

Messianic Orthodoxy?

From the beginning of established religion, there has always been a group; or groups, who consider themselves orthodox, or “more orthodox” than the rest. And then there are those who are not as concerned with the orthodoxy published by established religion, rather viewing themselves as “Biblically orthodox” or orthodox according to some other religious standard. What should we know about “orthodoxy” when it comes to Messianic Judaism? Does “orthodoxy” have any practical relevance to “personal relationship” with the Messiah? First, it’s important for us to define orthodoxy. Webster’s Dictionary defines “orthodox” as,

“1. Conforming to the usual beliefs or established doctrines . . .”

Wikipedia identifies the word “orthodox” as from the Greek word, “orthodoxos” which means “having the right opinion.” Who defines this? Whose “opinion” is it that defines what is true and straight and right in life and practice? In very general terms, if one is considered “orthodox” it means that person is adhering to the traditional and established religious practices of a community.

In Christian expressions there are many forms of orthodoxy with each adhering to their own established standard and authority. For this brief paper, rather than delving into the Christian ideas of orthodoxy, I would like to focus mostly on the Jewish standard of orthodox practice. Once again, looking to Webster’s Dictionary, *Jewish* orthodoxy is defined as,

“.b) strictly conforming to the rites and traditions of Judaism, such as kashrut, the Sabbath, etc. as formulated by the Torah and Talmud.”

[Orthodox Judaism](#) focuses on a strict adherence to what it sees as the correct interpretation of the [Oral Torah](#). Historically speaking, “the Greek-based word “Orthodox” was not applied to Jews until the 19th century, long after it was applied to Christians, and some traditional Jewish groups still prefer not to use it.” Nonetheless, most people today have an idea that Orthodox Judaism is populated by men with black hats and plain clothing, and that the women are all dressed with long skirts and their hair covered.

For the sake of brevity, there are two general categories of orthodoxy: The “Ultra-Orthodox” and the Neo-Orthodox (Modern Orthodox) – two groups consisting of many sects (subgroups) that don’t see eye-to-eye on all matters having to do with life and practice. Thus, Orthodox Judaism is not a unified movement with a single canonized standard. Basically, each group and subgroup feels their practice is closer to what is right and normative.

The charge of “observant” or “less observant” is a common way to express orientation to traditional orthodoxy. Oftentimes, Ultra and Modern forms of orthodoxy view each other

as quasi-heretical. The one thing most Orthodox groups do hold in common is their dedication to both the written and the “oral” Torah.

What is the “oral” Torah?

According to Rabbinic Judaism, oral Torah is the verbal instruction communicated from G-d to Moshe at Mt. Sinai, and provides interpretive value for how to apply the written Law. According to tradition, the oral Law was passed on from generation to generation and was later codified and written in the Talmud. Literally, it is the written record of oral traditions.

The Talmud is a wide-ranging document that touches on a variety of many subjects. These laws involve everything from literature, to history, to philosophy, ethics, and even folktales. Basically, the Talmud is an ancient discussion – a conglomeration of “opinions” from sages and rabbis of old and it is often argued that without the Talmud, it is impossible for us to know how to interpret and apply the Torah. To this, most expressions of Orthodox Judaism agree in principal but disagree on the specifics. In any case, for those in Orthodox Judaism, the Talmud stands as the guideline for orthodox life and practice. These discourses and traditions have been venerated in the volumes of Talmud, acting as the moral and ethical compass of the Jewish people for over 3,000 years.

Moreover, adherence to the Talmud as authoritative and binding determines those who are “in” and those who are not. For instance, most Orthodox groups characterize non-Orthodox forms of Judaism as heretical. This is the perspective of Orthodox Judaism in its classic sense.

In reality, “Orthodox Judaism” is an umbrella term that has a broad sense of meaning and application to different people. More importantly, in its classical (official) position, Orthodox Judaism does not accept belief in Yeshua (Jesus) as a valid expression of Judaism – at all. No matter how traditionally observant we are, no matter how many members of Jewish ancestry populate our congregations, we remain outside the pail of normative Judaism.

Messianic Judaism does not follow the Talmud as it does Holy Scripture. Messianic Judaism does not see any equivalency with the Talmud compared to the sacred writings of the Bible. Even so, there are those within our ranks that seek to understand the Talmud for its own sake, even if not inspired as the Scriptures. Personally, I don’t see anything inherently wrong with following many of these Talmudic traditions, that is, unless these “opinions” become some sort of a pious standard of holiness that everyone else must aspire to.

If Messianic Judaism can be viewed as a valid expression of Judaism, how then should that look? How should we respond to the Talmud and to the traditional orthodoxy expressed from those in Jewish religious authority?

As an example, we can look at Catholicism to illustrate a point. In Catholicism, one of their major doctrines involves the exaltation of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Most assuredly, Miryam (her Hebrew name) was blessed among women, but she was never divinely appointed to be worshipped as the orthodox Catholics venerate her today. She herself would have been repulsed at the idea! Nevertheless, within the Catholic Church, she is exalted as the “Queen of Heaven” and the “mother of G-d.” This is part of Catholic “orthodoxy.” This is also what I learned growing up as a child until I woke up to the authority of the Scriptures. It came as quite an awakening for me when I realized how easy it is for a religious system to impose various ideas of orthodoxy apart from the authority and backing of Scripture.

Both the Prophets and Yeshua warned about placing the traditions of men above the clear teachings from HaShem.

Then the L-rd said, “. . . this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote . . . (Isaiah 29:13 NASB).

Is Adonai saying here that memorizing Scripture and community traditions are bad? No, not at all! But tradition apart from “kavanah” (heart intent/heart intentionality) does not foster reverence and does nothing to enhance the obvious relationship HaShem desires. Be careful of tradition. Question tradition. Challenge anything passed on by word of mouth (1Thess 5:21 NASB). Hold fast to the written Word.

A certain group of P'rushim (Pharisees) challenged Yeshua because His disciples were not following the commonly held orthodox traditions. He answered His critics and said, *"Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of G-d for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3 NASB)*

Heaven forbid we should ever transgress or “invalidate” the Word of G-d (Matthew 15:6) for the sake of our traditions, no matter how old – no matter how deeply ingrained. Has the religious machine taken over? Have we become experts at setting aside (minimizing) the commandment of G-d for the sake of our precious traditions? Remarkably, the very religious authorities that should be guiding and protecting us are too often guilty themselves of promoting traditions that have eclipsed G-d's Word.

Back quite a few years ago, I used to be an avid tennis player. In learning the basics of tennis, one quickly comes to know there is an “orthodox” way to hold your racket and hit the ball. Some of the most successful tennis players and, for that matter, athletes in other sports disciplines have excelled because they don't follow the “orthodox” established ways.

Each one of us will stand at the judgment seat of G-d as an individual. In other words, I will not have any representation whatsoever from any religious authority, group, committee, or community. And therefore, only I can be accountable for how I have responded to HaShem, to His Word, and to His people (Matthew 22:37-39).

Having said this, individualism in today’s society has been taken to a new extreme, where any sense of community obligation has lost its importance. While individualism certainly has its place, G-d has always dealt with community because this bond of fellowship and unity is what G-d promotes in preparation for the coming Kingdom. In this sense orthodoxy (standardization) has in mind the worthy goal of bringing unity and identifying common objectives and expectations.

In conclusion, even though Messianic Judaism rightfully puts Yeshua back into His Jewish context, I will never again fall into the trap of accepting doctrine or practice simply because someone says, “It’s orthodox. That’s the way we’ve always done it!” We can surmise from the testimony of Scripture that Yeshua was Himself orthodox, *but sometimes He also challenged the commonly held ideas of orthodoxy in His community.*

Again, I ask the question: *If orthodoxy is not a single movement or canonized school of thought in traditional Judaism, than what should be considered acceptable orthodoxy for Messianic Judaism today?* I’m not going to pretend I have the answer – I don’t. But if we simply follow the rabbis without challenging the oral tradition, are we not, then, as guilty as those who blindly follow the Pope without questioning why? If the written Word of G-d is our B.I.B.L.E. (Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth) as we claim it to be – authoritative, inspired, and wholly divine in its original manuscript, then we should be examining it, and studying it, and deriving our nourishment from it, rather than any other source.

Commentary serves a purpose to enhance study, but no commentary from any source – be it from the Vatican or from the ancient traditions of the rabbis (Talmud) – no commentary should trump the written Word of G-d.

As Messianic Jews and non-Jews, we need to find the courage to define our own identity in spite of, and *sometimes right alongside* the traditions of our ancestors. Most importantly, we need to be Messianic according to the dictates of Scripture. Therefore, we should embrace Jewish tradition where appropriate but we should challenge all standard orthodoxy to the light of G-d’s written revelation. Let this healthy tension exist, but please my brothers and sisters, we must be on guard to never allow pride, piety, or ancient religious things to become the source and object of our worship.

Baruch HaShem!