

Messianic Jewish

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Life!

The Scriptures

Can We Rely on Them in Today's World?



- 3 Reasons Why Messianic Jews Believe in the Scriptures
- Archaeology and the Legitimacy of the Bible



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This is the Torah which Moses placed before the children of Israel at the command of the Lord by the hand of Moses.



MISSION STATEMENT

The purpose of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance is to provide for the spiritual and material welfare of Jewish believers and to witness to the Jewish people about Yeshua the Messiah.



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The Authoritative Bible and Jewish Believers

by Gershon Nerel

Contemporary Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jewish believers) almost unanimously accept the canonical Holy Scriptures comprising the Old and New Testaments as a 'fait accompli.'¹ In principle, Jewish believers hold no claims that would question the validity of that Canon. Furthermore, mainstream Jewish believers have no aspirations to initiate a theological process that would re-canonize the existing sacred texts.

The idea of a Canon of Scripture—i.e. books commonly and officially received as the rule of divine faith—goes back to Old Testament times. The list of Holy Scriptures, as we have it today, was formally closed towards the end of the fifth century A.D.² As a matter of fact, it was

through the tradition and authority of the Church that this collection of inspired writings was gradually defined.

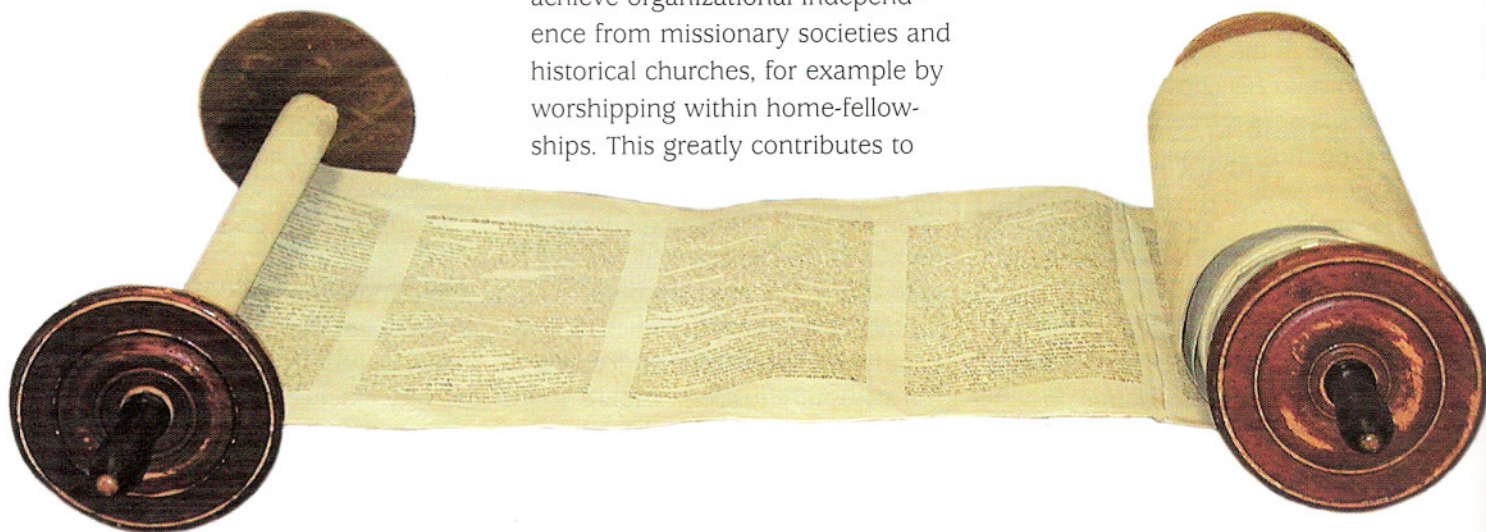
Jewish believers in Yeshua also make no attempts to canonize new or particularistic texts of their own. Nevertheless, they do insist on their full right to provide independent scriptural interpretations. A new exegetical approach has been developed mainly within communities rooted in the Hebrew language and culture. The revival of the Hebrew language within various circles of Jewish believers has given momentum to new tendencies among them to redefine theologies and even historical creeds.³

There are also the ongoing attempts of Jewish believers to achieve organizational independence from missionary societies and historical churches, for example by worshipping within home-fellowships. This greatly contributes to

their inclination to shape fresh insights into biblical hermeneutics. Actually, it seems that particularly in *Eretz-Israel*, the land of Israel, Jewish believers have the optimal conditions to benefit from both organizational and theological liberty, and thus shape original Messianic Jewish perspectives.⁴

The Question of the Apocrypha

The word *Apocrypha* is applied to an Appendix that is attached to some of the non-Hebrew Bibles. This appendix is a collection of twelve Jewish writings, among them the books of Maccabees, Baruch, Jesus Ben-Sirah, Tobit and Judith. They were produced by Hellenistic Judaism, especially that of Alexandria. The Apocrypha, known



also as the deuterocanonical books, was accepted by the early church as part of the Greek version of the Old Testament, but was not included in the Hebrew Bible. The non-Hellenistic Jews excluded the Apocrypha from their Canon of Scripture.⁵

Literally, Apocrypha in Greek means “the hidden (things).” In Hebrew this collection is called *The External Books*. Originally, an apocryphal book was too sacred and secret to be in every one’s hands. It was reserved for the initiate, the inner circle of believers. The modern employment of the term *Apocrypha* to the Appendix of the non-Hebrew Old Testament originates from the sixteenth century Reformation.

We should note that there is a terminological confusion here, because the Apocrypha to the Old Testament contains no books of secret teaching. Also they should not be necessarily viewed as spurious texts. However, the confusion becomes complicated when dealing with the Apocryphal New Testament. Namely, alongside the canonical New Testament, there are also many narratives of apocryphal gospels, acts, epistles and apocalypses.

The Old Testament Apocrypha

Together with mainstream Jewry, and most Protestant churches, Jewish believers in Yeshua exclude from the Canonical Bible the Old Testament Apocrypha. However, it is interesting that because of its antiquity, the Apocrypha was included in the King James Version published in 1611, and even earlier in Martin Luther’s German Version of 1534. In

fact, most translations at the time of the Reformation placed the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testaments, with a salient title “Books which are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures, and nevertheless are useful and good to read.”⁶

Today, following the precedent established by Jerome, translator of the Latin Vulgate version, and the Septuagint Greek Version of the Old Testament (LXX), some ecumenical German versions of the Bible still contain the Apocrypha.⁷ Yet, present time Jewish believers in Yeshua exclusively accept as the Word of God only the dual Canon of Old and New Testaments. However, modern Jewish believers who adhere to the Catholic Church and still highlight their national Jewish identity, keep the Apocryphal Books included in the Catholic Canon.

With regard to the question of composition and inspiration of the present Canon of Scripture, Jewish believers often raise the argument that when Yeshua himself was teaching, he never quoted from the second temple period apocryphal literature. In other words, Jewish believers emphasize the simple fact that Yeshua, though quoting the Old Testament so frequently, always referred only to the canonical Hebrew writings, whether the Torah, the Prophets or the Psalms. The same is true about Yeshua’s evangelists and apostles. Therefore the Apocrypha has no divine significance in the teachings of Jewish believers. For most Jewish believers in Yeshua the New Testament links itself immediately with the end of the Old Testament, as if no inspired writing came between.

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Ancient Apocryphal New Testament

The *Apocryphal New Testament* is a modern title for various early Christian writings outside the Canon of the New Testament. These include numerous fragments, among them, for example, the *Gospel of the Ebionites*,⁸ the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, the *Letters of Pilate and Herod* and the *Acts of Philip*. During this time, some lost heretical books, like *The Birth of Mary* and *the Memoirs of the Apostles*, were also in existence.⁹ Initially many texts were written in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Coptic, Syriac and Arabic, but none of the original Hebrew texts were found.

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Fundamentally, and unlike the Old Testament Apocrypha, today the New Testament Apocrypha is not used publicly by any historic Church. Similarly, the early apocryphal literature of the New Testament is also overlooked, and practically rejected, within Messianic Jewish congregations. Although certain scholars assume that in a few places some of these apocryphal texts embody trustworthy oral traditions, still a large portion reflects heretical influences.¹⁰ In any case, on the threshold of the third millennium, mainstream Bible believers, Jews, and the nations, accept as divinely authoritative only those Canonical Scriptures that keep out the apocryphal writings.

Modern Apocryphal New Testament

While the issue of ancient Apocryphal New Testament is not a real problem for Jewish believers, they do have to face the missionary attempts to introduce a modern apocrypha to the New Testament. Namely, Jewish Yeshua believers repeatedly need to explain that they add to the Old Testament only the New Covenant, nothing else. And, for example, that they have nothing in common with the apocryphal writings of Mormonism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which claims to add a new light to the New Testament.

Whereas Mormons believe in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, they also claim, after Joseph Smith (1805–1844), to have discovered through a revelation the *Book of Mormon*. In addition to that,

Mormons view another book, the *Pearl of Great Price*, as inspired and binding upon them. Consequently, the Mormons introduce “A New Witness for Christ,” and totally mix the Bible with a new ‘Gospel.’¹¹

Furthermore, some Mormons talk about “Jewish Mormons,” but few among them would even consider or present themselves as Messianic Jews. Such Mormons argue that Mormonism was originally very Jewish. However, in spite of certain Mormons attempts to relate to Israeli Jewish believers in Yeshua, the latter have boldly declined any connections with Mormonism. As a matter of fact, Israeli Jewish believers realize that it was a regrettable mistake to have recently included the Mormons within a survey that was conducted on contemporary Jewish believers in Yeshua.¹² Jewish disciples of Yeshua in Israel, as believers everywhere, emphatically reject the apocryphal writings of Mormonism.

Jewish Yeshua believers are very cautious in their approach to modern so-called *Scripture*. It is especially in Israel that Jewish believers must systematically reject accusations made against them of being a “dangerous sect” or a “cult,” like the Mormons. As a result, Jewish believers deeply sense the need to distance themselves from these heretical texts that sprang in the West, and that they have to be on the alert to protect themselves from other *Latter Day Apocrypha*, increasingly expanding from East Asia.

Eastern influences

During these days the message of

the Old and New Testaments is also directly confronted in Israel by a relatively new “church”—the *Church of Scientology*. The *Scientology Scripture*, based on the writings of Ron Hubbard, has been recently translated into Hebrew, and is distributed among the Israelis.¹³ Many young Jewish Israelis, usually after completing their hard military service of about 3 years, travel to the Far East and return from there with an import of Hindu, Shintu or Buddhist “light.” Scientology now adopts these eastern religions and tries to present its own spiritual alternative as a new “Hebrew Church.”

Thus various eastern religions are now under a process of *Hebraization*, and are openly presented in the Land as a modern solution—instead of the Bible—to the problems of mankind. For example, the central teaching of the Old and New Testaments about a personal God is directly antagonized by the *Gospel of Scientology*. In the Land of the Bible now Scientology offers other *higher developments*, imported from the east. These *developments and methods* are nothing but a sophisticated neo-paganism, formulating a counter-theology to the Bible.

Surprisingly, several weeks ago two local leaders of the Scientology group officially approached some Israeli Jewish Yeshua believers, suggesting they cooperate with them. Namely, the believers in Scientology offered that Jewish believers in Yeshua establish a united front with them, campaigning together against the anti-missionary activities in Israel. Basically, the Scientologists

were attempting to organize a common *human/civil-rights league*, together with Jewish believers. These repeated requests were plainly rejected by Jewish Yeshua believers.

As a result of this situation, Israeli Jewish believers realize even better than before that they should strictly stick to the Canonical Scriptures, just “as little children” (cf. Matthew 18:3). More and more the Old and New Testaments now also function—in Israel and elsewhere—as a fundamental criterion, a litmus paper, to simply discern between truth and all the new sects and cults.

The Syncretism of Shlomo Kalo

While mainstream Messianic Jewish congregations relate to the *Apocryphal New Testament* as unbiblical texts, in Israel today there is still a group of bohemian Jews who believe in Yeshua through harmonizing the Bible with ancient apocryphal literature. This trend of thought is developing under the patronage of a ‘spiritual leader’ called Shlomo Kalo, who immigrated to Israel from Bulgaria, and his new wife, Rivka Zohar. Kalo is a prolific writer who frequently mentions Yeshua and the canonical New Testament. However, Kalo believes in syncretism—a reconciliation of different religious tenets. For example, Kalo composed a prayer book where he combines verses from the Old Testament, the New Testament, Hinduism and the Koran.¹⁴

Through another book, ambiguously entitled *Behold Here It Comes*,¹⁵ Kalo also disseminates his blended teaching among Messianic Jewish

congregations in Israel. Unfortunately, Kalo even succeeded in convincing some prominent local leaders that he is an exclusive disciple of Yeshua and of the Canonical Scriptures. Only a few among veteran Jewish Yeshua believers immediately grasped that in fact Kalo is a syncretist, who equally believes in the New Covenant and in various old and new apocryphal stories. For example, Kalo symmetrically narrates the famous medieval legend about Veronica, the girl who courageously wiped the face of the Messiah on the way to Golgotha,¹⁶ as a biblical story.

Kalo is also the person responsible for the Hebrew translation and the local dissemination of an *Unknown Gospel*—the *Gospel of Thomas*. Within a leaflet that was produced by the followers of Kalo, there is a reference to a *Hidden Gospel*. The advertisement in this brochure reads as follows: “The Unknown Gospel—A translation of the Gospel according to Thomas (one of the disciples of Yeshua), that was discovered in an ancient Gnostic library in Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1946. Added is an original and surprising interpretation.”¹⁷ Thus Kalo endeavors to create an extraneous ‘New Jewish Christianity.’ In reality, however, such apocryphal texts are now promulgated merely within Kalo’s esoteric circles. Fortunately, mainstream Israeli Jewish Yeshua believers eventually unmasked Kalo and his writings as another representation of the parable (Matthew 7: 15) about ravening wolves appearing in the dress of lambs.¹⁸

Ecclesiastical Succession and Apostolic Authority

The Catholic Church, in particular, highlights its doctrine of Apostolic Tradition and Succession - the system whereby the ministry and teaching of the Church trace their legitimacy (and authority) from the apostles by a continuous succession. A fundamental argument of Catholicism against the Protestant churches, as well as modern Jewish Yeshua believers, is that they lack an uninterrupted chain of Apostolic Tradition and Authority.¹⁹ Indeed, contemporary Jewish Yeshua believers are not able to claim that they possess unceasing communities and a tradition that has lasted for the last two millennia.²⁰ Nevertheless, Jewish believers sincerely believe that when they accept, and follow, the Canonical Scriptures comprising Old and New Testaments, they possess an authentic and complete apostolic foundation.

Furthermore, modern Jewish Yeshua believers argue that because they were silenced, de-legitimized and assimilated by the Church for about 18 centuries, they had no real chance to preserve an uninterrupted tradition. Hence, in our times Jewish believers are searching for new ways to directly bridge between themselves and the apostles of the Canonical Scriptures. Through this process of mentally bridging over almost 2000 years of history, Jewish believers are now able to bypass, and sometimes even ignore, those theological and moral deviations that penetrated into the historic

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Church. For example, through this process Jewish believers are able to detach themselves from the theological anti-Semitism that was, and unfortunately in some places still remains, an existing part of the Church.

In other words, when Jewish Yeshua believers embrace a historic *textual succession*, i.e. following the Canon of Scripture—they view themselves as the direct and legitimate heirs of the early Jewish Apostles. This is also helpful for removing the apostasy from the road that leads to the Jewish Yeshua.²¹ From this point of view, therefore, Jewish believers in Yeshua are not only accepting the Old and New Testaments Canon as authoritative, but they also seriously question various *oral traditions* of the Church, such as Mariolatry.

Ultimately, as Jewish believers realize that the greatest wrong of the Church against their people has been the gentilizing of Jewish Yeshua followers,²² they also gratefully recognize that the Gentile Church at large crystallized the final shape of the New Testament. Indeed, the Church does deserve significant credit for preserving the New Testament. As a result of that, now Jewish believers are not only following those texts defined by the Church as orthodox, but are also rejecting many other texts which the Church defined as heretical or eccentric.

Summary

Today, together with the universal Church, mainstream Jewish believers in Yeshua exclude the Apocryphal New Testament—ancient and

modern—from their authoritative Canon of Scripture. Notwithstanding, some Jewish believers, such as those within the Catholic Church, still relate to the Old Testament Apocrypha as part and parcel of the Bible. In general, Jewish believers object to any attempts to classify them as a group that is aiming at establishing a new esoteric movement. Jewish Yeshua believers do not adhere to secret or external texts that would supposedly be used by certain inner circles. After all, while Jewish believers have no aspirations of their own to add any new *holy writ* to the existing Canon of Scripture, they also disapprove of such attempts done by other *believers*.

Like their forefathers in the first century, contemporary Jewish disciples of Yeshua believe in the Messiah according to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. By following the Old and New Testaments as a divinely inspired text, Jewish believers witness that they are spiritually returning to their biblical roots. This they do just as in modern times the people of Israel are nationally returning to their territorial heritage. Accordingly, Jewish believers in Yeshua cannot and should not be suspended merely as an anachronistic phenomenon. »

NOTES

- 1 D.B. Bravin, "The Book that Made the Jews Famous," in *The American Hebrew Christian*, vol. 53, (1968), pp. 18–20
- 2 "Canon of Scripture," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, London 1974, p. 232
- 3 Cf. Gershon Nerel, "Messianic Jews" in *Eretz-Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1996, pp. 342–345 (Hebrew)

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- 5 Cf. *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1, (From the Beginnings to Jerome), Edited by P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans, Cambridge 1975, passim
- 6 Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha of the Old Testament*, Revised Standard Version, New York 1965, p. viii
- 7 *Die Bibel in heutigen Deutsch*, (mit den Spaetschriften des Alten Testaments), Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 1982
- 8 Henry Longueville Mansel, *The Gnostic Heresies of the First and Second Centuries*, London 1875, pp. 123–128
- 9 Montague Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1926, passim
- 10 Apocryphal New Testament," in *ODCC*, pp. 71–72
- 11 *Meet the Mormons*, Utah, n.d., pp.5–16
- 12 Cf. Kai Kjaer-Hansen and Bodil Skjott, eds., *Facts and Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*, (Mishkan nos. 30–31), Jerusalem 1999, pp. 306–307
- 13 *Church of Scientology, Theology and Practicability in Contemporary Religion*, Copenhagen 1998 (Hebrew)
- 14 Dorit Israel, "The Guru of Bohemians," in *Olam Haisha*, January 1995, pp. 48–50, (Hebrew)
- 15 Shlomo Kalo, *Behold Here It Comes*, Published by D.A.T., Jaffa Dec. 1996 (Hebrew)
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114
- 17 See "Thomas, Gospel of," in *ODCC*, p. 1370
- 18 Boaz Fastman, "Shlomo Kalo—Wolf or Lamb?" in *Kivun*, vol. 5, (1997), pp. 2–4, (Hebrew)
- 19 See *Catéchisme de L'Église Catholique*, Paris 1992, paragraphs 75–83; 857–865
- 20 Cf. Vincent Martin, *A House Divided: The Parting of the Ways Between Church and Synagogue*, New York 1995, pp. 161–162
- 21 See Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den. The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*, Oxford 1990, p. 167
- 22 Mark John Levy, "To Atone for Christendom's Greatest Wrong to the Jews," in *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. 1, (1929), pp. 194–197

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University of Jerusalem (1996). Dr. Nerel is involved in several academic projects researching the modern Messianic Jewish movement. He also serves on the editorial board of *Mishkan*, a forum on the Gospel and the Jewish people published in Jerusalem.

End notes

from the publisher



“**M**essianic Judaism will be accepted by other Jews in *this* century.” So said Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok—a *non*-Messianic Jew—to the national conference of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (an affiliate of the IMJA) this past summer.

Cohn-Sherbok, Professor of Judaism at The University of Wales had heard about Messianic Judaism. This author of over 50 books and 150 articles came to the U.S., along with his wife, to find the facts. They attended “Messiah '98,” the annual conference of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (also an affiliate of the IMJA).

They reasoned that something so appealing to so many Jews had to be examined more closely. Their conclusion: “This is important!” *Messianic Judaism*, a book from a major British publisher, was the result of their research. Cohn-Sherbok is now compiling a collection of essays to be written by some of the leading Messianic Jewish thinkers on *The Future of Messianic Judaism*. It will be available next summer.

Why is this incident so important? Is it because finally a rabbi accepts us as Jews? Is it that we have been “certified kosher” by a Jewish theologian? Yes, but there’s more. *A prominent scholar has objectively examined the facts and is willing to state that Messianic Jews are Jews*, despite what the majority of rabbis teach. This is big news!

As the non-Messianic Jewish world reads Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok’s books, they will be more likely to consider one fact in particular— that Yeshua just might be the Messiah. That is why this is so important!

Shalom in Messiah,

Barry Rubin
Publisher

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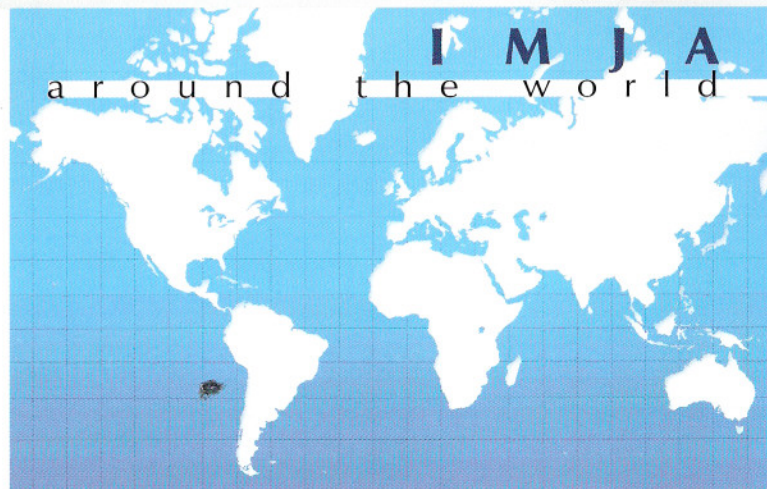
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