

The Battle for the Bible

Are the Inspired Scriptures Enough?

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • March 2009

We've all had the experience of traveling to some place new and trying to find directions to a given location. With map or directions in hand, we look intently for street signs and road markers as we try to find our way. Then we come to an intersection where we must turn either right or left, and discover that our directions are not as specific as we had hoped. For a moment there is a bit of panic! People behind us are honking their horns, wishing we'd move. But which way should we go? Left or right? For a moment we feel lost, and glancing at the directions we've received, we wish they had been more specific!

As followers of Yeshua who have come to love and appreciate the Torah and are striving to live out the Torah in our daily walk of faith, we have come to just such a crossroad. There are voices encouraging us to turn this way or that but what we really need to know is this: which way will take us to our desired destination? That destination is nothing less than our ability as individuals, congregations, and communities to sanctify the Name of God upon this earth by walking in the footsteps of our Messiah, Yeshua. We do this by living out a sanctified life unto God and by exalting the risen Lord, Yeshua, in our daily activities—by demonstrating His will in our marriages and families, our relationships, our work, our entertainment, and even our relaxation.

The intersection at which we are now standing is one that will determine our way more than anything else, and it is this: is the Bible, the 66 books we have received as the inspired, infallible, inerrant word of God sufficient to be our road map in all matters of faith and practice (*halachah*), or do we need something in addition to the Scriptures in order to sanctify God's name in our world, to know His will for us—to know how we should live righteously in this present age?

In 2003 Mark Kinzer wrote a paper for the Hashivenu Forum entitled "Messianic Judaism and Jewish Tradition in the 21st Century: A Biblical Defense of 'Oral Torah'" in which he argued that the written Torah is not sufficient in and of itself, but that the Oral Torah, the compiled traditions of the Sages throughout the ages, are also necessary for discerning God's will. In Kinzer's book *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (Brazos, 2005), he reiterates and expands on what he had written in the Hashivenu Forum. At the beginning of this chapter, under the sub-heading *The Insufficiency of the Written Torah*, he makes this bold statement (p. 236):

Is the written Torah sufficient for instructing the Jewish people in how to live as individuals, families, and local communities? While it is certainly foundational and indispensable, it is not sufficient. The Torah requires a living tradition of interpretation and application if it is to be practiced in daily life.

This statement and the following pages that seek to substantiate it, are in concert with Kinzer's overall purpose in the book, which is to find a way for Messianic Judaism (as he defines it) to be accepted within "wider Israel." Obviously, a theological position that would give supremacy to the written Scriptures (including the Apostolic Scriptures) over the traditions of the Rabbis (the Oral Torah) could never be accepted by Orthodox Judaism. But as Michael Brown has shown, rejection of the Living Torah (Yeshua) is the obvious key difference between so-called Messianic Judaism and present-day Orthodox Judaism, and this presupposes the rejection of the Apostolic Scriptures, which interpret the Tanach as prophesying about Yeshua as the true and long-awaited Messiah.¹

¹ Michael Brown's paper, "Is a Postmissionary, Truly Messianic Judaism Possible?" is available at: http://realmessiah.askdrbrown.org/Read/Entries/2008/12/11_IS_A_POST-MISSIONARY_TRULY_MESSIANIC_JU-

Many of us who have read Kinzer's work in the past were not overly surprised by his radical positions, and felt the critiques of his book that appeared shortly after its publication had sufficiently shown its shortcomings. What is alarming now, however, is that his position on the insufficiency of the Scriptures is gaining acceptance among other messianic ministries. In recent dialogs I have heard messianic leaders voice the opinion that God gave to Israel the responsibility and authority to be the judge, protector, and definer of the commandments contained in the Scriptures. That means that Kinzer's view of the insufficiency of Scripture is gaining traction among an increasing number of messianic teachers, for if Israel is to be the *definer* of the commandments, it means that a person cannot know how to obey God's commandments unless he or she consults the traditions of Israel. Or to put it another way, if Israel has been given divine authority to define how the commandments are to be obeyed, it means that the Oral Torah, the traditions of the Sages (in all of their diversities) are to be received as having divine authority.

If that position is not alarming to you, it should be! For if divine authority is accorded to the Oral Torah (which is the position of rabbinic Judaism since ancient times²) as God's will for how the commandments are to be obeyed, then your Bible is not enough. You'll need to start studying the Mishnah, Talmuds, Midrashim, and ultimately the *Shulkan Aruk* in order to find out exactly how to obey God. Of course, when you do, you'll discover that there is no such thing as "*the* Oral Torah." Instead, you'll find out that there are actually as many "Oral Torahs" as there are Judaisms.

However, when Paul wrote to his disciple, Timothy, he reminded him about the sufficiency of Scripture, the very Scriptures that had led him to faith in Yeshua:

... that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Messiah Yeshua. (2Tim 3:15)

For Paul, salvation consists in far more than having one's sins forgiven. Salvation also includes sanctification, becoming conformed to the person of Yeshua—walking as He walked. And Paul states that the "sacred writings," are able to give wisdom that leads to this salvation.

He then goes on to write:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2Tim 3:16–17)

When Paul speaks of the Scriptures, he's talking about the written Torah, not the Oral. And he makes it clear that the Written Scriptures are "profitable" for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. The Greek word translated "profitable" is *ophelimos* which means "good," "beneficial," "useful."

Then note what Paul writes in regard to the use of the Scriptures: "that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." In English, the word "adequate" seems minimalist, that it is enough to get by. But that is not what the Greek word means that lies behind this translation. The word is *artios* and means "to being well fitted for some function, complete, capable, proficient, i.e., able to meet all demands."³ The NIV has a better translation: "thoroughly equipped for every good work." For Paul, the Scriptures are absolutely sufficient to train the follower of Yeshua in living out every *mitzvah* (good work).

Surely the rabbinic literature, as well as the Pseudepigraphal and Apocryphal writings, are valuable for historical data and backgrounds to early Judaisms and Christianities, and they often contain valuable

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² See the opening of Pirkei Avot.

³ *BDAG*, ad. loc.

insights into the Scriptures themselves. But they are, like other commentaries, the thoughts and writings of men and women. They are not the inspired Scriptures, and they do not carry divine authority as do the Scriptures. Marking this distinction, between what is divinely authoritative and what is not, is paramount to maintaining a biblically based, Yeshua centered, Torah observant life of faith.

So when you start hearing teachers giving credence to the rabbinic writings or even to early Christian documents (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Apostolic Constitutions) as though they are authoritative or give us the definitive interpretation of the Scriptures, beware! If you are told that your obedience to God's commandments is not complete unless your *halachah* conforms to this rabbinic dictum or that rabbinic tradition, watch out! You are being led down a slippery slope that ends in submission to the traditions of men as having equal authority with the Scriptures. Rather, like the Bereans of old, who "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so," put everything you hear against the infallible word of God. What conforms to the Scriptures, accept; what does not, reject. Let the word of God be your sole authority for knowing what pleases God. A person determines if a stick is crooked by putting it next to a straight stick. Let the Bible be your straight stick.

Yeshua Himself warned His disciples and us about how the traditions of the elders could set aside the very commandment of God (Matt 15:3). In doing so, He was not negating all of the traditions of the elders, for it is clear that He followed many of these traditions and taught His disciples to do so as well. But what He did teach was that the traditions of the elders must be subservient to the word of God—the traditions do not have divine authority in and of themselves. Therefore, the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone are to be the final authority in all matters of faith and *halachah*.

Bucer's words contain a sobering contemplation for us: "A man is rarely to be found, who pays an excessive attention to human inventions in religion, who does not put more trust in them than in the grace of God." Let it not be so of us! Let us cling to God by faith in His Messiah, Yeshua, and prize the inspired Scriptures as worthy above all other literature to lead us in the paths of righteousness for His Name sake.