

**HASHIVENU FORUM III**  
**Re-Imagining of the Canonical Text**  
**(Paul L. Saal)**  
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Messianic Judaism has emerged over the past quarter century out of a movement of biblical positivism. Birthed from the Free Church movement, Messianic Judaism inherited a hermeneutical legacy of objectivism, based upon a series of operations systematically performed upon the texts of scripture and intended to produce foundational and unassailable truth. Though this approach gave a rational basis to the inchoate movement, it ignored the broader range of history and tradition, as well as the effects of the personal experience of the expositor on the text.

Self-appointed nomenclature such as ‘God’s End-Time Jewish Movement’ gives unsettling testimony to an interpretive grid that is distorted by grandiose expectations and invalidated certitude. After several decades of unfulfilled apocalyptic promises, many adherents were left shaking their heads at the prospect of yet more spiritual claims which fail to answer the on-the-ground needs of contemporary life. Though Messianic Judaism has matured and general sensibilities have moderated over time, still little has been done to approach or adjust the operating systems and methodology of interpretation which are applied to the texts of Scripture, the primary source of meaning for the movement. As a result, many leaders and teachers within Messianic Judaism have been left conflicted, vacillating between their most deeply held values on one hand and fidelity to stultified understandings of the sacred texts on the other. Suffice it to say that unless Messianic Judaism develops new and creative ways of approaching the texts to derive current

application and meaning for proclamation and practice, it will fail to remain credible, viable and compelling for present adherents and the potential next generation of believers.

It is with this concern in mind that I will share several observations which I believe characterize areas of significant difficulty that we share as Messianic Jewish expositors. As an intrinsically creative movement, many have already privately begun the arduous task of grappling with new approaches to the texts in both preaching and practice. By articulating these concerns and pointing to some new potentials for interpreting the text, I hope to stimulate a discourse that will help to liberate our collective understandings of the Sacred Canon.

### **How modernity has shaped our collective consciousness**

At first blush it would seem quite impossible to imagine that the Messianic Jewish hermeneutical approach was shaped by 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophical tradition but, as is often the case, we have been effected more by that which we resist than by that to which we aspire. The age of enlightenment created a perceived tension with the sacred texts, a tension whose ripples are still felt by believers today.

In the midst of social chaos in Europe, Descartes fashioned the philosophy of ‘interiority’ whereby the individual consciousness could generate its own sense of certitude. An individual could establish himself as an objective, disinterested center which dominated the margins. The enterprise established new models of knowledge grounded in

objectivity that was designed to provide an epistemological security that was lost in the dissolution of the medieval world-view.<sup>1</sup> Two complementary models of knowledge arose. The first was logical and coherent and was discerned by a ‘disembodied mind’. The second type of knowledge was derived from the experiential and the empirical, and therefore the factual. What resulted from the ‘project of objectivism’ was the nullification of the tradition of the church and crown that had failed to provide security.<sup>2</sup>

According to Stephen Toumlin in his book *Cosmopolis*, modernity produced four qualifiers for true knowledge. There was a move from the oral to the written, the particular to the universal, the local to the general, and from the occasional to the timeless. So great truths were understood to operate everywhere, for everyone, and in every circumstance. All truth formed a coherent and indivisible whole.<sup>3</sup>

Theological interpretations began to follow these same paths of objectivity and certitude. In a recent conversation, a colleague mused, “When I look at the theological world I have constructed, I realize that I have drawn a circle safely around myself, my friends and my family. I’m beginning to think something is amiss.” But if we have created a system of theological reality that is absolute and hermetically sealed, it has been largely due to the perceived threat of historical criticism which sought to create a system of validation of the texts contingent upon the facticity of their origin. Rather than denying the historical

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (New York: Albany State University of New York Press, 1987), 76

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 4-6

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Toumlin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 30-35

critical movement's foundational assumptions, we have generally chosen to accept them while denying their theological implications and results. By tracing the paths of the historical critical movement and subsequent developments which emerged from it in the theological landscape of the twentieth century, I hope to expose where its footprints have become obstacles in our hermeneutical approach.

### **Falling in the historical-critical trap**

The shaping of the history-oriented paradigm is most often attributed to Julius Wellhausen and the 'history of religions' school. Wellhausen continued in the process of de-mystifying the Old Testament texts in the footsteps of his predecessors in historical criticism, especially Wette, Vatke and Graf. He did so by identifying distinctions in the literary form of the Scripture and tying these distinctions to specific sources that presumably chronicle the development of Israel's worship. The JE (Jehovistic) represented the earliest development of Israel's cult when worship was natural and spontaneous, D (Deuteronomic) corresponds to the Josianic reforms (622 BCE) when worship is centralized in one place, and P (Priestly) marks the last stage whereby a priestly system of theocracy develops as the legal and political mechanism of a post-exilic government. His approach was quite Hegelian in that it recognized the sources as the product of stages of development that moved from the primitive to the more mature.<sup>4</sup> Under this school, Scripture was regarded as a mere record of historical vicissitudes, the bi-product of a localized religious cult, and therefore having no value as 'real truth' outside of its original context, as seen through the Enlightenment lens of 'objectivity'.

It is understandable, then, that those who relied and trusted upon the authority of Scripture for faith and practice would be adamantly opposed and even threatened by the historical-critical approach to biblical theology. Fundamentalism retreated into a bulwark of hyper-Calvinist theology that lost much of the nuance and exegetical genius of the reformer, yet maintained all of his dogmatic structure, and then some. This reaction, though, was logical and predictable. Calvin had already effected a radical shift in perspective from seeing the church as the source of the Bible's authority, to seeing the Bible as self-authenticating. Well before the Enlightenment, Calvin had already offered epistemological security for a changing world. Calvin's exegetical approach called for the expositor to strive for the 'natural', 'genuine' or literal sense of the text. He identified the literal with the author's intention through careful literary, historical and philological analysis of each biblical writer. While it is difficult for any Bible believer to deny the efficacy of *sola scriptura*, it should be noted that Calvin himself returned to the hermeneutics of the Greek Fathers in stressing the significance of the 'scope of Christ' in all of the Scripture.<sup>5</sup> What emerges is a picture of the reformer's theology informing his exegesis. Brevard S. Childs had the following to say about the relationship between Calvin's exegesis and theology.

Nowhere is Calvin's thought more profound than when he reflects on the relationship between exegesis and theology. Of course he made no distinction between Biblical Theology and Dogmatics. That it was not by chance that he separated his works into the *Institutes* and into *Commentaries* emerges with clarity in his criticism of Melancthon, Bucer and Bullinger. Already in the preface to the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* he set forth plainly his intent: 'it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel E. Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 4-6

<sup>5</sup> J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Commentary on John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 5:39

divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance it without stumbling'.<sup>6</sup>

The irony of Calvin's position was the inability to approach the text alone without deductive presuppositions informed by those who went before. Effectively the historical tradition of the church combined its voice symphonically with the voices of the putative authors. For us as expositors, then, to imagine what the full intention of the biblical authors was apart from the church tradition paradoxically resembles the 'school of religions' mindset, even if our intentions regarding the authority of Scripture are polar opposite. Curiously, as products of modernity, we have adopted the Enlightenment model of objectivity and generally bear the burden of historicity as the qualifier of validity.

While I do not think the Messianic Jewish movement is truly 'fundamentalist', the fears, concerns and prejudices we have inherited regarding cross-disciplinary approaches to the Scripture have stifled our hermeneutical development. Echoes of deconstructionist rhetoric have caused us to casually dismiss broader approaches to the text. In a recent article entitled *Three Reasons Messianic Jews Believe the Scriptures*, my friend and colleague Barney Kasdan writes

For some the Bible is simply a man made book laced with the human errors of creativity. Others (most notably the JEPD theorists) may show a measure of respect for the message of the Scriptures while calling into question much of its internal content and structure.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 49

<sup>7</sup> B. Kasdan, "Three Reasons why Messianic Jews Believe the Scriptures", *Messianic Jewish Life* Vol. LXXIII, No. 4, (Baltimore: Lederer, December 2000) 10

I greatly appreciate Kasdan's deep and abiding faith and respect in and for the authority of Scripture, but the message is clear – if you discuss the construction of the texts you have at least one foot outside of the pale. The reasoning is clear, as per Toumlin's observation of Enlightenment thinking, that only an unbroken written tradition is reliable to transmit true knowledge. Kasdan goes on to say, "The mere fact that the Tenach uses over 2000 times the phrase '*koh amar Adonai*' (thus says the LORD) should be enough to merit consideration." The idea of the enterprise of human partnership in the communication of the divine message appears to be threatening to his epistemological security concerning the authority of the texts, if he considered the possibility of such a partnership at all. Also the fact that Torah itself gives testimony to archival records that were kept early in Israel's history (Ex. 17:14, Num. 21:14) seems to be ignored. Furthermore, the casual yet polemical dismissal of 'JEPD Theorists' could imply an unawareness of the many subsequent hermeneutical developments in the past eighty years. Though literary criticism continues to be used as a tool for scriptural deconstruction by some, the various disciplines that have developed in the twentieth century can be used to shed great light on our understandings of the texts without necessarily challenging the authority of Scripture.

### **Approaching history as tradition**

Given the tremendous effect Wellhausen's 'history of religions' school had on the development of theological thought throughout the twentieth century, it seems almost inconceivable that its primary period of dominance lasted only fifty years from the latter half of the nineteenth century until the period following World War I. Though

Wellhausen's search for facticity undermined the authority of the texts, his identification of clear literary sources proved invaluable in later developments of biblical theology, especially the form critical and tradition-history critical approaches.

Hans-Joachim Kraus built upon Wellhausen's work in his seminal book *Worship In Israel*. Kraus argues that if Wellhausen's concepts of developmental stages in Israelite history are to be of any value two major ideological pitfalls must be avoided. First, it needed to be separated from its Hegelian motivations, and second it would need to take into account the interaction of 'sacred tradition' with the historical development of Israel's religion. He viewed Israel's worship as a 'sacred drama' that manifests a greater reality. Kraus understood this 'greater reality' as Israel's ritual response to their God.<sup>8</sup>

Building upon the work of Alt, Mowinkel and von Rad, Kraus's form-criticism showed that it was possible to use the literary seams of the text in a manner which moved beyond Wellhausen's preoccupation with literary origins and putative authors. Under the form-critical approach the text is liberated from the prison of literary source dating in principally two ways.

- 1) The understanding of Israel's religious tradition can pre-date the formation of the texts. Therefore, the dynamic tradition cannot be assigned to one group, locked in the historical continuum. Even if a later date is assigned to the texts, such as the priestly tradition, they probably retained and were therefore formed out of an earlier tradition.

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<sup>8</sup> H.-J Kraus, *Worship In Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament*, G. Buswell trans. (Richmond: John Knox, 1965).



2) Israel's religious system could be seen as standing positively apart from ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Where the historical paradigm viewed Israel's cult and the Sumerian and Phoenician cults as having common origins, the traditional-historical paradigm understood such similarities as peculiarities which resulted from a shared environment at the time of inception. Even if some of Israel's practices developed as ritual polemic, they were still viewed as unique expressions of Israel's cosmology.

This approach paved the way for much of the significant theology of the Hebrew Scriptures that would be done through the remainder of the twentieth century, including major accomplishments in Conservative Jewish and Conservative Evangelical Christian circles. For the former it allowed a bridge between the *peshet* (or 'plain-sense') approach of the Mishnaic and Rashi traditions and the 'abstract-meanings' of the text suggested by Maimonides. For the latter, the tradition layered approach to history allowed a sufficient response to the inchoate flow of archeological and scientific discovery, while maintaining a continued respect for the divine origins of the Scriptures.

In the late 1960's Kenneth Kitchen and Meredith Kline independently and almost simultaneously arrived at theories of the Deuteronomic literature based upon close comparison with the Suzerain treaties of the second millennium BCE. Though both scholars maintain an early dating of the texts, Kline credits the form-critical analysis of Gerhard von Rad as foundational to his understanding of the covenantal patterns of the text. In a review of von Rad's commentary on Deuteronomy, Kline writes

The studies of the structure of Deuteronomy made by von Rad twenty-five and even thirty-five years ago remarkably anticipated what has

subsequently been revealed by the publication of evidence as to the form of ancient treaties. He had recognized in Deuteronomy the pattern of a covenantal renewal ceremony, and the more recent investigation of the treaties has made it clear that the pattern identified by von Rad was indeed covenantal. Yet, now that there is objective confirmation that his form-critical analysis was pointing in the proper direction he seems more embarrassed than gratified. Apparently the evidence would lead him farther than he is prepared to go. For it shows that his covenantal pattern was not just cultic but documentary. Furthermore it discloses a more comprehensive structuring of Deuteronomy according to the documentary paradigm and at the same time testifies to an earlier date for the book in the overall integrity of its treaty form than von Rad's historical-philosophical predilections will permit him to accept.<sup>9</sup>

This acknowledgment clarifies several misconceptions that are widely held in the Messianic Jewish movement.

- 1) Higher-critical studies are the tools of agnostics and cannot be synthesized adequately by those who trust in divine inspiration of the texts.
- 2) Divine inspiration should be sanitarily free of human corruption and cultural packaging.
- 3) Acceptance of the 'Documentary Hypothesis' demands rigorous adherence to hermetically sealed literary categories which reflect strict structures of historical development. Kline identifies the layered influences of the cultic tradition on the documentary structure.

Perhaps John Sailhamer best sums up the tradition-historical approach from a Conservative Evangelical perspective in an article on the first creation account.

Two dimensions are always at work in shaping such narratives: (1) the course of the historical event itself and (2) the viewpoint of the author who recounts the events. This means that one must not only look at the course

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<sup>9</sup> M.G. Kline, "Book Review of Commentary of Deuteronomy by G. von Rad", *The Westminster Theological Journal*, XXX, 2 (1968) 233

of the event in its historical setting, but one must also look for the purpose in recounting the events of the Book of Genesis in historical narrative.<sup>10</sup>

Sailhamer offers the following example.

One of the more obvious elements is the repetition of the phrase ‘evening and morning,’ which divides the passage into a seven-day scheme. Creation forms a period of one workweek concluding with a rest day. Already this simple structural framework is the tilting of the account that betrays the interests of the author – Creation is viewed in terms of man’s own workweek.<sup>11</sup>

The explanation is clear. From the perspective of the tradition-historical approach, the historical narratives of Scripture are not viewed merely as factual timelines of historical events. Rather, they represent a process of selection and construction of features of the historical event that most characteristically portrays the meaning of the event as conceived by the author.

The form-critical and tradition-historical approaches changed the landscape of NT studies as well. Richard Longenecker’s *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* proved to be not only groundbreaking and controversial, but has been a point of early reference in the development of Messianic Jewish understandings of the apostolic witness.<sup>12</sup> By comparing the New Covenant Scriptures with the Mishna and early rabbinic texts, Longenecker identifies similarities in the exegetical operations used to extend the meaning of the scriptures. Longenecker built upon the form-critical work of Moffat, Vermes, Manson, Loewe and others, with the intention of identifying those

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<sup>10</sup> J. Sailhamer, “Exegetical Notes: Genesis 1:1-2:2a,” *Trinity Journal* 5, *New Series 1* (Spring 1984) 73-82

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis In the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975)

presuppositions that informed the exegesis of the biblical authors. Geza Vermes had postulated years earlier:

In inter-testamental Judaism there existed a fundamental unity of exegetical tradition. This tradition, the basis of religious faith and life, was adopted and modified by its constituent groups, the Pharisees, the Qumran sectaries and the Judeo-Christians. We have, as a result, three cognate schools of exegesis of the one message recorded in the Bible, and it is the duty of the historian to emphasize that none of them can properly be understood independent of the others.<sup>13</sup>

Uniquely, Longenecker was less concerned with “the broader issues of relationship of the testaments and the development of biblical religion” than he was in discerning “distinguishable patterns of usage and development that appear in the various strata of the biblical citations within the New Testament”. The interpretive and theological implications that resulted from this approach, however, were unavoidable, especially for the Messianic Jewish movement.

This approach is naturally attractive to Messianic Jewish expositors. It allows for the emergence of a thoroughly Jewish faith which, at a cognate level, is more organically connected to incipient rabbinic Judaism. But again our need for historical objectivity for validation can be as much of a trap as an assurance, since the Oral Law is, to some degree, a misnomer. Though it claims earlier oral sources, the earliest written record is the third century C.E. The Mishnaic voice is singular and specific fidelity to earlier pronouncements are not generally considered to be textually discernable apart from its own claims. Therefore, if we continue to demand a contiguous written record, we are left with an otherwise surreptitious continuity with Jewish history.

Also, the apostolic witness is not a monolith, which not only exhibits internal continuity but discontinuity as well. The intention of the inspired authors varies greatly as do their structure and genre. Therefore, to juxtapose a singular template over the apostolic writings would tend to narrow their scope and potential. While the Midrashic approach may work well with Hebrews 11 and Romans 4 and 9, Romans 5, for instance, shows greater affinity to 2 Esdras. The apocalyptic literature and intertestamental work should not be sacrificed on the altar of Midrash when examining stylistic parallels in the apostles' testimony. New studies in Second Temple Judaism, such as those done by James Charlesworth, Lawrence Schiffman and Gabriele Boccaccini, should be engaged and used to inform our understanding of both the literature and the world views that shaped the inspired crafting of the apostolic witness. Though Longenecker does engage the most contemporary Second Temple literature available, his heavy reliance upon the *midot* (rabbinic exegetical operations used to extend the meaning of the text) to produce his imagined cognate diminishes the effective voice of the apocalyptic literature.

Another area of tradition-historical study which has been largely ignored in the Messianic Jewish movement is in the area of rhetorical analysis. Stanley Stowers reinterprets the writings of Paul by comparing his discourse with extant rhetorical guides of the period. Stowers explains his approach to the text.

In order to read a text, a person must understand both the wider language and a specific practical context. Thus a text is not objective in the sense that it is ever given or noninterpreted. The markings on the paper are meaningful only because they constitute the conventions of a particular community. In different contexts of social activity the same markings might have different meanings. In another culture the same markings might mean something different or nothing at all. Texts are only objective

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<sup>13</sup> G. Vermes, "The Qumran Interpretation Of Scripture in its Historical Setting," *Alous VI* (1966-68) 95

in the sense that a community agrees deeply about the text's meaning. Their interpretation is relatively determinate most of the time because they play certain fairly stable roles in various social practices. Communities however are always changing, and the shared meaningful activities that constrain the meanings of the text also change. The traditions of the communities consist of oral and written texts that have continued to be made meaningful by shared activities.<sup>14</sup>

Stower's point is clear, the texts are composed of a pre-agreed upon set of social cues. Without a clear sense of modes of communication, social norms, webs of belief, and preunderstandings of words and phrases, the objective center of the text moves from communicator and audience to the cultural world of the interpreter. Furthermore, the interpreter is viewing the text through a grid layered with centuries of interpretations.

Since the practical contexts change as the communities change, the meaning of the texts change. The original practical context of Paul's letters is not the same practical contexts of the letters as scripture in worship, moral instruction, and doctrinal controversy of the fourth century imperial church. To approximate the readings given to a text in the first or fourth centuries, modern scholars must grasp the codes of meaning belonging to the practical social activities of the time and place in question.<sup>15</sup>

Thirty years earlier Krister Stendhal wrote a pioneering essay on Paul and the West's understanding of introspective conscience. Stendhal had argued that the nature of Paul's public alleviation of conscience, as it had been traditionally understood in Romans 7:7-25, was anachronistic and inconsistent with the rhetorical style of the period. He also pointed out Paul's consistently odd use of pronouns, often speaking in first person when the context did not seem to reflect the grammar. Still, he offered little explanation or

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<sup>14</sup> S.K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 7

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 7-8

comparative reference for Paul's stylistic peculiarities.<sup>16</sup> Stowers understands this text, along with others, as a *prosopopoiia*, a type of speech-in-character common to the Greco-Roman world whereby a speaker places a speech in the mouth of another person or an imagined interlocutor, or where an inanimate object speaks. He argues that it contains allusions to words made famous by Euripides' *Medea*, which had gained such cultural importance that Paul's readers could not have possibly missed the echo of the Medean saying. "A suppressed intertextual connection might be just as powerful as as one thrown into the foreground in the form of an explicit quotation."<sup>17</sup>

This type of rhetorical analysis of the text can serve an enormous purpose for the Messianic Jewish movement. By stripping away two millennium of church interpretation, the texts are liberated from the anti-Jewish grid through which they were often read. When Mark Nanos wrote *The Mystery of Romans*, he painted a new and refreshing picture of Paul as the builder of a community, true to covenant Israel, yet inspired by the radical changes brought by the coming of the Messiah.<sup>18</sup> Nano's analysis of Romans was so well received in the wider Jewish world that he received a Jewish Book Award, yet he received a relatively mixed reaction within Messianic Judaism. The reaction was predictable, though, since this type of cultural analysis misses the Cartesian standards of objectivity, which, as I have argued, we have inherited through Modernity

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<sup>16</sup> K. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West", *Harvard Theological Review*, 56 (1963), 199-215

<sup>17</sup> Stowers, 264-269. Stowers cites Cicero, Quintilian, and the *progymnasmata* (elementary rhetorical exercises) of Theon, Hermogrenes, and Aphthonius as the best evidence from the rhetorical tradition for *prosopopoiia* in the early empire.

<sup>18</sup> M. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996)

and have established as the qualifiers of real knowledge. Most statements of Scripture would be viewed by rhetorical-historical analysis as local, particular, and occasional, often responding to social cues, hidden from us by antiquity, yet presumably known by the encoded audience. Summing this up in a nutshell, Nanos extemporaneously stated in a 1996 lecture, “We have to realize that when we read Romans, we are reading somebody else’s mail.”<sup>19</sup> Honest as this may be, it is none the less threatening to those who trust in the authority of Scripture for faith and practice. So, if we are not going to bury our heads in the sand but, rather, choose to engage the broad range of literary and historical insights which informs our understanding of the biblical literature, we will need to adopt new models by which we understand the veracity and influence of those Scriptures.

### **Moving from history to text**

As I have previously noted, I believe we have unconsciously walked into a trap of post-Enlightenment thought which threatens our ability to extract importance and genuine meaning for contemporary life. Often our approach to the text has become overly descriptive, seeking to state unequivocally the intention of the biblical author. But if we follow this course to its honest and logical extent, we come to realize that the more we learn of this world thousands of years removed, its language, its culture, and its social norms and mores, the more we still fail to know. Furthermore, trying to ascertain the motivations of the biblical authors can be extremely elusive since the encoded information concerning the details of circumstance of writing are, at best, limited and often subject to the interpreter’s predilections. For instance, in Roman’s 2:1-5 the

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<sup>19</sup> Speaking at a private lecture sponsored by the Northeast Region of the UMJC in Sturbridge, MA in January 1996.



hypocritical and arrogant judge who is being admonished has traditionally been understood to be a Jew since the time of Augustine when the relationship between Christianity and Judaism had already declined. The pause of thought elicited by the chapter break just prior to this discourse serves to support such an assertion. But that chapter break was not part of the texts of Scripture. If the beginning of Chapter Two is appended to the end of the last chapter, a strong case can be made for the imagined interlocutor being a gentile based upon the identification of the audience as gentiles in verse 13. But by reading forward to 2:17, one could conclude, as Augustine did, that Paul is still speaking to the same opponent and that this person, real or imagined, is in fact a Jew. To do so would require me to understand Paul as an antinomian, which I do not. Certainly though, my understanding of this text is tied to my understanding of Paul's motivations, which is invested with my own ecclesiastical and sentimental interests.

I am not suggesting that we abandon either the historical or linguistical approach to the text, rather that we re-imagine these and the other analytical approaches to Scripture within new boundaries of reality. The two boundaries I am going to suggest are 'canonical reality' and 'perspective reality', with the latter emanating from the former. By 'canonical reality' I am referring to the approach pioneered by Brevard Childs. Childs was one of the first and certainly one of the most influential critics of the hegemony of historicity in biblical studies. Childs succinctly states the dilemma he was confronting.

Having experienced the demise of the Biblical Theology movement in America, the dissolution of the broad European consensus in which I was trained, and a widespread confusion regarding theological reflection in general, I began to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong with the foundations of the biblical discipline. It was not a question of improving on source analysis, of discovering some unrecognized new

genre, or of bringing a redaction level into sharper focus. Rather, the crucial issue turned on one's whole concept of the study of the Bible itself. I am now convinced that the study of the Bible and its theological use as religious literature within a community of faith and practice needs to be completely rethought. Minor adjustments are not only inadequate, but also conceal the extent of the dry rot.<sup>20</sup>

The general characteristic of the canonical approach is to place the context for meaning of the biblical text primarily in the canon, and secondarily in history. It is the Word within the canonical text that is authoritative and revelatory, not the putative documents, historical backdrop, or social particularities that influenced or contributed to its development from origins to final canonization. Though all other factors inform the understanding of the text, it is the final form of the text that discloses a theological reality normative for the faith of the community.

Though Childs sought to deal with the problems which developed at the other end of the theological spectrum, the minimalist tendencies of the historical critical school, he began a process of articulating clear boundaries which I believe are helpful for Messianic Judaism as well. It was never the intention of the canonical approach to undermine the contributions of the cross-disciplinary studies of the texts but, rather, to give them meaning and importance within the process of divine production of Scripture. If, then, we acknowledge the divine articulation upon the entire breadth of Scripture as a 'final product', we become liberated to engage the full range of studies that will help to inform our understanding of the message contained within. According to the canonical approach, "God is as evident in the redaction of Scripture as he is in the original transmission." The

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<sup>20</sup> B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 15. By biblical theology Childs is referring to the historical-critical paradigm. He later admits that 'the term Biblical Theology is ambiguous.' *Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 1

uncovering of human fingerprints upon the text, then, should not threaten our fidelity to the authority of the text. This approach could be considered incarnational in that it recognizes the full humanity and the full divinity of Scripture.

Childs himself does not go this far, however. In fact, his approach to the canon can be quite static in that it principally finds meaning in the final form of the text. The use of this static approach to the canon could be potentially difficult for Messianic Judaism in significant ways. Emphasis on the latent final form gives almost complete authority to the Church Fathers who were responsible for the recognition process which led to the canonical construction. Many of those involved were prolific writers who have left us volumes which unambiguously describe their attendant ideologies. Unfortunately, many of their ideologies contain anti-Jewish bias. A static approach to the final form can mistakenly canonize their intentions. Without tradition-historical explanation, the internal Jewish disputes, which surface on the pages of the apostolic witness, can take on a tone of universality that can perpetuate anti-Jewish understandings. If we were to adopt Childs' approach unmodified, the New Covenant texts would at the very least be rendered unserviceable for the development of Messianic Jewish practice since they could not be reconciled with historic Judaism, without tradition-historical analysis.

Others, though, have developed dynamic models of canon which work well for the development of a Messianic Jewish understanding of Scripture. Paul Hanson recognizes community as the agency for the development of the texts of the Bible. According to Hanson, the community is defined by interrelated qualities which are given from God.

Since righteousness is God's universal standard of justice, the people of God maintain strict adherence to a ritual standard which mirrors that justice. Compassion is the quality of God that tempers justice with mercy, so the people of God being delivered out of bondage maintain standards of justice that do not enslave. Worship is then understood within the canon as the communicator of God's highest standards. According to Hanson, "Only in worship of this unique God, Israel believed, could righteousness and compassion intertwine as strands of one life-enhancing package." Like the earlier form-critical work, this approach centers on worship. The distinction is that the center of the discussion is not interrelated history, rather the cosmology of the community of faith which can be understood directly from the accepted canon. This approach recognizes that the community shapes the canon and the canon shapes the community, and both interactions happen in direct response to the divine initiative. It is the dynamic and developing notion of the faith community, then, that constitutes the canonical reality for Hanson.<sup>21</sup>

Jon Levenson approaches the text from a similar position. Though Levenson contends that Jews are not interested in the enterprise of biblical theology<sup>22</sup>, he clearly identifies and analyzes the religious cult of Israel within the context and boundaries of the Hebrew Scriptures, liberating it from the margins of developmental history. He understands the rituals and worship practices of Israel as a re-enactment of creation and an implementation of God's creative design. Levenson explains:

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<sup>21</sup> P.D. Hanson, *The People Called, The Growth of Community in the Bible* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1986), 70-78

<sup>22</sup> J. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology", *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 33-61

Priestly tradition has adapted its own sacral *regimen* the picture of creation without the opposition as evidenced in Psalm 104. As a result, the creative ordering of the world has become something that humanity can not only witness and celebrate, but something in which it can also take part. Among the many messages of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is this: It is through the cult that we are enabled to cope with evil, for it is the cult that builds and maintains order, transforms chaos into creation, ennobles humanity, and realizes the kingship of the God who has ordained the cult and commanded that it be guarded and practiced. It is through the directives of the divine master that this world comes into existence.<sup>23</sup>

Levenson, like Hanson, recognizes the responses to the underlying social order behind the scriptural text as God-imbued. Therefore they do not reduce God to a powerful symbol, as some social scientists might in their literary critique of the texts. Nor do they understand God as a cosmic CEO shouting orders to the biblical secretarial pool. Rather, God is the director, the inspiration behind a sacred drama, guiding and informing the performing artists as they interpret and animate His creative vision.

Richard Hays regards Paul, the inspired writer, as this kind of visionary. Though he is admittedly grateful and reliant upon historical critical insights, his analyses of Paul is most reliant upon the author's own words, as interpretations of Scripture. This is how Hays explains his foundational position.

Paul did not think of himself as a writer of Scripture; he was writing pastoral letters to fledgling churches, interpreting Scripture (by which he meant the texts that Christians later began to call the "Old Testament") to guide these struggling communities as they sought to understand the implications of the gospel. It requires a disciplined effort of historical imagination to keep reminding ourselves that when Paul wrote there was no New Testament; As Wayne Meeks has wryly observed, "That the Christian movement existed once without the canon which later became constitutive of it is a fact whose hermeneutical significance has not, even

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<sup>23</sup> J. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil :The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 127

now, fully impressed itself on our theology.” ... If we approach Paul’s letters a priori as Scripture in their own right, we run the risk of distortion through a hieratic reading that loses sight of their historical contingency and hermeneutical innovation. Paradoxically, we learn how rightly to read Paul’s letters as Scripture only by first reading them as not-Scripture and attending to how he read the Scripture that he knew.<sup>24</sup>

What Hays is eluding to is a similar process to reading Paul, as was undertaken by his earliest audiences and the audiences of the other inspired writers. I am not referring to only the audiences that are encoded in the text both explicitly and implicitly, but those to whom the letters circulated for the first several hundred years. When we read the text in this fashion, we essentially enter into an ongoing dialogue with those who first recognized that these writings were somehow *sui generis*.

In his imaginative reflection upon Paul’s Letter to the Romans, *Elusive Israel*, Charles Cosgrove recreates a similar dialogue, to examine the dialectic tension that exists in the letter between its affirmation of Israel’s election and its insistence upon divine impartiality. For his debaters he chooses three believers in Yeshua, two are Jewish, Simeon and Reuben, and one gentile, Chariton. Reuben agrees with Chariton that Paul is an inspired prophet and an ambassador of the Messiah. Simeon opposes the reading of Paul at public meetings alongside Scripture because he strongly disagrees with what he understands to be Paul’s view regarding the destiny of the Jewish people. With Reuben, Simeon continues to attend the synagogue since they both agree against Chariton that God’s presence can still be found there and that God has promised never to forsake Israel. While Reuben believes Paul’s letter supports this position, Chariton agrees with Simeon that it does not. All three know the letter quite well and each of them assumes that it

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<sup>24</sup> R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 5

expresses a consistent position that they have properly ascertained. Cosgrove has his imaginary debaters each bolster his argument with a thorough working through of the text. Chariton is charitable to Paul, Simeon is suspicious of Paul as a radical sectarian, and Reuben reads Paul through the rabbinic view that “all Israel has a place in the age to come”. What is interesting is that Chariton and Simeon come to a similar read of Paul for quite different reasons, and their arguments are reminiscent of discussions throughout and around Messianic Judaism.<sup>25</sup>

The importance of Cosgrove’s imaginative dialogue is that it exposes a widely held yet naïve assumption that is often fostered by a solely historical-grammatical approach to the interpretation of Scripture. This assumption is that enough philological and historical examination can produce one clear and undebatable interpretation. If the true meaning of the text is the one intended by the author, and it is the only valid interpretation for faith and practice of the faith community that claims these Scriptures, there is an implicit demand placed upon every inquiry of the text to produce the one absolute and correct interpretation. Unfortunately, it is rare that a theologian has produced a theory of the biblical author’s intent that excluded all or even most other reasonable interpretations, even within small communities of faith such as Messianic Judaism.

On the other hand, if we attempt to understand the Scriptures canonically, our exegetical focus expands to not only the original historical meaning, but also the full range of meanings as it underwent the various vicissitudes of interpretation. Our job, then, is not

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<sup>25</sup> C. H. Cosgrove, *Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election In Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1-25

to describe the exact historical meaning of the text, rather to develop a method of adjudicating between competing plausible interpretations. Aside from the rigors of historical-grammatical analyses, the interpretation must fit within our understanding of the cosmology which we believe shapes the canon. Though I can accept as plausible the philological deduction that Paul believes only Christians are ‘the true circumcision’, my understanding of the larger canonical context mitigates against my accepting this interpretation. Nor do I think the interpretation particularly helpful for building synagogues. In my opinion, then, our shift should be from a descriptive hermeneutic to a constructive one or a hermeneutic of use.

### **Moving from text to perspective**

By a hermeneutic of use, I am referring to interpretations of the text which allow the larger biblical perspectives to shape our religion and our social reality. It is not that we have not endeavored to do so, but over-emphasis on the historicity of the texts can keep us in an apologetic mode which impedes our ability to separate the perspectives of the text from the hard and immediate propositions of the text. The fact that Paul considered Adam the first man is evident in the text of Romans 5, but the greater implications for contemporary life should be drawn from his assertion that Adam is Everyman. The significance that the first recorded activity outside the Garden of Eden is fratricide should not be overlooked amidst an obsession with genealogical assertions.



The perspectives that we derive from Scripture should move us beyond the realities of everyday life to greater realities that fill and complete them. As I have previously asserted, the narratives, poems, rituals and laws of the Scriptures were shaped by the divine-human partnership. The creative fashioning of the authors and redactors is in direct response to the complex personal and community interaction with their God. But a perspective hermeneutic must also engage the present day hearers, readers, and interpreters in a way that compels them to not only enter into the canonical and social realities of the ancient world, but also to shape a present world that conforms to the realities envisioned within the text.

Often within the American religious landscape, though, it has been the sheer momentum of a turning social tide which has elicited these kinds of interpretive changes. For instance, during the political unrest prior to the American Civil War, proponents called the biblical propositions, which supported slavery, into summons. From a straight propositional reading it is impossible to derive any other interpretation than a tacit support for the institution of slavery. Though emancipation followed the war, supporters of Jim Crowe, who were often though certainly not exclusively religious conservatives, continued to employ these texts. Today these attitudes have long been considered unacceptable and are an anathema in the conservative Christian world, yet these texts continue to evoke a hermeneutical discomfort for those who propose a purely propositional reading of Scripture.

In his short but visionary book *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*<sup>26</sup>, Richard Longenecker employs Galatians 3:28 as a central proposition to display the social trajectory of the canon. Longenecker observes the internal evolution of Scripture concerning the relationships between Israel and the nations, men and women, and the existing social-economic strata to derive ethical standards for contemporary social interaction. Longenecker provides an exegetical cover for the issue of slavery which would be readily accepted by most of the Messianic Jewish leaders today. I suspect, though, that fifteen years after the publishing of this book, the same leaders would have a great deal of difficulty with Longenecker's gentle exposure of male hegemony in the canon, despite his employment of an identical hermeneutical approach to both sets of relationships. If we accept his hermeneutical direction concerning the abolition of slavery, though no such proposition is even suggested in Scripture, we must also fund an interpretation that moves toward a more equal and inclusive role for women in Messianic Judaism.

To inform a perspective hermeneutic, the canon must be understood as a system of both sacred rhetoric and symbols that provide models both of and for reality. Symbols conceptualize reality in a way that makes it apprehensible, so that what is not yet fully grasped is conformed to that which is already established. For instance, in the ninth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews the "greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man made" is effectively more real than the "earthly tabernacle" yet the former is incomprehensible without the latter. Still the greater efficacy of the "heavenly tabernacle" need not, in fact must not, nullify the cosmology and significance behind

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<sup>26</sup> R. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984)

Israel's sacrificial cult, or it destroys its own descriptive and constructive value. As a system of sacred symbols, it conforms itself to the existent social reality, and also the existent social reality to itself.

Walter Brueggemann has been one of the most proactive theologians in the employment of a perspective hermeneutic. Brueggemann's primary focus is on the rhetoric of the Bible, which he believes, has the capacity to make sense out of the experiences of life. Brueggemann does not believe that the 'proposed worlds' of the Bible can be scientifically or objectively demonstrated, but they can be tested for truth nonetheless. He suggests that their validity rests not in their logic or facticity, but rather in their capacity to move those who embrace them to the expenditure of their lives.<sup>27</sup>

An example of the rhetorical power of the text to transform reality is Luke 19:1-9. Zaccheus, a tax collector, climbs a tree to get a glimpse of Yeshua. From the reading we can deduce what is obvious to the social-historical context of the text. Tax collectors were considered 'sinners', collaborators with the illegitimate and pagan government. Yeshua's rhetoric, though, would say anything but that. "Zaccheus come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Yeshua goes on to describe Zaccheus as a "son of Abraham too". Yeshua is not merely appealing to Zaccheus's lineage, rather to a promise of Torah, that in the social context, had long since been domesticated and dismissed when it came to Zaccheus and those like him. The point here is that Zaccheus accepts Yeshua's counter-verdict and begins the process of living up to it, giving half his

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<sup>27</sup> W. Brueggemann, 12-18

possessions to the poor and paying back four times what he has gained illicitly, twice the degree of repentance prescribed for such an act in Torah.

In a contemporary context, the life of popular speaker and author Joni Eareckson Tada also demonstrates the power of the rhetoric of the canon. I only heard her speak once on a televised broadcast of a Billy Graham Crusade, but was greatly affected not only by the power of her story, but by the power of the rhetoric of the Scriptures. As a young woman she suffered severe paralysis as the result of a diving accident. Needless to say, it changed the course of her life forever. Life no longer held for her the same promises it had before. She was moved to the margins of society in a way that no government program, equal access legislation or occupational therapy could completely rectify. The unspoken message concerning the severely physically handicapped is that they are to be pitied as victims of cosmic injustice, endured by the more fortunate, and that they are less than whole people. Predictably, she became distraught, depressed and embittered. Then at some point she was confronted by the promises of Scripture. The promises of eternal life became more than post mortem bliss, rather they became embodied in the present.

Though I cannot recall the particular Scriptures and concepts that she cited, it is not difficult for those familiar with the texts to recall the alternative reality of the Kingdom of God described in the beatitudes, where it is the meek and the humble who “inherit the earth”. Not only did the rhetoric of the canon create an alternative reality for Tada, but also in a mysterious and almost sacramental way her story is appended to the Scriptures, making the canon more open and dynamic.

## **Developing the Messianic Jewish perspective**

As I have suggested previously for a hermeneutic to be useful, it must be both descriptive and constructive. It must sufficiently understand the history, traditions, rhetoric and cosmology of the canon, but it must also extend that reality to create new models which both fit and transform our present day culture. It is absurd to imagine the implementation of capital punishment as a response to teenage insolence, or relegating women to temporary quarters in the backyard in response to their monthly biological cycle. It is insufficient, therefore, to merely transpose the situations and hard propositions of the Bible and overlay them upon our current world and circumstance without first adapting them for more than mere situational convenience. Rather, they should be considered in accordance with a larger canonical precept. I have suggested that this be done by attempting to derive a precept from the historical layer of voices which have interacted with the text and its interpretations. This can create quite a dilemma, though, for Messianic Judaism, as our historical communities of reference, Judaism and Christianity, have disparate voices regarding the interpretation of shared texts. Jon Levenson describes the dilemma.

What I believe I have demonstrated is that no Jewish theology consonant with the classical rabbinic tradition can be built on a perception of the biblical text that denies the unity of the Torah of Moses as a current reality, whatever the long, complex, and thoroughly historical process through which that Torah came into being. In insisting that the supreme document of revelation is the whole Pentateuch and the whole Pentateuch must ultimately (but not immediately or always) be correlated with the oral Torah of the rabbis, Jewish thinkers will separate themselves not only from those who absolutize the historical-critical perspective but also from their Christian colleagues in the field of 'biblical theology'. Only within the limited area of the smaller literary and historical contexts is an ecumenical biblical theology possible, and only as awareness grows of the

differences that context makes shall we understand where agreement is possible and where it is not, and why.<sup>28</sup>

What we are attempting to do then, is in fact precisely what Levenson said cannot be done, to develop a ‘biblical theology’ (by this he means an intertextual reading) which reconciles the great truths of both historical religious traditions. I believe such a reading can be developed, but not without resolving our own internal conflict over our primary locus of identity. Are we Christians of Jewish lineage, or are we Jews who believe in Yeshua? My colleague Mark Kinzer has pointed out that by our self-designation ‘Messianic Judaism’, we have defined our institutional identity principally as a Judaism.<sup>29</sup> I would agree with this assertion and, therefore, believe that we must read the texts as Jews, in dialogue not only with historical Jewish thinkers, but with the broad spectrum of contemporary Jewish thinkers as well. This does not mean that we can or should ignore the historical Christian perspectives, but rather understand them through a tincture of Jewish presuppositions and priorities. Our job, then, is not to find a single middle way but to recognize that there are dichotomies which must be adjudicated in order to produce a Messianic Jewish reading of the sacred canon. To produce such a reading, however, does not nullify other interpretative models since, as I have previously asserted, we need to find the most plausible reading for Messianic Judaism, not the sole correct reading for all who claim the Bible.

Due to the scope and length of this paper, I will not begin to discuss the broad sea of hermeneutical distinctions lying between Judaism and Christianity which we must

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<sup>28</sup> Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 81

<sup>29</sup> M. Kinzer, “The Nature of Messianic Judaism” a position presented at the Theology Forum of the annual Conference of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations in July of 2000.

eventually navigate. I will conclude by proposing a conceptual center for a Messianic Jewish canonical perspective – Jewish messianism. To speak of Jewish messianism as our center may sound obvious and even banal for a movement which has adopted this concept as its nomenclature. But to have a truly Jewish messianism we must again dialogue with the full range of Jewish thought on the subject. Messianism is the Jewish principle of hope, the belief that all of Jewish history, with all its inherent joys and sorrows, will some day culminate in an extraordinary act of God, when God will reconcile all men to Himself and one another. But at the center of Jewish messianism is Jewish particularism, the belief that Jewish uniqueness and Jewish existence matter and are worth protecting.

The hope that is Jewish messianism can be understood as points on a continuum between two poles. One of these poles is the sober minimalist position, the other is the apocalyptic, maximalist position. The former was formed out of the ashes of the Second Temple, the tears of the crusades and pogroms, and the billows of smoke from the Holocaust. The latter was forged from the flames of passion elicited by the same events. Each is a manifestation of the Jewish situation, but each is filled with a different kind of hope. The apocalyptic voice speaks of unprecedented upheavals which will transform the very basis of the human order and condition. The sober rabbinic pronouncements maintain standards of obedience ‘should Messiah tarry.’ The minimalists believe Torah will be in force in the ‘age to come’ while the maximalists believe even Torah will be transformed. Still there is one constant on this continuum of Jewish messianism –

without the Jewish people there is no Messiah. To say ‘the Jewish Messiah’ would only be silly and redundant.

The implications of Jewish Messianic perspective may raise a few eyebrows around Messianic Judaism where fidelity to Yeshua and Judaism are often bifurcated and prioritized. The Jewishness is often expressed as separate and secondary to belief in Yeshua. But if we accept a Jewish Messianic perspective, Yeshua and the Jewish people are inseparable. One cannot have the ‘God of Israel’ without Israel, and neither would ‘Israel’s greatest son’ be a reality. For Messianic Judaism, Yeshua must be the quintessential Israel. He is not a replacement for the Jewish people in salvation history, but he is the ongoing totality of Israel’s experience. For Christianity, there was and is no need to maintain the Jewish perspective to messianism, because theirs is not the task of maintaining Jewish continuity and maintaining Jewish hope. But, for Messianic Judaism, we cannot desist from reading the sacred texts through this perspective.

Jewish scholar Michael Wyschogrod ended his book *Body of Faith* with the following paragraphs, a compelling synthesis of apostolic thought.

Jewish messianism makes it possible for the Jew to hope when otherwise there would seem to be no hope. Beyond that, messianism is the principle of life in Judaism, preventing the past from gaining total hegemony over the present. Because there waits in the future a transformation of the human condition such as has never been known before, the past has the only limited significance as a guide to the future. The saving acts of God will be unexpected, revising much of our previously held wisdom, bringing into being a new heaven and a new earth in which not only the body of Israel will be circumcised but also its heart.



The circumcised body of Israel is the dark, carnal presence through which redemption makes its way in history. Salvation is of the Jews because the flesh of Israel is the abode of the divine presence in the world. It is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation.<sup>30</sup>

Effectively, Wyschogrod has sat down at a table with those who shaped the Christian and the Jewish canon and reasoned with them. They described their world, their traditions and rituals, their cares and concerns, and the thoughts which gave them hope. He allowed their words and symbols to shape his world, to refashion his reality. The words on the page went from history, to the response of a community to their world and their God, to a sacred and living document, to a new perspective for life. May we endeavor and be diligent to do the same.

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<sup>30</sup> M. Wyschogrod, *Body of Faith* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1996), 256