

A Response to FFOZ's
"Recent Theological Shifts at FFOZ"

Tim Hegg • July, 2009 • TorahResource

In the recent response by First Fruits of Zion (FFOZ) to my concerns over the theological shifts evident in their current teachings, a number of their statements bring confusion rather than clarity, and suggest that I am either mistaken or ill-informed in my assessments. While I agree that there is no need for an on-going battle of words, it is necessary to set the record straight on a number of points and to offer some clarification.

Of foremost importance, I want to make it clear that I am not passing judgment on the personal integrity or character of any of my brothers and sisters at First Fruits of Zion. Nor am I judging their motives or reasons for publishing certain materials or adopting new approaches to achieve their ministry goals. I affirm without hesitation that the teachers and writers at FFOZ are sincere in their desire to honor God, His Messiah Yeshua, and to produce materials that they believe will benefit the body of Messiah. My disagreements are with certain aspects of their recent teaching which have been made public both in printed materials and teaching seminars.

So, in what follows, I intend to deal with the theological issues that are raised in the *Study Guide and Commentary* to Levertoff's *Love and the Messianic Age* as well as those which have been taught in recent FFOZ seminars. In each case, I will deal with the actual quotes from the *Study Guide and Commentary*, or statements made in their seminars, transcribed from audio recordings. It is my contention that when materials are published or taught publicly, they are open to critique and critical evaluation. The goal of such evaluation is to reinforce the necessity for all of us to test all things against the clear, unchanging truth of the Scriptures.

No Longer Theological Editor

In the opening paragraph of their response, I am identified as representing the ministry of "Torah Resources International." This is actually the ministry of Ariel and Devorah Berkowitz (www.torahresourcesinternational.info), not our website, which is TorahResource (www.torahresource.com). Though the site names are similar, and though I much appreciate the work and teaching of Ariel Berkowitz, our two ministries have no direct organizational connection.

Likewise, in the opening paragraph of FFOZ's response, a number of things are implied which require clarification. First, though I was appointed as the primary Theological Editor for written materials produced by FFOZ, I was not the only editor. Several other men also read the materials with an eye to theological issues and we worked together in the editorial process.

Second, in FFOZ's response, a judgement is made regarding my motives for resigning as Theological Editor. There is no need to belabor this issue. Suffice it to say that I resigned because I could not, with clear conscience, be listed as the Theological Editor for materials that were moving in a theological direction which I could not wholeheartedly endorse.

1. Jews, Gentiles, and Torah

Several years ago, FFOZ began cautiously to make known to their readers that a shift was occurring in their understanding of how Jews and Gentiles relate to the Torah. Now, in their recent “Grafted In” seminar, they are making this shift explicit.¹ Here is a transcript of an excerpt from the audio file accessed from the FFOZ website (GraftedIn-Part2.mp3). The teacher is Boaz Michael, speaking in Puyallup, WA (June, 2009):

Also, because of your discipleship to Yeshua, Paul tells us clearly and passionately in Romans 6 and 7, that we are to consider ourself in Messiah, dead—dead. No longer is it I that lives but it is the Messiah Who lives through me. Paul tells us that we are to no longer be slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness. We know that the Messiah was faithful to Torah, lived an obedient life to Torah, so as a matter of discipleship and imitation to Yeshua, the nations embrace the Torah as a matter of discipleship to Yeshua. This is probably the most critical component of this attachment—דְּבִיקוּת—for the nations. And I, I’m going to say something, and I want you to just put it in your mind and set it there for a second, and then let me work it out, but I need to say something to you to help make a point: and that is, as Gentiles, you have no relationship to the Torah. Period. None. It wasn’t given to you; it was not for you; it was not intended for you; it was given to the Jewish people.²

So what does that mean? How do you access Torah? Your only connection to Torah is through the Messiah.

He went on to explain what this means: the Gentiles, who are given full access to the Torah, and encouraged to embrace the Torah, must understand that their attachment to Torah as disciples of Yeshua, if done righteously, must be within the guidelines of “greater Israel.” Here is a transcript of a second excerpt from the same Seminar session:

So, to be a respectful member of the community of Israel, which you have full access to—when I use the words “distinction” and “roles,” I don’t want you to be hearing me say that you don’t have a place within Torah—like somehow, as a Gentile, it’s not for you. Because the Apostolic community taught us a different message. The Apostolic community taught us, through the words of Paul, that you have full access. But what I am asking you to do, is when you take hold of it, which you have access to do, understand that it has been lived out by a people for thousands of years, that were given the responsibility and the duty to help define it so that when you embraced it, you did it within the order and the symphony of the greater people of

¹ I wrote this essay before the appearance of *Messiah Journal* 101 (August, 2009). In this issue FFOZ makes clear that they have abandoned the “One Law” position and adopted a stance on Gentiles and the Torah which is more in line with the UMJC. I hope to review the pertinent articles of this issue of *Messiah Journal* in a separate essay.

² Apparently the seminar speaker is using “Jewish people” as equivalent to “Israel.” This brings up the thorny issue of exactly “who is Jewish” or how to define “who is Jewish,” something with which even the Sages and the founders of the modern state of Israel struggled. Clearly as Israel stood at Mt. Sinai and received the covenant of the Torah, as well as when the people of Israel were renewing the covenant as they entered the promised Land (Deut 29:10–13), “Israel” included “foreigners” (*gerim*). The rabbis, in their anti-Gentile perspective, got around these references to Gentile membership in the covenant by interpreting “foreigners” or “aliens” (*gerim*) in the Torah texts as “proselytes,” but this is clearly not what the term *ger/gerim* meant in its original setting. Ex 23:9 and Lev 19:33–34 are proof of this, for in these texts God reminds the descendants of Jacob that they were *gerim* in Egypt, which hardly can mean they were “proselytes.”

Israel.

That's a tough, tough message. Because what that means is that our Torah observance is no longer going to be able to be simply self-defined by our own standards, but rather we're going to have to come in and submit to a people and as – I don't want to use the word "authority" – but an essential point of reference for us to begin to understand and interpret our faith through.

Believing that "greater Israel" was given "the responsibility and the duty to help define" the Torah, demonstrating respect for "greater Israel" means accepting their definitions of Torah obedience. An unwillingness to accept the role of "greater Israel" in matters of Torah observance would therefore be arrogant and disrespectful.

Yet it is clear that "greater Israel" would never agree that Gentiles have full access to the Torah. For the most part, rabbinic Judaism offers Gentiles access to the so-called Noachide Laws but not to the Torah of Israel. If Gentiles do desire access to the Torah, the path to such access within "greater Israel" is rabbinic conversion. So one wonders how this new position by FFOZ will fare much better in terms of showing respect to "greater Israel" when it clearly violates one of "greater Israel's" well-entrenched *halachic* standards. If normative Judaism is the conductor of the symphony that Gentiles are to join, then when they seek access to the Torah *as Gentiles* they will still be viewed by "greater Israel" as "walk-ons" who want to play the music but have never passed the audition that every other musician underwent in order to be part of the orchestra.

This new teaching of FFOZ presents numerous theological difficulties, but perhaps one of the most serious is the idea that believers in Yeshua (whether Jew or Gentile), must "submit to a people" called "greater Israel" through whom we are "to understand and interpret our faith" in terms of how we keep the Torah. No matter how one may juggle words, the obvious upshot of such a teaching is that "greater Israel," alongside of the Scriptures, is to offer the guideline for how we understand and live out the Torah. In such a scenario, the Scriptures are not the sole basis for faith and *halachah*, meaning that the Scriptures are not, in and of themselves, sufficient for understanding and living out the Torah. Rather, the Scriptures must be paired with the traditions of "greater Israel" in order to get a so-called complete picture.

What is more, to say that the Torah was never given to the Gentile believer in Yeshua—that it was not intended for the Gentile believer—means that when the Gentile believer reads the first five books of the Bible, it is as though he or she is reading someone else's mail. But if this is true of the books of Moses, is it not also true of the remainder of the Tanach? Did not the prophets address their words to Israel and to Judah? Are not the Psalms the hymnal of Israel? If one begins with the premise that the written Scriptures of the Torah were not intended for the Gentile believers in Yeshua, does this not inevitably lead to the conclusion that the whole Tanach was intended for Israel and not for Gentile believers in Yeshua? But if this were the case, how is it that Isaiah (for example) prophecies the work of the Messiah to include bringing the Torah to the Gentiles?

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He

will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not be disheartened or crushed until He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for His Torah.” (Is 42:1–4)

Moreover, Paul, writing to the messianic community in Corinth (made up of both Jews and Gentiles), states explicitly that the words of the Torah “were written for our instruction”:

Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY.” Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1Cor 10:5–11)

2. “Normative Judaism”

I want to clarify that I never said I have a problem with the use of extra-biblical literature. Anyone who has seen my personal library knows this to be a fact. My concern is with the misuse of such extra-biblical literature, whether rabbinic or otherwise. One such misuse is the unguarded assumption that later literature (including rabbinic literature) necessarily defines the beliefs and *halachah* of 1st Century Judaism. That one may glean from later literature some aspects of earlier belief and practice is obvious, but one must be diligent in corroborating what can and cannot be classed as “early.” To put it simply, when the Mishnah, Midrashim, or Talmuds describe beliefs and practices, this does not automatically mean that the same beliefs and practices were widely held in the 1st Century. Even more, citing medieval and later Chasidic works as though they illuminate the Apostolic Scriptures is anachronistic in the extreme.

A case-in-point: in the *Study Guide and Commentary to Love and the Messianic Age*, the following assertion is made:

Paul Levertoff maintained that, although the *Zohar* was written in the thirteenth century, it contained material inherited from earlier sources and schools of Jewish tradition—a conglomeration of early Jewish sources and spiritual constructs anthologized into the *Zohar*. Levertoff’s view is supported by most critics today, including the respected authority Gershom Scholem of Hebrew University. (p. 18)

In fact, Gershom Scholem, recognized as a foremost authority in Kabbalistic studies, suggests the opposite in his article from the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (which is referenced by the above quote), and makes his view even more clear in one of his major works:

Unfortunately, the most voluminous kabbalistic work of the thirteen century, the *Zohar*, namely, the complex of writings included within it, must be entirely eliminated from this discussion of the origin and early stages of the Kabbalah. The contention has often been made, and is still frequently repeated, that this book contains in part, if only in the form of a later redaction or revision, texts of great antiquity whose identification and analysis would thus be of the greatest relevance for our investigation. Most of the writings on the Kabbalah have taken practically no account of the sources and the points of reference of scientific discus-

on that will be treated here, but have relied almost exclusively upon the *Zohar*. In the chapter of my book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in which I touch upon this point, I presented the results of an extensive and detailed investigation of this work and demonstrated that there is unfortunately no basis for assuming that the *Zohar* contains any ancient texts. The entire work belongs to the last quarter of the thirteenth century and is of no use to us in the discussion that follows. Efforts are still being made in our day to sift out ancient elements of one kind or another, but they cannot withstand philological analysis and rather belong to the realm of fantasy.³

To give credit where credit is due, when I recently pointed this out to Daniel Lancaster, he conceded that the statement in the *Study Guide and Commentary* was less than accurate and promised to fix it in future printings. In the meantime, however, readers of the *Study Guide and Commentary* will be left with the erroneous impression that the *Zohar* actually contains early Jewish materials that therefore can be profitably used to interpret the Apostolic Scriptures, especially the Gospels.

An even more egregious misuse of extra-biblical literature is FFOZ's baffling endorsement of Kabbalistic texts. It is baffling because in the videos they recommend for clarification on their use of extra-biblical literature, Daniel Lancaster makes the following statement regarding the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic literature ("Hey, That's Not in My Bible," video #8, accessed on YouTube):

On the one hand, it can be incredibly rewarding literature. But on the other hand, the *Zohar* and Kabbalah are also replete with warmed-over Gnostic worldview and enough occultism, real occultism, to make them very dangerous. So one should be, should be careful. You do well to heed the warnings of the Apostle Paul in Col 2:18

Having made such a bold statement about the Kabbalistic literature being infused with "enough real occultism to make them very dangerous," why would anyone encourage fellow brothers and sisters in Yeshua to investigate them, especially when it is clear that their late composition precludes them from offering any real historical insights into the biblical text itself? Yet in the Preface to the *Study Guide and Commentary*, such strong warnings go unmentioned when the subject of the *Zohar* and Kabbalistic materials is introduced. Indeed, someone unacquainted with the *Zohar* or other Kabbalistic literature who reads the Preface might well get the impression that these esoteric works have much to offer by way of understanding the Scriptures and drawing close to God. For it is pointed out in the Preface that Levertoff himself, one of the "luminaries" among early Messianic believers and a renowned scholar, considered the *Zohar* a "deep-set jewel" of spiritual vision.

In FFOZ's response, they state: "Our position remains unchanged. We affirm the Bible as our sole authority." One wonders how this can be so dogmatically stated when (as noted above), the current "Grafted In" seminar makes it clear that "greater Israel" has been "given the responsibility and the duty to help define" the Torah. If obeying the Torah means doing so within the guidelines set by "greater Israel," then this is giving *de facto* "authority" to "greater Israel" even if FFOZ does not want to admit it. To claim that the Oral Torah is not, in fact, authoritative is an empty statement if people are told that when they embrace Torah, they should do so in concert with "greater Israel," that is, they should em-

³ Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 5–6.

brace Torah as “greater Israel” has defined it. Here is another excerpt from the “Grafted In” seminar:

So, the Torah was not given to individuals. It was given to a nation. And we need to embrace the Torah within the context of that nation. And leadership and communities need to connect themselves to the broader people so that it is all unified under the banner of Israel.

My response is twofold: First, “greater Israel,” expressed in Orthodox Judaism, even in its current multifaceted expressions, is in many ways as far removed from Apostolic Judaism as is the current Christian Church. To accept Orthodox Judaism as the “greater Israel” within which Messianic Judaism should define itself leads us, it seems to me, in a direction away from Scripture, not towards it.

Second, the idea that if we align ourselves with Orthodox Judaism in our Torah observance we will become unified with “greater Israel” is illusory. So long as we confess Yeshua to be the true Messiah; so long as we confess that Yeshua is worthy of our worship; and to the extent that we affirm Him to be Immanuel, “God with us,” “greater Israel” will not accept us and we should not attempt to couch our message in smooth words so they will.

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Yeshua also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. (Heb 13:11–13)

The “offense of the cross” is not, as some are teaching, merely or primarily the inclusion of the Gentiles into the family of God. For instance, it was not the issue of Gentile inclusion that emboldened the mob to stone Stephen (Acts 6–7). It was his bold proclamation of the risen and exalted Yeshua standing at the right hand of God that the mob could not tolerate (Acts 7:56). While surely Gentile inclusion into the people of God was a significant issue among the Jewish leaders of Paul’s day, the offense of the cross is the very person of Yeshua Who proclaimed that He was the only way to the Father (Jn 14:6) and Who now is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high as the risen and exalted Lord.

3. “*A Kabbalistic Approach to Spirituality*”

Facts are stubborn things. When I made my assessment that FFOZ was encouraging Messianics to appreciate and accept a Kabbalistic approach to spirituality, I did so based upon the statements they published in the *Study Guide and Commentary* to Paul Phillip Levertoff’s *Love and the Messianic Age*. The information given there are facts for anyone to see. Thus, when I read in the preface (p. 9) that the *Commentary* is “a plunge into the deepest waters of New Testament mysticism and apostolic theosophy,” and that its “bite-sized commentaries will also serve well as a type of daily devotional,” I took those words at face value, meaning that the *Study Guide and Commentary* was intended to offer teaching that would help the reader draw close to God in his or her daily walk of faith. In other words, what the preface promises is material to aid one’s spirituality.

What follows the Preface, however, is a description of Chasidic mysticism based upon Kabbalistic

texts, which is presented as having great affinity with the teachings of Yeshua and the Apostles. Throughout the book, the reader is left with the strong impression that the mystical or theosophical approach to spirituality developed by Chasidic Kabbalists is likewise the high-watermark for the followers of Yeshua.

In the *Study Guide and Commentary*, on pp. 37–38, the Kabbalistic belief that a person has two souls is taught as well as that God has “two sides”:

every Israelite is supposed to possess two souls: a ‘divine’ soul, which comes directly from God Himself, and a ‘natural’ or ‘animal’ soul, which comes from the ‘other side’⁴ of God.

FFOZ’s commentary goes on to explain that Jewish mysticism speaks of two distinct souls, a “divine soul” and an “animal soul,” and that the “animal soul” is not evil since it comes from God. Yet though it comes from God, it comes from “‘the other side of God’, His ‘back’ so to speak.”⁵ Jews have both the “animal soul” and the “divine soul,” while the people of the nations possess only the “animal soul and not a divine soul.”

Commendably, the commentary makes clear that such teaching is “at odds...with the teaching of the apostles....” Inexplicably, however, even after it is clearly stated that this teaching of two souls is contrary to the teaching of the Apostles, it is later referenced in the *Study Guide and Commentary* to explain the polarization of man’s heart (p. 113) as well as conscious and unconscious soul-levels in prayer (p. 117).

Still, with the clear notice that the “divine soul” vs. “animal soul” teaching of the Kabbalists is contrary to the Scriptures, the reader is set at ease because it appears that the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* are being careful to distinguish between Chasidic, Kabbalistic teaching and that of the Apostles when the two are at odds with each other.

Yet I am amazed to find that often throughout the remainder of the *Study Guide and Commentary*, statements that are in direct contradiction to the Scriptures are left without comment as to their veracity. This leaves the reader wondering whether the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* agree with the Chasidic, Kabbalistic approach to knowing God and whether they commend it as a path of spirituality for Messianics as well. One receives the strong impression that they do agree to one extent or another, because they often utilize the Kabbalistic teachings as an explanation for interpreting texts from the Apostolic Scriptures. In what follows I offer but a few examples (the quotes immediately following each bold heading are directly from the *Study Guide and Commentary* with page numbers indicated).

⁴ סיטרא אחרא, *sitra achra*, is literally “the other side.” The Glossary entry in the *Tanya* [Kehot] gives this definition: “‘the other side,’ i.e., not the side of holiness; it is another term for ‘evil’ in that it negates the G-dhead. Anything that tends to separate from G-d belongs in the *sitra achra*, the root of evil. See also *Kelipah*” (p. 851).

⁵ The Kabbalists were chagrined to state outright that there was an “evil side” to God, but their belief that “all is in God” required them to hold that if evil is extant in the world, it must likewise be “in God.” They use the phrase “other side” (see note 2 above) as a euphemism for the otherwise unacceptable statement that evil exists in God.

1) Evil will be absorbed in God

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 45) In Jewish mysticism, the Messiah is said to reside at the level of *Adam Kadmon* [the ideal man laid up in heaven]. Because of this lofty dwelling at which no other resides, He is called “very high” ... Levertoff says that during the Messianic Era “everything in Nature—even evil itself—will be absorbed in God.” This will be the time when “all things are subjected to Him,” [1Cor 15:28] and “the last enemy that will be abolished is death” [1Cor 15:26].

So the commentary suggests that the “all things” of 1Cor 15:28 and the “death” of 1Cor 15:26 can be understood as agreeing with Kabbalistic view that “all is in God,”⁶ meaning that “even evil itself will be absorbed in God.” Compare this with the following Scriptures:

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. (1John 1:5)

Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory. (Is 6:3)

But the LORD of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness. (Is 5:16)

2) God needs man

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 50) In a certain sense, God does need man. However, a king is not a king unless he has subjects over whom he rules.

Compare this with Acts 17:24–25,

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things;

and 1Tim 1:17,

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

So according to the Scriptures, God is eternally the King, even before He created “subjects” over whom He would rule, and He is in need of nothing.

3) “Divine sparks” in all matter

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 49) By collecting and elevating the so-called “divine sparks” that are hidden throughout creation, man has “the privilege and joy of becoming [HaShem’s] fellow-worker in this world, in natural as well as in spiritual life.”

Jewish mysticism teaches that when man sinned and fell in the early days of Creation, he shattered the world. This shattering, according to Chasidic philosophy, sent *nitzotzot* (“sparks [of godliness],” נִיצוֹצוֹת) in-

⁶ See Louis Jacobs, “God” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, Op. cit., p. 294.

to the world. This is an esoteric way of speaking of the godly source and potential inherent in all things: the world, man, and nature—even the fallen world.

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 122) Like all things in the material world, food contains within it sparks of godly potential... When we use food to provide us with the necessary vitality to better serve God, we are using it for its intended purpose. We are then releasing its godly potential... In these ways, the apostles and the Chasidim elevated the otherwise animal-act of eating food to a spiritual level. Likewise, we can “spiritualize the material and gather the ‘soul sparks’ which are contained in the food, and help them to ascend with our prayers to heaven.” By serving God in this way, “we co-operate with God in this process of spiritualization” of the material world.

This idea, that some aspect of the divine (“divine sparks”) resides in all material things, leans toward pantheism, i.e., the worldview that considers all material aspects of the universe to be part of or somehow consumed within the divine essence.⁷ In Chasidic philosophy, and particularly in Chasidism as expressed by the Chabad thinkers, this pantheism is described as “all is in God,” which is different from Spinoza’s pantheism expressed in “all is God.”⁸ Yet the notion that nothing exists in reality except the *Ein Sof* (the Kabbalistic idea of the “boundless one”), means that either what man experiences in the material world is an illusion, or else the material world is in some way an extension or emanation of the *Ein Sof*. This problem (which includes the problem of evil) was at the heart of the different Kabbalistic systems that developed in the middle ages and onward, namely, do the *sefirot* (emanations) have a real (not illusory) connection with the *Ein Sof*?

Ultimately, the crux of the problem with which the Kabbalists wrestled is what I would call their “incarnational dilemma.” That is, how can an otherwise “wholly other” God⁹ make contact with the created world? For those of us who are believers in Yeshua, the answer is clear even if unexplainable: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Therefore the whole idea of “divine sparks” indwelling all material things, along with the notion of “emanations,” is a failed attempt at answering a problem that can only be solved by acknowledging the mystery of God’s real presence within the fallen world, culminating ultimately in the incarnation, that Yeshua is Immanuel, “God with us.”¹⁰

When we eat our food, then, we give thanks to God because He has provided us with the food, and we seek to utilize the sustenance we receive from it for His glory, not because we are attempting to release the “divine sparks” within it but because the Scriptures instruct us: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1Cor. 10:31).

The Scriptures teach us that God created all things, but that in so doing, He remains the Creator distinct from His creation. He maintains the creation by the word of His power, but He exists without being dependent upon the universe He created:

⁷ See Gershom Scholem, “Kabbalah” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 10.601–606.

⁸ See Louis Jacobs, “God” in Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (Free Press, 1988), p. 294.

⁹ To use Karl Barth’s theological terminology of the transcendence of God.

¹⁰ The pre-incarnate appearances of Yeshua, as, for instance, on Mt. Sinai (Ex 24:9–10) or in the appearance of the Angel of the Lord, were the foreshadowing of the final appearance of Yeshua in His incarnation, taking upon Himself human nature forever.

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; (Acts 17:24–25)

For in Him we live and move and exist... (Acts 17:28)

For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1:25)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in [or by] Him all things hold together. (Col 1:15)

4) **Man can draw down God's grace**

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 51) If it is possible for human beings to grieve God so that He withdraws from man, it must also be possible to find favor in His eyes and draw down his lavish grace.

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 108) In Chasidic thought, the performance of *tzedakah* (צדקה), “charity,” or more literally “righteousness,” is a vehicle through which we draw down the grace of God and cause Him to concentrate His mind upon us:... The idea that God concentrates His mind on us through our righteous deeds is seen in the teaching of our Master when He says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men” [Matt 6:1].

To this Pelagian view of man, that he is able to “draw down” God’s grace, compare the following Scriptures:

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:44)

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. (Rom 7:18)

Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Messiah Yeshua from all eternity (2Tim 1:9)

So according to the Scriptures, those who receive God’s grace do not draw it down from Him, but have actually received it before the universe and mankind were ever created.

In regard to the Pelagian view of man presented in the *Study Guide and Commentary*, it is equally troubling that throughout the work, one receives the strong impression that the authors consider the spirituality of the Kabbalists to involve a genuine relationship with God in spite of their obvious rejection of Yeshua as the true Messiah. Yeshua taught:

The one who listens to you [the Twelve disciples] listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me;

and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me. (Luke 10:16)

5) God reveals Himself to the Messiah

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 50) Levertoff's words may also be understood to refer to the Messiah, the "being" to whom God reveals Himself. The Messiah is the ultimate example of one who accepts God's rule "voluntarily." By learning obedience, the Messiah was made perfect. Yeshua is the one to whom God reveals all things concerning the attributes and nature of the Divinity. God reveals Himself to the Messiah and in turn the Messiah reveals the Father to us as stated, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

It is certainly true that in the mystery of the incarnation, Yeshua took upon Himself the limitations of human nature. As a young boy He grew in His understanding of the Scriptures and in wisdom (Lk 2:40) and as a man, through suffering was taught obedience (Heb 5:8–9). But the mystery of Yeshua as Immanuel (God with us) is that He knew the Father, not because the Father revealed Himself to Him, but because He is Himself divine, one with the Father from all eternity. Even the brightest, most intelligent person, who was more diligent than anyone else in studying the Scriptures, could never say "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father."

Consider these Scriptures:

All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*. (Matt 11:27)

Here, the knowledge of the Son by the Father, and the knowledge of the Father by the Son, are equal. One is not primary and the other revealed or secondary. Consider as well the bold statements made by John in the Prologue to his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)
No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:18)

In this Prologue, John makes it clear that, though unexplainable, the Word, Who is Yeshua, is God. The reading of v. 18 presented above has the greater support of the document evidence (as opposed to the reading "the only begotten Son"), and should be understood to mean "the only begotten (One) Who is God," which forms a fitting and parallel *inclusio* to the opening statement in v. 1. The "the only begotten One" is said to be "in the bosom of the Father," which is anthropomorphic language to describe the inexplainable unity of the Father and the Messiah.

This corresponds to Paul's words in Phil 2:5–6,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped ...

The word translated "existed" is actually a present participle in the Greek, and is contrasted with the

aorist participles and verbs which follow.¹¹ Note the NIV translation: “Who, being in very nature God...” The point Paul is making (emphasized by the present tense participle) is that the nature of Yeshua was always the nature of God, that which He always possessed from eternity. There was never a time in eternity past when Yeshua existed otherwise because He had no beginning. MacLeod expresses this well:

He possessed all the majesty of deity, performed all its functions and enjoyed all its prerogatives. He was adored by his Father and worshipped by the angels. He was invulnerable to pain, frustration and embarrassment. He existed in unclouded serenity. His supremacy was total, his satisfaction complete, his blessedness perfect. Such a condition was not something he had secured by effort. It was the way things were, and had always been; and there was no reason why they should change. (Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* [IVP, 1998, p. 213.]

Yeshua therefore knew the Father, not because the Father needed to reveal Himself to His Messiah, but because the Father and the Messiah are one from all eternity. Ultimately His intimate knowledge of the Father is not revelatory but innate — a matter of His very being.

6) The Shechinah, who is Messiah, is in exile

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 31) That the Shechinah sojourns with Israel in exile can be demonstrated from the Torah; as it says, “I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again” [Gen 46:4]. This may also be learned from the apostles: “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” [1Cor 3:16. Cf. Eph 2:21–22]

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 41) The Messiah’s body became a dwelling for the Shechinah, for “all the fullness to dwell in Him,” a fullness of the Deity dwelling in bodily form. As Levertoff states in his commentary on Matthew 28:20, “Christ is the Shekinah, i.e., the visible Presence of God. His Presence is the Presence of God....

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 41) With the Messiah as our example of godly living and by virtue of His Spirit dwelling within us, we become “tongues as of fire” which collectively make up the dwelling of the Shechinah in exile, the Temple of the living God.

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 81) (quote from Levertoff) “We are obliged to strengthen the weak in order that the whole body may benefit, ‘so we must strengthen the Shechinah, which is sick from love’ and which ‘for our sakes has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.’” (50-51).

(*Commentary*) The Shechinah is “sick with love” because God longs for the final redemption and the end of the exile when His people and His Divine Presence will be reunited.... We can strengthen the Shechinah, so to speak, by laboring to hasten the day of redemption, as it says in the epistle of 2Peter, “What sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God.”

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 83) We must cleanse the garment with which the Shechinah is enwrap-

¹¹ For a more in depth study on Phil 2:5–11, and the whole doctrine of the Messiah as the Divine Son of God, see my *The Messiah: An Introduction to Christology* (TorahResource, 2006), available at: www.torahresource.com.

ped—the Torah. According to the *Tanya*, the dwelling of the Shechinah inside the human soul is strengthened by virtue of good deeds, that is, obedience to the Torah. If we stain our soul—committing lawlessness—then the garment of the Shechinah becomes stained. She is no longer fit to rise before the King, and as a result Her exile is prolonged. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” When we fail to live godly lives, the *Shechinah* cannot “ascend from the depths into the heights.”

This is all quite confusing. If the Messiah is the Shechinah (as stated), then in what sense is the Shechinah in exile? Rather, according to the Scriptures, the Messiah has ascended on high and is seated at the right hand of God where He intercedes for us. While it is certainly true that Yeshua is with us as He promised, He is so by the Holy Spirit Who indwells us and with Whom Yeshua is One. But this does not mean the Shechinah is in exile.

Moreover, the idea that the Shechinah is weak and looks to us to be strengthened is a gross misunderstanding of what the Scriptures themselves reveal to us about God and His Messiah. Yeshua Himself, at His trial before the Sanhedrin, responded to the High Priest this way:

But Yeshua kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Yeshua said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.” (Matt 26:63–64)

Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians makes it clear that he did not see Yeshua as the exiled Shechinah in need of our help:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Messiah, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the assembly, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:18–23)

Likewise, according to Paul in Phil 2:5–11, Yeshua, the risen and exalted Messiah, has ascended into heaven having conquered death, and is now revealed to be the high exalted One to Whom every knee will bow, the One Who is Himself LORD. Paul uses similar language in his epistle to the Colossians, in which he warns them about empty deception that would diminish the complete sufficiency of Yeshua as the One Who subordinates all rule and authority:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority... (Col 2:8–10)

Peter also describes the risen Messiah as reigning from His heavenly throne:

who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. (1Pet 3:22)

Indeed, did not the risen Yeshua Himself declare to His disciples that “All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18)? Let us then be warned about any teaching that would suggest that the Father, His Messiah, or His Holy Spirit is exiled and in need of our strengthening, for such teaching is at variance with the direct and clear message of the Scriptures.¹²

7) Repentance is the work of man

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 120) Therefore, man’s circumcision of his heart (i.e., repentance) is something he does on his own initiative in this present age. The circumcision of the heart that comes from HaShem is an act of God in the Messianic Age.

Compare this with the following verses, which teach that repentance is a gift from God:

He [Yeshua] is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (Acts 5:31)

When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:18)

...with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth... (2Tim. 2:25)

In fact, on p. 130 of the *Study Guide and Commentary*, it is stated that “Repentance is a gift from God,” which is in direct contradiction to the statement on p. 120 that repentance is “something he does on his own initiative in this present age.” If the intention of the authors of the *Commentary* was that repentance is both a gift from God and accomplished by the initiative of the person himself, such is not stated, and the careful reader is left hopelessly seeking an explanation.

8) God’s attribute of mercy overrides His attribute of justice

(*Study Guide and Commentary*, p. 77) He [God] is patient in that He does not execute judgment but rather allows His attribute of mercy to override His attribute of justice.

This rabbinic view, that divine forgiveness is the result of God’s mercy overriding His justice, is also found in the standard Siddur (*Daily Shacharit*, following the *Akeidah*)

¹² Footnote 96 on p. 44 of the *Study Guide and Commentary* is also troubling. The idea that Yeshua, as described in Col 1:15–19, could be compared to the *Adam Kadmon* who comprises both the Creator and the creation in the same way that the Kabbalists speak of the *sefirot* or emanations, treads ever so close to (or actually constitutes) a modalistic Christology.

Just as Abraham our forefather suppressed his mercy for his own son and wished to slaughter him in order to do Your will, so may Your mercy suppress Your anger from upon us and may Your mercy overwhelm Your attributes. May You overstep with us the line of Your law and deal with us — *O Hashem*, our God — with the attribute of kindness and the attribute of mercy.¹³

Such a plea arises from the fact that rabbinic Judaism does not ultimately consider the death of the Messiah as necessary for the atonement of sin. Instead, rabbinic Judaism pleads to God that His mercy should nullify His justice. As followers of Yeshua, however, we do not seek to have God act outside of His justice in order to lavish His mercy and grace upon us. That would make God to be less than just, which is an impossibility. Rather, we fully accept the fact that God’s justice in exacting punishment for our sins was entirely satisfied in the sacrifice of His Son, Yeshua. Since He died on our behalf, the justice of God is satisfied, since the penalty for sin has been paid. Thus, God remains entirely just when He declares the sinner justified, as the Scriptures plainly state:

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him... As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see light and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. (Is 53:5-6, 11)

...being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Messiah Yeshua; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Yeshua. (Rom 3:24–26)

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (Col 2:13–14)

Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE” (Gal 3:13)

9) premeditated sins become merits (p. 128)

The sinner repents to such an extent that his premeditated sins become transmuted into veritable merits, which is achieved through “repentance out of love,” coming from the depths of the heart, with great love and fervour, and from a soul passionately desiring to cleave to the blessed G-d [and thirsting for G-d] like a parched desert soil. (*Tanya* 7[Kehot])

This concept is well elucidated by the story of the sinful woman who wept over our Master’s feet [Lk 7:36–39]¹⁴ and our Master’s parable of the two debtors [Lk 7:41–42].

¹³ *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, p. 24–25.

¹⁴ Lk 7:47 is often misunderstood as teaching that the woman’s sins were forgiven on the basis that she loved Yeshua: “For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” But the Greek ὀτι (*hoti*) in the phrase “for she loved much” should be understood to mean “and the proof she

Here, once again, we see the dilemma of the Kabbalists since they deny the substitutionary death of the Messiah as payment for the sins of His people. For them, repentance itself is that which garners God's forgiveness, since it accrues merit before God. Likewise, full or deep repentance has such merit that it is able to transmute sins so that they too receive merit.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Paul, having taught forgiveness of sins on the basis of Yeshua's sacrifice apart from one's own works, recognizes that his detractors might argue, "What shall we say, then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase?" He answers with the emphatic "May it never be!" (Rom 6:1–2). For Paul, there is no merit in repentance, nor can repentance transmute sins into something meritorious. If there is any merit a sinner may claim before the throne of God, it is only the merit of Yeshua Who died, arose, ascended, and intercedes on behalf of the sinner. It is His righteousness, not ours, that gains merit before the Father:

But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

... and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Torah, but that which is through faith in Messiah, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith ... (Phil 3:9)

These are only a few examples of how the *Study Guide and Commentary* offer Chasidic, Kabbalistic teaching as something valuable for those who would seek to appropriate "apostolic theosophy" as a doorway to a more mature spiritual awareness of God and His Messiah. Yet even these few examples highlight the fact that such a Kabbalistic "spirituality" is based upon a deceptive philosophy and worldview that contradicts the plain meaning of the Scriptures.

4. "A Mystical Hermeneutic"

In FFOZ's recent statement they wrote:

We have always taught the Peshat, Remez, D'rash, Sod concept, a completely Jewish hermeneutic which implies that beyond the literal meaning of a text, additional insights may be discovered. In this approach, however, we have never diminished the importance and priority of a literal, historical, grammatical, contextual reading of the Bible.

For FFOZ to admit that they utilize the *Pardes* hermeneutic substantiates my claim that they currently are employing a mystical hermeneutic, for the *Pardes* schema is the basic mystical hermeneutic of the Kabbalists.

But for FFOZ to affirm that they use the *Pardes* method of interpretation and then to follow that statement with "we have never diminished the importance and priority of a literal, historical, grammati-

has been forgiven is that she loved much." This fits with the final clause, "he who is forgiven little, loves little," that is, love for Yeshua is the proof of being forgiven much. See Nigel Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (T & T Clark, 1965), pp. 37–40.

cal contextual reading of the Bible,” appears to engage in double-speak. This is because the historical, grammatical hermeneutic is diametrically opposed to all but the *peshat* of the *Pardes* method. If, in fact, the historical, grammatical method of interpreting the Bible takes priority in FFOZ’s exposition of the Scriptures, this would negate the use of three out of the four levels of interpretation which make up the *Pardes* method.

Terry gives this succinct definition of the Grammatico-Historical hermeneutic:

Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. It applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same grammatical process and exercise of common sense and reason, which we apply to other books.¹⁵

In utter contrast to the historical, grammatical method of interpreting the Scriptures, the *remez* (meaning “hint”) of the *Pardes* method looks for “veiled allusions such as *gematria* [numerical value of words and/or phrases] and *notarikon* [finding abbreviations in first letters or last letters of words]” in order to allegorize the *peshat* (the literal sense of the words).¹⁶ The *derash* level of *Pardes* utilizes the *remez* to construct new applications of the text (often in sermonic fashion) which go beyond the obvious meaning of the *peshat*. The Midrashim give plenty of evidence that at this level, the rabbis felt quite free to make the text say something far beyond or even something different than what the original author intended.¹⁷ And the final level, which for the mystics was the goal in interpreting any text, was the *sod* or “mystery,” which could only be found through supposed esoteric, mystical methods, which very often have no connection whatsoever with the historical, grammatical meaning of the text.

Thus, for FFOZ to state that they look for insights “beyond the literal meaning of the text” seems clearly to indicate that the historical, grammatical hermeneutic often times may not take a priority in their studies. Or to put it simply, the two methods of interpretation cannot coexist if priority is given to the historical, grammatical hermeneutic.

What is more, to describe the *Pardes* hermeneutic as a “completely Jewish hermeneutic” is too broad of a statement because it suggests that this hermeneutic has been widely embraced by Judaism in general, both ancient and modern. In reality, this four-level hermeneutic was the particular invention of the medieval Kabbalists, with the acronym *Pardes* being attributed to Moses de Leon (d. 1305) who was (most likely) the author of the *Zohar*.¹⁸ So this hermeneutic represents the late, Kabbalistic wing of Judaism and is, by no means, an ancient method of Jewish interpretation.¹⁹

In the *Study Guide and Commentary*, the mystical hermeneutic employed by the authors of Kabbalis-

¹⁵ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Phillips & Hunt, 1883), p. 173.

¹⁶ See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 13.91.

¹⁷ Note, for instance, the quote from *Numbers Rabbah* 15:4 on p. 87 of the *Study Guide and Commentary*, in which it is stated that “the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: ‘If you, O Israel, will keep the lighting of the lamps before Me, I will keep your souls from all evil things.’” But this is a contrivance finding no basis in the biblical text itself—God made no such statement to Moses. Thus, even though the *Pardes* scheme of interpretation was introduced only in later mystical texts, the *derash* aspect was modeled after the *midrashim* of the earlier rabbis.

¹⁸ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1974), p. 159.

¹⁹ For instance, the *Pardes* hermeneutic is not even mentioned in the comprehensive work of Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Clarendon Press, 1985).

tic texts and the resultant interpretation of Scriptural texts is accepted as the basis for admonitions to the readers. The following are a few examples:

1. Isaiah 43:25 / Deuteronomy 32:39 (p. 25)

Similarly it is written, “See now that I, I am he” (Deuteronomy 32:39), to show that there is no division between the upper and the lower. See now, in this way, when there are righteous men in the world, blessings are sent to all worlds.” (*Zohar* I, 87b)

Though this is given as a quote from the Soncino *Zohar*, the reader is not made aware of the fact that this is an edited quote. The actual paragraph from the Soncino *Zohar* reads as follows:

Said R. Eleazar to R. Yesa, ‘I see that you have come in company with the Shekinah.’ He said, “Assuredly it is so. I have been walking with him three parasangs, and he has told me ever so many excellent things. I hired him as a porter, not knowing that he was the shining light which I have discovered him to be.’ R. Eleazar then said to the man, ‘What is your name?’ He said: ‘Joezer’. Whereupon he said: ‘Let Joezer and Eleazar sit together.’ So they sat down on a rock in that field. The Judean then commenced to discourse on the text *I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions, for mine own sake, and thy sins I will not remember* (Is. XLIII, 25). He said: ‘The word “I” occurs here twice: once in reference to Sinai (cf. “I am the Lord thy God”, Ex. XX, 2), and the other in reference to the creation of the world (cf. “I have made the earth and created man upon it”, Is. XLV, 12), to show that there is no division between the upper and lower worlds. (*Zohar* I, 87a-b [Soncino])

In the *Study Guide and Commentary*, the authors indicate that the *Zohar* is dealing with Deut 32:39, when in fact Is 43:25 is the text being discussed. Regardless, both the Deuteronomy as well as the Isaiah texts have the first person pronoun “I” twice (אני, *’ani* in Deut 32:39; אנכי, *’anochi* in Is 43:25). The *Zohar* interprets the double use of the pronoun in Is 43:25 by way of *remez*, i.e., that each of the pronouns must have a distinct meaning. Thus, the first “I” refers to God at Sinai, and the other to God at creation, teaching that the upper and lower worlds are therefore united in God.²⁰ The historical, grammatical approach would understand the double pronouns as indicating an emphasis, which is a recognized grammatical phenomenon in biblical Hebrew.²¹ It would mean, “I, even I will blot out your transgressions...” In the *Study Guide and Commentary*, however, the authors give every impression that they accept the mystical interpretation of the *Zohar* on Is 43:25, using it as a basis for the phrase “we will see Him just as He is” in 1Jn 3:2, that is, the supernal upper world will be fully known by the lower world in the Messianic Age.

2. Isaiah 22:4; Jeremiah 31:15 (p. 31)

The Shekinah replied with tears: “...Look away from me, I will weep bitterly” (Isaiah 22:4), as much as to

²⁰ That the *Zohar* is referring to Isaiah 43:25 and not Deut 32:39 is also evident by the fact that the *remez* interpretation is dependent upon *gezerah sheva* attaching to אנכי (found both in Ex 20:2 and Is 45:12) whereas in Deut 32:39, the pronoun is the more common אני.

²¹ See Bruce K. Waltke; M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisnebrauns, 1990), §16.3.3, #7; J. Wash Watts, *A Survey of Syntax in the Hebrew Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 27.

say, “Seeing that my children have gone into exile and the Sanctuary is burnt, what is there left from me that I should linger here?” And the answer of the Holy One, blessed be He ... was “Refrain thy voice from weeping [and your eyes from tears; for your work will be rewarded ... and they will return from the land of the enemy] (Jeremiah 31:16). (*Zohar* I, 203a [Soncino])

This quote from the *Zohar* is taken from comments on Gen 43:30, which describe Joseph’s emotion upon seeing his brothers, and his leaving the room to go to his chamber to weep. This is understood by R. Hizkiah to demonstrate how the text of Is 22:1 is to be interpreted. There, the phrase “valley of vision” is taken to be an “appellation of the Temple when the Shechinah dwelt in it” since R. Hizkiah taught that all prophecy, regardless of the era in which it was proclaimed, derived from the Shechinah Who resided at the Temple. Taking this viewpoint, the language of Is 22:4 is then applied to the Shechinah (“Look away from me, I will weep bitterly”).

If such twisting of the Scriptures is allowed, then the text can be made to say whatever one wishes it to say! For clearly, in the context of Is 21–22, the statement “Look away from me, I will weep bitterly” refers to the prophet Isaiah himself. The prophet is telling the people of Israel that he is foretelling their destruction, and that in seeing the wrath of God as surely coming upon His people, he cannot be comforted in the midst of his own bitter weeping.

The same mystical hermeneutic is also applied to Jer 31:15.

Hence it is written, “A voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children because they are not”; or, as we should rather translate, “He is not” (*enennu*), referring to the Holy King who had gone aloft and was not in her midst. R. Hiya asked: “From what place did She begin to go into exile?” He replied: “From the Sanctuary, where His abode was.” (*Zohar* III, 20b [Soncino]).

In total disregard for the historical, grammatical hermeneutic, the negative particle with suffix (אֵינְנֻ, *’einennu*) is interpreted against the context as “He is no more” rather than the obvious “they are no more.” In other words, the pre-determined doctrine that the Shechinah has gone into exile with the people of Israel is forced upon the text of Jer 31:15, giving it a “meaning” the text itself could never sustain.

Levertoff himself suggests that such an “allegorical interpretation is at the back of Matthew 2:17–18” (where Matthew quotes Jer 31:15).²² The authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* appear to accept this interpretation of Jer 31:15 as well, because they parallel it with 1Cor 3:16, suggesting that since believers in Yeshua are a “temple of God” in exile, the Presence of God (i.e., His Spirit) is also in exile. But the Temple motif in Scripture speaks to just the opposite reality. Historically, Israel’s exile coincided with the destruction of the Temple so that the Shechinah no longer manifested His presence there. For the Apostles, when they speak of the believers in Yeshua as “a temple of God” in which the Spirit resides, the metaphor is one of restoration, not exile.

3. Gen 35:13; 17:22; 28:13 (p. 37)

Rabbi Shimon bar Lakish said, “The forefathers [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] are [God’s] chariot, for it says [in Genesis 35:13], “Then God went up from [Jacob].” ... and it says [in Genesis 17:22], “God went up

²² Paul Philip Levertoff, *Love and the Messianic Age* (FFOZ, 2009), p. 34, n.25.

from Abraham,” and [in Genesis 28:13] it says, “Behold, the LORD stood [upon him].” (*Genesis Rabbah* 82:6)

The mystical hermeneutic is employed in the above texts to prove that the forefathers were “chariots” in whom the Shechinah was transported, based upon the preposition על (‘al). Surely this is fanciful interpretation, and one would imagine that the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* agree that it is. Grammatically, it is clear that the verb עלה, ‘alah, “to go up,” is often followed by the preposition על, ‘al, “upon, to, from, etc.” (often also with the preposition מן, min “from”). Against the normal, grammatical understanding of the Hebrew, the mystics choose the meaning “upon” in order to infuse their esoteric thoughts into these texts. Likewise, in Gen 28:13, the context is clear that the preposition ‘al with third person masculine suffix (עָלָיו, ‘alaiv) refers to the “ladder” in Jacob’s dream, not Jacob himself! God stood “above it” (i.e., the ladder), not “upon Jacob.”

Yet based upon such manipulation of the Scriptural text, the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* quote the *Tanya* to the effect that all the organs of the patriarchs “were completely holy and detached from mundane matters,” and base their concluding admonition upon such notions: “Every person should endeavor to become a ‘chariot’ steered only by the will of HaShem.” Is it really necessary to resort to such disregard for the plain meaning of the text in order to encourage believers to be wholly given over to God in the totality of their lives?

One might argue that the authors are simply showing similar thought patterns between the Kabbalists and the message of the Apostles, but this is not how it is presented. Rather, the conclusions of the Kabbalists, based upon obvious manipulations of the biblical text, are granted as valid in some sense and therefore as offering a spiritual perspective on the Apostolic Scriptures that would otherwise be missed.

4. Jer 31:34 / Ezek 36:26 (p. 42, 79)

In the Messianic Era, HaShem will remove the heart of stone from humanity and give them a heart of flesh [Ezekiel 36:26]... In the Messianic Age, though, every man will know God [Jeremiah 31:34].

To “fear HaShem” directly is to fear God as the transcendent, omnipresent God, revealed in the Torah. This fear is based on knowledge of God. The man who fears God on this level does so because he realizes that HaShem is the source and the end of all things, and there is ultimately nothing besides Him. Levertoff says that in the days of Messiah, everyone will experience this type of fear, as it says, “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” [Jer 31:34].

A general tendency within Kabbalistic literature is to universalize “Israel” as encompassing all mankind,²³ for from the *Zohar*’s perspective, “man” comprises both the upper and lower entities.²⁴ Perhaps this explains why the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* interpret Jer 31:34 and Ezek 36:26 to be speaking of “humanity” and “every man” when the contexts of both the prophecies apply

²³ Arthur Green, “Hasidism” in Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (Free Press, 1988), p. 320.

²⁴ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (Yale, 1988), p. 119. This idea of “man” encompassing upper and lower entities is the basis for the scheme of the *sefirot* modeled upon the image of a man’s body.

specifically to Israel, not “humanity” in general. Moreover, the meaning given to these two prophecies by the Kabbalists highlights their belief in a universal salvation of mankind in the messianic age.

One is at a loss to understand how the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* could relate these prophecies universally to “humanity” when they obviously apply specifically to Israel, unless they were in agreement with the universalism of the Kabbalists. For it is clear in the message of the prophets, that the nations do not accept the sovereign rule of Israel’s God (i.e., they do not receive a “heart of flesh” in place of the “heart of stone”) but eventually are destroyed by God’s wrath (Jer 30:11; 46:28; 51:20; Zech 12:9; cp. Rev 6:16).

Moreover, a historical-grammatical interpretation of Jer 31:34 takes the whole context into consideration. The quotes of Jer 31:34 made in the *Study Guide and Commentary* conveniently leave off the rest of the verse! For after the prophet states “for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” he gives the basis for this wonderful promise: “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” Surely this cannot be applied to all mankind, for the Scriptures are clear that not all are eternally saved.²⁵

5. John 7:37–38 (p. 48)

(footnote #122) By putting John 7:37–38 back into Aramaic, it may be possible to see this concept [the mystical notion of the upper and lower waters being reunited] on the lips of Messiah.... In most English translations we read: “Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’” When this is put back into Aramaic we have the Scripture the Master is quoting as: “Out of his throne shall flow rivers of living water.” In other words, the upper waters will flow down and be reunited with the lower waters, thus creation will be restored and redeemed.... The joining of the waters, which begins with a flow from Heaven, metaphorically represents a return to the perfect state of unity before Creation.

Here is a good example of later rabbinic theosophy anachronistically forced back upon the text of the Gospels. It is a Kabbalistic notion that at the time of Creation, when God separated the waters above and the waters below, a tension was created within the world so that since that time, the upper and lower waters long to be reunited. But this mystical concept of reuniting upper and lower waters (itself an attempt to unite the upper and lower *sefirot* of the Kabbalists worldview) cannot be found in the Bible or even in the earliest strata of rabbinic literature.²⁶ Indeed, in the Mishnah (m.*Chaggigah* 2.1, cp. b.*Chaggigah* 11b) we read:

One does not expound on forbidden relationships with three, and not on the Act of Creation with two, and not on the Chariot with a single one, unless he was a wise man and understands himself. Whoever looks at four things, it would be better for him had he not come to the world: what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after. And whoever does not have regard for the honor of his Creator, it would be better for him had he not come into the world.²⁷

²⁵ E.g., Matt 7:22–24; 18:8; 25:41; 2Pet 2:4ff; 3:7.

²⁶ Note that in the passage to be quoted from the Bavli (b.*Chaggigah* 11b), this mishnah is corroborated by a *baraita*, indicating its early establishment.

²⁷ Quote from Pinhas Kehati, *Mishnah: Seder Moed, Vol. 3* (Eliner Library, 1994), Haggigah, p. 15.

Even though this statement most likely represents the majority opinion of the early Mishnaic period, it is clear that eventually

both in rabbinic and ancient Jewish mystical literature, speculations concerning pre-cosmogonical matters began to emerge.²⁸

So even though such speculations began to emerge, perhaps even in the later Mishnaic period, speculation about the pre-creation unity of “waters above” and “waters below” is not found except in the much later mystical literature. It is therefore entirely anachronistic to suggest that John had such a cosmogony in mind when he recorded Yeshua’s words in his Gospel. Rather, it seems quite clear that Yeshua used the water drawing ceremony carried out on each of the seven days of Sukkot²⁹ as the backdrop for His saying about living water flowing from the innermost being of those who drink the water He gives.

How could the authors of the *Study Guide and Commentary* have come to the conclusion that the saying of Yeshua utilized the much later Kabbalistic belief in the eventual uniting of the “upper and lower waters”? The only way such an interpretation could be given to John 7:37–38 is if a mystical hermeneutic is being employed.

Something is Terribly Backwards

After reading and re-reading the *Study Guide and Commentary*, I have to admit that I feel a certain growing angst. Here’s why: after reading Appendix 1 (“The Exalted Rebbe” by Toby Janicki, subtitled “An Introduction to the Concept of *Devekut* and *Tzaddikism* in Chasidic Thought”), I was astounded to understand that the whole purpose of the essay was to show Messianics that our attachment to Yeshua is very much like how the Chasidim view their attachment to their Rebbe. Indeed, the upshot of the essay is that we could deepen our relationship to Yeshua if we considered Him to be our Rebbe in the same way that the Chasids revere and follow their own Rebbes.

Janicki shows that from the Chasid perspective, a true Tzaddik (his Rebbe) is a sinless person, a miracle-worker, an intermediary between man and God, and one who suffers for the sins of his generation. Likewise, the Rebbe is a prophet and visionary who can give answers directly from heaven, being a shepherd of his followers, and acting in the capacity of a priest who intercedes for his disciples, since his prayers do not go unanswered. Thus, the Torah commandment to “cling to HaShem” is, from the Chasid’s perspective, fulfilled by clinging to his Rebbe, since one cannot cling directly to God Who is “a consuming fire” [Deut 4:24]. But since the sinless Rebbe is able to cling directly to God, the Chasid fulfills the commandment by clinging to him. Janicki goes on to show that in Chasidic thought such an attachment to one’s Rebbe actually transcends the death of his master, since the presence of one’s Rebbe is even stronger in his death than before it.

Janicki then makes the obvious connection to Yeshua as our Master, showing from the Apostolic

²⁸ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 113.

²⁹ Cf. m.*Sukkot* 5.1. Note that John 7 opens with the notice that it was the Feast of Sukkot.

Scriptures how our attachment to Yeshua is very much like the attachment of the Chasid to his Rebbe. Indeed, Yeshua fulfills all of the roles of the Chasidic Rebbe, and therefore we, like the Chasidim, should foster the same *devekut* (attachment) to Him, striving for the status of *yechudit* (oneness) with the same fervency and devotion. Undoubtedly some who read this Appendix will be amazed at how the Chasid gives us deep understanding about our own relationship to Yeshua.

But this perspective is backwards. The Chasidic Rebbe is actually not what he is said to be. He is not sinless, he is not a true miracle-worker, nor is he an intermediary between God and man. He does not suffer to provide atonement for the sins of his generation, nor is he a true prophet or visionary who has access to wisdom directly from heaven. He is not a priest who can intercede for his disciples, nor does his presence transcend his death. In point of fact, the comparison that is being made in Appendix 1 is backwards. What should have been pointed out is how the Chasidim have convinced themselves that their Rebbes have attributes and abilities which the Scriptures assign only to God's Messiah.

How backwards, then, to suggest that we who are followers of Yeshua could have our relationship to God enhanced by appreciating the *devekut* and *yechudit* of the Chasidim.³⁰ We have the reality in Yeshua while the Chasids who cling to their chosen Rebbe are trusting in a man they have immortalized only through their imaginative traditions. Their spirituality is at best a veneer because there is only one true "mediator between God and man, the man Messiah Yeshua" (1Tim 2:5).

Long before Chasidic Judaism ever existed, people of simple faith in Yeshua have clung to Him as the promised Messiah, the miracle-worker Who proved through His words and deeds that He is the promised Messiah of Israel's prophets. By His death and subsequent resurrection on the third day, He has proven Himself to be "the Son of God with power" (Rom 1:4). He is the One through Whom we have access to the Father, and Who "always lives to make intercession" for us (Heb 7:25). There is no need, therefore, for the followers of Yeshua to look to the Chasidim to discover what it means to cling to God. Rather, with humility and thanksgiving, we should glory in the grace that has been lavished upon us through the redemption we have in Yeshua. And we should recognize that we have the closest possible *devekut* (attachment) and *yechudit* (oneness) to God, not by our own striving, but by His very Spirit Who indwells us. Our eternal life is secure in Him, so that even though we do not presently see Him face-to-face, we experience in the here-and-now a foretaste of the victory He has won for us. As Paul states:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Messiah (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Messiah Yeshua ... (Eph 2:4-6)

Therefore if you have been raised up with Messiah, keep seeking the things above, where Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God. (Col 3:1)

³⁰ p. 151, "Yeshua is the ultimate tzaddik, the only truly sinless person to walk the face of the earth. The concepts of *devekut*, tzaddikism, and *yechidut* can teach us a great deal about our relationship to Yeshua." p. 153, "The Chasidic background can also be applied to the Master's parting words: 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'"

Conclusion

In his book *Love and the Messianic Age*, Paul Philip Levertoff sets out to “demonstrate the difference by comparison,” i.e., to compare Chasidic mysticism with Christianity and by doing so, to “prove that traditional Orthodox Judaism has no lack of spiritual fervor.”³¹ Moreover, he intended by these lectures to show that “the difference between Chasidic and Christian conceptions of love is not a difference of degree but of quality, a difference between expectation and realization.”³² In this work, Levertoff has shown that at least the wing of Orthodox Judaism that would consider themselves Chasidic strive for a spirituality that surely could not be described as merely “external religion” or consisting “almost wholly in ceremonies.”

Moreover, if Levertoff’s mission was that his comparison of Chasidic mysticism with the Apostolic Scriptures might function as a *praeparatio evangelica* [“preparation for the gospel”],³³ then may his work be strengthened to draw many to the Savior, Yeshua.

Yet when I finished reading *Love and the Messianic Age*, I was left with the gnawing sense that Levertoff has accredited to the Chasidim far more than an “expectation” in their striving for a genuine relationship with God. The glowing language expressing the wonder of Chasidic spirituality leaves one with the strong impression that Levertoff believed such spirituality was genuine and real, even though it is entirely apart from faith in Yeshua.

This seems to be even more the case in the republication of *Love and the Messianic Age* by FFOZ, and especially in the publication of the accompanying *Study Guide and Commentary*. Clearly, FFOZ’s purpose in publishing these works was not primarily that they should be a *praeparatio evangelica* or that they would offer a study in comparative religions, but, as is stated in the Foreword, to show that the Messianic faith in Yeshua has great affinity with the Kabbalistic worldview, and that such a worldview and approach to spirituality will enhance the Messianic movement by encouraging Messianics to enter the “deepest waters of New Testament mysticism and apostolic theosophy.” The fact that by their own admission the republication of Levertoff’s work and the accompanying *Study Guide* was the culmination of three year’s work, shows that they consider it as having great significance for their Messianic readership. Since I have expressed my own serious misgivings in regard to some of the exegesis in the *Study Guide* which has led, in my understanding, to seriously mistaken conclusions, I hope the call for a thorough, biblical evaluation of this material will be received and heeded.

³¹ *Love and the Messianic Age* (FFOZ, 2009), p. 23f.

³² *Ibid*, p. 24.

³³ This is how Elizabeth Belenson so describes her essay on “The Hidden Christ among the Jews” (*Love and the Messianic Age*, [FFOZ, 2009], p. 156.