

But who do we say that He is?

A Response by Erez Soref to "Communicating the Deity of Yeshua to the Jewish People"(Daniel Nessim) and "Worship and Witness to the Deity of Yeshua" (Richard Harvey)*

As followers of Messiah Yeshua, we are charged by the Holy Scripture to proclaim the Gospel to those who are lost. In regard to this charge, we are told by Rav Shaul – the apostle Paul - that the priority of this proclamation is to the Jewish people first. How are we to communicate the deity of Messiah in our proclamation of Him to our people? The two papers by Nessim and Harvey deal with that question. I will first relate to Daniel Nessim's paper.

At the beginning of his paper Nessim raises the question whether communicating the Deity of Messiah might somehow compromise the accessibility and 'agreeability' of the Gospel message to Jewish people. Since the deity of Messiah is a central characteristic in the identity of Yeshua, it is central to the presentation of the Gospel. In other words, to empty the Gospel of God incarnate is to distort the Gospel beyond a saving / redeeming message. Therefore one cannot receive Yeshua as the Messiah, the Anointed Redeemer, without recognition of His Divine Nature.

Although our presentation of the Gospel, including communicating the Deity of Messiah, may differ in language and terminology from the historic articulations of Christian faith, at no time may the Messianic community compromise Biblical truth in order to make our message more palatable to the Jewish community or any other community. Hence the shoulders that we stand upon are those of the Apostles, rooted in Holy Scripture alone. This of course does not mean that we should not consult the early Church Fathers and take seriously their confessions and creeds as aids in arriving at the theological positions that we hold as truth. But once again these theological positions must be revealed and derived from Scripture alone.

I strongly agree with Daniel Nessim that it is imperative to clarify what one means when it is said that Yeshua is both God and man; hence the need for some type of statement, i.e. creed. While it is true that creeds and formulas *may* interpret biblical content in light of contemporary mindsets, sociological and theological issues, this not the way it should to be. Creeds and confessions rooted in biblical truth will hold their relevance throughout time. Perhaps their language will need to be updated, but their content will pass the test of time..

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In moving now into the heart of the first paper, Nessim states, "...while the divinity of Yeshua is attested, it is not confused with θεός, who is the Father." This statement would, while affirming the divinity of Yeshua, refrain from calling Him God. Nessim references Longenecker, who apparently wants to reserve θεός solely for the Father. Such a view does indeed misrepresent the deity of Messiah. In Mark's Gospel, the High Priest asked Yeshua if He was the Son of the Blessed One, obviously a reference to God. Yeshua answered affirmatively, which the High Priest understood as blasphemy. Yeshua did not correct the High Priest by saying He was not God and that the High Priest misunderstood Him. Rather, Yeshua's silence should be seen as an agreement with the High Priest's conclusion. However this was not an example of blasphemy, because Yeshua *is* God. In other words, being the Son of God is not in any way less than being God.

I would like to relate to Nessim's statement in discussing Kinzer's and Bock's positions on the Messianic Jewish commitment to creeds. On the one hand he expresses agreement with Bock's position that the Messianic Jewish community must accept the church's boundary (in creeds) and thus maintain our solidarity with the church. On the other he states: "I also think we must develop a way of living with understanding with Jewish people who confess Yeshua as the Messiah but have controversial or even negative views concerning his deity. The boundary is certainly one that demarcates correct doctrine, but it should not prevent us from remaining in dialogue or even fellowship with 'heretical' Jewish 'believers'." As leaders in the resurrecting Messianic Jewish community, we have the responsibility, often difficult and unpleasant, to do exactly what Nessim propose we avoid. That is, not only demarcating a doctrinal line, but applying that line in order to protect those that God has given under our spiritual care. Naturally one would want to continue dialogue with such individuals for the purpose of teaching them an accurate representation of Yeshua. However, to believe that one can deny the Deity of Yeshua and be saved is a distortion of the Gospel. Therefore in regard to *fellowship* with erring individuals, as hard as it may be also in light of previous relationship we may have with them, our answer as leaders needs to be - NO! Finding this fine line in the Spirit of Messiah is one major task of leadership before us, both here at this symposium, and in our congregations and institutions.

Just because it is more likely for a Jewish individual to be willing to accept Yeshua as Messiah, rather than the divine Son of God, should not cause one to shy away from teaching His true identity. In other words, to reject the divinity of Yeshua, but to accept His Messiahship, is to accept a Yeshua less than the Biblical Yeshua. Yes one grows in the faith and a new believer begins with milk, but I would argue that without recognition of the identity of Yeshua as the Son of God, one has not been born again.

The issue at the heart of the section discussing the Hypostatic Union is how can a Jew believe that a man could be God? I believe a better way to state the issue is, "Is it possible for God to enter into humanity". Learning of the Magnificent Creator shown us in Scripture, it is easily conceivable to believe that this God could cause a woman to conceive a child by means of the Holy Spirit, especially after stating He will do so time and again in Scripture.

The claim that Yeshua as God-incarnate is too outrageous for Jews to believe is derived from those who are not familiar with the folklore that is present within the Talmud and Midrash Rabba and a wealth of rabbinical literature. These very outlandish legends are not only presented as illustrations of truth within Judaism, but are required to be accepted in the exact manner they appear as historical fact.

I strongly agree that when one presents the deity of Messiah one must be well informed and clear and afford himself to Biblical terminology. Yet the messianic community must not place a rabbinical expression as "Jewish" as the standard for Jewishness. Even a cursory review of Judaism shows that there have been periods of significant change in what is acceptable in Judaism and what is not. The fact that in current Judaism a form of reincarnation is embraced, as well as a Jewish zodiac, is a clear indication of this fact. Chassidus is another example of that which was initially rejected and now accepted as a viable and authentic expression of Judaism.

Part of the problem in regard to those who struggle with the implications of Yeshua's divinity stems from a failure to understand that although Yeshua as God incarnate is seen in the New Covenant, what is more emphasized is Yeshua's Sonship. This Sonship involves Yeshua's call to redeem man from sin and to demonstrate how a human being should respond to God. In other words, although the Pre-existent and eternal Messiah is expressed in the New Covenant, it is not the primary message. One should not ignore this fact; nor, because of the proportionally small number of verses that deal with this compared to His Sonship, neglect this mandatory aspect of His identity. In regard to the revelation of Yeshua, the concept of *Kenosis* takes central stage because it is inherently related to Yeshua as the One sent from the Father to accomplish the work of the Father. In order to do this work Yeshua "emptied" Himself in order to be fully man, but at no time did His identity as God cease. Those that share the views of Uri Marcus or Hugh Schonfield, who feel that a Trinitarian view attacks the monotheism of Judaism, fails to understand that at no time does the doctrine of the Unity of God (the Trinity) undermine the fact that God is One. For them to believe that Yeshua is not eternal and that He did not have an existence before His birth, is to deny a wealth of Scripture.

Nessim's paper ends with the section that speaks of a Hidden Messiah. This view presents the possibility of saying no to Jesus, but yes to God. This view

is highly problematic, for it fails to realize that the only way to the Father is through the Son. In essence this view presents the idea that one can know the Biblical God and be in good standing with Him, but reject the One that He specifically sent to be the only Way to Him. This view stands in contrast to the implications of John 5:23 which states "that all men should honor the Son just as they honor the Father, for he that does not honor the Son does not honor the Father Who has sent Him."

Nessim's paper ended with the statement, "Yeshua's identity as the Son of God is part and parcel of the miracle of God reaching down to man. His sacrifice on the cross and the efficacy of that sacrifice depends directly upon His Divine Identity. We are brought to the foot of the cross and to the statement of the centurion guarding Him who said, 'Truly this was the Son of God.'" This is an excellent statement that strongly shows the necessity of presenting Yeshua as not only the Redeeming Messiah, but God incarnate.



In Richard Harvey's paper entitled "Worship and Witness to the Deity of Yeshua" the familiar issue of Jewish identity surfaces once more. Jewish identity is of course very important to us as Messianic Jews; however we need not be bound by rabbinical definitions that were put into place for the specific purpose of excluding believers in Yeshua. The Messianic movement needs to be willing to say that "this is who we are and this is what we believe" and not feel the need to be accepted by Judaism or the Church.

In regard to the issue at hand, it is most clear that the biblical view of a divine Messiah is unacceptable to all expressions of Judaism. It is not that we have abandoned a central tenet of true Judaism, but have simply acknowledged rabbinical leadership's unwillingness to properly interpret many passages from the Hebrew Scriptures that reveal that HaShem will visit His people for the purpose of redeeming them in the Messiah. In short, we cannot avoid the clash; therefore we need to be able to voice our faith standing upon the wealth of Scripture which supports our view, and allow our critics to use the arguments of human reason in their attempt to refute the Biblical record. This does not cripple our witness, but offers what Judaism does not provide today, a Biblical presentation of the God who redeems His people. Challenging existing views of Judaism through the Scriptures in my experience brings our Jewish family and friends to the Scriptures which presents the power of the Word of God to go to work on these individuals.

We need to be more concerned about training our community in the truth of Scriptures than having a panic attack that we might be accused of not being "Jewish" enough by others.

The fear that by being biblical we might sound like a two-headed monster with one half speaking the language of the Christian Church, while at the same time living in the Jewish community, is a point well taken. We must learn to present Biblical truth in the language of our Jewish community and we must be culturally sensitive.

I strongly agree with Richard Harvey that "we must find ways of articulating the divinity of Yeshua which allow both our witness and worship to cohere, to define an authentic theological position which is sensitive to the public we address, but even more sensitive to the truths of Scripture and tradition which we affirm."

In following the order of Richard Harvey's paper I will next respond to five Christologies that are presented in the paper.

The first is - *Can we have witness to Yeshua as Messiah without worshipping Him as the embodiment of God?* To this I resolutely answer No! To deny the Biblical identity of Yeshua is to offer a misrepresentation of Yeshua. Those who deny the preexistent Messiah have crossed a line which puts them outside of Messianic Judaism. Their arguments demonstrate a severe lack of awareness of Scriptural truth. In other words it is wrong to invite them to this table to place such views before us for the purpose of debate. To entertain gross distortions of the Biblical Messiah causes just concern for where the Messianic movement stands today. Uri Marcus, David Tel-Tzur and others who argues against the Deity of Yeshua does not do so on the grounds of the Hebrew Scriptures, but due to their embracement of rabbinical perspectives that cloud their ability to deal with the Scripture objectively. Marcus' assumption that the doctrine of the Unity of God (Trinity) is an attack on the Oneness of God stands in opposition to historic biblical Christianity that has strongly professed that the Unity of God in no way speaks of a theology that is anything other than Monotheistic.

Marcus' use of Pesachim 54a, and his supposition that New Testament writers should have utilized this, shows he has a very low regard for the inspiration of the New Covenant. In short, Marcus' preference of rabbinical texts over that of New Covenant reveals that he offers nothing to this discussion that we already know from standard Judaism.

Second, *"Can we articulate our Christology without recourse to a Jewish frame of reference?* There is no doubt that it is helpful to use tradition, terms, and other expressions from the community that one belongs to and is trying to reach, obviously without compromising our Scriptural fidelity. In reaching the Jewish community this challenge should be easier, for proper Jewish norms ought to be founded in the Hebrew Scripture. We all know that this is often not the case, so we have a wonderful opportunity to reintroduce our fellow Jews

to authentic "Jewishness".

I concur with Baruch Maoz in regard to what is said about his views of the nature and identity of Messiah in this paper. We ought not to shy away from the Biblical view of God as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This view speaks to the divinity of each, but does **not** endorse a multiplication of the One God. Nor should we fail to present Yeshua as fully man and fully God. These positions can be voiced authoritatively from the Scripture and we can utilize terms, language, and tradition that are normative within Judaism to support the Biblical revelation. But once again the Bible is the primary and only inspired source; other texts are only the work of man and should be utilized simply to show that many of our points are not foreign to Judaism. Contrary to Maoz, I do not see this in any way as "kowtowing to rabbinic standards or places cultural matters where Messiah should be" rather it is utilizing what is done in many other cultures by those who have wanted to take the Biblical message of Yeshua to a new people group.

There are many within the Messianic movement, perhaps especially within Israel, that have developed such a disdain for Judaism, that they hastily reject anything associated with the rabbis, even if the text or tradition etc. can be utilized to strengthen a Biblical truth. Such a use does not condone all of rabbinical Judaism, but simply is a means of connecting with one's audience. I have found that demonstrating knowledge of rabbinical Judaism often builds credibility with the individual to whom I am sharing. Hence Maoz's view of Messiah seems to be most sound, but his reluctance to allow cultural Jewish norms into the debate are regrettable, and do not reflect the heart-beat of most of the Israeli Messianic Jewish community.

In regard to the third point, *Jewish Mystical tradition*, I believe great caution is needed. On the one hand, I see no problem utilizing such material as supporting Biblical truth. However, I do want to point out that to use non-Biblical texts as primary sources or means of divine revelation of truth is most problematic. Perhaps there is in Jewish Mysticism elements that we can utilize to support our Biblical perspectives; however, because such material is foreign to the vast majority of Jews throughout the world and in Israel, I do not see much profit in it. I have no doubt that one could derive from the Zohar and Chassidus numerous citations that could support our views. However, once again we must be careful to clearly present such citations as support for our Biblical views in order to demonstrate that such views are not always outside the boundaries of rabbinical Judaism. In other words, when one says that what we are sharing is not acceptable for them because they follow Judaism, it is often times helpful to present texts which support the Biblical truth from sources that the hearer affirms as credible.

Within this section on Jewish Mysticism the question is raised if the concept of the Trinity is considered by Judaism as idolatry. Christianity unanimously

affirms monotheism. What is presented here as the united front of Judaism is certainly a distortion of the theology that is contained in the doctrine of the Trinity. Harvey quotes Sadan, representing this view, who states, "If Messianic Jews will decide to speak about the unity of God within the boundaries set by the Bible, they would not only be able to promote unity among themselves, but also improve their relationship with the Jewish community." The question which must be raised concerning his statement is whether he is lobbying for a change of terms, that is that the term "Trinity" needs to be substituted with another word or words, or whether the content of the doctrine itself is problematic? I personally agree that the term 'Trinity' misrepresents what we believe and especially when sharing with the Jewish community different language may better explain to our audience what we believe. However the theology of the Trinity is biblically sound and to reject the content of the term places one in the position of distorting the Biblical Yeshua.

The forth point asks: "*How can we recontextualise Nicene Christology*". Harvey quotes Juster, who calls for full recognition of Yeshua's divinity, yet he states, "...that God is more than just Yeshua." One needs to be most careful not to imply that Yeshua is in any way less than fully God. He further writes, "Only a perfect man could bring a full revelation of God, as man is made in the image of God." Yes, even though Yeshua is fully man and proved to be the perfect man, and like all men created in the image of God, this is not why He reflects the fullest revelation of God. He is not simply a revelation of God, because He is the perfect man, He is the fullest revelation of God, because He is God.

We must answer strongly those who ask the question, "How is Jesus of Nazareth God?" This is our task at hand and we need not waiver on the Biblical truth, because some may assume that good theology may be too difficult for the Jewish community to handle. We can certainly improve how we convey Biblical truth to our Jewish community, becoming more aware of cultural and other sensitivities, but to lessen sound theology or create new theology without clear Biblical foundation must not be tolerated in our movement. This brings me to one of the most dangerous theological issues raised in our discussion, which is the fifth point in Harvey's paper.

It reads: "Is it Kosher to affirm a Trinitarian and incarnational theology whilst recognising the hiddenness of Messiah to our people?"

I believe we must answer this with an overwhelming **no!** Although Yeshua loves the Jewish people in a special way and they and the land of Israel both play a vital role in the last days, and many Jewish individuals will come to faith in Yeshua in the last days, it is heresy to believe that one can be saved without a personal recognition of Yeshua as Messiah and God. To state that

although a Jewish person rejects the name Jesus or Yeshua; but because he is a "serious Torah centered Jew" who believes in a redeeming messiah, and because of the horrible things those who supposedly carried the banner of Yeshua did i.e. the church, that a hidden Yeshua to these individuals will save them in spite of this rejection is Scripturally without foundation.

Kinzer's view of a "bilateral ecclesiology" is confusing the decision of the Jerusalem council and other related passages as a statement for conduct of behavior relating to gentiles who have come to faith rather than as a basis for presenting the Gospel to a gentile. He assumes that Torah observance is in regard to the Biblical Torah which Judaism unanimously denies. He seems to overlook the significant gap existing between Torah observance within the context of current Judaism which is a reference to the rabbinical commandments and not the Torah from Sinai. Judaism understands that without a Temple the Torah from Sinai is not in force. This is why, for example, Shabbat violators cannot be stoned and many other of the punishments that are clearly stated in the Torah are not placed upon violators by a Beit Din.

The most problematic and dangerous view of the "hiddenness of Messiah" is that it makes a **no** to Messiah Yeshua in essence a Yes to God. That is, to reject Yeshua is to embrace the God of Israel. This view that Israel's suffering in some way mimics the suffering of Yeshua and unites unbelieving Israel with their hidden Messiah is severely flawed. The statement that "Israel's no to Yeshua can be properly viewed as a form of participation **in** Yeshua" (emphasis is Kinzer's) goes beyond the bounds of any Scriptural foundation. If the meaning is that God revealed this hardening and in essence Israel is doing what God said would happen, if this is the intent, it is important to stress that such behavior is not in any way redemptive. It echoes the same error of Lev Gillet that uses Isaiah 53 incorrectly. He writes,

"The suffering of the Jewish people is to be understood in the light of Isaiah 53, as both 'prophetic and redemptive.'"

What Gillet and Kinzer, who states that "Gillet does not lose his Christological bearings" seem to ignore is that orthodox Judaism which holds to the full inspiration of the Talmud as also scripture affirms that Isaiah 53 addresses *Messiah* as the Suffering Servant and not as we currently hear to the Jewish people. Hence to utilize Isaiah 53 as a reference to Jewish people suffering is beyond proper exegesis within Judaism. Rashi, who in his commentary on the book of Isaiah began the view of interpreting Isaiah 53 as speaking of Israel's suffering, did so for the purpose of debating with Christians. It must be pointed out that when Rashi writes about Sanhedrin 98b which speaks to Isaiah 53 and its relationship to Messiah, he also agrees that the Suffering Servant is Messiah. Rashi's commentary is not an authoritative text within Judaism, but

the Gamara is and it states that the one who suffers in Isaiah 53 is not the Jewish people but Messiah.

Hence what we have in Gillet's statement is a misuse of Isaiah 53 which was introduced by Rashi for the purpose of misleading people, now being used by believers, with a danger of misleading others. It is especially noteworthy to mention in that regard that the book of Acts 8:32-35 and many places in the Gospels quote from Isaiah 53 and clearly reveal that Isaiah 53 speaks that Messiah is the Suffering Servant.

In conclusion, it is proper for Messianic Judaism to strive to communicate the Biblical identity of Yeshua to others, especially the Jewish community, in a more effective manner. We are free to borrow from various sources to aid in this endeavor as long as these sources are not viewed as primary sources, for it is only proper to use the Holy Scripture as the only source which has been inspired by God and true. Other sources are secondary and should only be used to help communicate the Biblical revelation.