

The Effect of Mysticism and Gnosticism on the Messianic Movement

by J.K. McKee posted 17 May, 2005 www.tnnonline.net

The Messianic community today faces many issues. Perhaps the most important of these issues, as more and more people come out of evangelical Christianity and embrace a Messianic lifestyle, is the question of: **Why?** Why are people changing their lives and how they practice their faith? What is the attraction of Hebraic Roots and the Messianic movement? What is the motivation for being Messianic?

The answers to these questions, as can and should be expected, vary from person to person, and congregation to congregation. But, the common thread throughout people embracing a Messianic lifestyle should be that we are all trying *to grow and mature in our faith*. As Yeshua the Messiah and the Apostle John admonish us, we are to be “abiding” in the Lord—meaning we are to be moving forward in our walk of faith:

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5).

“Whoever confesses that Yeshua is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15).

How many people have entered into the Messianic movement and truly asked themselves the honest question: **Why am I here?** How many, when asked this question, would answer it correctly?

What would substantiate an incorrect answer? Consider how many people have entered the Messianic movement *not* because they read their Bibles and started asking some questions—but how many people have been sensationalized? What do I mean by sensationalized? How many people in the Messianic community have read a book or an article or listened to a message with an agenda? This agenda has not been to encourage people in their walk of faith, but rather get them angry or embarking down a path that they have no business going.

The Lord has given us as born again Believers His Holy Spirit not just so that we would be able to commune with Him, but also so that we may be empowered to discern between truth and error. As Messianic Believers, we should have the Holy Spirit convict us when we fall short of God’s standard contained in the Torah, and the Spirit should be leading us to keep God’s commandments. We should also have the Spirit to distinguish who the many false teachers are and what they teach. The Apostle Peter attests that there will be false prophets circulating in the Last Days:

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Peter 2:1).

While these Scriptures are often applied by Messianics to refer to some false, non-Biblical Christian teachings, they could just as well refer to certain Messianic teachers and/or ministries, which are leading people astray into aberrant teachings, or worse, onto a path from falling away from faith in Yeshua. Let us not, in arrogance, think that we have “arrived” or “understand all things.” Let us be willing, as Messianics, to put our feet to the fire sometimes and examine the errors that we as a community might have, *before* criticizing Christianity. After all, is our purpose for being Messianic one of where we are trying to grow in our faith and become fully Biblical? Or, are we trying to prove ourselves “spiritually superior” to others?

Back to the First Century—and its Problems

It is commonly said in the Messianic movement that we as Believers need to be restored to the faith of Yeshua and the First Century Disciples and Apostles. I could not agree more with this. We must return to the Torah obedient faith of our Lord and Savior, and emulate His early followers in our faith practice. We must return to the faith of those who had the Holy Spirit

poured out on them at *Shavuot*/Pentecost, and realize that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 required non-Jews to hear the Torah of Moses taught.

But aside from the richness of our faith that we have missed, because of our blindness for many centuries, how many of us fail to recognize some of the problems we *presently face*? Specifically, how many of us fail to recognize that if we are returning to the First Century faith of the Disciples and Apostles, *that we will be facing the same problems that they faced*? And what are some of the problems that they encountered?

Obviously, as many non-Jews from the nations embraced faith in the Messiah of Israel, the challenges that the First Century *ekklēsia* largely faced dealt with how these new Believers were to grow in their faith. The primary issues they dealt with related to how they were to leave Greco-Roman religious practices and adopt a Torah foundation as they were discipled and properly trained. They had to leave idolatry, fornication, and other practices expressly prohibited by Scripture. Many of these same issues, lamentably, have plagued the Body of Believers for centuries.

Specifically, as we strive to return to the First Century faith of the Disciples and Apostles, we will not just be facing “common problems” like adultery, idolatry, or even sins such as lying. We will also contend with some of the very specific religious problems that the First Century *ekklēsia* faced. Very few when examining Scripture, unfortunately, fail to consider it in its historical context. Many do not have an understanding of First Century Judaism, Greco-Roman religion, Second and Third Century Christianity, and the various mystery religions and cults that existed. Many of us fail to consider the gross religious errors that were circulating throughout the First Century that affected the early Believers in Yeshua, and how some of these same errors are affecting Believers today.

Religion of the First Century

In seeking to understand the First Century origins of our faith, and thus fully comprehend some of the problems that are occurring in the Messianic movement today, it is important for us to have a working knowledge of the religion of the First Century. If you were a Believer in Yeshua in the First Century, you were in a mixed group of Jews and non-Jews. If you were a Jewish Believer, you had received the long-awaited Messiah of Israel into your life, and you were still connected to the larger Jewish world as you had Jewish family members who likely did not receive or believe in Yeshua. If you were a non-Jewish Believer, you received the Messiah of Israel into your life, and you had undergone some major lifestyle changes, likely having come out of Greco-Roman religion. Many of your family and friends would not have understood the changes that you made, and you needed some extra help with your new walk of faith, unlike the Jewish Believer who was relatively familiar with the Scriptures. Consider the challenges that the First Century Body of Messiah faced, and when understanding this how it can change your perspective of the Apostolic Scriptures, notably the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles.

But things are even more complex. While we all might have a basic understanding of Judaism, primarily from what Judaism is today, and a basic understanding of Greco-Roman religion, from what we have read from Greco-Roman mythology, the truth of the matter is that ancient Judaism was factional (and sometimes referred to as ancient “Judaisms”), there was no “standardized” Greco-Roman religion as there were many regional variants, and there were mystery religions and cults that were competing for the attention of the people as well. Before we can address some of the problems that we are facing today, we must have a fuller understanding of First Century Judaism, Greco-Roman religion, and other influences that might have affected the early Body of Believers.

Many of you who have studied the New Testament and have been in the Messianic movement for any period of time are probably already familiar with First Century Judaism, at least in passing. The two dominant sects of Judaism in the time of Yeshua were the Pharisees and the Sadducees, which made up the religious council known as the Sanhedrin. An eclectic sect known as the Essenes also existed. But there were also other “side sects,” for lack of a better

description, that were often influenced by the mystery religions of the Greeks and the Romans of the time.

The Sadducees

The Sadducees did not have a great amount of religious influence over the early Believers. The Sadducees are well-known in the Gospel accounts for *not* believing in the resurrection (Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). *ABD* indicates that “the Sadducees did not believe that the soul continued to exist after death or that people suffered punishments or received rewards after they died....The NT considers the Sadducees’ rejection of resurrection as their primary characteristic, for the issue of resurrection was of central importance to the early Church.”¹ The *Jewish Study Bible* comments that “They held to a strict application of Torah and to maintain order to continue the Temple practices without interference, the Sadducees were apparently willing to collaborate with the occupying Roman power to some extent, including accepting Roman interference in the choice of high priest.”²

It appears that the Sadducees were largely in league with the Roman occupiers of the Land of Israel. They did not have a great amount of influence over the common people, who viewed them as collaborators with Rome. The historian Josephus wrote in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, “the Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side” (13.6).³ *NIDB* tells us, “There is no record of a Sadducee being admitted into the Christian church. According to Josephus (*Antiq.* 20.9.1)⁴, they were responsible for the death of James, the brother of the lord. With the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Sadducean party disappeared.”⁵

The Pharisees

The Pharisees, probably more than any other group, had a great amount of influence on the early Believers in Yeshua. Many of the Jewish Believers were Pharisees, and in the case of the Apostle Paul, he was a Pharisee who had been trained by the Jewish sage Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).⁶ The Pharisees were much more conservative in their doctrine than the Sadducees, believing in the resurrection, angels, demons, and an afterlife. “The Pharisees were concerned to extend Jewish practice into all areas of life, and followed the tradition of interpretation (**Oral Torah**) associated with the schools of Hillel and Shammai. They were thus proponents of a Jewish identity separate from the larger non-Jewish culture that surrounded Judea.”⁷ The Pharisees followed the same Tanach Scriptures that are generally followed today, but they also gave credence to the Oral Torah or Oral Law that would later be written down in the forms of the Mishnah and Talmud.

¹ Gary G. Porton, “Sadducees,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:892.

² Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2138.

³ Flavius Josephus: trans. William Whiston, in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 335.

⁴ Josephus specifically states, “[B]ut this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders...Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned” (Ibid., pp 537-538).

⁵ Steven Barabas, “Sadducees,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 885.

⁶ The Talmud says of Gamaliel, “Our Rabbis taught: From the days of Moses up to Rabban Gamaliel, the Torah was learnt only standing. When Rabban Gamaliel died, feebleness descended on the world, and they learnt the Torah sitting; and so we have learnt that ‘from the time that Rabban Gamaliel died, [full] honour ceased to be paid to the Torah’” (b.*Megillah* 21a).

Gamaliel was held in such high regard, that the Jewish Sages believed that full honor was not believed to be given to the Torah following his death. This indicates that Paul was indeed trained in his theology by a teacher who had substantial standing and influence in First Century Judaism.

⁷ Berlin and Brettler, 2136.

The Pharisees are featured many times in the Apostolic Scriptures, and most of the time Christian theologians have concluded that they are antagonists of Yeshua. However, understanding the divisions among the Pharisees themselves, Yeshua often argued with the Pharisees in a very Pharisaical style. Yeshua's theology was closer to that of the Pharisees than any other group of people, and He Himself would have likely been classified as a Pharisee. In fact, in Matthew 23:2-3 He says, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*." We are to take our theological lead from the Pharisees, but be cautious of their works.

Of course, the Pharisees did have their problems. It has been validly observed, "Formulation and adaptation of Mosaic Law by scribe and rabbi, increased tradition, and a more rabid separatism from almost everything resulted in an almost new religion, much the opposite from that handed down in the covenant by the prophets" (*NIDB*).⁸ Consequently, much of the disagreement in the Gospels between Yeshua and the Pharisees is often over interpretation and application of the Torah, as opposed to the validity of the Torah itself.

Even though some of the Pharisees did seemingly have a problem with Torah legalism, the Pharisees did have some very noble qualities we can admire. The Hebrew word *Parush* (פָּרוּשׁ), the singular form of *Perushim* (פָּרוּשִׁים), means "the separated ones, separatists,"⁹ and they "vehemently oppose[d] all secularization of Judaism by the pagan Greek thought that penetrated Jewish life after the Alexandrian conquest."¹⁰ The Pharisees were active in making proselytes, and had planted many synagogues in the Diaspora. Menahem Mansoor summarizes, "The active period of Pharisaism extended well into the second century C.E. and was most influential in the development of Orthodox Judaism... After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., it was the synagogues and the schools of the Pharisees that continued to function and to promote Judaism" (*EJ*).¹¹

The Pharisees, perhaps more than any other group, had great influence on the development of the First Century Body of Messiah. Paul's declaration before the Sanhedrin was *ani Perush* (אֲנִי פָּרוּשׁ), *egō Pharisaios eimi* (ἐγὼ Φαρισαῖός εἰμι), "I am a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6). He plainly attested, "according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee" (Acts 26:5). Mansoor also says that "Pharisaic doctrines have more in common with those of Christianity than is supposed, having prepared the ground for Christianity with such concepts as Messianism, the popularization of monotheism and apocalypticism, and with such beliefs as life after death, resurrection of the dead, immortality, and angels" (*EJ*).¹²

The problem as it appears in the New Testament is that there was a specific group of those from Pharisaical sects, who had believed in Yeshua, who said that non-Jews coming to faith had to be circumcised and observe the Torah *first*, before they could be saved. Acts 15:5 attests, "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.'" The Pharisees were a broad group of people, so we should not automatically believe, as some do, that these were all of those from the Pharisees who converted to faith. Furthermore, this belief that physical circumcision and Torah observance (in other words, ritual proselyte conversion) were prerequisites for salvation was not only adhered to by Pharisees.

The Essenes

A third group which had far less influence on First Century Judaism than the Pharisees and Sadducees were the Essenes. They are not mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures, but rather by ancient writers such as Josephus and Philo. *The Jewish Study Bible* describes them as "a Jewish

⁸ Lorman M. Petersen, "Pharisees," in *NIDB*, 779.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 778.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 779.

¹¹ Menahem Mansoor, "Pharisees," *Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows gx*. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

¹² *Ibid.*

group that flourished from around the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE. They kept the Jewish law with utmost rigor, living apart from other Jews in their own communities.”¹³ The Essenes were a communal group that observed the Torah very strictly, and preferred to keep to their own affairs. The most widely known of the Essene groups was the Qumran community, which was responsible for writing what scholars refer to as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is debated among scholars whether or not the Essenes had any major influence on, or for that matter any contact with, the early Believers in Yeshua. It seems that there may have been a few doctrinal similarities, but those similarities would also have been shared with the Pharisees. *NIDB* comments that their “literature reveals that the people of the Qumran community were avid students of the Jewish Scriptures,” and indicates that “Many of the Essenes perished in the wars against the Romans,” speculating, “Many of the survivors probably became Christians.”¹⁴

The Dead Sea Scrolls are primarily a collection of Scriptural documents, that are often employed by scholars in textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. But there were also texts describing the Qumran’s community’s behavior and practices, as well as some sectarian extra-Biblical works like the Book of Enoch. Again, how much influence the Essenes had over the First Century *ekklesia* is debated, if indeed they ever had any contact.

The Jewish Mystics

A fourth group, which is by far the least organized when compared to the Pharisees, Sadducees, or Essenes, that existed in the First Century, was the Jewish mystics. This would be a loose-fitting group of Jews who would practice some form of magic or sorcery along with their Judaism and “Torah observance.” There is no universal set of beliefs or practices for Jewish mystics of the First Century, other than the fact that they were a minority. In ancient times they appear to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, some of which are mentioned in the Apostolic Scriptures and early Christian writings.

The Torah expressly prohibits the practices of divination and sorcery in Deuteronomy 18:9-14:

“When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you *to do so*.”

These practices were considered by God to be “the abhorrent practices of those nations” (NJPS). They included using divination and witchcraft to cast spells on someone or to try to determine the future or communicate with the dead. The Israelites were brought out of Egypt and were going into a land where Canaanites practiced these things. Haim Hermann Cohn comments,

“It was to be the characteristic of Judaism that nothing would be achieved by magic, but everything by the will and spirit of God: hence the confrontations of Joseph and the magicians of Egypt (Gen. 41), of Moses and Aaron and Egyptian sorcerers (Ex. 7), of Daniel and the Babylonian astrologers (Dan. 2), etc., and hence also the classification of crimes of sorcery as tantamount to idolatrous crimes of human sacrifices (Deut. 18:10) and to idolatrous sacrifices in general (Ex. 22:19) and its visitation, just as idolatry itself, with death by stoning (Lev. 20:27; see Capital Punishment). In a God-fearing Israel, there is no room for augury and sorcery (Num. 23:23; Isa. 8:19), and the presence of astrologers (Isa. 47:13) and fortune-tellers is an indication of godlessness (Nah. 3:4; Ezek. 13:20–23; et al.). Nonetheless, magic practices remained widespread throughout, and not only with idolaters (see, e.g., I Sam. 28:4–20; II Kings 18:4; Chron. 33:6)” (*EJ*).¹⁵

¹³ Berlin and Brettler, 2128.

¹⁴ Clyde E. Harrington, “Essenes,” in *NIDB*, 326.

¹⁵ Haim Hermann Cohn, “Sorcery,” in *EJ*.

Leviticus 20:27 clearly states, "Now a man or a woman who is a medium or a spiritist shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their bloodguiltiness is upon them." Those people practicing witchcraft and divination were to be executed. But, the Scriptures do clearly indicate for us that these things were practiced by many in Israel.

There are three primary examples in the Scriptures of those practicing divination we need to consider.

The witch of Endor was consulted by King Saul to bring up the spirit of Samuel from Sheol. Saul swore by the Lord that even though he decreed that all witches should be put to death, that she would not be put to death. King Saul sees the disembodied soul of Samuel, who tells him that he will be defeated and will die and lose his kingdom. Saul, swearing by the name of God to a diviner, found himself the recipient of God's judgment:

"Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.' And his servants said to him, 'Behold, there is a woman who is a medium at En-dor.' Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, 'Conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you.' But the woman said to him, 'Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?' Saul vowed to her by the LORD, saying, 'As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.' Then the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' And he said, 'Bring up Samuel for me.' When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, 'Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul.' The king said to her, 'Do not be afraid; but what do you see?' And the woman said to Saul, 'I see a divine being coming up out of the earth.' He said to her, 'What is his form?' And she said, 'An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe.' And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and did homage. Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' And Saul answered, 'I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has departed from me and no longer answers me, either through prophets or by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I should do.' Samuel said, 'Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has departed from you and has become your adversary? The LORD has done accordingly as He spoke through me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, to David. As you did not obey the LORD and did not execute His fierce wrath on Amalek, so the LORD has done this thing to you this day'" (1 Samuel 28:7-18).

Bar-Yeshua (Bar-Jesus), also called Elymas, encountered the Apostles Paul and Barnabas on Cyprus:

"When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also *known as* Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, 'You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.' And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem" (Acts 13:6-13).

Bar-Yeshua is described as "a Jewish sorcerer and pseudo-prophet" (CJB). We are not expressly told anything in the Biblical text about Bar-Yeshua, who was also called Elymas, other than the fact that Paul proves him to be an absolute fraud in front of the Roman proconsul, and a deceptive liar. Paul, under the power of the Holy Spirit, declared that Bar-Yeshua was to lose his

sight. Sergius Paulus was greatly impressed, and believed the gospel as a result. *ISBE*, describing Bar-Jesus, speculates that he was a Jew from Babylon, having been influenced by astrology and the occult:

“The East was flooding the Roman Empire with its new and wonderful religious systems, which, culminating in neo-Platonism, were the great rivals of Christianity both in their cruder and in their more strictly religious forms. Superstition was extremely widespread, and wonder-workers of all kinds, whether imposters or honest exponents of some new faith, found their task easy through the credulity of the public. Babylonia was the home of magic, for charms are found on the oldest tablets. ‘Magos’ was originally applied to the priests of the Persians who overran Babylonia, but the title degenerated when it was assumed by baser persons for baser articles. Juvenal (vi.562, etc.), Horace (*Satires* i.2.1) and other Latin authors mention Chaldean astrologers and impostors, possibly Babylonian Jews. Many of the Magians, however, were the scientists of their day, the heirs of the science of Babylon and the lore of Persia, and not merely pretenders or conjurers...It may have been as the representative of some oriental system, a compound of ‘science’ and religion, that Bar-Jesus was attached to the company of Sergius Paulus.”¹⁶

The final, and perhaps most significant example, is that of Simon, a Samaritan, in Acts 8. He is customarily called Simon Magus as he was a magician. “He ‘believed’ as a result of Philip’s preaching there, though the real nature of his faith is not clear...He undoubtedly was especially impressed by the operation of divine power in Philip, a power that exceeded his own” (*NIDB*):¹⁷

“Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, ‘This man is what is called the Great Power of God.’ And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Yeshua the Messiah, they were being baptized, men and women alike. Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed” (Acts 8:9-13).

The Apostles Peter and John go to Samaria to see the work of the Lord being performed and they encounter Simon:

“Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Yeshua. Then they *began* laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity’” (Acts 8:14-23).

Simon Magus, believing that he could advance himself by performing the same kinds of miracles the Apostles did, actually believed that he could buy the Holy Spirit from them. Peter directly told him, “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!” (NIV). According to Church history, Simon did not go away. He apparently did establish a following that errantly influenced many as the gospel message spread abroad. Eusebius, an historian of the Fourth Century Church, has this to relate about Simon Magus in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

¹⁶ S.F. Hunter, “Bar-Jesus,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:431.

¹⁷ Peter Toon, “Simon,” in *NIDB*, 945.

“(1) THE FAITH OF OUR LORD and Savior Jesus Christ, having now been diffused abroad among all men, the enemy of salvation devising some scheme of seizing upon the imperial city for himself brought thither Simon, whom we mentioned before. Coming to the aid of his insidious artifices, he attached many of the inhabitants of Rome to himself in order to deceive them.

“(2) This is attested by Justin, who was one of our distinguished writers, not long after the times of the apostles, concerning whom I shall say what is necessary in the proper place. The reader may see for himself in the first defense of our religion, addressed to Antonine, where he wrote thus: (3): ‘And after the ascension of our Lord into heaven, certain men were suborned by demons as their agents, who said that they were gods. These were not only suffered to pass without persecution, but were even deemed worthy of honors by you. Simon, a certain Samaritan of the village called Githon, was one of the number, who, in the reign of Claudius Caesar, performed many magic rites by the operation of demons, was considered a god, in your imperial city of Rome, and was honored by you with a statue as a god, in the river Tiber, (on an island) between the two bridges, having the superscription in Latin, Simoni Deo Sancto, which is, To Simon the Holy God; (4) and nearly all the Samaritans, a few also of other nations, worship him, confessing him as the Supreme God” (2.13.1-4).¹⁸

According to this tradition, Simon, who was a Samaritan, was considered to be among the milieu of Jewish mystics practicing sorcery, came to Rome and was performing mighty deeds that were supernaturally empowered by demons. He came to be worshipped as a god by many of the Romans.

The Greek Mythos

Examining the religion of the Greeks, which many of the non-Jewish Believers came out of, can be extremely complicated, because it was not standardized to the same degree as Judaism, and there were many regional variants. Greek religion was a mix of various myths regarding the gods of Mount Olympus and their involvement with humanity, *and* the religious system as set forth by priests in the temples. Often times, the Greek gods embodied the same qualities as human beings themselves. *ISBE* summarizes,

“Like other ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples, the Greeks considered natural forces external to themselves to be divine. But, unlike many of those peoples, they came to conceive of natural powers in human form, with passions and experiences much like their own. They reduced their gods to a manageable number and pictured them as an extended family living on Mt. Olympus in northeastern Greece. Like the inhabitants of a Greek city-state, the gods engaged in interminable petty quarrels and infidelities. Although they had no real concern for humanity, occasionally some came down from their lofty home because of jealousy or fear of what human beings were doing or because of a petition expressed by someone on earth.”¹⁹

This same entry goes on and comments, “The truth is that the myths present Greek gods in many immoral or compromising situations. Zeus, e.g., is portrayed falling in love with numerous women and then resorting to a variety of tricks to hide his extramarital activities from his wife. Scholars commonly have explained such involvement by the fragmentation and fusion of Greek polytheism. Geographical and economic conditions tended to divide the Greeks into divergent cultural and religious groupings with slightly variant myths” (*ISBE*).²⁰

Greek religion, as it is attested, is complicated not because of the various myths surrounding them, but often because a story or myth was applied to a specific location in order to strengthen civil ties of the citizen:

“Religion was bound up with the life of the city-states early in Greek history. Although each city-state worshipped the whole pantheon, each tended to venerate a particular patron

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, in C.F. Cruse, trans, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), pp 47-48.

¹⁹ H.F. Vos, “Religions: Greco-Roman,” in *ISBE*, 4:107.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 4:109.

deity...State cults were established, so that religion became a social cement that bound the community together. Public officials led the ceremonies honoring the patron deity" (ISBE).²¹

An excellent example of this as attested to in the Scriptures is in Acts 19, when Paul's preaching the gospel to the Ephesians hurts the business of Demetrius, and Demetrius wants to stir up the mob against him. Demetrius sold silver emulates of the goddess Artemis, who was one of the local deities of the Ephesians. In Acts 19:28, 34, the mob against Paul cries out "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" This is only one of many examples indicating the regional nature of Greek religion.

While there were many variants of Greek religion, often determined by location, there were also many constants. The Greek gods were considered to have many of the same qualities as humans. The gods in mythology could get drunk, have sexual relations and affairs, lie, steal, and cheat. They were not all-powerful or omnipresent, and were represented in their temples by statues. Ancient history later reveals that the Romans basically adopted the Greek religious system, although some of the names of deities and their representations changed.

Just like Judaism had its mystics who used sorcery and divination, witchcraft was not unique to the Greek's religions, either. In Philippi, the Apostle Paul encounters a woman possessed by "a spirit of divination" or the spirit of Python.²² Even though what she says is true, Paul called her out as her power was from the demonic:

"And it came to pass in our going on to prayer, a certain maid, having a spirit of Python, did meet us, who brought much employment to her masters by soothsaying, she having followed Paul and us, was crying, saying, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who declare to us a way of salvation, who attest to the fact that he is a witness of the one true God'" (Acts 16:16-17, YLT).

Many non-Jews who came to faith in Messiah Yeshua in the First Century came out of this Greek religious system, and had once been under the influence of the various myths and would have been familiar with divination and spiritism.

The Roman religious system was very similar to that of the Greeks as Hellenism spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Romans adopted the same basic mythos behind their deities, although the names that the Romans used for their gods differed from that of the Greeks, being deeply rooted in magic:

"The earliest Roman religion was little more than magic or spirit worship. Believers in magic attributed to certain objects or actions the power to control nature or the actions of others...Over the centuries Roman deities were changed to resemble corresponding Greek gods and were represented by Greek cult statues" (ISBE).²³

The formalization of Roman religion, just like Greek religion, was done to primarily be a civil affair. Loyalty to and patriotism to the Roman state was partially determined by one's devotion to Rome's gods. However, with the transformation of the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire, another dimension of worship was added with the cult of the emperor, the pattern of which began with Augustus Caesar:

"Augustus had an ulterior motive for [his] religious refurbishing: to use religion as a political prop. Julius Caesar was deified and a temple built to him in the Forum where his funeral pyre had been. Augustus did not seek full deity for himself in Rome, but he called himself *divi filius*, son of the deified one" (ISBE).²⁴

Roman religion was more highly politicized than Greek religion, to give the people of the Italian peninsula something to rally themselves around, but basically it was the same as that of the Greeks. Worship of the emperor, in particular, as emperors would often be deified by the Roman Senate either during or after their reign, was something that came into direct conflict with First Century Judaism, and consequently Second-Third Century Christianity.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Grk. *pneuma puthōna* (πνεῦμα πύθωνα).

²³ Ibid, 4:111.

²⁴ Ibid.

Greek Philosophy

The second group related to the Greeks was that of the philosophers. Anyone who studies one of the social sciences today will no doubt be confronted with the sayings and writings of the classical Greek philosophers. Three of the main philosophers whose writings still influence many in the West today are Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as their philosophies permeate Western government and how we are to conduct ourselves as an orderly political society. Surprisingly, to some, much of Greek philosophy actually parallels what the Bible has to say, as far as inter-human relations are concerned, and how an upright and orderly person is to conduct himself in the world. The Greek philosophers, by-and-large, often in contrast to the dominant religion of their times, spoke against decadence and emphasized the responsibility of the individual to his or her fellow humans. However, it must be emphasized that there was a wide variance of Greek philosophers as well. Some of them had huge followings, and some of them only had followings of two or three.

In the Apostolic Scriptures, there are only two specifically recorded groups of Greek philosophers mentioned: the Epicureans and Stoics. Paul encounters them at the Aeropagus or Mars Hill in Athens:

“And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, ‘What would this idle babbler wish to say?’ Others, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Yeshua and the resurrection” (Acts 17:19).

The Epicureans and Stoics, debating among themselves, as was their usual practice, stumble upon Paul who was proclaiming the gospel message to those assembled. Not unlike the dominant Jewish groups of the time, they also had distinct philosophies that influenced the masses. The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus (341-260 B.C.E.). “He taught that nature rather than reason is the true reality; nothing exists but atoms and void...The chief purpose of man is to achieve happiness. He has free will to plan and live a life of pleasure” (NIDB).²⁵ Basically, the Epicureans believed in a life of no consequences, because their only existence was here on Earth and there was nothing else to look forward to but void. Man’s job was to please himself through whatever way possible, because he faced no retribution. The idea of any kind of afterlife or resurrection or eternal consequences was absolutely foreign to the Epicureans.

Stoicism had a much larger influence in the ancient world, “Boasting a galaxy of distinguished exponents, both Greek and Roman—e.g., Zeno, Cleanthes, Seneca, Cicero, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius...[Stoicism] held that fire is the ultimate substance with God, the active principle of the cosmos, permeating everything as a sort of soul. Nature, it taught, is a hierarchical unity controlled by the universal Logos, an impersonal reason at once immanent and divine. As participant in the Logos, man is also participant in deity” (NIDB).²⁶ Stoicism had some parallels with what the Bible teaches, but then many things not in common with Scripture as well. “[T]he Stoic ethic is egocentrically negative. Nothing lies within man’s power except imagination, desire, and emotion,” although, “Implicit in Stoicism...was the idea of a universal morality rooted in the universal Logos” (NIDB).²⁷ It would have been difficult to reach these people with the gospel message as well, as the Stoics would likely think that there was really no difference between their universal Logos, and the *devar Elohim* (דְּבַר אֱלֹהִים), the true Word of God, Yeshua (John 1:1), and between their universal morality and the message of the Scriptures. Unless God was truly wooing them, in their minds based on their moral experience they would have seen no need to change their ways. Do we not encounter people today who believe that they are “saved” because they are upstanding, moral people?

These are just two examples of the types of philosophies that probably influenced some of the new Believers coming out the mileu of the Greeks and the Romans. The Epicureans and Stoics just happen to be the ones mentioned in Scripture by name.

²⁵ Steven Barabas, “Epicureans,” in NIDB, 318.

²⁶ Vernon C. Grounds, “Stoicism,” in NIDB, 964.

²⁷ Ibid.

The Mystery Cults

The last, but most complicated group, was the many mystery cults that pervaded the ancient world. As their name suggests, they were **mystery** cults, and were by-and-large a **secret**, except to those who entered in. As we have examined thus far, the religious world of First Century Judaism, combined with that of the religion of the Greeks and Romans, and the Greek philosophers, is already complicated because many of us do not often consciously realize that the first Believers in Yeshua the Messiah, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, came out of these religious and philosophical backgrounds. Making it even more complex are the mystery cults.

NIDB comments that the mystery cults or mystery religions “were probably vestiges of earlier religions, maintaining themselves as secret societies after the introduction of the Olympian and other Indo-European deities, and ending after what seems a common social pattern, by winning their way with the conquered people.”²⁸ It goes on to say, “Little is known about the rites of worship and initiation, for the initiates seem to have been faithful in the keeping of their vows of secrecy.”²⁹

ABD has more to say about the mystery religions, saying, “Unlike official, public religions, in which people were expected to show outward allegiance to the gods and goddesses of the *polis*, or state, the mystery religions stressed an inwardness and privacy of worship within groups that were frequently close-knit and egalitarian. The devotees of the mysteries ordinarily shared in celebrations that were public in nature...as well as in secret ceremonies that remain largely unknown.”³⁰ *ISBE* adds that “The special appeal of the mystery religions was a threefold provision: a personal involvement, an emotional stimulation, and a promise of a future life—none of which the official cults could offer.”³¹

Of course, as with all counterfeit religious systems, there were some parallels with what these mystery cults advocated and with what the Scriptures tell us. In the Bible, we are told to look at the Creator God as our Heavenly Father, and it is in that context that we are to have a union with Him. But at the same time, the message of Scripture cannot just be appealing to our human emotions, as was the case with the mystery cults; it must likewise be appealing to our intellect, and indeed our whole being.

It is widely believed that the religious system known as Gnosticism developed from the many mystery religions that existed in the First Century. Gnosticism infected many in the Second and Third Century Christian Church, and is readily spoken against in the writings of the Church Fathers. Gnosticism “linked aspects of traditional Christianity with attractive ideas taken from Greek philosophy and Eastern religion, magic, and astrology” (*NIDB*).³² Gnosticism was the ultimate form of mixing the holy with the profane. The word “Gnosticism” is actually derived from the Greek verb *ginōskō* (γινώσκω), which simply means “to know.” However, the meaning that it has widely come to be associated with today relates to “secret knowledge,” very much emanating from the same spirit as the mystery religions or cults.

The other major competing influence with Gnosticism was that of Jewish mysticism. Gnosticism, for the most part, died out in the Fourth Century, as did its influence on parts of early Christianity, as attested by the historical writings of the Church Fathers. However, Jewish mysticism continued to live on, and now there is an attempt among many to revive both of them in today’s world.

The Required Repentance of the non-Jews

Examining the varied and complex religious backgrounds of those coming into the assembly of faith in the First Century can be confusing for some. But understanding it is necessary for properly understanding the Apostolic Scriptures. Many who enter into the Messianic

²⁸ Edward M. Blaiklock, “Mystery Religions,” in *Ibid.*, 685.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Marvin W. Meyer, “Mystery Religions,” in *ABD*, 4:941.

³¹ Vos, in *ISBE*, 4:113.

³² Peter Toon, “Gnosticism,” in *NIDB*, 393.

movement, unfortunately, only concentrate their area of study on the Torah and the Tanach, in an effort to more fully understand the Gospels and the sayings of Yeshua. They concentrate their efforts on studying First Century Israel and the writings of the Jewish Rabbis who were contemporaries of Yeshua, so they can see His Rabbinical teachings skills. While this is by no means something I discourage, it can be problematic when this is *all we do* because many of these same people have no idea how to properly interpret or answer criticisms to their Torah observance from the writings of the remainder of the New Testament, notably the Pauline Epistles. This is because their understanding of the larger First Century Greco-Roman world that Israel was a part of is **lacking**. What is ironic, is that often in criticizing the Greeks and the Romans, and sometimes even worse in criticizing the Spirit-inspired words of Paul and the other Apostles, they find themselves falling into the same traps that these anointed servants of God warned about.

By far, one of the most complicated issues that the First Century *ekklēsia* had to face was the inclusion of non-Jews into the assembly. We have just described in the previous sections some of the religious backgrounds that the non-Jews were coming out of as they embraced the good news of salvation in the Messiah of Israel. But what were they to do once they received salvation? Coming out of errant influences that were opposed and spoken against by the Hebrew Scriptures, how were they to come into fellowship with their Jewish brethren, who had been trained from childhood that sins such as fornication and idolatry were abominable in the eyes of the Creator? These are things that were capital crimes according to the Torah. How would the non-Jews coming out of Greco-Roman paganism be trained up in the truths of the Scriptures, the Tanach?

These were some of the issues that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 met to address, as they assembled to debate the issue of the inclusion of non-Jews into the assembly of Believers. Some of the Pharisees who believed in the Messiah said that they must be circumcised immediately, convert to Judaism, and then they could receive salvation. If you were in the First Century group of Believers, and had just come to saving faith in Yeshua, you would no doubt be confused.

James, the half-brother of Yeshua, summarily ruled the following concerning the non-Jews coming to faith:

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

The non-Jews coming to faith were required to do four things:

1. Abstain from idolatry and heathen worship (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7).
2. Abstain from fornication and sexual immorality (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10-21; Deuteronomy 5:18).
3. Abstain from non-kosher meat (Deuteronomy 14:2-20).
4. Abstain from blood (Deuteronomy 12:25-35).

When we put ourselves back in the First Century, and we understand the Greco-Roman religious background that most of these non-Jews were coming out of, it only makes perfect sense for them to begin their walk of faith by adopting these four things. Much of what we consider Greco-Roman “mythology” as demonstrated by literary works such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or Virgil’s *Aeneid*, had been the “theology” of these non-Jews entering into the assembly. The need for them to be properly disciplined and trained in the truths of the Scriptures cannot be overstated. They needed to be properly instructed in what the God of Israel considered acceptable and unacceptable, so they could cast off their former way of life in paganism. These four things, in perspective to their former religion, were:

1. Abstinence from idolatry and heathen worship directly related to the worship of idols, and the participation in the various temples of worship, be they focused around regional deities, or more widely known deities.

2. Abstinance from fornication and sexual immorality did not just relate to sex before marriage, extra-marital affairs, or homosexuality, but also directly related to temple prostitution, a common way to worship Greco-Roman gods.
3. Abstinance from non-kosher meat, animals that were strangled, related to the fact that the non-Jews were expected to eat kosher.
4. Abstinance from blood related to the fact that the non-Jews were expected to stay away from blood and that their meat was to be slaughtered properly, i.e., in a kosher method with the blood drained.

When they adhered to these four requirements, the non-Jews would then be fit to go into the synagogues and hear Moses taught. The reference to Moses in v. 21 is a reference to the Torah. The new non-Jewish Believers did not have to have Torah obedience “forced” upon them. Rather, after being saved, they would be expected to go to the local synagogue and hear the Scriptures. As they would grow and mature in their faith, Torah obedience would come naturally. It is important to understand that the only Scriptures in existence at the time were the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and the only copies of them were available at the Synagogue.

When we understand the religious backgrounds that the non-Jews of the First Century were coming out of, the ruling of the Jerusalem Council should be quite apparent. The non-Jewish Believers were coming out of paganism and needed to be properly trained in what the God of Israel considered proper and improper conduct. However, as should be expected, in the Apostolic Scriptures we see that as many new, non-Jewish Believers received Yeshua and began to be trained in their walk of faith, errant influences crept into the assembly. Some of these errant influences directly related to the mystery religions and cults previously described.

The Galatian Heresy

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians is estimated to have been written anywhere from 48-59 C.E., either right before or right after the Jerusalem Council’s ruling in Acts 15 (usually dated about 49 C.E.) that the non-Jews were to go to the Synagogue to hear the Torah or Law of Moses taught. Historically, Galatians has been interpreted by most Christian theologians as being a treatise against the Torah. However, Paul’s letter to the assemblies of Galatia can be easily understood as an appeal to their good sense and an admonition to them not to take their focus off the Messiah. When we view it from the perspective that,

1. Paul says that Yeshua’s words are primary (1 Timothy 6:3-5), and Yeshua said that the Torah will not pass away (Matthew 5:17-19)
2. Paul is a trained Rabbi, a student of Gamaliel, and a Pharisee (Acts 5:34; 22:3)
3. The Jerusalem Council (later) ruled in Acts 15 that the non-Jews coming to faith were to go to the Synagogue to hear the Torah, hence Torah observance would come as they grew and matured in their faith
4. The issue that the Galatians faced was that circumcision and Torah observance—ritual proselyte conversion—were required, for salvation and acceptance among God’s community

These are four things that are recognized by all conservative Messianic Bible teachers, who believe that the Torah is still to be followed today. The Galatians were being influenced by the Judaizers, a group of people who said that you must be circumcised *and* keep the Law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1). Many in the congregations of Galatia were being errantly influenced to believe this, and were straying from the path of simple trust in the Messiah. It got so serious that Paul said, “You have been severed from Messiah, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4). Notice that the issue was not the morality of the Torah, nor the high standard of God in the Torah; the issue was how it was being used. The foolish Galatians thought that they would be forgiven and saved by God by just keeping the Torah’s commandments as was promoted by those leading them astray.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing statements made by the Apostle Paul in his entire letter to the Galatians appears in Galatians 6:13: “For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.” This relates to the motivations of the Judaizers who were errantly influencing the Galatians. He basically says that they do not even keep the Torah that they claim to uphold. Why would this be the case? Is not circumcision a part of the Torah? It is. And circumcision should be practiced, provided that it is a part of one’s maturation in the faith, as opposed to being forced on anyone.³³ The Judaizers could only be violating the Torah if they were using the platform of “Torah observance” to bring in outside errant influences that were contrary, and indeed opposed, by the Torah.

Two of the most misconstrued verses in Paul’s entire epistle are Galatians 4:10-11: “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” These verses are often interpreted as meaning that the Apostle Paul is deathly afraid for the Galatian Believers, because they were keeping the appointed times of Leviticus 23. But in vs. 8-9 he prefaces these comments by saying, “However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?” In referencing “days and months and seasons and years,” Paul asks, “how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?” (RSV). This is in reference “to those who by nature are not gods” (NIV). The Galatians were actually returning back to practices that somehow mirrored those things that they practiced in Greco-Roman paganism.³⁴ The worthless, elemental things, cannot be the ways of the God of Israel as expressed in the Torah.

But how can this be the case? Were not the Judaizers forcing the Law of Moses onto the Galatians? Yes and no. They were forcing the Torah onto the Galatians, but they were accused by Paul of not even keeping the Torah themselves. Specifically, Paul warned the Galatians, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8). Paul warns against anyone bringing in or teaching another gospel message. The specific reason why he warned against this may surprise you.

IVPBBC speculates that this may be because “Some Jewish mystics of the period claimed revelations from angels,”³⁵ a reference to those bringing in the “different gospel” or “so-called ‘Good News’” (CJB). If the Judaizers were indeed Jewish mystics, then in fact the “days and months and seasons and years” mentioned in Galatians 4 that the Galatians were “returning” to, would likely have been related to astrology and the occult. It would make perfect sense for Paul to say that those who were forcing the Galatians to be circumcised did not even keep the Torah, because what Jewish mysticism stands for is directly opposed and in violation of the Torah itself. Paul’s letter to the Galatians takes almost an entirely new approach when viewed in the light that the Judaizers errantly influencing the Galatians were somehow practitioners of Jewish mysticism.

The Galatian heresy was something that was much, much more than just the Judaizers influencing a group of young, naïve Believers who were being trained in a Torah foundation. The Judaizers used the platform of “Torah observance” to promote errant beliefs relating to Jewish mysticism. It was for this reason that the Apostle Paul denounced those influencing the Galatians as not keeping the Torah.³⁶

³³ Note that the Patriarch Abraham was called into covenant with God while uncircumcised. It was not until a later point in his trek of faith that he was circumcised. Similarly, it does not matter if a person is called into saving faith in Messiah Yeshua circumcised or uncircumcised. However, circumcision should be practiced as a part of one’s continuance in the faith. Consult the editor’s article “Is Circumcision for Everyone?” for a further discussion.

³⁴ Consult the comments of Samuel J. Mikolaski, “Galatians,” in D. Guthrie., et. al., *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p 1100, which reflect this interpretation.

³⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 520.

³⁶ For a further and more detailed discussion of this, consult the editor’s commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

The Colossian Heresy

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians was written in about 60-62 C.E. As with all of his epistles, Paul admonishes the Colossians for errors circulating in their midst and strongly encourages them to recognize the Messiah as the center of their faith. It is widely believed among expositors that the Colossian heresy, the error that was infecting the Believers at Colossae, was that of Gnosticism. The *NIV Study Bible* comments that "the seeds of what later became the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century were present in the first century and already making inroads into churches."³⁷ As previously discussed, the Gnostic sects were a mix of Greco-Roman religion, and beliefs from the mystery cults, Jewish mysticism, and Eastern religion. These sorts of philosophies were errantly influencing the Colossians and led to superstition and theologies that were taking them off the proper path.

The most quintessential verse in Paul's letter to the Colossians is Colossians 2:8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah." This is a direct reference to errant philosophies and teachings that were not originating with the Bible or with God. Keener states that "Because philosophy of this period grappled especially with moral and ethical issues, new Christians in the culture now struggling with the same questions would naturally be interested in philosophers' ideas" (*IVPBBC*).³⁸ Paul follows his warning against worldly philosophies with the words, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9), a direct reference to the Divinity of the Messiah. Whatever these philosophies were, they were leading people off the path of faith and from believing that Yeshua was God in the flesh.

Some use Paul's words in Colossians 2 as a treatise against the Torah and against keeping the appointed times and dietary laws. Vs. 16-17 say "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (ESV). Of course, in light of the Colossians being persuaded *against* things of the Lord, and the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council ruling of the non-Jews going to the Synagogue, what is actually being stated here is that the Colossians were not to take judgment by others *for keeping these things*. The appointed times of the Lord are not vain philosophies and human traditions designed to lead people away from believing that Yeshua is God in the flesh. Rather, the substance of the appointed times is found in the Messiah, and they all point to who He is and what He has done for us.

The Colossians were being errantly influenced by worldly philosophies, many of which seem to be represented by teachings that would later classify as being a part of Gnosticism. One of the gross errors of Gnosticism was the teaching that what one did in the body, physically, did not affect a person spiritually. It is with this in mind that the Apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). These were some of the sins that were no doubt being practiced by those who were influenced by the errors of early Gnosticism. While indeed Paul prefaces his comments with "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2), this does not all of a sudden mean that sins committed in our physical bodies do not affect us spiritually or our rewards (or punishment) in the hereafter.

While Gnosticism did die out by the Fourth Century, and did not have the type of influence on early Christianity as it could have had, ironically, there are people today who embrace some Gnostic ideas, while not even realizing it. The principle error of Gnosticism was the gross separation between physical and spiritual. There are people who consider themselves Believers today, who do not think it matters what they do with their physical bodies. They consider their faith secure because they prayed a prayer asking God to forgive them of their sins,

³⁷ Kenneth L. Barker, ed. et al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1851.

³⁸ Keener, 575.

and they feel so secure about it, so that when they sin again they feel no need to repent or ask God for any kind of forgiveness. Paul spoke against these attitudes, by saying that the deeds of the flesh were to be put to death in our physical bodies.

Gnosticism was the major competing influence with Jewish mysticism in the First Century. But while Gnosticism submerged into obscurity, Jewish mysticism continued to flourish.

The Errors Circulating Today

There are many theological errors and teachings circulating throughout the Messianic movement designed to get people off the narrow way of coming into greater maturation in their relationship with the Lord. This is certainly not something new, as since the First Century the enemy has done his best to get people coming into the community of faith off track and away from Yeshua. Sadly, though, many of the errors that are circulating today directly relate to the same religious errors and outside influences that were disturbing the Galatians and Colossians, through the propagation of mystic and Gnostic beliefs. The Apostle John plainly warns us, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). We always have to test what is being circulated and what people are doing against or with the Word of God, and see whether or not it has any substantial basis.

As Believers in the Messiah of Israel, we know that our ultimate loyalty is to Him, to our salvation experience, and to the instructions that He has given us in the pages of the Bible. Anything else that is outside the Bible must be viewed with some caution, especially if the fruit of such things is taking people away from their faith in Yeshua. In Galatia, Paul warned against those who preached “another gospel,” presumably by the Judaizers who were teaching Jewish mysticism. In Colossae, Paul warned against those teaching vain human philosophies leading people away from believing that Yeshua was God Incarnate.

It should be no surprise for us at all, especially if we are living in the Last Days, to see the errors that were going on in the First Century *ekklēsia*. However, we have one advantage over those who lived in the First Century. We have the advantage of looking at the Apostolic Scriptures, seeing what happened in the Book of Acts and Pauline Epistles, and heeding the warnings described by them so that we not fall prey to the enemy. The Prophet Daniel says of the end-time saints, “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). This insight that Daniel speaks of must be the Divine insight of God that leads people into righteousness—and by no means should it lead people away from Him.

Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism

The first major error that is being circulated in various sectors of the Messianic community today, and is tickling many unsuspecting ears, comes in the form of Messianic Bible teachers who promote Jewish mysticism. Specifically, they teach from what is called Kabbalah. While it has existed in various “primitive” forms, Jewish mysticism was a major competing outside influence with Gnosticism in the First Century. But while Gnosticism became relatively dormant by the Fourth Century, Jewish mysticism continued to develop and actually became a formalized area of Judaism by the Twelfth Century. *The Jewish Study Bible* notes that “Kabbalah taught that God was inaccessible through direct experience, and could only be apprehended through emanations of the Godhead; Torah in kabbalistic teaching had a hidden meaning, and meditation on texts was a method of ascent to a mystical vision.”³⁹ One of the primary thrusts of Jewish mysticism was to view the Hebrew Scriptures as esoteric and try to find a hidden meaning behind everything. Consequently, many superstitions morphed into what we now call Kabbalah. “Kabbalah’ is the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th

³⁹ Berlin and Brettler, 2132.

century onward" (*EJ*).⁴⁰ *Everyman's Talmud*, a condensed collection of writings from the Jewish Rabbis over the centuries, comments,

"The Talmud reveals very clearly a conflict between the pure, rational doctrines of the Bible and the debased beliefs and superstitions which pervaded the world in which the Jews lived. The Scriptures vehemently denounced every kind of magical practice and all attempts to pierce the veil which conceals the future from human men by means of divination. We see several Rabbis, particularly in the early period, waging a brave fight to stem the tide of sorcery which threatened their community, but in vain. In the later period even Rabbis succumbed, and credulity prevailed over faith."⁴¹

At first, the study and practice of Kabbalah in Judaism was not popular. It arose during a time in the Middle Ages when superstition and myth saturated much of Europe. While the formalization of Jewish mysticism for the most part began in Muslim Spain where Jews were not as influenced by Christian European superstitions, Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike were nevertheless infected by superstitious beliefs, and mysticism was by no means limited to just Judaism. During this same period, Muslim mysticism, Sufism, also arose, and superstitious beliefs regarding Biblical saints or Biblical characters was affluent throughout Catholicism. As *EJ* notes, "there are elements common to Kabbalah and both Greek and Christian mysticism, and even historical links between them."⁴²

During the Twelfth Century, the primary texts and mythos surrounding Kabbalah were formulated. Many of these texts attest to this form of "communicating with God" going all the way back to Abraham, or perhaps even much farther to prior to the Noahdic Flood. True communion with God is described as something that is simply unattainable by mankind, and so humans must use esoteric and mystical methods to commune with Him. These include radical re-interpretations of the Scriptures, taking entire portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps putting pages of the Bible through some kind of numerical chart to determine one's future, and even using séance-type techniques to communicate with the Higher Power. Certainly, while the study of Jewish mysticism is very complex, when one with a discerning eye looks at some of the practices of them, immediately the Holy Spirit inside the person should be convicting him or her that this is wrong. Consider this rather forthright description of Kabbalah from *EJ* regarding its origins:

"From the beginning of its development, the Kabbalah embraced an esotericism closely akin to the spirit of Gnosticism, one which was not restricted to instruction in the mystical path but also included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic. Only later, and as a result of the contact with medieval Jewish philosophy, the Kabbalah became a Jewish 'mystical theology,' more or less systematically elaborated. This process brought about a separation of the mystical, speculative elements from the occult and especially the magical elements, a divergence that at times was quite distinct but was never total...There is no doubt that some kabbalistic circles (including those in Jerusalem up to modern times) preserved both elements in their secret doctrine, which could be acquired by means of revelation or by way of initiation rites."⁴³

This Jewish source sums up what Kabbalah is all about quite well. It says it comes out of an esoteric strain of thought "akin to the spirit of Gnosticism," which "included ideas on cosmology, angelology, and magic." It says that there are many elements in Kabbalah that come straight from the occult. Does Kabbalah sound like something that would be supported by Scripture, or condemned by Scripture? Would one practicing Kabbalah be subject to the penalty of practicing divination and witchcraft? Certainly, according to Leviticus 20:27 if a person becomes a medium or spiritist, he or she would be subject to the Torah's capital punishment.

Interestingly enough, under its entry for "Sorcery," *EJ* tells us that "While there is no information about the measure of law enforcement in this field in talmudic and pre-talmudic

⁴⁰ Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah (J. mysticism)" in *EJ*.

⁴¹ Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp 274-275.

⁴² Scholem, "Kaballah (J. mysticism)," in *EJ*.

⁴³ *Ibid*.

times, it seems certain that this branch of the law fell into disuse in the Middle Ages. Superstitions of all kinds not only flourished and were tolerated, but found their way even into the positive law (see YD 179, *passim*, for at least eight instances). **What became known as ‘practical Kabbalah’ is, legally speaking, sorcery at its worst.**⁴⁴ This same entry goes on and says, “The penal provisions relating to sorcery are a living illustration of the unenforceability of criminal law (whether divine or human) which is out of tune with the practices and concepts of the people. In modern Israel law, witchcraft and related practices are instances of unlawful false pretenses for obtaining money or credit (Penal Law Amendment (Deceit, Blackmail, and Extortion), Law, 5723–1963).”⁴⁵ While attesting to the fact that proper punishment upon those practicing Kabbalah was not readily enforced in Judaism, it is nevertheless illegal in modern Israel to use witchcraft as a means for advancing oneself.

Unfortunately, today, as many people enter into the Messianic movement, some accept the teachings of Judaism without question, not understanding Jewish history (or for that same matter Christian history), and have little understanding that Judaism has its divisions and errors just as Christianity does. Many who accept the study and practice of Kabbalah as being valid for their “Biblical faith” do not understand its occultic origins, which are readily documented by Jewish sources. In fact, few realize that when the Chassidic movement arose in Eastern Europe in the Seventeenth Century, that it was opposed as heretical by many of the Jews in Eastern Europe. One of the reasons that it was opposed by the mainline Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe was because these Ashkenazics had brought in an influence that had mostly remained confined to Sephardic Jews, and they recognized and identified it as being in violation of the Torah. In fact, it has even been documented that some of the early Chassidic leaders practiced magic:

“Some 19th-century scholars described modern Hasidism, founded by Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, as a prime example of magic and superstition...[M]any leaders of the hasidic movement believed in magic and practiced it, especially in giving amulets (the Ba'al Shem Tov himself dealt in magic and probably made his living as a popular healer and magician)...” (*EJ*).⁴⁶

However, in total fairness, this same entry does note that “the vast homiletic literature which describes its ideology, is devoid of all magic elements.” It goes on to say that “The difference between the ‘practical tradition’ of Hasidism, which practiced magic, and the ‘ideological (theoretical) tradition’ of the movement is probably more pronounced in modern Hasidism than in any other mystic movement” (*EJ*).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, these sorts of attestations as to what the Chassidic movement and Chabad are based on should make us be suspect of considering their theology and whether or not it has validity to Messianics today. Many unsuspecting Messianics do not know these things, and do not know the fact that the Chassidic movement includes some of the most avid practitioners of Jewish mysticism.

But what is some of the errant and dangerous theological influence that is seeping into the Messianic community today from the study and practice of Jewish mysticism?

A specific area that has infected many areas of Messianic theology, that the majority who use it probably do not know comes from Kabbalah, is the usage of PaRDeS (פַּרְדֵּס) in Biblical interpretation. PaRDeS is an acronym describing what are often referred to as the so-called “four levels of Hebraic interpretation.” It is “a Late Biblical Hebrew word borrowed from Persian, meaning ‘park, garden, orchard.’ It was later employed as an acronym for the four levels of meaning in Scripture according to the *Zohar*: *peshat* (contextual sense), *remez* (allegorical sense), *derash* (homiletical sense), and *sod* (mystical sense).”⁴⁸ Many Messianics believe that employing PaRDeS is a proper way to interpret Scripture, not knowing that it comes directly from Jewish mysticism. The PaRDeS hermeneutic was widely used by Kaballists as *EJ* attests:

⁴⁴ Haim Hermann Cohn, “Sorcery,” in *EJ*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

⁴⁶ Joseph Dan, “Magic,” in *EJ*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*.

⁴⁸ Berlin and Brettler, 2136.

“The *peshat*, therefore, which was taken to include the corpus of talmudic law as well, was only the Torah's outermost aspect, the ‘husk’ that first met the eye of the reader. The other layers revealed themselves only to that more penetrating and latitudinous power of insight which was able to discover in the Torah general truths that were in no way dependent on their immediate literal context. Only on the level of *sod* did the Torah become a body of mystical symbols which unveiled the hidden life-processes of the Godhead and their connections with human life.”⁴⁹

Interpreting Scripture from the method of PaRDeS often robs the Bible from its straightforward meaning, because the *sod* or hidden level is considered the ultimate as it is mystical and enables us to understand the so-called secrets of God. While so-called *sod* level interpretations have been able to tickle the ears of many in the Messianic movement, they often subtract the value of the Biblical text and its practical application for modern life. No longer do we have people examining the Tanach for what it is as narrative, history, prophecy, and wisdom literature, but people are searching it for hidden meanings. This means that when David struck down Goliath with a sling and five smooth stones, we cannot accept the text as meaning what it says, as there has to be a hidden, esoteric meaning behind it. Even worse, PaRDeS has been applied to parts of the Apostolic Scriptures by some Messianics, for which it has no remote context. Messianics who employ PaRDeS often fail to look at the New Testament for what it is as Gospels, history, and epistles. When Yeshua and His Disciples walk down a road together, it can no longer be treated as them walking down a road. What this does to us in the long run is reveal our inadequacy for using standardized hermenutics which examine literary structures in a Biblical text, taking into examination texts as a whole and its source language(s), in addition to required historical background information. Author Tim Hegg makes the following valid remarks in his workbook *Interpreting the Bible*:

“It is therefore a mistake to think that such a hermeneutic was in place in the 1st Century, or somehow that Yeshua and His Apostles would have interpreted the Scriptures from this vantage point. To postulate such a scenario would be entirely anachronistic.

“Further the PaRDeS schema undermines all sound hermenutics, and divests the text of its literary meaning. Such the Pashat is considered to be the ‘surface’ or plain sense, this is considered less than significant for the true *chagam* or Sage. It is only when one arrives at the *sod*, the mysterious and mystical sense found through subjective criteria, that the text gives up its treasures. Such an approach simply combines a full-blown mysticism with a kind of ‘sensus plenior,’ leaving the text entirely manipulated by the interpreter, and thus unable accurately to bear the author’s meaning. **Such a hermeneutic should be avoided at all costs.**”⁵⁰

It has been our ministry’s experience that most Messianics who employ a PaRDeS hermeneutic are unaware of its origins in Jewish mysticism, so they are using it “in ignorance,” per se. However, we must point out that those who believe that a mystical level of interpretation is the pinnacle of Biblical examination are often making the mistake of trying to find hidden meanings in Scripture when the answers we need are often right before us in plain sight.

One heretical teaching that can be directly documented as coming straight from Jewish mysticism, and that finds some validation in PaRDeS, is that of the “Greater and Lesser YHWH.” This teaching attempts to explain the co-existence of the Father and the Son, and how God the Father and God the Son can both co-exist, yet both be separate, and at the same time not sound like any teaching of “Christianity.” What is interesting is that it has some now denying Biblical monotheism and embracing a belief in “two gods.”⁵¹ Rather than letting Scripture define the Godhead, the plurality and oneness of God, and how the Father and Son are separate yet of the same Divine substance, proponents of this error have had to bring in errant influences straight from extra-Biblical literature and Jewish mysticism. The belief that “the lesser YHWH” is the Son

⁴⁹ Scholem, “Kabbalah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*.

⁵⁰ Tim Hegg, *Interpreting the Bible* (Tacoma: TorahResource, 2000), 90.

⁵¹ Consult the article “The Greater and Lesser YHVH Heresy” by Tim Hegg, for a more detailed theological analysis of the Kabbalistic background behind this errant teaching, available for download at <www.torahresource.org>.

is “only a Scriptural concept” as some proponents might say is confounded, because as *EJ* candidly states, it comes right out of Jewish mysticism, and is also embraced by the Gnostics:

“At the beginning of the tannaitic period speculations are found concerning the angel who bore within him the name of God Himself, the angel Yahoel, who occupies a dominant position in the Apocalypse of Abraham. Everything said here of Yahoel was transferred in another circle to Metatron, to whom the mystics assigned many other secret names, most important of which were Yahoel and ‘the lesser YHWH.’ While traditions concerning Yahoel and the lesser YHWH reappeared in different forms among the Gnostics, the subject of Metatron remained confined to Jewish circles for a long time. Metatron also took upon himself several of the duties of the angel Michael, and from the amoraic period onward he was identified with the ‘prince of the world.’”⁵²

We have to be extremely cautious of teachings circulating in our midst, and if someone is bringing Kabbalah into our assemblies, he or she must be stopped. The origins of Kabbalah are not Biblical, and they lie with the occult and practices which are distinctly classified in the Bible as being divination. Divination is punishable by death according to the Scriptures (Exodus 22:18; cf. Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-12). The Book of Revelation says that “the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons **and sorcerers** and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (21:8), plainly attesting that those who practice sorcery, esoterism, asceticism, or anything related will be eternally separated from God. While some of these mystical teachings might sound good, and might tickle our ears, their origin is not the Holy Scriptures.

We as Believers are always called to test the fruit of something, to see if that fruit be good and wholesome, and that the fruit is leading into a greater and better relationship with the Lord. We also have to be very careful with the company that we keep. The Apostle Paul writes, “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). Right now as I write this article, the study of Kabbalah has actually become quite popular among some Hollywood celebrities. The most notable celebrity who has embraced Kabbalah has been Madonna. An article entitled “Madonna adopts kabbalah and a new wave of controversy,” appearing in the 26 July, 2004 edition of the *Houston Chronicle*, reports,

“On a recent news-magazine show, she discussed her interest in kabbalah and how she has adopted a Hebrew name, Esther. She has worn a red string on her wrist to ward off the ‘evil eye,’ and used sacred prayer accessories and symbolic Hebrew letters in music videos and concerts...Madonna is a student of the Kabbalah Centre, a worldwide education organization...The center does not require students to be Jewish, and the study can be incorporated into any faith, said Robin Davis, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles-based organization.”⁵³

We know that the influence that this one celebrity has had on modern-day America, and indeed the world, has been anything but positive. The same can easily be said with some of the other celebrities who are likewise investigating Kabbalah. Is this just a passing fad for them, or is it something more permanent? Regardless of whether it is a passing fad or not, we do know that such celebrities have experimented with various religions, specifically those relating to New Age and the occult, and Kabbalah is of the same spirit as these things are. The Scriptures plainly warn us, “examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

Numerology

One of the areas that has its roots in Jewish mysticism is numerology. Each Hebrew letter of the *alef-bet* (and each Greek letter for that same matter) has a numerical value. This is because in ancient times letters were used to represent numerical values. The Romans had a more streamlined system, with only using a handful of letters of the Roman alphabet for numbers. From

⁵² Scholem, “Kabbalah (J. mysticism),” in *EJ*.

⁵³ Tara Dooley (2004). *Madonna adopts Kabbalah and new wave of controversy*, 27 July, 2004. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved 10 October, 2004, from <<http://www.religionnewsblog.com>>.

a purely practical perspective, using letters as numbers in day-to-day activities and normal arithmetic was not something odd or strange for the Ancient Hebrews, or those of other societies whose letters were used for numerical values.

Numerology, however, is an issue that has arisen with looking at the numerical values of words in Scripture. In other words, taking the numerical values of each letter of a Hebrew or Greek word, adding it up, and then trying to derive some theological meaning behind it. While it may reveal some interesting things, conclusions drawn by people are often questionable. This is because among proponents interpreting Scripture via Gematria, the usage of Biblical letters as numbers, is often used first, as opposed to examining a Hebrew or Greek word in linguistic and historical context, using a wide array of scholarly Hebrew and Greek lexicons, Biblical dictionaries, Biblical encyclopedias, and well-respected commentaries. This is not to say that there are not numerical patterns in the Scriptures, but it is to say that before we examine numerical values or numerical patterns, we must first have a very clear understanding of the Biblical text we are trying to interpret, from a contextual, linguistic, and historical perspective.

ISBE describes Gematria as a “peculiar form of numerology...used for the interpretation of the Scriptures in later Judaism and adopted by some early Christians....The method employed the numerical values of the letters of the alphabet to find hidden meaning in scriptural passages.”⁵⁴ This is an area of Scriptural interpretation that has been used by many practicing Jewish mysticism. “Cabalistic literature carries the unlimited possibilities of this method to incredible extremes” (*ISBE*).⁵⁵ Gematria has not only been used by those practicing mysticism, but also by those trying to use numbers in the Bible to predict the future. This might not just be predicting the future for oneself, and what one can expect for one’s life, but predicting and forecasting certain global-changing events. In many cases Gematria has been used for fortune telling, which is a capital offense in the Torah. While there are numerical patterns in the Scriptures, numerical patterns in the Bible are *not* primary to Scriptural texts exegeted for what they say in the plain Hebrew or Greek as their original authors communicated them.

This same entry in *ISBE* quoted goes on to say that “The only clear example of a biblical writer’s use of gematria is the mysterious number of the beast, 666.”⁵⁶ Revelation 13:18 is one of the most fiercely debated passages today in Bible prophecy: “Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.”

How many people who study and examine prophecy have claimed to know the “true identity” of the antimessiah/antichrist and know a person whose name adds up to 666? How many have actually claimed to be that “man of wisdom” mentioned in this verse? How many theories have been espoused about who the man of lawlessness is that have later proven to be erroneous?

Historically, many expositors have believed that the individual referenced in Revelation 13:18 was Nero Caesar. But that precludes that the Book of Revelation is not futuristic in its scope, and is only speaking of the past. Revelation is widely agreed to have been written in about 90 C.E. during the reign of Dometian, whereas Nero lived from only 37-68 C.E.

Furthermore, in very recent days there has been some debate among textual critics as to whether or not 666 is the correct reading in extant Greek texts of Revelation. An article entitled “666 wrong number of prophetic beast?” appearing in the 08 May, 2005 edition of WorldNetDaily remarks,

“While many Bible have footnotes saying the number translated from the original Greek could be 616, experts say new photographic evidence of an ancient fragment of papyrus from Revelation indeed indicates the number is indeed 616, instead of 666.

“Scholars in England have been using modern technology to scour some 400,000 bits of papyri which were originally discovered in 1895 at a dump outside the ancient Egyptian city of

⁵⁴ B.C. Birch, “Number,” in *ISBE*, 3:560.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Oxyrhynchus. Many of the sections have been damaged and discolored, but an imaging process is shedding new light on the sacred text, believed to have originally been penned by John, one of Jesus' 12 apostles."⁵⁷

This information may not be that substantial in the long run, but if the prophesied antimessiah/antichrist has his name add up to 616, *instead of* 666, then what it means is that some prophecy teachers expecting a certain political leader to be the person may be deeply disappointed.⁵⁸

The fact that the only specific mention of Gematria in the Bible is in the prophecy of confirming who the antimessiah/antichrist should be disturbing. What if the antimessiah himself is a mystic, and his fellow mystics somehow identify him as "anointed" via the number 666 (or 616)? There are some in the Messianic community today using Gematria to interpret Scripture, as opposed to looking at the Bible in its clear, contextual, cultural, and historical context. This is problematic. While there are numerical patterns in the Scriptures, they should only be examined after examining what the Bible says first, and its personal application to our lives, lest we run the risk of "running numbers" and fall into a dangerous game of trying to forecast the future.

Hebrew Letter Pictures

The final specific area of Jewish mystical thought that has errantly influenced some in the Messianic community is that of Hebrew letter pictures. While it can be an interesting study for some, and it tickles many ears, the source of some of these spiritual lessons is questionable. Some of you may be familiar with teachings associated with Hebrew letter pictures in passing. Basically, what is advocated is that each letter of the Hebrew *alef-bet* has significance. It has significance in that it has a numeric value, and that the picture of the letter itself means something. On the surface, this may not seem to be much of a problem. But when it comes to credible Scriptural exegesis and examination of Biblical texts, it can become a serious problem.

How are we to properly understand the Hebrew Scriptures and words of the Tanach? Obviously, in order to properly understand them we must have, at the very least, a working knowledge of the Hebrew language. We must know Hebrew from a *linguistic standpoint*, inasmuch that we know how to read Hebrew, form simple sentences in Hebrew, know what Hebrew nouns, verbs, and adjectives are, and know what the linguistic meanings of these words are. We must be able to look at Hebrew words in passages of Scripture and see how they are used in other passages of Scripture, to determine their correct Biblical meaning. At times, it may be useful to consult ancient Bible translations like the Greek Septuagint, the Aramaic Targums, or the Latin Vulgate, to see how various Hebrew words were translated into other languages, to gain a fuller theological perspective. And perhaps most importantly as it relates to this subject matter, there are at our disposal an entire array of scholarly Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons, produced at universities and by scholars whose mastery of the Hebrew language and related subjects has enabled them to produce the needed theological resources that today's Bible students need for proper examination and interpretation of the Scriptures.

People examining Hebrew letter pictures seem to forget this. While many do not have an ability to read Hebrew, they are often content with the poor theological resource that *Strong's Concordance* is,⁵⁹ they will look up a Hebrew word in *Strong's Concordance*, and then finding out how it is spelled in Hebrew, proceed to determine its theological meaning on the basis of Hebrew letter pictures. It seems, at least to me, that more complete Hebrew language tools used by Bible students today, such as the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Koehler

⁵⁷ 666 wrong number of prophetic beast?, 08 May, 2005. *WorldNetDaily*. Retrieved 08 May, 2005, from <<http://www.worldnetdaily.com>>.

⁵⁸ The textual variant of 616 instead of 666 may have been the result of some early Christian communities believing that Nero Caesar was the antichrist, whose name can apparently add up to both 616 and 666. Consult pp. 749-750 of *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament* (third edition) by Bruce M. Metzger (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975).

⁵⁹ Consult the editor's article "Getting Beyond Strong's Concordance."

and Baumgartner, and the presently 14-volume *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*—standard tools used by **all theologians today**—widely available and relatively inexpensive (with the exception of the *TDOT*), based on Hebrew lexicography and how the Hebrew language is used in Biblical and related texts, are cast aside in favor of this “new interpretation.”

But where does this “new interpretation” of Hebrew words come from? If we cast aside the premise of interpreting the Hebrew language (or any language for that matter) from the basis of how words are used linguistically in (Biblical) documents, then where are we to get the meanings of the Hebrew letters? Do the meanings come from the Scriptures themselves, or do they come from outside sources? Not surprisingly, they come from the latter, rather than the former.

The primary basis of each Hebrew letter having spiritual significance comes from a saying in the Talmud in *b.Berachot* 55a, “Bezalel knew how to combine the letters by which the heavens and earth were created. It is written here, and He hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding, and in knowledge.” This saying of the Jewish Rabbis related to the construction of the Tabernacle and how Bezalel was able to use Hebrew letters to create the Tabernacle in the same way that Heaven and Earth were created—so the Rabbis say. As stated, “The Talmudic exegesis goes on to demonstrate Bezalel’s prowess by showing that he possessed a degree of wisdom similar to that with which God created the universe.”⁶⁰ The problem with this is obvious; the Bible itself says no such thing. Genesis chapter 1 just tells us that God created the world. As Believers, we are called to accept this on the basis of faith, and we are to accept the fact that the world has a Divine origin and design. This design of the world far exceeds anything contained or represented by the Hebrew *alef-bet*, or any other alphabet for that matter, or for that matter any genetic code or engineering blueprint.

What is disturbing is where the theological meanings of the Hebrew letters come from, meanings being applied by some in the Messianic community today. We should be very skeptical of an interpretational method that is often being employed *before* Hebrew words are examined in their linguistic context in the Scriptures themselves. Commenting on the so-called importance of pictographs represented by Hebrew letters, Rabbi Michael L. Munk says, “[T]he *Aleph-Beis* has much to teach even the most accomplished scholar. A Kabbalistic dictum likens the letters to human beings, as it were, saying that every letter has...*body, spirit, and soul*.” He goes on to say “The classic Talmudic passage on the *Aleph-Beis* (*Shabbos* 104a) derives lessons from the *Aleph-Beis* that had been unknown for nearly fifteen centuries.”⁶¹

These words, opening up his book *The Wisdom of the Hebrew Alphabet*, confirm that the theological meanings of Hebrew letters are derived from Jewish mysticism. While the primary writing of the theological meanings of the Hebrew letters is first contained in the Talmud, the Talmud is a collection of writings that has both good *and* bad in it, compiled from almost four hundred years of post-Second Temple Judaism. Here, the Jewish author attests to the fact that what the Rabbis have ascribed to each Hebrew letter has been taken by those practicing Kabbalah who have developed mystical and occultic connections to them. Munk confirms this in his book by commenting,

“When...Eliezer HaKalir, wanted to describe God’s infinity [in *The Hymn of Glory*], he realized that his pen would exhaust all human means of expression without completing the praises of the Creator. He therefore used his kabbalistic power to inquire of the angel Michael regarding the manner in which the angels compose their songs of praise to God. Michael replied that the angels used the *Aleph-Beis* and thenceforth R’Eliezer, too, composed his poems...”⁶²

This is just one of many examples we could give from Munk’s work where Hebrew letters are used by those practicing Kaballah. Thankfully, we as Believers have the Holy Spirit inside of us to convict us that we do not need Hebrew letters to determine our right relationship

⁶⁰ Rabbi Michael L. Munk, *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1983), 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 37.

with God; we have the sacrifice of the Messiah at Golgotha and we can go to our Father through Him. We also have the Holy Spirit to convict and show us **where errant and flawed techniques of Scriptural interpretation exist as well.** The Lord has been gracious to use the Hebrew linguistic and lexicographic scholars of the past few centuries to give us the tools to interpret the Hebrew language properly—through examination of words in the Biblical texts themselves! Those embracing this “new way” of interpreting the Hebrew language through letter pictures, while it may be interesting, have embraced a way that has questionable origins that will ultimately not stand under the light of linguistic scholarship.

The Bible Code

One area that is related to mysticism, but is much newer in scope compared to some of the “older” forms, is the Bible code. The Bible code, as you are no doubt aware, has even gained some notoriety among secularists. First developed by Israeli Dr. Eliyahu Rips, the Bible code is a computer program which attempts to look at equal-distant character spacing in the Biblical text of the Torah, and examine names of prominent world figures, dates of events, and what happened. Proponents of the Bible code believe that their research has revealed the future, inasmuch that events such as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust, and the Apollo 11 moon landing were encoded in the pages of Hebrew Scripture. The problem with this conclusion, among proponents, is what to make of the origin of this so-called “Bible code.”

The Bible code was initially popularized by journalist Michael Drosnin, a secular Jew who has written for both the Wall Street Journal and Washington Post. His book *The Bible Code* was released in 1997, and got many people thinking. It also got some to go out and purchase the computer program used for determining what and who is mentioned in the characters of the Hebrew Torah, to possibly search for their own names and future destiny. The Bible code was never that popularized in the Messianic community, but our ministry does from time-to-time discover those who are trying to plug in data to discover events about the future.

The problem with the Bible code is self-apparent. Drosnin writes that “The Bible is not only a book—it is also a computer program. It was first chiseled in stone and handwritten on a parchment scroll, finally printed as a book, waiting for us to catch up with it by inventing a computer. Now it can be read as it was always intended to be read.”⁶³ *Reading the Bible as it was always intended to be read?* Whatever happened to just reading Scripture, praying to the Lord, asking Him for spiritual guidance and direction, and learning from the stories that the Bible has for us? To this, Drosnin answers, “I had always assumed that the future does not exist until it happens.”⁶⁴ Certainly, we know as Believers that the Scripture does foretell the future, but Drosnin’s comments should be taken as meaning that it is not the plain reading of Scripture that reveals the future, but the hidden meanings in *his* “Bible code.” What does Drosnin say about “the code’s” origin? Does he say it is from “God”? Not exactly. He remarks,

“Many...will say...that we now have the first secular evidence of [God’s] existence. I am persuaded only that no human could have encoded the Bible in this way.

“We do have the first scientific proof that some intelligence outside our own does exist, or at least did exist at the time the Bible was written.”⁶⁵

What are we to interpret of these words? Is Drosnin basically saying that extra-terrestrials invented this “Bible code,” that was only to be uncovered by mankind at a later point in time? Rather than believing in the God of the Scriptures, the Eternal Creator, why is Drosnin, the man who has popularized this, trying to find a way around believing in a Divine origin for Scripture? His answer: “The Bible was encoded to sound a warning.”⁶⁶

What kind of warning are we talking about? The quintessential message of Bible prophecy is the Lord’s statement, “Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned *it*, surely I

⁶³ Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

will do it" (Isaiah 46:11). What is in His Word is going to happen whether we like it or not. It is not a "warning" for us in the sense that what He has decreed can be averted or stopped. But this is not what proponents of the Bible code believe. They believe that events are encoded in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures so that they can foretell the future to change things. In a manner of speaking, those who delve into the Bible code, secularists with no regard for the message of salvation and repentance that the actual text of the Bible presents, are using the Holy Scriptures to soothsaying and predict the future. In his own words, Drosnin says,

"It [the Bible] is not a promise of divine salvation. It is not a threat of inevitable doom. It is just information. The message of the Bible code is that we can save ourselves.

"In the end, what we do determines the outcome..."⁶⁷

This is the problem, because Drosnin, and other proponents of the Bible code, do not believe in a Divine Author of Scripture; they believe that at the most extra-terrestrials gave it to terrestrials (or terrans) to be a warning of what might occur in their future. He denies the Bible's message of salvation and redemption. He treats it as just information.

There have not been that many, thankfully, who have delved into the Bible code, but the thinking behind the Bible code is very much related to the same thinking of Jewish mysticism and Gnosticism. There should be little doubt in our minds that if computers existed in the First Century that there would have been Jewish mystics and Gnostics plugging names, dates, and events into the Bible code, and trying to predict the future or participate in some kind of fortune telling. The Bible code just happens to be a modern-day manifestation of some old methods to deceive people.

If indeed there are coded messages in the pages of the Scriptures, it is notable that all of them have been found *after the fact*. No one has been able to predict or stop anything by using the Bible code. This is because God is sovereign over the universe. What we need to be doing is to stop looking in hidden places for our deliverance, when our true Deliverer, Messiah Yeshua, is spoken of all throughout the pages of the Bible, **and He is not hidden**. The true message of Divine judgment is contained all throughout the pages of the Bible as well, and whether or not you consider it a warning does not matter to the Lord, because He has already decreed that it is going to come to pass.

Gnosticism and Extra-Biblical Writings

The last, and perhaps the most dangerous area of all as it relates to the infestation of mystic and Gnostic beliefs in the Messianic community today relates to certain extra-Biblical writings. While on the surface, it is doubtful that many in the Messianic movement are actually practicing Gnosticism, the major competing influence to Jewish mysticism in the First Century, there is nevertheless in certain sectors of the Messianic movement a tendency to gravitate *exclusively* toward consulting extra-Biblical literature in determining theology and doctrine.

There is **always** extra-Biblical literature that is often consulted in determining some Biblically based belief. The most common extra-Biblical writings consulted in Judaism are, of course, the Mishnah and Talmud, which make up the Oral Torah or Oral Law. Even though we do not believe in the absolute validity of the Oral Law, these writings do nevertheless offer the consensus of Rabbinic opinion and tradition throughout the ages and are a valuable historical reference. In Christianity, the most commonly consulted extra-Biblical writings would be those of the Church Fathers, a collection of early Church writings from the Second-Fourth Centuries. They give us a picture of what early Christianity faced, the central figures and martyrs of early Christianity, and also demonstrate how early Christianity distanced itself from its Hebraic Roots. The other most commonly consulted piece of extra-Biblical literature would be the books of the Apocrypha, included in the Greek Septuagint and considered canonical by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Neither Jews nor Protestants consider them canonical, but do consult them a valuable reference.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 179.

While it can be important at times to consult extra-Biblical literature to get a feel for the times in which the Scriptures were written, it must always be emphasized that these writings are not canonical and they are not Scripture. The two principal keys regarding the canonization of any book of the Bible relates not only to its theology, and whether it can truly demonstrate being inspired of the Holy Spirit, but also how well disseminated a work is, so manuscripts of a Biblical book can be compared to other similar manuscripts to demonstrate some uniformity. A Biblical book must be very well disseminated so that it can stand up to the test of textual scrutiny and whether or not it can be considered as genuine.

This is not something that is new by any means. The Apostle Paul warned the Thessalonians, “that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come” (2 Thessalonians 2:2). He wrote regarding a “letter purporting to be from us” (RSV) or a “letter supposed to have come from us” (NIV), indicating that in the First Century there were those writing letters claiming to be from Paul, when in actuality they were not. They were nothing less than forgeries.

Early Christian history reveals that it did not stop at Paul warning us about people writing letters in his name. There is an entire collection of writings, pseudo-gospels, pseudo-epistles, and pseudo-apocalypses, claiming to be from various New Testament characters. Even though in the canonical Gospels themselves, we may have not heard much about Andrew or Bartholomew, there are nonetheless extra-Biblical writings that are ascribed to their names. Are these writings genuine, or are they false?

Sadly, in the Messianic community today, because there are many people who are open to new beliefs, there are those who are falling into the error of consulting some of these false works for spiritual edification. The most substantial of these works are the Gnostic Scriptures, compiled in the mid-Second to Third Centuries C.E. These were the writings of the Gnostics, who, while spread all throughout the Mediterranean basin, had a firm footing in Egypt. Most of what we know about the Gnostics comes from what the Second and Third Century Church Fathers write about combating their false teachings, including their belief that the Messiah was only resurrected spiritually, and not physically. In 1947 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, a large collection of manuscripts was discovered which included what we now call the Gnostic Scriptures, sometimes referred to as the Gnostic Gospels. By-and-large, these texts were written in Coptic, an Egyptian language written in Greek letters, although some of the texts were in Greek.

The exact array of the Gnostic Scriptures is extremely broad, ranging from the Apocryphon of James to the Gospel of Truth to the Gospel of Philip to the Apocalypse of Adam to the Gospel of Mary. Of all the Gnostic texts, by far the most popular of them all is the Gospel of Thomas. Unlike all of the other Gnostic texts, this one has the most parallel references to what we see in the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, the so-called Gospel of Thomas still reflects Gnostic thought and theology. One statement of the Messiah's that appears in its pages is, “Woe to the flesh that depends on the soul; woe to the soul that depends on the flesh” (*Gospel of Thomas* 112).⁶⁸ This reflects the Gnostics' principal belief in the radical separation of body and spirit.

The problem with these Gnostic Scriptures, more than anything else, is that you will notice in reading them that they are fragmented. In many cases, entire pages or substantial parts of pages of the manuscripts were eaten away by the elements. We have no outside copies of the texts to compare them to, to determine an original reading. This is unlike the thousands of texts we have for the Hebrew Tanach and the Greek Apostolic Scriptures.

Just like Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism are experiencing a revival, so are there some today who are advocating a revival of Gnosticism, and a reexamination of the Gnostic texts. One work that has been largely responsible for this is the novel *The Da Vinci Code* by author Dan Brown. This fictional novel goes into explaining, based in the Gnostic texts, how Yeshua was not

⁶⁸ Thomas O. Lambdin, trans., in James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 138.

God in the flesh, how He did not ascend into Heaven, and how He and Mary Madgalene fled to France and their line of offspring produced the royal families of Europe. Much of Brown's work has been under substantial criticism by Christian apologists, and rightfully so, as it is based not only in the Gnostic texts, but also in a substantial amount of Medieval myth and superstition that has been proven to be fallacious.

We have to be extremely cautious of extra-Biblical texts, especially those that we do not have multiple copies of, as is the case of the Gnostic Scriptures. In the Messianic community today, Bible teachers have the awesome responsibility of maintaining theological credibility, while at the same time legitimately challenging the status quo. This does not mean that extra-Biblical works cannot be consulted, but what it does mean is that we must be extremely cautious in the works that we do consult. The Gnostic Scriptures and so-called other "lost Biblical texts" do not classify as works that we should be consulting. If all we have are one or two copies of these manuscripts, we must exhibit caution, and indeed some criticism. We cannot fall prey to the enemy's tactic of just reading something because it "sounds good" and tickles our ears. The revelation that we need for certain is in the canonical Scriptures alone.

Applied Knowledge Versus Secret Knowledge

In this article, we have just examined an entire array of errant teachings and practices that have infected the Messianic community. As with all illnesses, these things must be treated, and they must be purged from the Body. While these things on the surface might look like delectable tasty treats, once they are ingested they become nothing less than poisonous. We always have to be asking ourselves where the inherent spiritual value in these things is. Are these things going to help us in our daily testimony to others? Do these things have practical spiritual application to us? Or, at the very least are these things just vain speculations of the mind?

Regarding Israel's obedience to the Torah, the Lord tells us "keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deuteronomy 4:6). Ancient Israel was commanded to obey God so that they would be a testimony to the heathen nations around it. These nations would be attracted to Israel's God, because they saw that Israel was a wise and blessed people because it followed His commandments. Yeshua reemphasizes this by telling us, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). This is why we are to keep the Torah and be Messianic. We are each spiritually blessed because of our obedience, and our obedience is a testimony to others, *in action*, of the gospel message and of the internal spiritual transformation we have all experienced.

This is the difference between applied knowledge and secret knowledge. Some people have the wrong motivation, which is not to be a testimony to others, but rather draw the attention toward themselves and toward what "they know." Things like Jewish mysticism, numerology, Hebrew letter pictures, the Bible code, and Gnostic writings have very little practical value in them. They have been used by the Adversary to take our attention off Scripture itself, and off its clear message for us today. They have taken our attention off clear, concise, and above all realistic examination and exegesis of the Bible. As it was true of the mystery cults, their appeal was to the emotions of a person rather than to the intellect. While these things tickle ears, in the long run they often make no rational sense, and do not bring theological credibility to the Messianic movement.

We are not facing anything new by any means. As commented and documented, these things plagued the First Century Body of Messiah as they plague us today. If there is any lesson to be learned by the present infestation of mystical ideas in the Messianic movement, it is that we must reexamine ourselves to make sure that we have the proper motivations for being where we are today. Are we truly here so that we can become more Messiah-like, and grow and mature in our faith? Are we here so that we can be a better testimony to others? How well do we truly know the Bible in its full context, with an understanding of Hebrew and Greek linguistics and the

history behind it? How well do we understand the errant influences in the First Century *ekklēsia*? More than anything else, how can we have the spiritual discernment to determine truth and error?

In Titus 1:13-14, the Apostle Paul wrote, concerning the proper overseer, that “This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them [the false teachers] severely so that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth.” Paul makes a specific reference to “Judaistic myths” (CJB), which were apparently Jewish teachings with no inherent spiritual value. This is not an anti-Semitic statement by Paul, but rather is a statement regarding things passing themselves off as “Jewish” that are not Biblical if not anti-Biblical. David H. Stern says in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* that these things would be “imitative of Judaism without actually emanating from normative Judaism.”⁶⁹

These are some of the very same teachings that are circulating in our midst today. Just as Paul admonished Titus to expose those who are teaching such things as frauds, so must we. We have to be the proper testimony to others that we are Biblically and theologically credible, we must know what the Scriptures say, and above all pray for wisdom and discernment in all that we do. We must have the proper motivation for being Messianic, which is to demonstrate a positive spiritual change to others in adopting Torah obedience, not a negative one where a person is drawn into mystic and Gnostic beliefs.

Truly, the old adage, “**The more things change, the more things stay the same,**” remains true for us today as we are only seeing some of the old errors of the past.

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

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⁶⁹ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 655.