

The Existential Communication of the Deity of Messiah Within the Postmodern Jewish Community

Scott Nassau

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As one of the few postmodern participants in the Borough Park Symposium, I have the task of responding to the papers presented by Cohen and Moskowitz on how to *Communicate the Deity of Messiah with the Postmodern Jewish Community*.¹ While Moskowitz has demonstrated the complexity of the task by illustrating how each individual within this community possesses a fragmented identity and has shown the “missiological challenge of communicating to the postmodern Jewish community,” he does not devote much of his discussion on specific ways in which the *Deity of Messiah* can provide a means of engagement.² Cohen also recognizes that no magic “*formulae*” exists to communicate the *Deity of Yeshua* within the postmodern Jewish community, yet he presents a constructive framework from which a fruitful dialogue concerning Yeshua’s deity can begin.³ Thus, in the limited time allotted for this response, I will focus upon how the paradigm shift to a postmodern culture significantly impacts theological dialogue and why the deity of Messiah, in particular, presents unique ways in which we can engage our culture with the hope of the King of Israel. Due to the restraints of the setting, this paper will only begin to examine why the Incarnation creates meaning for Jewish life. Hopefully, productive dialogue within our community will ensue.

Cultural Paradigm Shift

Since Moskowitz and Cohen have both articulately described the climate of a postmodern culture, the following discussion will not elaborate on their observations; rather, it will analyze the ramifications this paradigm shift has upon creating meaningful dialogue from within our community. Due to the ubiquitous shift from modernity to postmodernity, Messianic Judaism must rethink the way in which it communicates within the broader Jewish community. If postmodernism is the rejection of any universal truth and the abandonment of an overarching meta-narrative, then appealing to the “*Truth*” or “*proving*” the reliability of our faith will not have much resonance within this culture. Cohen, citing Dockery, demonstrates how the questions

¹ By referring to myself as postmodern, I have already alienated a few of my colleagues, who rightly challenge the tendency within postmodernism to reject any universal truth. To clarify, I am not advocating a pluralistic approach or arguing for the deconstruction of truth; I am simply acknowledging that I am part of this postmodern generation. While I certainly reject a number of the tenets of postmodernism, growing up in this generation has shaped my perspective, in the same way that modernism shaped the thinking of previous generations.

² Jhan Moskowitz, *How to Effectively Communicate the Deity of Messiah to a Jewish Postmodern Community* (Paper presented at Borough Park Symposium, April 2010), 1. Although I recognize the term “missiological” provides us with technical nomenclature, I prefer to refrain from using such language, because it creates too great a schism between our community and us. To borrow from Buber, it moves us from an “I-Thou” relationship, into an “I-It” relationship with our community.

³ Akivah Cohen, *Communicating the Deity of Yeshua to Postmodern Jews* (Paper presented at Borough Park Symposium, April 2010), 15.

the postmodern community asks, when searching for spiritual meaning, differ from the questions asked by previous generations.⁴ Therefore, if Messianic Judaism wants to effectively engage the postmodern community with the story of Yeshua, the God of Israel, then it must actively seek to answer the questions this postmodern generation is asking.

Unfortunately, the traditional approach employed by the Messianic community does not adequately answer these questions. Essentially, Messianic Judaism has attempted to respond to, as Kinzer calls it, “the apparent Jewish no to Yeshua.”⁵ The Messianic community has faced the charge that worship of Yeshua as God is more objectionable than idolatry and that belief in the Incarnation is simply adopted from pagan religions.⁶ Obviously, the Messianic community has felt the need to defend itself from these claims of idolatry and syncretism. Therefore, in order to defend the faith and provide a reasonable response to the larger Jewish community, Messianic Judaism and Jewish missions have traditionally emphasized the use of apologetics when discussing the deity of Messiah.⁷ Contrary to popular opinion, in a postmodern culture, apologetics rarely produces *empirical evidence that demands a verdict*.⁸ This does not mean that apologetics has outlived its usefulness; rather, it cannot ultimately demonstrate the meaning and significance this postmodern generation craves.

Even if we win the intellectual argument and prove that the Hebrew Scriptures speak of the deity of the Messiah, we will not create any resonance within the postmodern Jewish community unless we demonstrate the existential significance to Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel. In a postmodern world, where truth is relative, proving “truth” has very little impact in the spiritual realm. According to Kepnes, postmodern thinking “seeks no universal, all-encompassing system or story. It is content with particular stories; it celebrates the multiplicity of local stories of truth without trying to reduce them all to the one, the universal.”⁹ Therefore, reliance upon an apologetic that seeks to prove the intellectual integrity of faith will not produce a compelling claim in a postmodern context. This generation is not concerned about knowing “truth,” but discovering existential reality. An apologetic defense of the Incarnation is not

⁴ Ibid 23, en 49. I agree with Cohen’s appeal to the importance of Messianic Prophecy and believe that it remains an indispensable element in sharing Yeshua’s story as the King of Israel.

⁵ Mark S. Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 213. In this chapter Kinzer presents Yeshua as the “representative and individual embodiment of the people of Israel,” which provides a helpful discussion in regards to communicating the story of Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel, within the Jewish community.

⁶ For an example of these allegations see Aryeh Kaplan, *The Real Messiah? A Jewish Response to Missionaries* (NCSY Orthodox Union: New York, 1976), 17. Kaplan also argues that the “Jewish Messiah is truly human in origin. He is born of ordinary human parents, and is of flesh and blood like all mortals” 27. He then states, states, “Although the Messiah may achieve the upper limit of human perfection, he is still human. The kingdom of the Jewish Messiah is definitely ‘of this world’” 29.

⁷ The term apologetics derives from the Greek word ἀπολογία, which is a legal term referring to a speech of defense or the act of making a defense, see BDAG.

⁸ This writer apologizes for the terrible allusion, but offers no defense on why he included it in this response.

⁹ Stephen Kepnes in *Reasoning After Revelation: Dialogues in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy*, Stephen Kepnes, Peter Ochs and Robert Gibbs, *Radical Traditions: Theology in a Postcritical Key* (Boulder: Westview, 1998), 11.

sufficient; Messianic Judaism must demonstrate why a divine Messiah produces a meaningful framework for Jewish life. While this may challenge some of the preconceptions prevalent within the Messianic community, it is not some radical new paradigm. Rather it is a call to return to the early Jewish *ecclesia*, to the way the Body of Messiah operated prior to the expansion of *Christendom*, which began during the reign of Constantine.¹⁰

The Shaping of a Postmodern Messianic Community

Cohen and Moskowitz both present a picture of what the Messianic community should look like in order to initiate productive dialogue concerning the deity of Messiah within the postmodern Jewish community. Cohen's affirmation "that our communication of Yeshua's Deity needs to take place in Yeshua-Centered Jewish Community, engaged in Yeshua-Centered Jewish lifestyle and Yeshua-Centered Jewish belief," provides an excellent foundation for this discussion.¹¹ At the forefront of this conversation is the need to create an authentic and attractive Jewish community. Both Cohen and Moskowitz emphasize the need for creating compelling communities and appeal to Mordecai Kaplan's description of the three possible ways to identify with a religious community, believing, behaving and belonging.¹² Certainly, a yearning for belonging and community shapes and defines the postmodern generation. Postmodernity has rejected exclusivism and embraced inclusivism, making pluralism and diversity virtues in the present culture. These values have caused society to embrace and seek community. When society seeks community, it actually expresses a desire for the God of community.¹³ In His very nature, God is self-sufficient and a perfect expression of love and community; therefore, God's nature demonstrates the balance between plurality and unity, providing an example for the pursuit of a postmodern society.

In search for belonging, the Messianic community faces the tendency to reduce the discussion to external forms in an attempt to discover the appropriate level of liturgical expression. While Moskowitz correctly observes that postmodernity seeks to incorporate the ancient into their religious observance, Messianic Judaism must not forsake the intangible aspect of community.¹⁴ Ten years ago, Rabbi Sidney Schwarz set out to discover the essential elements

¹⁰ The early Messianic community relied upon a more Hebraic worldview, but later generations introduced Greek dualist thought into the Yeshua community. For an excellent discussion on the formation of the Messianic community in a post-Christendom society see the seminal work by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

¹¹ Cohen, *Communicating the Deity of Yeshua to Postmodern Jews*, 6.

¹² Ibid, 6; Moskowitz, *How to Effectively Communicate the Deity of Messiah to a Jewish Postmodern Community*, 7.

¹³ At the heart of the relationship in the Godhead is the *perichoresis*, which is the mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. The *perichoresis* is the "real objective onto-relations in the eternal movement of Love in the Communion of the Holy Trinity as they have been disclosed to us in the incarnate economy of God's revealing and saving acts of Yeshua HaMashiach and the Ruach HaKodesh. See Thomas, F Torrence. *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 194.

¹⁴ Moskowitz, *How to Effectively Communicate the Deity of Messiah to a Jewish Postmodern Community*, 8. In saying this, I do not want to invalidate the importance of incorporating ancient Jewish traditions into our

in the creation of a vibrant Jewish community.¹⁵ He presents various case studies from four different synagogues, each representing the four major segments of American Judaism. He discovers that even though the four synagogues represent four very distinct Jewish movements, they all share a number of common elements and represent communities where Jewish people “feel at home.”¹⁶ Thus, Schwarz recognizes the need for belonging and the intangible nature of creating compelling Jewish communities. Frost and Hirsh discuss an important model for an incarnational community when they differ between bounded set and centered set communities. “This means that rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn’t, a centered set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from the center.”¹⁷ Cohen cites Hiebert’s model of the “centered-set” when he shows how “we cannot compartmentalize the communication of a *belief* apart from connection with a *community*.”¹⁸ Thus belonging within a community is crucial for a postmodern culture.

The Search for Significance

The rejection of any overarching meta-narrative and the abandonment of universal truth have left postmodern society void of a sense of meaning and purpose. Cohen has stated that the postmodern Jewish community lacks a “coherent vision of why their lives are ultimately significant.”¹⁹ This longing for meaning and significance is where the deity of Messiah can specifically resonate. Rather than feeling ashamed over its adherence to a divine Messiah, Messianic Judaism can present Yeshua, the King of Israel, as the unique person who provides significance for a postmodern Jewish life.

Incarnation: The Shekinah

The Incarnation provides humanity with the greatest picture of God; it allows God’s people to come to know God through Yeshua.²⁰ “The Word became flesh and made *His dwelling* among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The *incarnation* became the most significant expression of the *Shekinah*, שְׁכִינָה, which is literally “the dwelling” or “presence” of God with Israel, “the divine manifestation in the community’s life, or the sense of divine immanence within the

spiritual lives. If we are going to create an authentic Jewish community, we cannot go out and develop new forms, which are completely foreign to broader Jewish community.

¹⁵ Sidney Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews can Transform the American Synagogue* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 268.

¹⁷ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 47.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Communicating the Deity of Yeshua to Postmodern Jews*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁰ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 88.

world.”²¹ This occurred when the Glory of God filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34). God also dwelled in Israel’s midst, which the Targum translates as the *Shekinah*, שְׁכִינָה, dwelling among them (*Tg. Onq.* Ex 25:8). The *Incarnation* provides the culmination of how God has come down to reveal Himself and dwell among His people. The purpose for the *Incarnation* was so that God could enter into community with His people. “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and *Only*, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18).

The Existential Importance of the Resurrection

Yet, for a postmodern community, presentation of the deity of Messiah simply as propositional truth does not create the existential vitality needed to produce significance for Jewish life. Our message must be greater than the “Find Heaven, Avoid Hell” approach Dauermann refuted in the previous symposium.²² Instead, we need to discover the existential aspect of Yeshua’s deity that will infuse Jewish life with meaning. When Rabbi Shaul describes Yeshua as the “image of the invisible God,” he gives him the moniker, “firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:15-18). In his great treatise on the resurrection, Shaul proclaims, “Messiah has been raised from the dead, the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep.” For Shaul, the resurrection represents the greatest demonstration of Yeshua’s deity; it validates his divine nature. When Thomas tangibly grasped the evidence of Yeshua’s resurrection, he declared, “My Lord and My God” (John 20:28). The resurrection is not simply a historical reality, but provides the existential significance for Jewish life today.

But if we leave the resurrection without any present implications, our message lacks the necessary power. Shaul explains this significance when he says that we who have been buried with him in his death shall also rise with him in his resurrection to “new life” (Rom 6:3-9). The resurrection provides the power for a transformed life, the existential reality longed for in a postmodern world. As Cohen states, “only the challenge of Yeshua to, take up one’s cross and follow him, has the existential vitality to impart a vision worth living and dying for.”²³ Thus, presentation of Messiah’s deity must include the hope of resurrection into a new life, not simply the eschatological hope to get to heaven and avoid hell. To borrow from Kierkegaard, we need to employ “existence-communication,” which means we are not attempting to convey knowledge, but an inward authentic relationship with God.²⁴ The resurrection enables the indwelling of the Spirit, which means the *Shekinah* comes down and infuses the Messianic community with the transformed life (1 Cor. 3:16-17).²⁵ Our transformed lives must present the existential reality of the Messiah’s deity (2 Cor. 3:2-3). While some may misunderstand my argument, I am not attempting to diminish the importance of propositional truth. Rather, in a postmodern world, if

²¹ Jewish Study Bible, 2139.

²² Stuart Dauermann, *What Is the Gospel We Should Be Commending to All Israel in these Times of Transition* (Paper presented at Borough Park Symposium, October 2007).

²³ Cohen, *Communicating the Deity of Yeshua to Postmodern Jews*, 13.

²⁴ Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁵ May I recommend Darrell Bock’s message on the significance of the indwelling of the Spirit to provide transforming power. <http://www.dts.edu/media/play/?MediaItemID=c180f9ec-7c6a-404d-89d9-b751ab84f19f>

there is a disconnect between the content of our message and the reality of our lives we will not have much resonance within our Jewish community. We cannot compartmentalize our lives, *believing*, *behaving* and *belonging* are all equally important. Like the man who was born blind, we should be able to declare, “all I know, although I was dead, now I am alive” (John 9). He did not need to present any theological treatise on the deity of Yeshua, he simply described the transformation he experienced through Yeshua.

Allow me to conclude with one last story. When Peter and John healed the man who was lame from birth as they entered the temple precinct, a large crowd gathered to hear about what had occurred (Acts 3). The Sanhedrin arrested Peter and John, because they were annoyed over their declaration about the resurrection from the dead (4:1-2). Even though the Sanhedrin objected to their message, they could not dispute the evidence of the man healed beside them and recognized that they had been with Yeshua (4:13). Our community may not accept our message, but the evidence of the *Shekinah* within our lives needs to provide existential evidence that Yeshua has transformed us and given us a story to share with our community.