and that wants to please Him. Not eating certain things is not a huge sacrifice for Believers to make. In fact, you will find that when you begin to eat kosher that you will be healthier.

Jewish commentator J.H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain in the 1930s-40s, makes the following valid observation:

“Even as nothing that suggested the least taint could be associated with God, so it was the duty of the Israelites to strive, so far as it was attainable by man, to avoid whatever would defile them, whether physically or spiritually. Wherever men and women honestly strive after holy living, such striving carries its own fulfillment with it.”⁵

Indeed, are we not to be striving for holy living? What is wrong with that? The Lord says “be holy; for I am holy” (cf. 1 Peter 1:16).

But what about the professor’s words? Is food anything that I can gain nourishment from?

I answer this question with a question: Is food anything that I put into my mouth?

⁴ Of course, it is absolutely notable that the celebration of additional festivals, such as *Purim* or *Chanukah*, or modern Israeli holidays such as Israel Independence Day or Jerusalem Day, are seen in the Messianic community.

⁵ J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 453.

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

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

But you are being legalistic!

I was unaware that following the simple instructions of our Heavenly Father given to us in the Scriptures was legalistic. When did being “legalistic” equate to being obedient? When we follow the Scriptural mandates to not commit murder or not to lie or not to commit adultery or not to steal, are we being legalistic? Or is it because these are “moral” commandments in the Bible that abiding by them does not make a person “legalistic”? Is it only keeping the “ceremonial” commandments that makes a person “legalistic”? What is the difference? Does not James say “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10)?

If we stumble in the Torah, whether we have lied or eaten a piece of bacon, we have violated it. We are human beings and we will all fall short of the Lord’s high and holy standard. That is why we need Yeshua as our Savior.

Legalists are those who say that you must do this or that—usually their way—for *salvation*. We do not follow the Torah and live a Messianic lifestyle for salvation, as salvation is a free gift of God available through Messiah Yeshua (Ephesians 2:8-9). We live a Messianic Torah observant lifestyle because it is the way Messiah Yeshua lived, and we are to imitate His example of holiness.

I sincerely hope I have given you some basic answers to those who may criticize your Messianic points of view. Whatever you do, be sure to respond to the criticism “with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15, LITV). Do not “attack back” or respond in the spirit in which you were criticized: “keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Messiah will be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:16). Remember that a servant of the Most High gets his justice from His Master.

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