

Editorial: The Historical Jesus Controversies and Future Things on Our Theological Horizon

by J.K. McKee posted 03 April, 2007 www.tnnonline.net

This Spring has historically been a time when Biblical scholars have released their newest “findings” on the life of Yeshua (Jesus) and what they have concluded concerning His ministry, and indeed His existence. Over three years ago, it was during this season that the controversial Mel Gibson film “The Passion of the Christ” was released. Following this came Dan Brown’s “The DaVinci Code.” More recently, director James Cameron released a series on the life of our Messiah, including the “revelation” that His tomb and remains may have been found.

When one surveys the modern phenomenon commonly known as “the historical Jesus,” he or she will typically find that the Spring time, when most of the Christian world is commemorating Easter, is when it gets its most publicity. So-called findings that have been known to scholastics for decades are released to the public to prey on their naïveté and ignorance of the facts. The common person sees pictures of Christ on the cover of Time Magazine. The undiscerning churchgoer *or even Messianic Believer* sees criticism of the life of Yeshua that he or she had never heard before. Some have their faith challenged, while others seek second and third opinions—clearly realizing that some information has been hyped or doctored to fit a particular agenda.

Let’s face it, no person has had more books or articles written about Him than Yeshua the Messiah. Anyone attempting to write his own book about Yeshua has a great amount of information and opinions to survey from conservative to liberal, modernist, post-modernist, feminist, liberationist, and now gay and lesbian—in addition to a whole host of other viewpoints on the life of our Lord. Some of these perspectives help us understand the life of Yeshua better, while others clearly detract from who He is as depicted in the Scriptures and legitimate history.

The quest known as “the historical Jesus” has actually helped the growth of the Messianic movement, particularly as scholars have investigated the Jewish background of His teachings and ministry. Furthermore, the New Perspective in Pauline studies has helped ask some questions that have given scholars today a more well-rounded picture of Judaism and Paul’s life. Of course, whether or not all of the conclusions of these trends are valid is another subject altogether. The good thing is that information previously not brought into the discussion is now being considered.

But while a great deal of attention is often given to the life of Yeshua, with a person at least once a year finding Him on the cover of Time, Newsweek, or sometimes even The Economist—what about other areas of Biblical Studies that are under fire? While we know the life of Yeshua is a lightning rod—in fact it is a lightning rod even in our own Messianic community—what about other Biblical characters and events? How do these play into our Messianic handling of Scripture? In the coming days, are you aware of the fact that today’s Messianic movement will have to acknowledge the various criticisms out there against the Tanach (Old Testament)—as well as the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament)?

We should all be familiar in passing with the various debates over the Creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. Did it take place in six 24-hour days, six long periods of time, or did God simply intervene in the evolutionary process? There are well meaning Christians and Jews who adhere to Young Earth Creationism, Old Earth Creationism, and Theistic Evolution. I have encountered all three views expressed by Messianics today. For those of you who follow the annual Torah cycle, do not be surprised if these issues start to come up in your future examinations of *Bereisheet* and *Noach*. Do not expect everyone to hold to your view, and expect the emerging Messianic movement to be engaged in some conversations that have been going on for a very long time on how God made the world.

During this Passover season, a great deal of attention is given to Ancient Israel’s Exodus from Egypt—and it should. In the Bible, *after Yeshua’s death and resurrection*, I believe that there is no event more important than the Exodus. Without the plagues delivered upon Egypt, the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, and the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea—you have no significant prophetic typology for Yeshua to fulfill. But would it surprise you if I told you that there is controversy surrounding the Exodus as well? Liberal theologians for centuries have

considered the Exodus at best to be the movement of a few hundred slaves from Egypt to Canaan, and at worst a total myth. Even among those who accept the fact that an Exodus from Egypt took place with many there are debates over when it took place in Egyptian history, whether there were several hundred thousand or several million, and where the crossing of the Red Sea occurred. Likewise, for a Messianic movement that places a great deal of attention to the Exodus, should we be avoiding controversies that exist? Why is there no Egyptian record of the Exodus? How many people were involved? In the future, today's Messianic community will have to engage with the criticism against the Exodus—another hot topic that often receives great publicity this time of year.

It does not stop there. Some liberal scholars even deny the Conquest of Canaan by Ancient Israel. They say that the archaeological evidence of the Conquest is scant at best. Conservatives have had to rightly respond to this criticism by pointing out that archaeological data has to be interpreted, and that many archaeological sites are inaccessible due to today's unstable political climate in the region. Conservatives point out things like there being three Jerichos: one spoken about in the Old Testament, one spoken about in the New Testament, and another modern city today. How many of us as Messianics are not even aware of such debates? Are we even ready to hear about this?

Finally, do you know that today there is an emerging sector of radical liberal theologians who deny that King David was an historical person? In response to some of the legitimate conservative criticism against their liberal views, some have taken an extreme response and are proposing that everything prior to Ezra-Nehemiah was total mythology. These liberals propose that a group of nomads approached the Persian king with a religious document (i.e., the Torah) that indicated that they had a promised land their God had given them forever. The Persian king granted their request and helped them found a new life in Palestine. Everything that we hold dear in Scripture including the accounts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and David is nothing more than a story to these people. So when are we going to see David on the cover of Time?

Significant parts of today's Messianic movement are being plagued by the rotten fruit of the Jewish anti-missionary organizations. Jewish anti-missionaries have targeted naïve people who are unsure about the life and ministry of Yeshua and have enabled many to deny Him as Messiah. There have been many Messianics disturbed about this issue—and rightfully so. Many have stood up against this and have demonstrated anti-missionary arguments to be theologically and ideologically flawed. Many have been stopped from committing apostasy.

I believe, however, that the theological questions posed by anti-missionaries are only *some* of a few that will be forced out into the light in the next decade. The life of Yeshua the Messiah, commonly discussed this time of year, is only one of a few of the controversial subjects that have existed in Biblical scholasticism for centuries. The anti-missionary phenomenon is going to open up a whole host of other issues pertaining to not just the reliability of the Apostolic Scriptures, but even more so the Tanach itself. Trends that have been allowed to go on in the Messianic movement like people saying that they really do not know how much of the New Testament can be trusted, but that the Torah has been perfectly preserved since Mount Sinai, *will simply not be allowed to go on any more.*

As we engage with these controversies, be assured that there are conservative, reasonable answers to them that affirm the reliability of the Scriptures. I believe that God created humanity *ex nihilo* without any kind of evolution. I believe that plagues were delivered upon Egypt and that many, many people were led via the Red Sea to Mount Sinai to be given the Law. I believe that the Israelites conquered Canaan and that King David was a real person. Most of all, I believe that Yeshua the Messiah entered into the world at just the right time and paid the penalty for our sins. But likewise, I recognize the criticism against these things and am not afraid to say that as Messianics we cannot avoid it any longer, because there are answers!

The faith of some will be challenged by the things on the horizon. Some of our popular teachers and leaders will be exposed to views that they have never heard—but have been around

for several hundred years in *both* Judaism *and* Christianity. There will undoubtedly be some tension—but in the end we should emerge stronger as a people who can affect a positive difference in our fallen world—as we answer the questions that *they* are asking about the Bible. Most importantly we will recognize our need to be tempered by a profound supernatural and life-changing experience with God via His Son—something that any critic of the Holy Scriptures—Jewish, Christian, *or* Messianic often does not have. It is that experience of salvation that is to testify to us of the reliability and trustworthiness of God's Word, and guide our motives for upholding it as a standard of truth and instruction.

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