

The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation

by J.K. McKee posted 01 August, 2006 www.tnnonline.net

In the Messianic community today, we often hear a high emphasis placed on the need for us to follow the Hebraic lifestyle practices of our Messiah Yeshua. However, for many generations of Believers that have preceded us, this has not always been the case. Many who have gone before us in the faith have not seen the same things that we have. This has been for a variety of reasons, but most notably it has been because we have access to information today that the Reformers and some of the early Christians who settled America did not have. They did not have the benefit of archaeology, renewed contact with the lands of the Bible and the Middle East, and especially the excellent Jewish-Christian relations that we have today in the world of Biblical Studies. At most, what these people had access to were the classical works of Greece and Rome and the writings of the early Church. Today we have a much larger information base, including not only the classics and early Christian works, but also Jewish works.

Our call as Believers is to have an as accurate as possible view of the Bible and the world in which its events took place. The Prophet Jeremiah admonished those of his generation, "Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls. But they said, "We will not walk in it"' (Jeremiah 6:16). God wanted His people to remember the way things were before sin crept into the camp of Israel, and return to His blessings. The same is largely true for us today. The Lord wants us to remember how our goal as individuals is to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, and follow Him as the Apostles did. The challenge is that in order to do this we must "ask about the various paths of history" (ATS), and deal with a diverse array of Biblical and extra-Biblical literature spanning almost 3,000 years. We have to put ourselves back into societies and cultures, which are largely foreign to us, and then be able to apply what we learn in our modern societies and cultures today.

These things are admittedly challenging to us as human beings. When we come to faith in Messiah Yeshua, we turn to Him because we know that we are sinners and are in need of reconciliation with God. We know that we need a heart change that will cause us to love Him and love others like never before. But once we receive that heart change we need to begin a life of consistently studying the Bible, God's Instruction for us. As we study the Bible our minds are transformed, and hopefully we can begin to see the world from God's point of view. As we continue in our study of the Bible, then God should supernaturally give us the ability to deal with increasingly more difficult ideas and concepts.

The existence of the Messianic movement today demonstrates that at least some people want to deal with some difficult theological concepts. Because we live in a time where Jewish-Christian relations and Christian support of Israel is at an all time high, we have a responsibility not just to ourselves, but also to posterity, to truly consider the historical context of the Scriptures. This presents many obstacles, not just in our understanding of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), but also of the Tanach (Old Testament). We have to come to grips with the fact that things may not be as simplistic as we want them to be, and not only will we have to deal with new information, but we will also have to, in the words of Hercule Poirot, "use our little gray cells." This article will explore some of the key facets of examining the historical context of Scripture, and how it affects our emerging Messianic theology.

Was the Bible written directly to us?

A question that each of us must ask ourselves is, "Was the Bible written directly to me?" This is a different question than is posed by the ever-popular words from the Apostle Paul, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Paul is writing that Scripture, which at his specific time included only the Tanach, is spiritual instruction for us. None of us should deny the fact that the canon of

Scripture, as we have it today, is authoritative spiritually. But how we interpret it and apply it is another issue.

When many people read the Bible, one of the biggest mistakes that can be made is reading it as though it were written directly to a person living in the Twenty-First Century. Whether we consciously realize it or not, the events of the Bible not only took place in another century, another part of the world, and in another culture—but in different centuries, different parts of the world, and different cultures. The relatively desert existence of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was substantially different than the more urban existence of the Corinthian Believers. Likewise, approaching the court of King David was significantly different than approaching the court of Caesar. Immigrating out of Egypt was certainly not like crossing the Mexican border.

It is difficult for many to consider the fact that although the texts of the Bible *are written for us*—they were *not written to us*.

Consider, for example, that we are not the Ephesians or the Colossians or the Philippians, and the Apostle Paul did not write those letters to us. These letters include valid teaching in them, and I fully consider them all to be inspired of God. But in order to apply them today, we must understand first what they meant to those who originally received them. Once we can conclude this accurately, then, using the guidance of the Holy Spirit we can then apply them in a modern context. Some of the things that Paul wrote are grossly misunderstood, because they were written *for an ancient audience*. Whereas there are many parallels between cities such as Rome and New York City, or Corinth and San Francisco, there are some noticeable dissimilarities as well.

But this is not only the case of Paul's letters, but also much of the Tanach. How many of us read the Prophets without knowing the places they are referring to, the times in which they prophesied, and the general circumstances in which God told them to call the people to repentance? When we do this, we may discover that a great deal of prophecies that we think are to be fulfilled have already been fulfilled, and prophecies that we think have been fulfilled, have yet to be fulfilled.

Understanding historical context is imperative even for us to properly understand the Torah. We all agree that as Messianics the Torah forms the foundation of the remainder of the Bible, and that as part of being holy unto God we should follow its commandments. But the position of the Torah has changed because of the entry of Yeshua the Messiah into the world. The Torah has undergone some changes per the sacrifice of Yeshua, notably in relation to animal sacrifice (Hebrews 7:12), but it has also undergone changes by virtue of the simple fact that *we are not the people the Law was originally given to*. The development of modern technology and economy, whether we realize it or not, does affect our application of the Scriptures.

The Bible is, without question, the final authority on which we should rest all of our decisions for life. Even when we may be getting “mixed signals” in our prayer life and worship life, we can turn to the Bible for a definite answer to our questions. But the Bible is not just one book; it is one book of texts. And the Bible is not just one book made up of books; it is a book made up of treatises on law, history, praise of God, prophets calling the people back to God, gospels presenting the salvation available in Yeshua, and letters written to the early congregations and groups of people who believed in Him. The Bible includes a wide array of literary types, and Biblical history—including understanding the events of the larger world of the Bible—can help bring depth and dimension to the text.

Biblical Civilizations We Cannot Ignore

In many cases when reading the Torah or Tanach, or even the Apostolic Scriptures, Messianics focus so highly on “Israel” that they can forget the fact that Israel lived in a much larger world with much larger neighbors. The call of Israel was to be a light to the world around it, so that others might come to a knowledge of the One True God. Generally speaking, there are about seven different historical civilizations that often allude your average Messianic student opening up his or her Bible, that we must consider when we read sections of Scripture. We cannot afford to

act as though these people “did not exist,” because their existence often makes up the framework of the larger world in which the Kingdom of Israel, and later the exiled Jewish people, existed in:

1. **Sumer:** The area of modern day Iraq and Kuwait, the southern half of the valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, was the location of Ancient Sumer. The Sumerian civilization generally flourished between earliest recorded history (approximately 3000 B.C.E) and 1700 B.C.E. Some Sumerian stories such as the Epic of Gilgamesh have parallels to the Noahdic Flood, and the region certainly boasted a city named Babel (later becoming the more classical Babylon), indicating that these people had contact with the ancient descendants of Noah and their stories. A city from Sumer that features prominently in the Bible is Ur, the original home of Abraham. **This Mesopotamian civilization is particularly important to understand for the middle chapters of Genesis, and in the calling of Abraham.**¹
2. **Egypt:** The need to understand the Egyptian civilization is easily understood by anyone who reads the Book of Exodus. The Egyptian civilization was the most prominent of the ancient world in which the Kingdom of Israel existed. From the establishment of the Old Kingdom in approximately 2200 B.C.E to the late New Kingdom ending in around 1100 B.C.E., the contributions that the Egyptians made to world history cannot be ignored. The Nile basin was one of the most fertile and strategic areas in the Ancient Near East, and the Egyptian level of agricultural technology made them an awe of the ancient world. It was not just Joseph's position in Pharaoh's court that enabled Egypt to have food during the famine, but also Egyptian ingenuity that enabled that food to be properly stored. **Knowing about Ancient Egyptian advances, its politics and the changing of dynasties, as well as its religion, is imperative for us to understand the Exodus and the immediate giving of the Torah to Ancient Israel.** Egypt also dominated the period following the Exodus, and became a chief rival to emerging empires such as Assyria and Babylon.² Fortunately, the modern-day study of Egyptology has given us a wider array of information to consider in our examination of the Exodus. While this leads some to doubt what the Bible says, it has enabled many others to be confirmed that it actually did take place and that the Lord did indeed judge the gods of Egypt.³
3. **Assyria:** The Assyrian Empire that we see in the Bible was largely located in what is today Northern Iraq and Syria, and dominated the Ancient Near East from approximately 900-612 B.C.E. The Assyrians were a Semitic people, and descendants of those who had lived in Sumer and migrated north. As an empire, they were known for being extremely brutal and manipulative of their client states. They were fierce rivals of Egypt and were eventually overcome by their southern neighbors, the Babylonians, who copied their brutal methods. **Understanding Assyria is important for us to get a better feel about Ancient Israel and the judgment that God issued upon the Northern Kingdom.** What is interesting about Assyria, though, is that Assyrian records

¹ For a more detailed summary of the Sumerian civilization and its relation to the Bible, consult the articles “Sumer,” by S.N. Kramer, in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4:454-463 (moderate-liberal); and “Sumer” by F.R. Steele, in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:653-662 (conservative).

² For a more detailed summary of the Egyptian civilization and its relation to the Bible, consult the articles “Egypt,” by J.A. Wilson, in *IDB*, 2:39-66 (moderate-liberal); and “Egypt,” by W.S. LaSor, in *ISBE*, 2:29-46 (conservative).

³ I would particularly recommend any of the works of K.A. Kitchen, Egyptologist and professor emeritus at the University of Liverpool, for a conservative and well-detailed examination of Ancient Egypt and Ancient Israel's neighbors.

have been used to confirm the existence of the kings of Israel, thus affirming the historicity of the Bible.⁴

4. **Babylon:** The Babylonian Empire, which could also be called neo-Babylonian, dominated the Ancient Near East from its conquering of Assyria in 612 B.C.E. to its own fall to Persia in 539 B.C.E. The Babylonians were descendants of the Sumerians and adopted many of the brutal methods of the Assyrians, building an influence that spanned from modern-day Iraq to Egypt. Babylonian royalty and nobility were known for being very opulent and easily corruptible. **Understanding Babylon is important for us to comprehend the severity of the dispersion and exile of the Southern Kingdom.** The prophecies of Daniel were issued in Babylon, and the dispersion signaled a major shift in the history of Israel as the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. In Jewish theology the term "Babylon" would quickly be associated with wanton greed and corruption, a symbol that any true follower of God should avoid.⁵
5. **Persian:** Compared to its Babylonian predecessor, the Persian Empire was very tame and diplomatic, overrunning its Babylonian neighbor that was too aggressive, and freeing all the captured peoples that Babylon had conquered. Centered in what is today Iran, the Old Persian Empire that we encounter in the Bible roughly existed from 600-300 B.C.E. In the Bible, we are largely presented with the Persian Empire in books such as Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1&2 Chronicles, and most notably Esther. The Persian Empire stretched its dominion over the Babylonians, the Land of Israel, Egypt, and well into Asia Minor. The Jews under Persian rule were well tolerated as the Persians divided their empire into provinces. Provinces were generally allowed to govern their own affairs provided they remain loyal to the empire and pay regular taxes. **We need to know about Persia as it was during the period of Persian dominance that the Southern Kingdom exiles returned to the Land of Israel and Jerusalem, and started to rebuild what the Babylonians destroyed.** While the Jews were not independent during this time, answering to a foreign ruler, it was relatively peaceful.⁶
6. **Greece:** The Greek city states and civilization had been relatively splintered and factional up until the time of Persian expansion into Asia Minor, where the Greeks had established colonies. Prior to this time the Greek Peloponnesus had been largely dominated by the two cities of Athens and Sparta, which had divergent philosophies, but this began to change with the Persian Wars between 546-466 B.C.E. in which the united Greeks were victorious over the invading Persians, even though they suffered great losses. The victory was short lived, and the Peloponnesian Wars broke out with the Spartans defeating the Athenians. Proxy conflicts began to take place until an outsider, Philip of Macedon, moved in and began taking control. His son, Alexander the Great, ascended to the throne in 336 and began a massive campaign of expansion across the Eastern world, conquering Asia Minor, Egypt, Babylon, and all the way to Western India. When he died in 323, Alexander's empire was divided, and Greek philosophies began to be spread throughout these territories. The Greek language quickly became the

⁴ For a more detailed summary on Assyria and its relation to the Bible, consult the article "Assyria," by D.J. Wiseman, in *ISBE*, 1:332-340 (conservative).

⁵ For a more detailed summary on the Babylonian civilization and its relation to the Bible, consult the articles "Assyria and Babylonia," by A.L. Oppenheim, in *IDB*, 1:262-304 (moderate-liberal); "Babylon," by D.J. Wiseman, in *ISBE*, 2:391 (conservative); and "Babylonia," by D.J. Wiseman, in *ISBE*, 2:391-402 (conservative).

⁶ For a more detailed summary on the Persian civilization and its relation to the Bible, consult the articles "Persia, History and Religion of," by M.J. Dresden, in *IDB*, 3:739-747 (moderate-liberal); and "Persia," by R.E. Hayden, in *ISBE*, 3:776-780 (conservative).

principal language of commerce and diplomacy throughout the conquered lands. **Our need to properly understand Greek civilization cannot be overstated, as the Jews would come into conflict with the Seleucid Greeks who succeeded Alexander in Syria, and many Jews would settle in other parts of the Greek world.** Alexandria in Egypt, under the Ptolemies (note that the widely famous Cleopatra, consort of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, was one of the Ptolemies), was a Greek city boasting a Jewish population of over 300,000 by the First Century. Even though these Greek territories would mostly be engulfed into the Roman Empire by 85 B.C.E., its language and ideas continued on. Paul's epistles (with the exception of Romans), were all written to cities originally founded by the Greeks.⁷

7. **Rome:** The Roman Empire formally arose in 30 B.C.E. with the installation of Julius Caesar as emperor, even though the Roman Republic had been involved in the affairs of the Mediterranean for much longer. Rome had taken control of the Italian peninsula by 275 B.C.E. and struggled with its rival Carthage, a city in North Africa, for the remainder of the Third and early Second Centuries B.C.E. Its introduction into the Biblical world largely began with scores of Jews fleeing from Israel during the Maccabean era (approximately 160 B.C.E), and a plea from the high priest for the Roman Senate to intervene in the conflict with the Seleucids. Prior to Caesar coming to power, Rome had been ruled democratically by its Senate and proconsul, and the Senate still functioned—at least ceremonially—during the time of the emperors. Judea under Herod the Great had been allied to Rome, and after his death it was formally made a province of the empire in 6 C.E. At its peak, the Roman Empire spanned from Egypt, Israel, and Syria all the way across the Mediterranean to modern-day France and England. Socially, Roman religion and philosophy were largely influenced by Greece, with some noticeable differences. The Roman Empire was very well-organized and technologically advanced, and the Roman military very strong. Jews in the empire generally succeeded in business, and Judaism was protected as a legal religion. Only until the Jewish Revolt of 66 C.E. did anti-Semitism begin to swell in significant numbers. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E., the Messianic Believers lost their protected status as a part of Judaism, and splits began to occur with the Synagogue. All during this time “the Christians,” as they were called, were considered atheists and an illegal threat to the empire, and would not be tolerated until the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E. Until this time, many thousands would be hunted and martyred at the hands of the Romans. **Understanding the Roman Empire is imperative for anyone doing intensive research into the Apostolic Scriptures, as the Romans were in control of all the lands where events occur.** Many Romans, both in Rome and elsewhere, came to faith in Yeshua the Messiah, and Paul as a Roman citizen and Jew uses his unique status as a means to travel easily to spread the gospel.⁸

When you examine the breadth of each of these seven civilizations that we encounter, in some form or another, during your reading of Scripture, you should be awestruck that they compose some 3,500 years or more of world history. This should especially be true for those of us in North America, whose recent history at most generally goes back three hundred-fifty or four

⁷ For a more detailed summary on the Greek civilization and its relation to the Bible, consult the articles “Greece,” by F.C. Grant, in *IDB*, 2:473-479 (moderate-liberal); and “Greece,” by J.F. Strange, in *ISBE*, 2:557-567 (conservative).

⁸ For a more detailed summary on the Roman civilization, consult the articles “Roman Empire,” by R.M. Grant, in *IDB*, 4:103-109 (moderate-liberal); and “Rome,” by H.F. Vos, in *ISBE*, 4:228-236 (conservative).

hundred years. Our first overall challenge when reading the Bible is that we often have to transport ourselves back to a time and imagine that we are Ancient Hebrews, and secondly consider ourselves as Hebrews in a period that is dominated by a particular civilization. Even in periods where the Kingdom of Israel was independent of foreign rule, we still have to remember that it did have foreign neighbors that it interacted with.

On top of this challenge is the fact that not everyone in the Bible was a Hebrew. In the Apostolic Scriptures, particularly in the Book of Acts, we see the text begin with the Holy Spirit being poured out in Jerusalem and ending with Paul arriving in Rome. While some believe that this indicates some “Divine transference” of authority from Jerusalem to Rome—it is not. But it was an indication, though, that the gospel message moved forward from a relatively desert and backwater region to the most important city on Earth in the First Century—and that God is concerned with the salvation of all, even Caesar. The reason that we consult history to understand these societies is not so that we can admire their religions, but it is so we can understand the activities of the God of Israel in a fallen world, how He judges the world, and how He has shown mercy toward that world.

In my experience as a Messianic Believer since 1995, I have seldom seen Messianic teachers or congregational leaders take an “historical” view of the Scriptures. Admittedly, it can be difficult by the simple fact that one must consider *additional perspectives* in the examination of Biblical texts. But these perspectives should *enrich* our understanding of the text, rather than take away from it. Unfortunately, rather than hearing about how the Lord was interested in the salvation of the Egyptians, in addition to His own people, we often only hear about how God judged them. And do not even get me started on the Greeks and the Romans, as I have witnessed a great deal of ungodly harassment against them in the Messianic movement. Even though many of them were pagans who practiced things opposed by the God of Israel, the greatest evangelistic successes took place in the Greek and Roman areas, as is easily attested by Acts—not to mention the fact that the majority of the First Century Jewish population probably lived in Greco-Roman lands.⁹

None of us has to be an expert on Ancient Egypt, Ancient Babylon, or Ancient Rome in order to understand the Bible. But we do have to deal with these civilizations, and other cities and cultures, that we may encounter in the Biblical text. We cannot act as though the Bible is a single story about a single people in a single land. ***It is not!*** It is a story about a single people and its interactions with other peoples and other lands. It is a story about how God uses that people to bring His Son, Yeshua the Messiah, into the world—and **how that people is to share Him with the world.**

Scripture Only *or* Scripture First?

When we begin to consider a more historical view of the Scriptures, we are often forced to deal with religious literature outside that of the established canon of the Bible from Genesis-Revelation. Many people that I know in the Messianic community follow the Protestant mantra of *Sola Scriptura*, meaning Scripture Only. This is often viewed as meaning that our theology should be derived from the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone. But the Protestant Reformers never viewed “Scripture Only” as meaning that we were to divorce the Word of God from its historical context, and the world in which the events took place. Many of the early Reformers were well

⁹ F.F. Bruce indicates that there were major Jewish communities established “from the territories of the Parthians and Medes and Elamites’ in the east to Rome in the west, with Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Crete, Arabia, Egypt and Cyrene receiving special mention between these limits” (*New Testament History* [New York: Doubleday, 1969], p 135). While some of these Jewish communities, notably in the East, had been remnants from the Babylonian Diaspora, many others were birthed out of Jewish merchants moving to these areas for economic opportunities, as well as the incessant Pharisaical drive to establish synagogues that could make proselytes out of the nations. The bulk of Diaspora Jewry that we get a glimpse of in the Apostolic Scriptures is Hellenistic Jewry, primarily constrained to the Eastern Mediterranean basin with centers in Northern Egypt, Asia Minor, Corinth, and Rome. It grew rapidly because of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek via the Septuagint, and was very successful in making converts. Its expansion paved the way for the spread of the gospel.

trained in the classics, and incorporated what they knew about the ancient world into their theology. The difference between them and us living today *is that we know substantially more than they did* about the ancient world. Whereas most of the Reformers could only read about Jerusalem, or even Rome, all we have to do is get on a plane today and fly there, arriving within a few hours.

In our Biblical hermeneutic, whether one is able to admit it or not, there are many ideas and concepts that one integrates from sources outside Scripture. With the first crisis a pastor is going to face in ministry, some kind of tradition is going to be consulted for advice on how to handle the situation. Consider the fact that even though the Bible condemns pre-marital sex, it does not tell us anything on how to deal with a pregnant teenager in the Twenty-First Century. For that, we may have to turn to more recent examples from the Twentieth Century, consulting theologians' and rabbis' opinions on what advice and counsel that they gave. Hopefully, such traditions can be helpful with us forming an opinion and thus making a decision on what counsel we should give.

Tradition in this case need not be "evil," but rather is a helpful tool to guide us when Scripture may be unclear on an issue. Scripture is absolutely the first and final authority, but our decisions may be influenced by something more. Of course, consultation with tradition must also be coupled with a sound prayer life and being able to be led by the Holy Spirit. Our relationship with the Lord will give us the reasoning abilities and mental capacity we need to deal with complex situations.

It is very easy to consult an extra-Biblical tradition, be it the simple comments of Jewish and Christian teachers from centuries ago, when a major issue arises in the community of faith. But when it comes to interpreting the Bible, we have to keep in mind that the authors of Scripture were likewise influenced by the traditions of their time. Each of the Gospel writers, for example, came from distinct walks of life and had distinct influences that affected their vocabulary and writing style. Luke, the accepted author of the Gospel of Luke and Book of Acts, was a medical doctor from Asia Minor who was a likely convert to Judaism. He demonstrates a great knowledge of contemporary Jewish and Roman politics, and is the broadest sweeping in his appeal. His Gospel is widely regarded as being the most thorough, as any Jew or Roman of the First Century could read it, knowing that they were reading something well-researched. Luke borrowed from a great deal of sources, many of which we have access to today that can enhance our understanding of his Gospel.

Of course, this is not only true of Luke's Gospel, but generally the entire Apostolic canon and the whole of the Tanach. It should not be surprising that most of the ancient literature we have extant is closer to the "New Testament period" than the "Old Testament period," by the simple fact that we are dealing with a much shorter space of time with the Apostolic Scriptures, approximately 120 years, when compared to the two-thousand years or more of history (and pre-history) that the Tanach spans. Some of this literature includes important insights and views on Tanach Scriptures, but it will influence more our understanding of the Apostolic Writings. The following is a short summary of some of the literature that can, and in many cases should, be consulted with examining the Bible.

We first see two main texts dealing directly with our interpretation of the Hebrew Tanach:

1. **The Septuagint (LXX)** is widely acclaimed as being the first Bible translation. It was compiled during the Second Century B.C.E. by Jews for Greek-speaking Jews living in Alexandria. It quickly became the canonical Scriptures of the Diaspora Jewish community and is the oldest extant complete witness we have to the extant Hebrew Scriptures we possess today. The LXX is not a word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text, and there are significant variant readings in some places. Some of these variant readings are theological interjections into the text, whereas others indicate that the Septuagint was likely translated from a Hebrew source no longer extant. Some of these

differences are minor, but some of these are quite significant. In the Greek New Testament, most of the quotes from the Tanach are from the LXX, and surely indicates that the Apostles held it to be authoritative. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, for example, many of the author's distinct arguments about Yeshua are specifically directed from the LXX, indicating that he considered it to be absolutely authoritative for theology. Interestingly enough, the *halachic* judgments that the LXX represents in its rendering of the Torah, largely align with the mainline Pharisaical Judaism of Yeshua's and Paul's time.¹⁰

2. **The Targumim** or simply, the Targums, are a collection of Aramaic paraphrases of books of the Hebrew Bible, probably compiled anywhere from the return of the Jews from Babylon to the First Century B.C.E. The Targumic renderings often add information to the Biblical text that is not explicitly stated in the Hebrew. While this was often done to expound upon a teaching, it is also possible that many oral understandings extant in Ancient Judaism found their way into the Targums. The two main Targums are the Targum Onkelos and the Targum Jonathan. Targum Onkelos is only a paraphrase on the Torah, whereas Targum Jonathan includes a paraphrase of both the Torah and some of the Prophets. The Targums give us interpretive views of various Tanach texts that we may see integrated into the theology of the Apostles.¹¹

The second set of extra-Biblical literature largely deals with the period immediately before, and immediately following the Apostles. In this series of texts we find a great deal of information on theological opinions circulating before the time of Yeshua, various wisdom sayings, *halachic* determinations and important Jewish traditions, as well as the challenges the Believers in the Second and Third Centuries faced:

1. **The Apocrypha** is a collection of books written sometime between the late Third and Second Centuries B.C.E., that by the First Century B.C.E. were added as an adjunct onto the Greek Septuagint. These texts primarily included history and wisdom literature. Most of these texts were originally written in Greek, although some were probably first written in Hebrew, the originals having been lost to history. The texts of 1-4 Maccabees and Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) are very significant as secondary resources to the Bible. The Apocrypha gives us a good idea about some of the "sayings" of Yeshua and the Apostles, and the history of Judaism during the Greek period. Notably, the books of the Apocrypha are considered canonical in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican traditions. While the Reformers largely rejected these texts as canonical, because Judaism did, they are nevertheless a very valuable source of secondary material that should probably be used in some of our theology. It is very easy for one to acquire an English Bible version with the Apocrypha included (KJV, RSV, NEB, REB, NRSV), or even a study Bible with commentary included (i.e., *Oxford Study Bible, New Interpreter's Study Bible*).¹²

¹⁰ For a further summary on the Septuagint, consult the article "Septuagint," by S.K. Soderlund, in *ISBE*, 4:400-409 (conservative). Also consult the book *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* by Timothy R. McLay (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). For Hebrews, consult the editor's forthcoming commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

¹¹ For a further summary on the Targums, consult the article "Targum," by B.H. Young, in *ISBE*, 4:727-733 (conservative); and the Targum entries in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp 616-617 (conservative-liberal).

¹² For a further summary on the Apocrypha, consult the article "Apocrypha," by T.W. Davies, in *ISBE*, 1:161-165 (conservative).

2. **The Pseudepigrapha** is a wide array of religious texts that were largely written in the names of the Biblical Patriarchs and other important figures, compiled largely from the Third to First Centuries B.C.E. Much of this literature recorded oral traditions extant in the Judaisms in this period, notably Diaspora Judaism, and for that reason most of these texts survive in Greek. The interpreter will find sentiments and beliefs that may make their way into the Apostolic Scriptures. This demonstrates that certain ideas, such as the New Jerusalem or the Messiah serving as a priest, were not unique to the Apostles. Texts of the Pseudepigrapha should be consulted on a case-by-case basis, as most of them are anonymous, are very broad sweeping, and some have undergone some noticeable changes from their originals. It is advisable that one employ an English translation with some kind of commentary (such as the two-volume edition edited by J.H. Charlesworth) or guide when consulting it.¹³
3. **The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS)** are the collected works of the Qumran community from the First Century B.C.E. that were discovered from 1946 to 1956 in caves on the shore of the Dead Sea in Israel. The Qumran community was an eclectic apocalyptic group expecting the arrival of the Messiah and the overthrow of the Romans. They were Essenes who strongly opposed the Saddusaical Temple priesthood and who thought that the Pharisees were too liberal in their approach to the Torah. Other than the historical traditions we have of Pharisaical theology, the DSS make up the second historical witness of another branch of Judean Judaism during the First Century. We can actually see some parallels between the DSS and views that are recorded in the Apostolic Scriptures. This does not mean that there is total agreement, but does reveal that many of the teachings of the Apostles were not unique to their time, and there were parallels elsewhere. The DSS should be consulted when one is searching for the theological views of the major branches of Judaism in the First Century. Oftentimes, what the DSS say will often be considered when a reference is made either in a commentary or some other work. (Several English translations of the DSS are available; the most widely one by Geza Vermes.)¹⁴
4. **The Mishnah** is the written down form of the Oral Torah, or what was considered to comprise the Oral Torah by the First Century C.E. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, the surviving Jewish Rabbis wrote down the Pharisaic oral traditions that guided their Torah observance. The Mishnah was composed in 200 C.E. in a unique form of Hebrew. In Orthodox Judaism today the Oral Torah is considered to be on par with the Written Torah or Chumash, and is authoritative to a lesser extent in Conservative and Reform Judaism. The Mishnah forms the basis of Jewish law, being divided into five distinct segments: agriculture, the appointed times, women, damages, holy things, and purities. The Mishnah certainly records the history and procedure of how things were done in the Temple and much of the *halachah* that Yeshua and the Apostles would have been exposed to in Judea. The Mishnah is an invaluable historical resource that gives us much insight into how the Torah was followed in the First Century, and there are many good, wisdom sayings in it. (Jacob Neusner has translated a single, one-volume edition of the

¹³ For a further summary on the Pseudepigrapha, consult the article "Pseudepigrapha," by G.E. Ladd, in *ISBE*, 3:1040-1043 (conservative).

¹⁴ For a further summary on the Dead Sea Scrolls, consult the article "Dead Sea Scrolls," by W.S. LaSor, in *ISBE*, 1:883-897 (conservative).

Mishnah in modern American English that is extremely valuable for any congregational or personal library.)¹⁵

5. **The Talmud** is actually a broad term describing two principal bodies of literature: the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. Both of these works are composed in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, and span across two centuries from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E. The Babylonian Talmud largely represents the interpretation and traditions of Eastern Judaism from Babylon building upon the Mishnah, and the Jerusalem Talmud represents the views and traditions of Judaism from Judea, although there are many, many crossovers. Reading through the Talmud can often be a very daunting task to the interpreter who is unfamiliar with reading legal briefs. Much of the Talmud is compiled in the form of “Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y that Rabbi Z said...” Most who examine the Talmud in any detail are religious scholars and teachers, whereas your average interpreter will have to have a tractate pointed out in a commentary or reference book so as not to get lost. The Babylonian Talmud, the larger of the two, has several translations into English. A congregation should at least have an electronic version of the Talmud on hand for reference. (The most popular edition available is the Soncino Talmud, even though Neusner has edited his own modern English version).¹⁶
6. **The Midrashim** are largely commentaries composed of “conversations” or sustained passages of Scripture on various books of the Torah and Tanach. These works are all closely associated with the composition of the Talmud, and stopped being written between 450-500 C.E. In the midrashic method of investigating Scripture, texts are often reinterpreted as applying to Israel or to Israel’s messiah. The Midrashim give us important clues as to how various Tanach texts have been interpreted by the Jewish community. Some of the Midrashim add material beyond the Biblical text in a similar way that the Targums do, and others expound upon texts in a moralistic way to turn people in repentance toward God. The Midrashim are frequently consulted by Messianics wanting to see various Jewish opinions on Tanach texts, but the fact that these appear four to five centuries after Yeshua requires that we treat these sources as tertiary, and not secondary. (Soncino and others have produced various English translations of the Midrashim.)¹⁷
7. **The writings of the Church Fathers** are actually a very broad series of texts compiled anywhere from the early Second Century through the early Fourth Century. These texts include letters, apologetic treatises, and historical summaries of the challenges that the early Church faced. While many in Messianic community are quick to judge these writings, we cannot lump them all together as being “this” or “that,” or all being “anti-Semitic,” as they are simply too diverse. The writings of the Church Fathers were composed by many different individuals spread over a large geographical area, and it is best

¹⁵ For a further summary on the Mishnah, consult the articles “Mishnah,” by Roger Brooks, in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:871-873 (liberal); and “Mishnah,” by Ephraim Elimelech Urbach, in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997 (conservative-liberal).

¹⁶ For a further summary on the Talmuds, consult the article “Talmud, Babylonian,” by Eliezer Berkovits, in *EJ* (conservative-liberal); the entry “Talmud,” in *Encyclopedia of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, pp 614-615 (conservative-liberal); and the book *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* by Hermann L. Strack (New York and Philadelphia: Meridian Books and the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931).

¹⁷ For a further summary on the Midrashim, consult the entries on “Midrash” in *Encyclopedia of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, pp 429-430; and the book *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture: Introduction to the Rabbimic Midrash* by Jacob Neusner (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

that we examine them on a case-by-case basis by who wrote what and the circumstances that the person wrote in. Just like the Talmud, searching through the writings of the emerging Church of this period is like jumping into an unfamiliar ocean. These texts give us important clues as to how Christian communities applied the Scriptures to their lives, as well as many of the persecutions they experienced at the hands of the Romans, and in some places the Synagogue as well. We also get a glimpse at some of the heresies that circulated in the Second Century, and how the immediate successors of the Apostles handled them. An important section of these writings is the Fourth Century work *Church History* by Eusebius. When dealing with these texts, one will often have to be pointed to a specific reference via a commentary or reference source. (There are several English translations available of these writings, most of which are in the public domain.)¹⁸

The third set of extra-Biblical literature that is widely consulted in theology are two collections of philosophical/historical writings from two First Century contemporaries:

1. **Philo Judaeus** or Philo of Alexandria lived between 20-25 B.C.E. and died between 40-45 C.E. He is widely regarded as the first Jewish philosopher and believed that it was possible to present the teachings of the Tanach in palatable forms to students of Greek philosophy. On one hand, Philo's writings represent many of the key theological tenets that we see present in First Century Diaspora Judaism, but on the other he was also somewhat eclectic. Many of Philo's works should be seen in the construct of him trying to defend Jewish belief and custom against Jews being persuaded in the so-called superiority of Hellenistic dogma, as Philo would defend Judaism as being the "true philosophy" or "true mystery" that Hellenism is trying to seek. Philo, while arguing to a different sector of the Jewish community, the Diaspora community, actually holds a very high view of Moses and the Torah. Some of Philo's ideas are paralleled in parts of the Apostolic Scriptures, although compared to his Judean counterparts he would most certainly be considered "progressive." Philo's works are valuable as they give us a glimpse into some of the ideas and beliefs of Diaspora Judaism (which the Messianic movement today largely ignores), and are an excellent historical witness to its customs and traditions. (Single-volume compilations of Philo's works are available in English, and all of his works are in the public domain.)¹⁹
2. **Flavius Josephus** lived between approximately 37-100 C.E. He was born into a well-to-do priestly family in the Land of Israel. At 16 he began a thorough study of the major Jewish sects of his time, and by 19 had become a Pharisee. At the age of 29, he made his way to Rome to see to the release of various priestly friends, and made the acquaintance of the Roman court. Josephus did not join the Jewish Revolt of 67 C.E. and was taken a prisoner by the Roman army. He "prophesied" before Vespasian that he would become caesar, in order to save his own life, believing that the Jewish people could survive in cooperation with Rome. When Vespasian was installed in 69 C.E., Josephus was freed and witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem firsthand in 70 C.E. After this he returned to Rome and became an author of Caesar's court, compiling several histories of the Jewish people. Josephus' works are extremely valuable as they give us insight into the Judaisms of the First

¹⁸ For a further summary on the writings of the Church Fathers consult the article "Apostolic Fathers," by J.R. Michaels, in *ISBE*, 1:203-213 (conservative); and the reference book *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, David W. Bercot, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998).

¹⁹ For a further summary of Philo Judaeus, consult the articles "Philo Judaeus," by R.M. Wilson, in *ISBE*, 3:847-850 (conservative); and "Philo Judaeus," by E.R. Goodenough, in *IDB*, 3:796-799 (moderate-liberal).

Century and the development of early Christianity. They are an excellent external witness to the historicity of the Apostolic Scriptures, and throughout much of Christian history have been read as second only to the Bible. (Single-volume compilations of Josephus' works are available in English, and all of his works are in the public domain.)²⁰

The three areas of extra-Biblical literature I have just mentioned comprise most of the literature that the able researcher will consult in his or her examination of the Scriptures. Consulting this literature, more than anything else, should give us a better view of the world(s) of the Bible, and into the contemporaries of Israel. There are, as can be assumed, other sources that can likewise be considered. Most of these come in the forms of archaeological finds and records, and classical histories such as those from Greece and Rome. Most of these references are going to be found via a technical or critical commentary, so there really is no need for you to start digging without someone pointing you in the right direction. Nevertheless, I would advise you to at least be familiar with such classical works as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

The role that much of this literature plays in our theology can be a debated one if a person holds to a strict "Scripture Only" hermeneutic that only allows the Written Scriptures of Genesis-Revelation to determine one's outlook on the world. The problem with this is that the Biblical world that can sometimes be created in our minds is often an artificial one, as it is by an examination of history that we see how the ancients truly lived their lives, and most importantly how Ancient Israel was not alone and had neighbors. Certainly, our first technique in coming across a difficult verse or passage should be to let Scripture interpret itself, as other verses and passages elsewhere will give us keys to a right interpretation. But this may not always be the case, and turning to outside sources may be necessary.

In the development of our Messianic theology today, I believe that we have to move beyond holding to a strict "Scripture Only" hermeneutic, and instead move to what we might call a "Scripture First" hermeneutic. A Scripture First or *Scriptura Prima* hermeneutic recognizes the final authority of the Bible in all matters, but is not limited so as not to consider the thoughts and ideas of others who have had to wrestle with what the Bible tells us. The Jewish and Messianic celebration of *Chanukah*, more than anything else, is established by traditions recorded in 1-4 Maccabees in the Apocrypha. Certainly, Yeshua the Messiah observed it (John 10:22), but independent of this, our celebrating *Chanukah* is a beneficial and edifying tradition where we celebrate the mighty deeds of God as good overcomes evil.

Perhaps even more important than the example of celebrating *Chanukah*, the body of extra-Biblical literature just summarized can help us immensely when the Bible is vague or mute on an issue. The reason that the Jewish people compiled the Talmuds was so that the Torah could be applied in situations that it was not originally intended for. The same is true of the writings of the Church Fathers when we see Scripture applied in a mostly "under-persecution" state. We turn to all of these traditions to get focused when the Bible itself may not give us the definite answer. Of course, none of us should simply apply tradition haphazardly—because proper application **can only come with spiritual discernment, and being able to reason with an issue through the power of the Holy Spirit**. In your own life and examination of the Bible, these skills can come if you ask the Lord to impart them to you and you have been tested by experience, knowing that things are sometimes more complicated than they seem.

Where do you go from here?

What we have just examined should give you an important "peek" into the various ethnicities, cultures, and ideologies present in the world of the Bible. Admittedly, when you look at civilizations such as Ancient Egypt, Ancient Persia, or Ancient Rome, you will be struck by their advances and the good things that they contributed to humankind. At the same time, these

²⁰ For a further summary of Josephus, consult the articles "Josephus, Flavius," by H. Schreckenberg, in *ISBE*, 2:1132-1133 (conservative); and "Josephus, Flavius," by J. Goldin, in *IDB*, 2:987-988 (moderate-liberal).

civilizations largely did not recognize the God of Israel as the One True God. Similarly, when you look at extra-Biblical literature such as the Apocrypha, the Mishnah and Talmud, or Josephus, one's focus can sometimes go off Scripture itself and onto these works. This should not be our intention; consulting this literature is designed to enhance our understanding of the Biblical text and the ideas and information circulating at the time Biblical books were composed. **This literature should never take our focus off of the inspired, God-breathed Biblical text.**

How do you employ all of this properly? Some of you are probably overwhelmed with these simple summaries that I have just given you. **My recommendation is not for you to go out and spend thousands of dollars on building your library this week.** But I would advise that you have a good Bible encyclopedia handy, such as the four-volume evangelical-conservative *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). I would also recommend that if you are a Messianic congregation or fellowship leader that you read the following two books that will give you more detailed examinations into the world of the Bible: *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* by K.A. Kitchen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), and *New Testament History* by F.F. Bruce (New York: Doubleday, 1969). I believe that by reading these two books, at some point or another in your ministry, you will be equipped to more easily understand the historical world of the Bible, and the issues, *as well as* controversies, it presents. Consulting critical commentaries, such as those in the *New International Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) or *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books) series, will also be very helpful as they will point you to many unfamiliar references in extra-Biblical literature.²¹

The role of history is something that has been often ignored in today's Messianic world of ideas. Unfortunately, because the emerging Messianic movement is still in its infancy, we sometimes suffer from sensationalistic views of the past. What actually took place and how events really occurred are much more interesting and can equip us better for the work that the Lord has for us in this century and the diverse world we live in. Sadly, some in the emerging Messianic movement forget that we have access to information that our great-grandfathers, and even grandfathers, largely did not have, and so it has become more *en vogue* to criticize the Christians who have preceded us, rather than recognize that we are continuing their work. **Note that arrogance is a far worse sin than ignorance—or a lack of information—will ever be.** A fair-minded view of Jewish and Christian history is imperative to consider as a more definitive and refined theology can be established for future generations of Messianics Believers.

Be blessed as you continue your faithful study of the Scriptures with all its history from the past, which surely speaks volumes to us today!

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

²¹ All of these books, and other important reference tools, are listed in the **Theological Resources** section of the TNN Online website.