

Zot Habrit

This is the Covenant

A Journal of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel (MJAI)



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A Word from the Editors:

The current issue of *This is the Covenant* is an enlarged English adaptation of the proceedings of two seminars which were carried out in Hebrew at the Messianic village of Yad Hashmona in the Judean Hills near Jerusalem. Both seminars were initiated and organized by the executive committee of the MJAI. The first seminar focused on the topic of "Our Jewish Identity in the Messiah Yeshua," and took place on Friday, January 26, 2001, during the bi-annual general meeting of the MJAI. The second seminar, on "The Trinity – What do we believe?," took place on Friday, February 7, 2003.

Although these materials appear in writing only now, they are still most relevant also several years later, and thus they remain "ever green." It is our hope and prayer that the two last seminars of MJAI, on Christian anti-Semitism and on Politics among Israeli Yeshua-believers, will appear within the next year.



Gershon Nerel and Hanan Lukatz

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זאת הברית



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III PART TWO

This issue is an English adaptation of the proceedings of a seminar on the topic:

“The Trinity - What Do We Believe?”

Which was held in Hebrew at Moshav Yad Hashmona on February 7, 2003
during the Annual Meeting of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel

The original version of the seminar proceedings was
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The Trinity – An Historical Perspective

Gershon Nerel

In the theology of the historical churches, the “Trinity” constitutes a central, uncontested doctrine, a dogma, in other words, “a religious truth determined by divine revelation and defined by the Church.” Under the Ottoman rule in the Land of Israel, as well as during the time of the British Mandate, when believers first began translating Christian/Church terminology to Hebrew, “Trinity” (Shilush) was not the sole term in use. At times the word “Shlishia” was used. After the establishment of the State of Israel, the “United Christian Council in Israel” (UCCI) published a glossary entitled “Christian Messianic Terms,”¹ in which the term “Shlasha”² appeared. According to “The Doctrine of the Trinity,” the one God exists in three persons, but is one being. This doctrine is defined as a “secret,” a “mystery,” and is received by faith, by revelation, without any logical proof, although it does not necessarily contradict human reasoning.

The term “Trinity” in its Greek and Latin forms (trias, trinitas) first appeared during

the latter years of the second century CE. As is commonly known, the term does not appear in the Old or New Covenants. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Yeshua Himself spoke of the “triple” immersion, if one can call it that – “In the

Historically, even from the beginning of the Jewish community of believers in Yeshua (“The Circumcised”), controversies arose regarding the relationship between the three components of the “Trinity”: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). It is also worthy to note the following verse: “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one” (1 John 5:7).³ In addition, the concept of plurality in the Divine union appears in the Scriptures in the very phrase “The Lord is one,” “God is one” – one (*echad*) rather than singular (*yachid*). This is the case, for example, even when the word pair “Lord God” appears in the Hebrew Scriptures (2 Samuel 7:18-19 & 28, Genesis 2:8-9).

Many lengthy historical disagreements revolved around the definition of the Trinity.

1) Edited by Robert Lindsey (Hebrew, English, French, Arabic), Jerusalem 1976, p. 8.

2) Like the Hebrew word for “Trinity” (Shilush) commonly used today, the variations *Shlishia* and *Shlasha* derive from the Hebrew root for the number three.

3) Not in all manuscripts.

This is the most prevalent question that arose in the past, and it exists to this day: Is there full and absolute equality between the three elements of the ‘Godhead’?

It is important to note that we are not treating a solely philosophical, intellectual debate. Rather, the subject of the unity of the Godhead has practical implications for the life of the believer and the management of congregational frameworks.

In the course of history, the positions of Orthodoxy, “the correct faith”, and “heresy” in the form of various sects, were established, each being recognizable by their stance on the doctrine of the Trinity and by their recognition or denunciation by a recognized, ordained body. Thus, many versions of the articles of faith appeared, and alongside them the names of corresponding heretics.

Historically, even from the beginning of the Jewish community of believers in Yeshua (“The Circumcised”), controversies arose regarding the relationship between the three components of the “Trinity”: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the first centuries of the Common Era, there were two main streams among the Jewish believers in Yeshua. One stream, the Ebionites, rejected faith in the divinity of Yeshua, attributing to Yeshua only a human nature. Accordingly, the

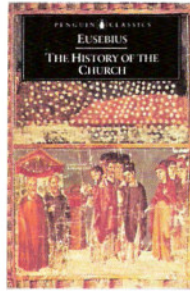
Ebionites proposed that Yeshua was born by a completely natural birth and not by a miraculous virgin birth. The Nazarenes, in contrast, believed that Yeshua had already existed as the Word, the Logos, before He became flesh and came to dwell on earth. The Ebionites also did not have a clear stand concerning the Holy Spirit. The various Church Fathers, both the Greeks in the east, and the Latins in the west, regarding their definition of the faith as orthodox doctrine, viewed the Jewish Ebionites as heretics.

It is especially interesting that the Church Fathers did not reject the Ebionites alone, but the Nazarenes as well. The leading theologians of the Church were not satisfied with the invalidation of the Ebionites because of their negation of the divinity of Yeshua. Eventually the Church Fathers invalidated the Nazarenes as well, because the Nazarenes, like the Ebionites, desired to preserve a distinct Jewish identity. In other words, despite the fact that the Nazarenes believed that Yeshua existed even before His birth to Miriam, and accepted His supernatural birth and believed in His divinity, nonetheless, the Church Fathers were disturbed by the self-definition of Nazarenes as Torah-observant Jews. Thus, for example, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, who had great authority and influence in the Church from the fifth century onward, determined the fate of the Nazarenes, relegating them to a sect banned by the Church; he saw the Nazarenes as followers of Yeshua

who “Judaize” the Church through observance of commandments such as the circumcision, the Sabbath, kosher laws and biblical holidays. Augustine defined both the Nazarenes and the Ebionites as heretics, despite the fact that the Nazarenes did not in fact qualify as such.

Augustine followed in the footsteps of Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century, who also took a stand against the early Messianic Jews who kept the commandments of the Torah in antiquity.¹ At that time in the Church, which was already composed mainly of Gentiles, the “problem” according to the Gentile theologians, was that all of the Jews that believed in Yeshua kept the commandments of the Torah. The latter based their daily lives on the words of Yeshua in the Sermon on the Mount, which states that the Messiah did not come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets but rather to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).

In other words, the center of gravity in the early theological thought traversed clear boundaries, shifting from the



realm of the divinity of Yeshua to the domain of the distinct national identity of the Jewish disciples of Yeshua. Torah-observant Jews of various kinds, whether they rejected the divinity of Yeshua or accepted His full divinity, were perceived to be anomalies, and were expelled from the Church, particularly under the accusation of heresy. In their writings, the

Church Fathers did not bother to clearly distinguish between the Ebionites and the Nazarenes, and essentially discovered a new problem – “The Jewish Problem” – no longer a Christological problem focusing on the nature of the Messiah.

Actually, the same questions that arose in Antiquity concerning the theology of the divinity of Yeshua on the one hand, and maintenance of a Jewish lifestyle in Messianic Jewish circles, on the other, exist to this very day. Nowadays, as in the early centuries, the concept and reality of Torah observance in light of the words of Yeshua are not directly or necessarily related to the subject of the rejection of Yeshua’s divinity. Keeping the Torah, which was given to Israel, especially according to the clear teaching of Yeshua and by the leading of the Holy Spirit, and not according to the Jewish Halacha (practice) tradition of men, is not in the realm of heresy against the Godhead.

It is worthwhile to note that in contrast to the situation that characterized the

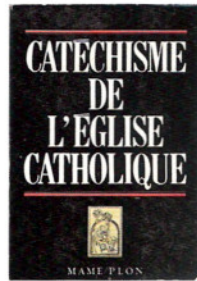
1) See Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, *The Church Chronicles* (Hebrew), Caspari/Akademon, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 91-92. Cf. Gershon Nerel, “Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History and the Modern Yeshua-Movement: Some Comparisons,” *Mishkan*, 39 (2003): 65-86.

first two hundred years of the Common Era, since the third century, most of the churches and their believers had already canonized the basic text of the New Covenant, which included the four Gospels and the 13-14 Epistles of Saul/Paul. This Canon includes texts that served as a basis for the definition of the faith on the subject of Yeshua's divinity. In addition, the first ecumenical Church Council that was held in Nicaea in 325 CE became an important turning point in the definition of faith in the Messiah and His divinity. This council was called in order to oppose the Arian heresy. The Arians rejected Yeshua's divinity. They opined that the Son of God did not exist from the beginning of creation, and was not born of the Father (Psalm 2:7), but was entirely created by the Father ex nihilo, in order to create the world through Him. According to their teaching, Yeshua was not divine in nature and substance, but was a changing creation, who received the honor of the Son of God based upon the righteousness and glory that would be His in the future.

The Council of Nicaea, sponsored by the Caesar Constantine, unequivocally determined that the Father and the Son are entirely co-equal and co-eternal. The terminology used in that period concerning the substantive identity between the Father and the Son were *homoousios* in Greek, and *consubstantio*

in Latin. These terms express the desire to attribute full equality to the Father and Son within the Godhead.

From the fifth until the eighth century, a different problem plagued the Church, a heresy called "Adoptionism". According to this doctrine, God the Father adopted Yeshua as a Son when John the Baptist immersed Him in the Jordan River and a voice was heard from the heavens that said, "This is My beloved Son" (Matthew 3:17). The followers of this teaching believed that Yeshua was a man of flesh and blood, who was adopted as the Son of God due to His lofty attributes and special merits, and was elevated to divine status. This position was rejected as heresy by the Church Council at Ephesus in 431 CE, but reappeared in the West in the eighth century.¹



In the Catholic Church Catechism, the basic book on the essential elements of the Catholic faith, which was updated and republished in 1992, all of the statements of faith formulated at the first Council of Nicaea (325 CE) were affirmed. Most of the Protestant churches in their various denominations also did not challenge the dogmas established at Nicaea, apart from a few groups,

1) See "Adoptionism," The Hebrew Encyclopedia, vol. 1, Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 1968-9, p. 486.

including the Unitarians, who, from the time of the Reformation to this day, reject the idea of the Trinity and the divinity of Yeshua.¹

It is important to note that we are not treating a solely philosophical, intellectual debate. Rather, the subject of the unity of the Godhead has practical implications for the life of the believer and the management of congregational frameworks. To this day, there are groups that immerse new believers in water only in the name of Yeshua. In other words, without mentioning the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit during the time of the immersion. This anti-Trinitarian perspective characterizes, for example, a stream called Oneness Pentecostalism. Another group that negates the divinity of Yeshua and the principle of the Trinity is the “Jehovah’s Witnesses”.² Currently, both groups have active representation in Israel.

However, to this day the essential controversy regarding the Trinity does not concern the unity that exists in the

“one circle” of the Godhead, but rather the question whether or not it is possible to explain this unity in a schematic fashion – either horizontally or vertically. Namely, is there a mathematical formula in which the Father, the Son and the

We need to be able to distinguish between the need to preserve continuity of those principles of faith which we affirm and which have become rooted in the churches, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the need to promote theological restoration and reinterpretation, not only regarding the Trinity.

Spirit are entirely equal in substance, position, operation and eternal nature (a horizontal line)? Or alternatively, is there a clear vertical functional hierarchy within the divine unity? The latter speaks of a graduated structure within the divine unity that does not detract from the divine nature of Yeshua, the Son of God. Stated differently, in the wondrous unity of the Godhead there exists a special and perfect division of function, in which the Father nonetheless is positioned over all, since the Father Himself never became flesh and blood and was not crucified in this world; rather, the Son submitted to the Father, the Son hears the Father’s voice and sits at His right hand in heaven, and He is the One that sends the Holy Spirit to those who fear Him. In the vertical perspective

1) See Joshua Praver, “Controversial Principles of the Christian Faith during the Reformation,” in H.A.L. Fisher, *A History of Europe* (Hebrew), vol. 2, Book 3 appendix), Bialik Institute, Massada Publishing Co., Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 1963-4, pp. 197-208.

2) See, for example, *Christianity and Christians in the Land of Israel* (Hebrew), Ed. G. Barkai & E. Schiller, Ariel Series, No. 155-156, Jerusalem 2002, p. 279, and p. 183.

of the unity of God, the words of Yeshua “for My Father is greater than I” (John 14:28), on the one hand, and His statement that “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30), on the other hand, naturally complement one another.

An interesting point: In the Jewish world of the great Hassidic rabbis, the Messiah is increasingly represented as a divine image that has taken on flesh and blood. The Chabad Movement, for example, believes that the rabbi from Lubavitch, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, that passed away in 1994, is the “creator of the world,” possessing indubitably divine characteristics. His followers also attribute to this false messiah the characteristics of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, i.e. “the messiah that died on behalf of others;” they also expect his resurrection from the dead.

At any rate, the foremost question before us today is this: Can the term “Trinity” express a faith based entirely upon the Old and New Covenants, and if so, why not use this term? Are we wary of the expression “Trinity” only because of theological problems associated with creeds formulated by the historical churches, which do not necessarily reflect the literal interpretation of the Old and New Covenants? Or do we primarily have emotional and psychological concerns regarding our national identity? In other

words, is our rejection of the concept of the “Trinity” due to our unwillingness to associate with the history of paganism in the Church, and our struggle against anti-Semitism in the Church?



770 Lubavitch replica
in Kfar Habad

We are indeed facing a complex problem – we need to be able to distinguish between the need to preserve continuity of those principles of faith which we affirm and which have become rooted in the churches, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the need to promote theological restoration and reinterpretation, not only regarding the Trinity. Our worthy contribution towards explaining the theological phenomenon of Israel in God’s plan (the People, the Land, and the State), is a good example of the success of such efforts. In other words, we need to refine the principles of our faith in light of Church history, and in light of the reality in which we live - through scriptural interpretation led by the Holy Spirit, of course.

In addition, apart from the difficulty with the concept of the “Trinity,” there is a tendency amongst us to emotionally and intellectually recoil from the use of “Gentile” terminology – terms such as “Christian” or “Jesus of Nazareth,” which already appear in the New Covenant (Matthew 26:71; John 19:19). So, on second and third thought, it seems to me that we do not have principled reasons to be wary of the term “Trinity.” Among

our predecessors there have been individuals, among them Rachmiel Frydland, that explained that “the Trinity is Jewish.”

Therefore, just as we adopt the New Covenant axiomatically as a holy text, as a direct and natural continuation of the Old Covenant, so there is nothing to prevent us from adopting, for example, even the expression “Trinity.” But, this also does not mean that we need to automatically adopt existing Church creeds, but rather to use the term “Trinity” in a technical linguistic framework – again, without mindlessly adopting the definitions that already exist regarding the Trinity. In other words, we need use the Hebrew language to fill our theological interpretation (an interpretation that is undergoing renewal) with clear and biblical content; enough terms exist in biblical and modern Hebrew to sufficiently express our faith.

In conclusion, we have no small challenge before us, particularly in light of the long history of two thousand years behind us.¹ We need to match our thoughts to the Word of God, and to nothing else, as it is written: “Yet the House of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ O House of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair?” (Ezekiel 18:29).

Concerning one thing there is no doubt: In the process of transition from groups of individual believers to a broad movement that is crystallizing and becoming more visible, a movement whose members value the education of new believers, it is impossible to avoid differentiating between issues of true doctrine versus false teachings. In this, there is nothing new under the sun, and the need remains to clarify the whole truth with courage and persistence, without embarking upon a personal or congregational “witch hunt,” but for the purpose of testing all things thoroughly and seriously. According to the words of the Apostle Paul: “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21,22).



Jan Huss, Czech Reformer (1369-1415)
Martyred as heretic for his views

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1) Compare, for example: Ora Limor, *Between Jews and Christians* (Hebrew), vol. 1, The Open University, Tel Aviv 1993, pp. 110-115.



OUR PURPOSES

- ❖ *To* serve the Messianic congregations and believers in Yeshua in the Land of Israel
- ❖ *To* give an expression for our Jewish and Israeli Identity as believers in the Messiah Yeshua, Son of God
- ❖ *To* strengthen the unity among the Messianic believers in the Land
- ❖ *To* be living witnesses for the truth of the Bible, Tanach (the Old Testament) and the New Testament
- ❖ *To* build and maintain relations with Messianic believers all over the world

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