

Yeshua: How Do We Know Him?

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The centrality of the Person and Work of Yeshua is at the core of who we are. Whether we call ourselves “messianic believers,” “Jewish believers,” or simply “believers,” clearly our primary confession of faith centers in the historical person we call Yeshua. Though not unique, in our times the so-called “search for the historical Jesus” has concluded that He actually is not at all what the Scriptures claim Him to be. At worst He was a 1st Century Jew who followed the Judaism of His fathers and was only later, in the emerging Christian Church, made into the “Messiah” that He never claimed to be. At “best,” these scholars make Him out to be a “marginal Jew” who gathered a small but insignificant following of disciples in His radical, apocalyptic message that proclaimed the end of the world to be near. But in all of these modern messages, He is nothing close to the Son of G-d proclaimed by the Gospel writers, and preached by the Apostle Paul.

This overwhelming conclusion reached by the recent Jesus Seminar (which actually began in 1985 under the leadership of Robert Funk and co-chaired by John Dominic Crossan) and popularized by Public Television programs (such as the program in 1990 based upon Barbara Thiering’s *Jesus and the Riddle of Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story* and the PBS special, “From Jesus to Christ”), is that most of what is believed about Yeshua has no historical basis. It is all religious dreaming built by theologians down through the ages who needed to find a mystical incarnation to satisfy their ecclesiastical needs.

Unfortunately, these recent events only flame the fires of an ancient debate, one which apparently began in the very life time of Yeshua Himself. Was He the promised Messiah or not? But this debate takes on even deeper proportions for the Torah Communities in which we find ourselves. Having (at least in measure) left the mainstream Christianity of our day (by that I mean we have left the mainline Christian denominations, at least in practice and community issues), and attempting to regain what we believe is a life of obedience to G-d through acceptance of the Torah, we find ourselves somewhere between the Christian community on the one hand, and the traditional Synagogue on the other hand. While the Christian Church

paints the picture of Yeshua with hollow and European, Caucasian features and customs, the traditional Synagogue defines Yeshua as an imposter, and worse, an idolater, deceiving the people His day and leading them into blasphemy of the Almighty.

In the midst of these tensions we strive to find our identity. And in doing so, we are understandably driven to that same ancient question: is Yeshua the Messiah? Some, wanting to retain the strong family and cultural ties to the Christian Church in which they found their faith in the first place, continue to define Yeshua in the philosophical jargon of the 3rd and 4th Century synods, fearing that if they do otherwise they will be labelled heretical by the very Church to which they find their fundamental attachment. Others, wanting to embrace and be embraced by the Jewish community with its ancient roots in Torah, talk of Yeshua (if they mention Him at all) as a worthy Rabbi, and perhaps more, but would never use terms like “Son of G-d.” They may even suggest He is simply one of many messiahs who have come to teach G-d’s people, and may even consider Him the “best of messiahs.”

As always, the core issue of who we are revolves around this person we call Yeshua. But there is perhaps even a more fundamental question that we must ask, and it is to that question I draw your attention now. “How do we know Yeshua?” In other words, on what criteria will we base our final answer to this most important question? What is the source of our data, and how good is that source? Here we are drawn to the foundational question of authority. “On what authority will I base my conclusions regarding Yeshua?”

A number of answers have been offered to this question, though the answers may be “seen” more than “heard.” What I mean by this is that the answer to this question for any given group should not be sought in their creeds or statements of faith, but in their actions. For what we honestly believe is not best determined by what we say but by what we do. For instance, while many would claim that their faith rests upon Scripture, in reality their faith rests upon experience. When put to the test of why they believe this or that about Yeshua, if one listens carefully one inevitably hears a recounting of one’s personal mystical experience. Unfortunately, with all of the good that has come from the so-called Charismatic movement, the downside has been that the foundation of faith for many has

shifted away from an objective standard of authority to the religious experience of the individual.

I do not mean to dismiss the value of personal experience. The nation of Israel as well as the Apostles appealed to their own experiences as well. But one's personal experience cannot be the final voice of authority in matters of faith, and especially in solving the question of "Who is Yeshua?" For if mystical experience is the bedrock of one's faith, then it is impossible to discount similar experiences of Mormons, Muslims, and a host of other religious expressions all claiming their particular "leader" to be G-d's promised Prophet, Messiah, or whatever.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that relying upon mystical experiences, regardless of how incredible they may be, is never by themselves enough to sustain strong, solid faith in the face of overwhelming opposition. In a society and era that put so much stress on inner feelings, it is understandable how the religious community may be pulled to this apologetic without giving it much thought. But such a stance is disastrous when it comes to defending a position as central as the person of Yeshua. To only have this or that experience to explain why I have become a follower of Yeshua rings hollow to the skeptic, and often wilts when my own mind doubts what I have been taught. There needs to be an object foundation—something outside of my experiences, something by which I can judge my experiences.

I think you know where I am going with this: that objective authority is nothing less, and nothing more than the inspired, eternal word of G-d, the Bible. And here is again, as one would expect, where the current battle rages. So the question that precedes "Who is Yeshua?" is "How do I know Yeshua?," or better "can I trust what the Bible says about Yeshua?"

The attacks upon the veracity of the Bible are surely extant in our day. While liberal scholarship essentially dismissed the Bible decades ago, the battle I am speaking of is within our own communities. Having come to the conclusion that a great many things have been taken from us by the historical Church (such as Sabbath, Festivals, and Torah in general), we have begun to question the Scriptures given to us by that same ancient Church. And primarily the Scriptures that are being questioned are those I call the Apostolic Writings, the gospels and epistles, or the New Testament.

We only know about Yeshua through the Apostolic Scriptures, and primarily the Gospels. Apart from these, He is mentioned once in Josephus (but this text is disputed), a number of times in the Talmud (these were edited out in some earlier editions but have been allowed to remain in most modern editions), and a few times in other writings. But if we did not have the Apostolic Scriptures, while we certainly could have a genuine faith in Messiah (as did the believers during the period of the Tanach), we would not know that this Messiah is Yeshua ben Yoseph of Natzeret. And we would have no sure knowledge that Messiah had come, died, rose again, and ascended to His Father at Whose right hand He now sits, interceding for His people.

An attack upon the Gospels, then, is a direct attack at the very foundations of our faith in Yeshua. But can the Gospels be trusted? More and more we are hearing that they cannot be trusted, and we are hearing this from people who have relied upon in our search for understanding Torah within the context of our faith in Yeshua.

Sometimes the attacks are subtle. Like the allegation that the Gospels were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and that thus because we now have only Greek manuscripts, the translation is either badly tainted or has lost the original meaning. Bivin and Blizzard have adopted this viewpoint: “The [Greek] Gospels are rife with mistranslations . . . ,” some passages “have been misinterpreted to such an extent that they are potentially damaging to us spiritually Many Gospel expressions are not just poor Greek, but actually meaningless Greek.” (*Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, pp. 105, 37). Michael Brown (“Recovering the “Inspired Text”?” available at www.icnministries.org) has done an admirable job of showing both the weakness and the danger of this approach. Data for the idea that the Gospels were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic is continuing to increase in our day. But this does not automatically mean that we should mistrust the Greek texts. Even though such a conclusion may not be the intent of current authors, it often comes across this way. For instance, when Trimm in his *Hebrew Roots Version*, writes: “Unlike most translations this edition will not be rooted in a Greek Hellenistic text . . . ,” he gives the strong impression that the Greek manuscripts should not be trusted, nor any translation made from them. But this does not match the evidence. For the existence of semitic texts (Old Syriac, Peshitta, DuTillet, Even-Bohan

[Shem Tov], etc.) does not, in and of itself, prove the inferiority of the Greek manuscripts. Once again, hard and consistent work in the texts, using standard methods of textual criticism, will yield the best results in answering the question of which reading in any given place is “original.”

Akin to this approach is the one that claims so many scribal errors have entered into the manuscripts of the Apostolic Scriptures that they can no longer be trusted. But such a claim is not founded upon the facts. In all of the thousands of manuscripts, scraps, and pieces of texts found, the significant variants between all of the texts amount to less than 15%. Of this percentage, the many are matters of spelling, grammar, or obvious mistakes (identifiable scribal errors). Of the remaining small percentage of variants, the basic rules of textual criticism enable us confidently to recover well over 90% of the original text. What is more, in the remaining 10% of the text where variants exist, in no place do the variants make a substantial difference in essential teachings or *halachah*. To simply say that the manuscripts are corrupt and cannot be trusted is to speak out of ignorance. In fact, the manuscripts of the Apostolic Scriptures stand head and shoulders above extant literary manuscripts of Shakespeare’s works, even though his work is comparatively so much more recent. If the pure data is accepted, the Apostolic manuscripts manifest an integrity across the ages unparalleled in any other literary phenomena. Sir Fredric Kenyon (d. August 1952), one of the great scholars in the area of textual criticism of the Apostolic Scriptures, after surveying all of the evidence available to him, came to this conclusion: “It is reassuring at the end to find that the general result of all these discoveries and all this study is to strengthen the proof of the authenticity of Scriptures, and our conviction that we have in our hands, in substantial integrity, the veritable word of God.”

But if the manuscript evidence overwhelmingly supports the veracity of the texts we have today, what internal measure is there? Even if we have texts that come directly from the ancient centuries, texts that have been faithfully copied, why does that mean they are Scripture? Here, of course, we come to the issue of canonicity, or what should be “in” and what should be left “out.” Once again, the misnomer that seems to be surfacing is that “the canon of the New Testament was determined by the 4th and 5th Century Church.” And since we have come to the conclusion that the 4th and 5th Century Church was very corrupt, and was certainly against Torah and

openly anti-semitic, we have every right to be suspect about their opinions of Scripture. *But the opening premise is wrong. The 4th and 5th Century Church did not determine what should be “in” and what should be “out.”* The Scriptures do not need man’s stamp of approval to substantiate their veracity. They are self-authenticating. By this I mean that they contain in their basic structure the endowed inspiration of the Ruach (Spirit) to the end that they convey the very word of G-d and effect His purposes among people. The councils and synods of the 4th and 5th Century Church did not determine what was “in” or “out,” they simply attempted to recognize as a governing body what texts were endowed with the inevitable characteristics of Divine inspiration. But whether or not these synods had existed, the word of G-d would have remained because it is the word of G-d. Certainly if the Almighty gave the Scriptures, He is able to maintain them within the scope of His mysterious providence.

In fact, if we ask the question whether or not we can trust the Apostolic Scriptures, if we are honest we must ask the same question about all of Scripture. On what basis do we receive the Torah to be G-d’s word to us? Or the Prophets, or the Writings? We cannot trust our own personal experience, because we were not at Mt. Sinai, and we did not see the flashing nor hear the thunder. We did not personally witness the tablets in the hands of Moses as he descended the mountain. But we receive the Torah because it comes to us endowed with G-d’s mark of authenticity. We receive it because it has been passed down from generation to generation by G-d’s people until it has come to us. We receive it on the basis of faith—not on an irrational leap into the unknown, but a reasoned faith which is the gift of HaShem Himself.

And in that we receive the Torah, we take it as the final measuring stick of all other Scripture. A prophet who comes to speak to us but speaks contrary to Torah is to be rejected as a false prophet. This is why we begin our reading of the Prophets and Writings with the presupposition that they must agree with the Torah. They cannot contradict nor set aside the Torah. And when they appear to disagree with Torah, rather than throwing them out, we work to find a reasonable explanation for how they can agree. The Torah remains the touchstone of the authoritative Scriptures we trust.

The same is true of the Apostolic Scriptures. If they disagree with Torah, they should be rejected, not because they have become corrupt, but

because they do not measure up to the touchstone of G-d's truth. This is why the doctrine that the Torah has been abolished is so devastating. Once the fixed measure of G-d's revelation is lost, there is nothing to which we may make a comparison and judge whether or not this book or that book is Scripture. Torah is the litmus test for all the rest. So this is why we must read the Apostolic Scriptures with this presupposition: *they agree with Torah*. Where they appear not to agree with Torah, we must presume we have misread them, or that we do not have all of the information we need to make a proper interpretation.

So my answer to the question, "How do we know Yeshua?" is "through the Apostolic Scriptures." We must strive to find G-d's Messiah there—in the ancient, inspired record which G-d has revealed. We cannot settle for the Jesus of the silver screen, nor the Jesus of the self-made Church. We must know the Yeshua of the Gospels, Who was the core of the Apostles' gospel in the Acts and Epistles and is revealed to us in John's Apocalypse.

Does the Ruach Who indwells us teach us of Him? Surely—but always in connection with the Scriptures. Ultimately, the Scriptures form the bedrock of our faith—apart from them, Torah, Prophets, Writings, Apostolic—we have no faith, we have nothing to base it on.

And what do these Scriptures tell us about the Messiah?

1. The Messiah is a human, male, from the offspring of Chavah (Gen 3:15)
2. He would come from the nation fathered by Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) and would fulfill the covenant made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 49:10)
3. He is the presence (face) of G-d among His people (Ex 33:15, cf. Isaiah 63:9)
4. He would be from the family of David, and would fulfill the promise of his eternal dynasty, bringing the Torah to all peoples (2Sam 7:19; Psalm 89; Isaiah 42:1-4).
5. He is eternal (Micah 5:2) and would embody the Name (Jeremiah 23:6).
6. He will suffer for the transgressions of His people, life for life, yet win over death through His resurrection (Isaiah 52-53).
7. He would be born to a Jewish virgin (Isaiah 7:14) and fulfill the prom-

- ises made to the fathers (Isaiah 9:6).
8. He was born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1, et al).
 9. He lived and grew up in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23, et al), and spoke the words of HaShem to His brethren as Moses said He would (Deuteronomy 18:15).
 10. He was despised and rejected by His own, in accordance with the words of the Prophets (Isaiah 53; Psalm 22:16[17] note the Nachal Chever text; Zechariah 12:10; John 1:11).
 11. He was killed at Pesach time and rose from the dead three days later (Matthew 27:35, et al; 1Corinthians 11:23ff; 15:3ff)
 12. He ascended from this earth back to the presence of the Almighty where He now sits at His right hand (Acts 1:9; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 1:3; 1Timothy 3:16).
 13. He will return at the appointed time to gather His elect and to rule as the victorious Messiah upon the earth (Psalm 2:9,cf. Rev 2:27; Isaiah 52:13; 1Thessalonians 4:13ff).
 14. Forgiveness of sin and a place in the world to come is found only in Him (Psalm 2; Isaiah 42; John 6:44;14:6; Titus 2:11-14).

The question then is presented to us once again, in this generation, as it has been to every generation before us: *will we receive the inspired message of the Almighty regarding His Messiah?* Will we affirm the mystery of His person and work, and accept with pure and lasting faith that without Him we are nothing? And will we with that same pure and lasting faith await His return with unaltered faith—even if He tarries?

By His will and through His grace we will persevere.

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:

He who was revealed in the flesh,

Was vindicated in the Spirit,

Seen by angels,

Proclaimed among the nations,

Believed on in the world,

Taken up in glory.

1Timothy 3:16