

LEGITIMATE MODELS FOR MESSIANIC JEWISH LIFE AND JEWISH SPACE IN THE DIASPORA

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It is a constant human failing that we tend to claim absolute and objective superiority and right for strongly held preferences. This is often done without clear Biblical teaching or clear evidence of the pragmatic superiority of the preference. The greater pragmatic superiority is often assumed with not convincing supporting evidence. This is the case in Messianic Judaism in the Diaspora, where these proponents of these various models vie the superiority of their model. Yet, We must begin with Biblical principle and see how such principle is worked out in preference. We must begin with universal truth and then seek to be flexible in application.

The Universal and True

My assertion concerning the universal and true with regard to Messianic Judaism has three major points. These points are significantly supported by some leading contemporary scholars. I believe these three are historic points of agreement among many Messianic Jews.

1. Jewish people are called to live and identify as Jews as part of their New Covenant faith. This includes being part of the larger Jewish community. It includes applying the Torah as is fitting to the New Covenant (All have a call to apply Torah, but Gentiles emphasize that which is universal in practice) This identification includes not just that which is Biblical, but affirming that which is good and beautiful in the Jewish heritage as weighted by a renewed mind that is conformed to the Word of God. It also includes repentance and intercession for that which is not good in our heritage.
2. Jewish disciples of Yeshua are to be disciplined in their covenant responsibilities to Jewish life and calling. This is to include the concern for intergenerational continuity.
3. Gentiles believers are called to appreciate the original context of their faith. All are called to play a role in support for Israel, the Jewish community, and the salvation of the Jewish people. In a Jewish population area, this concern should be expressed by outreach to Jewish people in specific programs and strategies.

Creative Applications

There is no Biblical clarity on just how to best apply these truths so that the implantation of these truths is successfully achieved. Here are models that are presently being used. These are legitimate choices for Jewish believers in Yeshua. Jewish believers may be led to other choices, but such choices require Messianic Jewish life without congregational support which is impractical over the long haul.

1. The Church that Supports Israel, the Jewish Community and Jewish Life in Yeshua

In such a church, the pastor is committed to the Wyschogrod-Soulen view that it is the responsibility of the Church to teach its Jewish members that they are responsible to live a Jewish life (see *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*). This church at least teaches on the meaning of the Feasts and Torah. It disciplines its Jewish members to live a Jewish life,

to be part of the larger Jewish community, and even to from sub-group *chavurah* meetings so that something of Jewish communal dimensions are attained. Such a church as a whole will have a primarily gentile projection. They may celebrate Christian traditions, the Church Year, liturgy and more. Their music may include Messianic Jewish songs and content, but this will not be primary. To achieve this model's goals, there needs to be a pastor educated about the biblical theology of Jewish life and calling and who knows enough about Judaism to be a proponent of Jewish life and calling. He may enlist others in his community who have greater expertise to lead, but it is essential that he be overt in support.

While no one can say from Scripture that this model is not biblical, it has not yet been proven effective. The reason why is that I have not found pastors who are committed to implementing it. They may theoretically say they are for it. However, to really implement it would require much focus and commitment and even much conflict with Jewish members who really do not want to recognize that they have a distinct calling. While this model could work, it has not yet been proven.

2. The Jewish Roots Church

In a Jewish roots church, the whole church celebrates the Biblical Feasts. They may worship on Shabbat. They may also celebrate aspects of the Christian cultural heritage, but such elements are not prominent. Usually the musical style of services are a mixture of Messianic Jewish and mainstream church modern styles. In addition, some Jewish liturgy may be incorporated. The majority of the community is Gentile. The projection from the bema is a Jewish-Gentile combination of elements. The culture or mannerism of the people is gentile. Some may say Jesus Christ and others may say Yeshua. Some may call their community a congregation and others may call it a church.

For such a group to succeed, Jewish members need to be disciplined in Jewish calling and responsibility. The Gentile members should be trained to support this calling and responsibility. As in the above model, the pastor, Jew or Gentile, needs to be educated in both the biblical theology of Jewish life and calling and in the main positive values and pitfalls of post-biblical Judaism.

The congregation would do well to foster committed Jewish *chavurahs*. In this model the outreach focus is to both Jews and Gentiles equally. However, all appreciate a deeper presence of Jewish rooted elements. To not lose Jewish effectiveness there at least needs to be a significant group or groups that are committed to involvement in the Jewish community and whose primary focus of witness and involvement is the Jewish people. This model as well is untested because as yet none have shown significant success.

3. The Messianic Jewish Congregation with a Gentile Majority

This model along with the next one has been the most successful in Messianic Judaism both in outreach and in building good size congregations. In this particular model, the primary focus for outreach for the whole congregation is the Jewish community. Integration into the Jewish community is taught. In addition, gentiles are welcome who appreciate Jewish roots and who believe they are called to the Jewish people either for a season or permanently.

The public projection from the bema is Jewish. This is by the effect of those chosen to lead the services, the music and liturgy chosen and the messages preached. This is very strongly governed. Therefore, the bema creates Jewish space. Gentiles are willing to subordinate themselves to such Jewish space considerations for the good of the mission of the congregation.

Because the majority of the the congregation is gentile, the effect of Jews who meet the people will be that this is a strange place. This is because most gentiles will project a gentile affect even if they appreciate Jews and Judaism. This is mitigated by explaining that the congregation fosters the fellowship of Jew and Gentile in the Messiah as a fulfillment of eschatological promise.

In such congregations, gentiles are often effective in Jewish witness and people from Churches bring their Jewish friends. Most practices are open to both Jews and Gentiles who desire such involvement, including wearing a tallit, reading from the Torah and more.

4. Messianic Jewish Congregations with a Jewish Majority

In such a congregation as in the above, the projection from the bema is Jewish. However, because the projection of the people is also Jewish, the Jewish visitor will find that he has a sense of being among his own in the community of people as well as being at home from what is projected from the bema. Gentile membership also has to be explained, but there is less cultural dissonance. Sometimes due to gentile interest, congregations have evolved from this model to the above model. However, if there was effective outreach, a congregation could move from the above model to this one.

Again, in this model most practices are open to both Jews and Gentiles. This includes the use of the tallit, being called to Torah, and much more. Indeed in this model and the above, the leaders may be gentiles who can project adequate Jewish expression and affect. Again, Gentiles subordinate themselves to Jewish space considerations for the sake of the good of the mission.

5. Messianic Jewish Traditional Halakhic

Those who practice this model are concerned to practice Judaism more in accord with accepted practice and usage in the Jewish community. (All should be concerned to apply Torah in the New Covenant (halakhic interpretation, but all are not so tied to Jewish traditional restrictions.) They do not necessarily choose orthodoxy as the standard, but mainstream Judaism in Conservative and Reform models. In such a model, there is a stronger liturgical emphasis. Majority Jewish membership is diligently sought. Gentiles may join but are rigorously tested by interview, membership courses, and high bar requirements.

Such a concern for mainstream Jewish practice causes the leaders of such congregations to preclude the looser appropriation of Jewish practice in the other models. For example, Gentiles will not be called to Torah or permitted to wear a tallit, which is interpreted as a Jewish covenantal sign. The shofar will only be blown at prescribed times according to Jewish practice and not used more liberally as in some Messianic Jewish congregations. The leader of the congregation will be a Jew.

We should note that some who claim Messianic Jewish nomenclature are aberrant. This includes those who claim that Jew and Gentile are to live out the same Law in almost all regards and obliterate the distinction of calling. It includes those who claim they are Ephraim or the Lost Tribes and thus keep the same Torah. One Law groups are not mainstream Messianic Judaism.

To date, Messianic Judaism has been a movement represented by mostly model 3 and 4. These models have varied in liturgical style, charismatic manifestations, and much in detail. They are the most proven models.

In a network of congregations, it is important that all the legitimate models be affirmed but that our corporate projection be from the center of our movement and hence reflective of 3 and 4. Those who are leaders of joint programs or conference worship and preaching times need to be able to project themselves as category 3 or 4 congregations. Those in category one and two will need to be willing to be subordinate to those who can project the corporate center of our vision. They can be well used in such support roles of preaching, teaching and training, but not the dominant leadership roles. Those who are in category 5 need to accommodate the less rigorous application of normative mainstream Judaism, while recognizing that we all want to grow in Jewish sensitivities that even most secular Jews would understand. For example, we all stand for the Shema and the Torah processional or the Amidah prayer.

We of course recognize that some will be between such categories and have unique dimensions. We do have the Holy Spirit and his creative leading.