

# Where Should the Messianic Movement be in 2107?

by J.K. McKee posted 01 January, 2007 www.tnnonline.net

One-hundred years from now—should the Lord have yet to return—the world will be a much different place than it is today. It will be the Twenty-Second Century. Technology will have advanced much more than it has advanced in the past few decades with the rise of the personal computer and the Internet. Rather than having to dictate to a computer with a keyboard and mouse, interactive voice communication and some kind of artificial intelligence will assist people with their daily affairs. Travel between continents will become even more commonplace, and it is likely that man will probably have a permanent presence on Earth's moon, will have set foot on Mars, and possibly even other celestial bodies in the Solar system.

But will the ills that plague the human condition have changed at all? Will there still be poverty, disease, hunger, and discrimination? Will there still be global terrorism? How will the United States have changed? Will the center of world power have shifted from the West to the East? What will the Middle East look like? Will people have more freedoms, or fewer freedoms?

Planet Earth in the year 2107 is undoubtedly an issue that few of us today want to consider, because of the likelihood that most of us will be dead when it arrives. I doubt that when going on his missionary journeys in the 50s C.E. that the Apostle Paul ever frequently asked the question of the legacy his work would have left for those living in the 150s C.E. Did the Ancient Israelites, entering into the Promised Land under Joshua, ever think that their progeny would quickly fall into a cycle of sin, rebellion against God, and then chastisement? They probably just focused on the moment that they found themselves, not worrying about the long-term affects on their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

When we look at what God is doing in our day through the emerging Messianic movement, including the restoration of the Torah to His people, where will we be in another century? Are we presently—today—considering the legacy that we will be handing to those who come after us if the Lord does not return in our lifetimes? Are we going to leave something that the next generations of Messianic Believers can build upon and use for the situations that they will be facing?

## God's Timetable is Not Our Timetable

When any one of us surveys the Bible, we should discover that many events occur over a long, drawn-out period of time. Few of us are aware of the fact that a name like "Israel" (or close derivatives) was common in the Ancient Near East in 2300 B.C.E., at least five centuries before the Patriarch Abraham was even born.<sup>1</sup> What something like this shows the Biblical reader is that Jacob being renamed Israel is certainly plausible, as Israel was a name that existed in the ancient period and was not simply "made up" by someone thinking that he had an encounter with God. But the fact that when we read Scripture that time works in a much different way than modern-day people perceive it, presents some major challenges for us—especially if we are Americans.

Many of us run the risk of looking at things from too much of an American perspective, where we are completely disconnected from the fact that the Lord works from century-to-century and not necessarily from year-to-year. Most of this comes from the reality that here in the United States we are disconnected from anything that is ancient. We do not have Medieval castles with a drawbridge and moat in the countryside. We do not have aqueducts or Roman ruins we can park our cars next to. We do not have any of the things that our European neighbors have that are older than 500 years. We think that when a sports stadium is 30 years old that it needs to be torn down in favor of a new one. Are we surprised that our lack of understanding things from century-to-century affects our view of the Bible? It frequently causes us to not have a long-term approach to the work that God has placed us here to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. K.A. Kitchen, *The Bible in its World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), pp 52-53.

Few that I know today are willing to ask the question: Where should the Messianic movement be in 2107? The majority of today's Messianic community believes that by this time Yeshua the Messiah will have returned and the world will be experiencing His Millennial reign. We should certainly hope that this will be the case—but **what if it is not?** What if we are found wanting by the Lord for not performing some critical spiritual work, as a result of putting it off because we thought the Second Coming would *absolutely* occur in our lifetimes? Surely, if we are performing the work of God—and then the terrible things prophesied about in Scripture come crashing down upon us—our training from the Scriptures and life experience should have disciplined us enough so we can properly encounter whatever we will face.

But in the meantime, as we wait for the Lord's return, how much of that spiritual work is not being performed? Consider the Apostle Paul's words to the Thessalonians, who likewise believed that Yeshua was *absolutely* going to return in their lifetimes. Not only did they stop doing the daily work of God's Kingdom, many of them quit their jobs, thinking that Yeshua could come at any time. He candidly tells them that the person who does not work should not be allowed to eat:

"For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-13).

How much work has gone unfinished because of this attitude? How many of us are ill-equipped to deal with the daily struggles that the world delivers us as Messianic Believers—to say nothing of the rise of the antimessiah/antichrist or beginning of the Great Tribulation?

The modern Messianic movement has been around for almost forty years. Many attribute its growth to the recapturing of Jerusalem in 1967 by the State of Israel and the high prophetic expectations that were on the horizon. Many of the Messianic Jewish pioneers of the early 1970s likely thought that the world of the year 2000 would have been much different than the world they were living in. Certainly, many evangelical Christians in the past thought that Jesus Christ would have returned by 2000. Seven years ago there was a great uproar about Y2k and the thought that it would have brought about the "End of the Age." We have all been subject to seeing teachers and ministries rise up and declare that "this is the year" the Messiah will return, and this has contributed to some major Kingdom work *not* being completed. Many more previous generations have thought that they were the ones that would see Yeshua return, but as of yet, He has not.

The Messianic movement has certainly achieved some major things in the past forty years. It has restored the need to see Yeshua the Messiah, our Lord and Savior, as a First Century Jew. It has allowed us to recognize that Jews who come to faith in Yeshua do not have to give up their Jewishness. It has shown us the need to understand that our belief in Yeshua and His teachings are intimately connected to the Torah and Tanach. And, it has given rise to many non-Jewish Believers being exposed to the Hebraic Roots of their faith and the need to live lives fully like the Messiah and Apostles.

But what has not been accomplished during the past forty years that could have been? The modern Messianic movement has not been subject to the same kind of circumstances that the late First Century Believers were subject to. No Messianic has had to worship or live in catacombs for fear of his or her life. None of us have had to worry about the government coming in and arresting us for keeping *Shabbat* or eating kosher. To my knowledge, none of us have been subjected to martyrdom. At most, we have been harassed for our beliefs and have been socially ostracized by a few. For some, the lack of resources and financial support have been the major obstacles. And when compared to the martyrdom of some of the early Believers, these things are not that bad. On the whole, we have had it pretty easy compared to the others who have gone before us, and our brothers and sisters in the third world who do face martyrdom on a regular basis.

For a movement that largely considers itself to be one that will significantly, if not radically, change the face of our faith—certainly more could have been accomplished in the past forty years. This is evidenced in some of the current theological controversies that we are facing today, that will have to be remedied in the next forty, if not one-hundred years should the Lord tarry. Do we have a basic theology about God? Where are all of the Messianic commentaries on *all* books of the Bible? How do we relate to our modern age? These are only a few of the things that should have probably been addressed earlier, but are only now being discussed by Messianic Believers.

As the Lord expands and grows the Messianic movement, we have to be aware of these things so we can truly be that light to the world that God has called His people to be. We have to know the areas where we need to make some major improvement, while continuing to empower people for the challenges that they face right now in their daily lives. While we do this, we also have to avoid the mistake made in the past of force-feeding an American view of time onto the Scriptures, which demands that change be almost instantaneous. We certainly need to be looking for our Master's return, but not forget the daily work of His Kingdom that He has imparted to us.

In this article, I have laid out three long-term areas where I believe we can commit ourselves to improvement *now*. This will not only affect the current work that the Lord has given us, but will enable us to hand over a legacy to those who come after us. Should we indeed arrive at the year 2107, substantial progress should be made in these aspects of our faith.

## **1. Our Need to Have a More Conservative-Critical View of the Bible**

Many of today's Messianic Believers are rightly convicted that the entire Bible is for their instruction. We witness this when people from Jewish backgrounds come to faith in Yeshua, and see the richness of the Hebrew Scriptures lived out in His life and the life of His early followers. We also witness this when we see non-Jewish Believers from Christian backgrounds see that there is no major difference between the Old and New Testaments. The Tanach forms the foundation that the Apostolic Scriptures build themselves upon. Even if a new Messianic has difficulty finding a congregation or fellowship in his or her local area, he or she often will find a small group of people to associate with and study Scripture.

I firmly believe that a regimented, disciplined study of the Bible is required for our spiritual growth. The easiest way that I believe you can do this is to study the weekly Torah portions, be engaged in mid-week study of another text from the Prophets, Writings, or Apostolic Scriptures, and then be engaged in examining a text yourself. You may think this sounds hard, but no one ever said our faith was easy! Having a balanced diet of Biblical instruction is required so we can face the challenges of our world. Every single one of us, at least once in our lives, should read through the entire Bible, surveying the text and making observations about what we are reading.<sup>2</sup>

The immediate challenge that we often have to overcome today is that the vast majority of Messianic Bible studies are only focused on the weekly Torah portions. Now while I fully believe this is something important—and should by no means be discouraged—many coming out of Church settings the past few years have simply exchanged only reading the New Testament to only reading the Torah. This needs to be remedied. **We cannot forget the centrality of Yeshua to our faith and His love. He is the model that we are to emulate.**

Problems have erupted in the past several years in sectors of the Messianic community as some have challenged the canonicity and inspiration of various books of the Apostolic Writings. They believe certain teachings made by the Disciples of Yeshua and their immediate successors contradict God's revelation in the Torah. Rather than reason with the Scriptures, many are content to simply throw texts away without examining them with a critical eye. Many perceived contradictions can be easily solved by an examination of the history and/or circumstances

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<sup>2</sup> Consult the editor's workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic* for a guide on how to do this with the New Testament. The companion workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic* is due for publication sometime in early 2008.

surrounding the original writing of a Biblical book, or by looking into the original language source text behind it. How many have failed to do some basic research into the Bible before casting things aside? Certainly, if it leads people into doubting who Yeshua is in their lives—we should be greatly concerned.

How much of this failure to consider the history of the Bible is a result of the fact that today's Messianic movement is largely disengaged from the reality that the Scriptures as a whole have always been under attack? While it rightfully appalls many Messianic Believers that some would cast aside Yeshua because of a supposed contradiction here or there (that can often be easily solved), very few of us are aware of the same kinds of criticisms against the Tanach, and in particular, the Torah. As the Messianic movement grows and matures—particularly in a movement that places a great deal of emphasis on the Torah—these are the kinds of things that we must increasingly become aware of so we can combat them.

Did you know that there are many Christian *and* Jewish theologians who believe that Moses had nothing to do with the composition of the Torah? Many believe that Moses, at best, was a herdsman who led a group of disenfranchised slaves out of Egypt, and that they ultimately made it into Canaan. These people would later become a tribal power known as Israel. They would be subject to invasion and exile. When some of them returned from Babylon, they would then compile the varied traditions of their tribal myths and call it the Torah of Moses. They contend that Moses did not have anything to do with the Torah; it is said that it should all be attributed to the Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Priestly (P), and Deuteronomic (D) writers.

For many of you reading, this is the first time you have ever heard about the JEDP documentary hypothesis. This liberal viewpoint is not something new, as it has actually been around since the mid-1800s with the rise of German higher criticism. You do not have to go that far to read about it, as many Bible dictionaries and Bible commentaries are written from the perspective that Moses did not write or compile any of the Torah (that is, if he existed). This is not only true of liberal Christian works, but also many liberal Jewish works as well. If you have a copy of the *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), you will get a strong exposure to these kinds of beliefs.

Most of today's Messianic community—even among some teachers—is not even aware that these beliefs exist. It is surprising to me, in a movement that studies the Torah on a weekly basis, that few questions (at least that I am aware of) have ever arisen from a person reading through a study Bible or consulting a commentary that mentions something called JEDP. Certainly, there are solid Biblical and historical answers to these criticisms. But how many of us remain ignorant of them? When we see something on the Discovery Channel or the History Channel that criticizes the Bible—what do we do? Our answer cannot be to throw away our television set. We need to engage with the criticism and respond to it so that our own faith can be strengthened in the process. If we truly give the Tanach a high place in our understanding of God, then we need to be willing to know that there is criticism out there against what it says. We need to know how to respond to this criticism so that our own faith can be reinforced.

The ultimate answer to our dilemma in Messianic Biblical Studies is that we need to have a conservatively conscious, critical view of the Scriptures. (This is not going to come if the only sources we consult are Orthodox Jewish commentaries that are often totally disengaged from the discussions going on.) We need to find the safe middle ground between the Bible and history. We need not make the errant conclusion that the Exodus did not take place because there is no Egyptian record for it as liberal theologians often do. We should, rather, engage with the history and consider why the Egyptians would not write about it. We need to understand that we cannot read our modern-day expectations of preciseness and exactness on a text that was compiled millennia ago. We need to affirm the truth of what the Bible communicates, and understand it in the context of real history.

When we can learn as a Messianic movement to appreciate the historicity of things such as the Exodus, Israel's monarchy, the Babylonian exile, and certainly the life of Yeshua and the Apostles—we will also learn to appreciate the call that God has upon us. We will learn from the

testimony of Scripture, the complex circumstances that ancient generations faced, and thus be empowered to adequately face our own complex circumstances in our life and society.

**If the Lord has yet to return by the year 2107, the Messianic movement should have adopted a more conservative-critical view of the Scriptures. This will affirm that what the text is saying is true, but does not shy away from any of the controversies it presents.**

## **2. Our Need to be Able to be a Socially Relevant Movement**

Every week when we study the Torah we are surely presented with an issue or two that relates to something we are facing today. In the first few Torah portions in Genesis, we see comments made about the Fall of humanity, the first fratricide, God judging the Earth via the Flood, and the judgment upon a city engaged in gross homosexuality. We face all of these things today, and nothing has changed that much. We should learn from the lessons that God teaches us in His Word, so we can then be able to deal with these same sins present among us.

But is our study of the Torah ever really focused on the mission of God in the world? What about Scriptures like the Prophets, which we seldom ever examine other than to just read about the coming of the Messiah or the end of the world? The Prophets have a great deal to say about social justice and how we need to be involved in our communities. How many Messianic congregations and fellowships are closed off from others around them? Does your congregational leader or rabbi have friends who are pastors of local churches? Does he have any friends in the local Jewish community? Do they ever focus on humanitarian and social issues that are relevant to the local community? These questions are some that we as Messianics need to answer today.

Surely, if the Lord is restoring the Hebraic Roots of the faith, He will—via time—transform us into a movement that can more readily respond to the social challenges of the day. A consistent study of Scripture and an appreciation for the circumstances that previous generations have faced should empower us to be about God's work today. When we study the Torah, if all we are focusing on are "curiosities" in the text, and we are not able to apply those curiosities in our own relationship to God today—what have we accomplished? If all we do is sit around discussing how many Hebrew letters are in Genesis 1:1 versus Deuteronomy 34:12, we have *accomplished nothing* in terms of the mission of God in today's world.

The message of Scripture has so much to tell us about the human condition and how our Heavenly Father is intimately concerned about the salvation of the lost. The Lord wants us to be a people who are transformed by His Holy Spirit and are able to testify of Him via our good works. The Lord wants us to have hearts that love others, and minds that can deal with the complexities of human living. But how many of us are so closed off to modern-day issues that we cannot properly respond to the questions of pre-marital sex, homosexuality, abortion, murder, terrorism, cloning, stem cell research, embezzlement, fraud, extortion, discrimination, and a host of other things too long to list? These are the things that the world is asking about—and we need to have Biblically-based answers!

In your experience as a Messianic Believer, have you considered your own personal ministry to the lost in today's world? Are you connected to what they are experiencing? Or, do you simply remain cloistered to yourself and others like you—oblivious to what is going on? Certainly, each one of us has our individual callings and roles to perform based on our unique spheres of influence. However, if the Messianic movement is truly something of God, then given time we should not remain a community that is largely devoid of making any sizeable impact on others. Given time, we will have the answers that the lost are desperately seeking, as they know they need salvation and to live a holy life according to God's commandments.

**If the Lord has yet to return by the year 2107, the Messianic movement will need to engage itself more with society at large. We need to be able to make a significant impact on our local communities, sharing the good news of Yeshua and discipling people in how to properly follow God.**

### **3. Our Need to Have a Global Vision**

Beyond impacting our local communities and those we interact with every day, the current Messianic movement of 2007 needs more of a global vision. We have to consider that the early Messianic Jewish movement of the late Twentieth Century was limited in the goals that it set. It was largely concerned about restoring the Jewishness of Jesus, and establishing the fact that Jewish Believers did not have to give up their own Jewishness or cultural traditions. These were very important for the early days of the movement. But in the past decade, a large number of non-Jews have entered in, and the kinds of questions being asked are becoming more complex. While many non-Jewish Messianics rightly acknowledge that they have missed out on the Jewishness of Yeshua, they see the present vision of today's Messianic movement being limited. Frequently, there is too much of an emphasis on Israel at the expense of the world. The dilemma that we face may be summarized in the following remarks:

“Just as Joseph was disguised, so too the Messiah remains disguised to His brethren, the Jewish people. In some ways, Gentile Christianity is responsible for the disguise. Christian artwork represents Jesus with Gentile hair, makeup and clothes. In Christian literature Jesus speaks in Greek and in the language of every nation; His Hebrew mother tongue is all but forgotten. Christianity has removed Him from His Hebraic and Torah context and made Him unrecognizable to His own brothers.”

It is absolutely true that much of the Christian Church is responsible for forgetting about the Jewishness of Yeshua, and the fact that He was a Torah observant rabbi. Yeshua taught according to the norms of His day, and observed the standard customs of the Judaism of His period. These are things that the Messianic movement has rightly been restoring to the faith. But Yeshua did not only speak Hebrew; He also spoke in Greek to the Greeks and Romans He encountered. He commissioned the Disciples to go to the ends of the Earth and proclaim the gospel. The Christian Church today largely speaks of having a global vision, but then can forget about “tiny little Israel.” Has today's Messianic movement made the reverse mistake? How do we maintain the integrity of having a high regard for Israel, while recognizing that Israel is to serve the masses of humanity? This, perhaps more than anything else, is something that many Messianics today need to discuss.

Certainly, our world today is becoming more global. All you have to do is go to your local grocery store and see a wide array of food products from Europe, Africa, and the Far East that thirty years ago you would probably not have found. The global economy has changed the way we do business. Whereas the Disciples would have had to walk days to get where they wanted to go, we can now drive a car. When Paul was in Asia Minor, it may have taken him five to six weeks to get to Jerusalem. Now, all we have to do is call a travel agent or book our tickets online. If you live on the Eastern seaboard of the United States, you can be there within fourteen hours.

If you have not been to modern Israel, you may not realize that within this small country is a very ethnically and culturally diverse group of people. Many expect to go to Israel and see Orthodox Jews everywhere. While they are certainly there, you will also encounter Jews from seventy or eighty different countries, Jewish people visiting from diverse parts of the world, and hear at least a dozen languages spoken. It is not as easy as learning modern Hebrew to communicate with everyone. On top of this, many different ethnic churches have representation in Israel. Do not be fooled: Israel itself is not an homogenous place.

When today's Messianic movement can learn to appreciate the fact that our faith is not just about Israel, nor is it just about the world, then we can begin to have a more global impact. The Spirit of God moves at many Sunday services in our own country, just as in *Shabbat*-keeping Messianic services. But even more so, the Spirit moves in places like Africa, India, or China. How do we expect to relate the Messianic things God has revealed to us to those Believers? Have we even considered this? Do we even recognize that when Believers in the third world are persecuted or killed for their faith that we as a whole are being persecuted and killed? Do we ever attempt as Messianics to see the “big picture” of the world and God's people?

The phenomenon known as globalization is changing the world we live in and how we do business. The Messianic movement should embrace it because if it gives the enemy the ability to spread lies and sinful behavior, then it surely also gives us the ability to spread the good news of Yeshua across the world as well. Embracing a global perspective—perhaps more than anything else—will indeed require time. Perhaps we are not ready to send Messianic missionaries into the Congo—but are we even recognizing that it will come? What are we to do in the meantime? We need to be trained to understand that it is not about Israel or the world—it is about Israel serving the world. The Prophet Isaiah tells us,

“Thus says God the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and its offspring, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it, ‘I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison’” (Isaiah 42:5-7; cf. Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22).

These are the exact same things that Yeshua came to do.

**If the Lord has yet to return by the year 2107, the Messianic movement needs to continue its strong support of the State of Israel, while at the same time making a strong impact on others all across the world who need salvation. The Messianic community will hopefully have a global influence that it presently does not have.**

### **What can we do right now?**

Realistically, we actually have a long way to go before we can see some of the goals I have written about being achieved. Many of us could easily adopt them in our own personal approach to Messianic faith and the Scriptures, but it will take some time—and probably even some more “ups and downs”—in the development of the Messianic movement as a whole for them to be more fully integrated. We have to know what the criticisms against our faith are, especially if they have been around for several centuries. We have to make an impact on the world immediately around us. And, we have to recognize that Israel is called to serve the world. If the Lord does not return as soon as we may think, then we need to take advantage of the time He has given us to make progress in these areas.

The most pragmatic way to see some of these things integrated into our current Messianic experience is being able to readily submit ourselves to the teachings of the Bible. But these need to be well-balanced teachings from all across Scripture. We need to see the mission of God and His salvation history present in what we read. We have to recognize the cultural diversity of the text and how Israel is called to interact with its neighbors and positively impact them. We need to become self-critical individuals who can wake up each morning and pray, “Heavenly Father, show me where I need to improve.” Truly, if we can be self-critical individuals and learn to improve ourselves, than we can become a self-critical movement. Those who recognize their faults and their need to rely upon God, **are those who can be used by Him to do great things.** It was the Apostle Paul himself who said, “I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the [assembly] of God” (1 Corinthians 15:9), and yet he was empowered to perform some great tasks for the Lord—leaving a legacy that we now benefit from.

What will we be able to do in the coming years that will transform the emerging Messianic movement into one that can be used to bring about the final restoration before Yeshua returns? Where do we need to improve? Will Yeshua have returned by 2107? How much of answering that question is contingent on whether or not we are performing the work that He has us to do right now? If we do not do that work, will we be delaying His return? Remember that God does not see time the way we do as limited humans. He will only accomplish His tasks through a people that are maturing, that can love others, and that can handle the complexities of the fallen world that He is trying so desperately to redeem. Let us be about the tasks before us! Let us make significant progress so that should we arrive at 2107, we have left a positive legacy of

Messianic faith that our grandchildren and great-grandchildren can benefit from and appreciate, as they await Yeshua's return.

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