

Ten Narratives on the Place of Story and Orality in Christian and Messianic Jewish Theology and Ministry: Rediscovering the Lost Treasures of Hebraic Narrative Epistemology

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“*God made man because He loves stories.*” (Elie Wiesel)¹

Why is the theme of story and storytelling critically important in Christian and Messianic Jewish theology and ministry, and especially so in our time? Stories can be found in Scripture wherein are embedded concepts that will address any given category of systematic theology. Between 60% and 70% of the canonical Scriptures are in the narrative genre. The “People of the Book” are the people of the story. The theology of Israel is story-based. The Holy Scriptures comprise the master story of the universe by which all other smaller stories are given their meaning. The master story provides the necessary hermeneutical key for interpreting the other genre of Scripture by evoking the question—How does this passage or story follow the thread of God’s Master Story?

Yeshua the Messiah used stories as his primary teaching method. He used stories to teach both the *am ha aretz* (the common folk) in Galilee and also for the most highly literate and erudite Torah scholars of his day in Jerusalem. He is the Master Teacher and our exemplar for our teaching vocations. The influence of the Western conceptual and analytic approach to theologizing, homiletics and teaching has been strong and prevalent in modern Western Christianity as well as within the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement. This approach is not to be disregarded or devalued. However, we need to retrieve some lost treasures to restore balance, holism and depth of impact on hearts and lives to our ministry of the Word.

In modernity, the focus has been on the following: the rational, scientific, analytic, logical, linear, and technological. There is an ancient and continuous biblical and Jewish storytelling tradition—the *Aggadic/Haggadic* and *Midrashic* tradition—whose focus is on the literary-artistic, aesthetic, the emotionally and relationally expressive, the big-picture, the holistic, and metaphor, imagery and story. Yeshua said, “Every Torah scholar disciplined for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure both new things and old” (Matt. 13:52, TLV). Toward retrieving these lost treasures, toward re-digging the wells of Story, in this essay we shall consider ten “narratives”:

1. Narrative 1: Hebraic Theology Is Based on Story
2. Narrative 2: The Hebraic and Jewish Roots of Story and Storytelling

¹ Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), 208.

3. Narrative 3: “Hear O Israel”: Orality Is Fundamental to Human Communication
4. Narrative 4: European Enlightenment Epistemology
5. Narrative 5: Hebraic Epistemology
6. Narrative 6: Jewish *Midrash* and Story
7. Narrative 7: The Power of Story
8. Narrative 8: Yeshua the Messiah and Story
9. Narrative 9: The Postmodern Moment and Its Prospects for Story
10. Narrative 10: Storytelling in Contemporary Jewish Ministry

Overview

The “Ten Narratives” in this essay cohere as follows: The first eight narratives give the theoretical grounding for the subject. The last two narratives make application for contemporary practice. Israel’s theology was formed by Israel’s *storying* the acts of God, together with their meaning, in community, and thus transmitting Israel’s identity and mission from generation to generation. The literature of Israel and Judaism has always comprised both *Halacha* (law) and *Aggadah* (story), and they are interdependent. Oral speech is the fundamental nature of human language. God created human beings by His spoken word. Thus humans, reflecting the *Imago Dei*, are endowed with the gift of language and capable of “I-Thou” relationships (Buber). Israel was a hearing-dominant society in harmony with the way humans are made and most authentically communicate. The medium and technology of reading and writing detaches verbal discourse from its personal source.

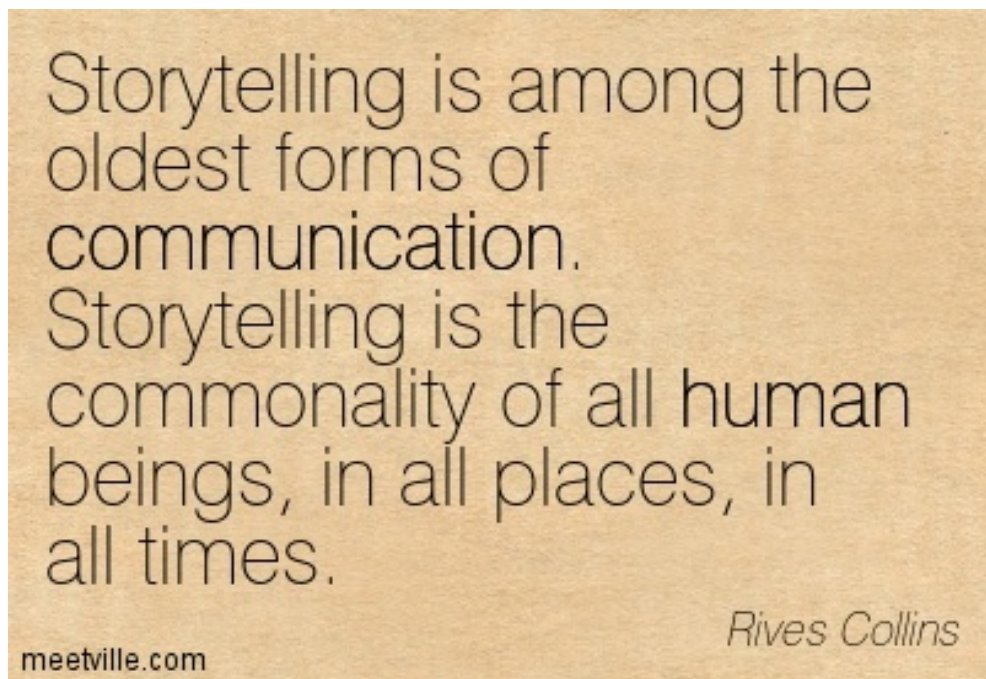
There are three forms of the Word of God—1) Yeshua the Messiah is the *Living Word*, who became flesh. 2) The inspired canonical *Written Word*, which is the authoritative standard for the testing of truth in teaching. 3) The *Oralized Word*, “Hear O Israel!,” existed before the Written Word and completes its purpose. The purpose of the Book of the LORD is to know the LORD of the Book (which requires personal, verbal communication). The origin and study of Rabbinic literature was oral. Yeshua delivered his teaching orally and it was transmitted orally (he said his words are “spirit and life”); he did not write a book.

In contrast to the European Enlightenment epistemology of *disengaged reason*, Hebraic epistemology is receptive of divine revelation and is a *narrative epistemology* that embraces story as a way of knowing, and is testimony to the fact that “reason is the organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning” (C.S. Lewis). There are lost treasures to recover in the Jewish hermeneutical tradition of *midrash aggadah* and the *imaginative reconstruction* of gaps in Biblical stories. Story/storytelling is a more effective way to bring truth home to human hearts than the “naked truth” of propositional statements. Stories and songs, told and sung in a manner or medium well-oriented to its audience and under the right conditions, most effectively mobilize groups to catalyze culture-change.

Yeshua is the Master Teacher and was not a conceptual theologian; he was a *metaphorical theologian* and a storyteller. Yeshua’s parables are like a house, into which

people are invited and from which they can look out at the world from several different windows. Humans are *homo narrans*, and so story will always and everywhere be relevant, though styles of discourse and media may change. Our postmodern moment of history has created a search for new meta-narratives and provides an auspicious context to re-tell the master story of Scripture and for ministry of the Word through storytelling.

Jewish people have always been at the *vortex* of history-making and culture-making movements. In this “Digital Era,” a major way the Christian and Messianic Jewish movements will advance the Kingdom of God and be a “light to the nations” is through creatively re-telling the Biblical Story and stories to the current and succeeding generations.



Narrative 1: Hebraic Theology Is Based on Story

How did Israel come to know the Creator as *Adonai Elohim*, as *Avinu Malkeinu*, and how did Israel develop its theology? The Creator called Avram in Ur of the Chaldees. Avram listened to the voice of God and began the journey. God continued to speak to the other patriarchs, revealing Himself and His purposes. But contrary to the religions of the ancient Far East, inner subjective experience was not the major means of revelation. God’s objective outward acts in space-time history determined the content of inner revelation. Mystical experience was not the focus, but rather the very earthy, participatory, messy, and concrete events that included Abraham’s journeying to a place and a destiny as yet undisclosed to him, his learning by struggle and trial how to respect his wife, and the significance of an heir. Jacob’s wrestling with God to be transformed

into *Yis-ra'El*, and later Joseph's suffering at the hands of his brothers and his moral testing in Egypt, all in God's providence prepared Jacob's clan to be forged by blood, sweat, and tears into a nation. This is revelation in and through the real, the tangible, and the actual.

After the patriarchal period God began to reveal Himself on a larger scale to the nation of Egypt and to the people of Israel, forming Israel into a nation by His mighty acts among them and for them. The powerful saving acts of God in the events surrounding the exodus from Egypt constitute the foundational narrative of Israel. History was the primary arena in which God revealed himself. History is never a bare record of neutral facts. It always includes the meaning of those facts. The telling of those revelatory events and their God-given meaning produced Israel's theology. As the saying goes, history is "HisStory."

G. Ernest Wright, who studied under the great archaeologist W.F. Albright and participated in excavations in Israel (then Palestine) in the 1930s and later was professor of Old Testament at Harvard University, has fully researched and explained this theological formation process. He states,

[Theology] is fundamentally an interpretation of history, a confessional recital of historical events as the acts of God, events which lead backward to the beginning of history and forward to its end. Inferences are constantly made from the acts and are interpreted as integral parts of the acts themselves which furnish the clue to understanding not only contemporary happenings, but those which subsequently occurred. The being and attributes of God are nowhere systematically presented but are inferences from events.²

An example of this process of theologizing from history and story is Moshe Rabbeinu who taught the people of Israel that when they came into the land promised to them, they were to bring a tithe of the firstfruits of their produce in a basket to the place God designated. They were to offer it to the priest, who would set it before the altar. But then this striking practice is commanded,

Then you are to *respond before the Adonai your God, and say*, "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt and lived there as an outsider, few in number there, few in number. But there he became a nation—mighty and numerous. And the Egyptians treated *us* badly, afflicted *us* and imposed hard labor on *us*. Then *we* cried to Adonai, God of *our* fathers, and Adonai listened to our voice heard *our* voice and saw *our* affliction, *our* toil, and *our* oppression. Then Adonai brought *us* out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought *us* into this place and gave *us* this

² Ernest G. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, Studies in Biblical Theology (London: SCM Press, 1952), 57.

land—a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:5-9, TLV, Italics added).

Note that this was an oral-aural community event, not an isolated individual reading a text in a study carrel. The people are commanded to annually recite, to tell the story of their father Jacob, of his family’s decent into Egypt, and then of the story of their great deliverance from slavery to Pharaoh which forged the Israelite peoplehood. The telling—or the *storying*— of the acts of God in their history formed the theology of Israel.

The stories of Genesis are archetypal and prismatic, but the identity of Israel is grounded in this bedrock story, this root story of the exodus from Egypt. This is Israel’s master story. And as Michael Goldberg says, “master stories not only *inform* us, they *form* us.”³ This story runs through Jewish tradition like a river. Recall how the liturgy for Shabbat Eve Kiddush in the Siddur retells it, “*Blessed are You, HASHEM, our God, King of the Universe, Who... gave us His holy Sabbath...a memorial of the exodus from Egypt...*” This master story of historical events gives meaning and direction to the people in the present and hope for the future. Because God acted thus before, we trust He will so act again.

To the present time, each year at Passover, the Jewish people are commanded to tell their children the story of the nation’s founding, of God’s awesome deliverance from Egypt. “And you shall *tell* your son on that day...” (Exod. 13:8). The Hebrew verb is “*vehiggadta*” —to “tell.” Hence the Passover event and the “*Haggadah*” is the oral “telling” and annual retelling of the story that reinforces the Jewish people’s identity. And each Jewish feast or holiday provides an opportunity to recite and retell another story of God’s gracious acts on behalf of His people. This was the rationale for the pilgrimage festivals. This retelling and reenacting through ritual and liturgy is how theology was created and how it is transmitted from generation to generation.

³ Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight: The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 13.



Psalm 78 is a retelling of the story of Israel. This is a model liturgy for Israel, and is what is done in most Jewish feasts—telling and retelling the story and stories of Israel.

Psalm 78: A *maskil* of Asaf:

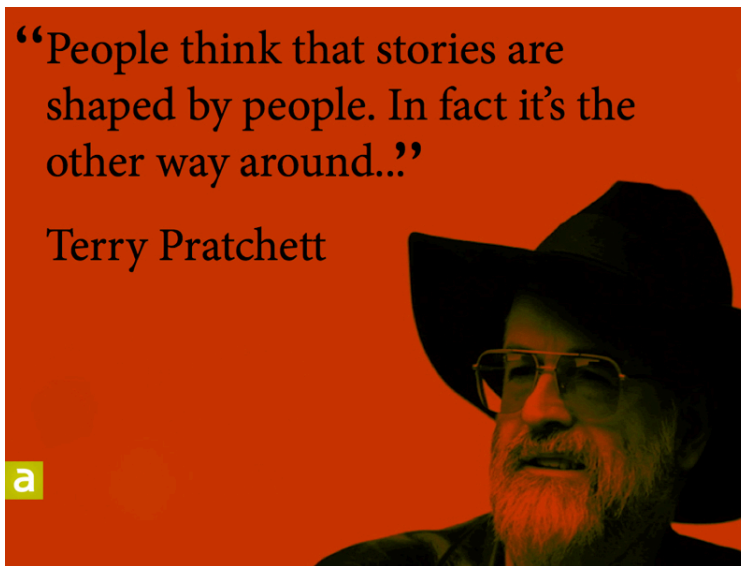
Listen, my people, to my teaching;
turn your ears to the words from my mouth.
I will speak to you in *parables* (Hebrew: “*mashal*,” a wisdom saying, poem, or story)
and explain mysteries from days of old.

The things which we have heard and known,
and which our fathers told us
we will not hide from their descendants;
we will tell the generation to come (Verses 1-4, CJB).

And this contemporary version translates the Hebrew “the things we have heard and knew from our ancestors” as “stories”:

O my people, listen to my instructions.
Open your ears to what I am saying,
for I will speak to you *in a parable*.
I will teach you hidden lessons from our past—
stories we have heard and known,
stories our ancestors handed down to us.
We will not hide these truths from our children;
we will tell the next generation
about the glorious deeds of the LORD,

about his power and his mighty wonders” (Verses 1-4 New Living Translation, NLT).



Doctrinal formulation and a systematization of theology as propositional dogmatics was alien to the Hebrews /Israelites of the Biblical period. They favored the concrete and shunned the abstract. The theologians of Israel were narrative theologians. The modern habit of mind that reasons from axioms, principles, or universals to the concrete was foreign to them. So the Jewish systemization of doctrine during the Talmudic periods was due to the influence set by the Athenian philosophical schools.⁴

Likewise the theology of the earliest apostolic church (the early Messianic Jewish movement) grew out of the experience of practical ministry. Ministry preceded and produced theology (not vice-versa as is so often assumed in the modern West). As we read in the Book of Acts, Luke records the practicing before the preaching, the doing before the teaching. “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Yeshua began both *to do and to teach* ...” (Acts 1:1). The New Covenant epistles were written (theology was codified) ten or more years after the spiritual renewal movement and the launching of obedient efforts to fulfill Messiah’s Great Commission.

Hebraism and Hellenism

There has long been dissention between Hellenism and Hebraism and between “Athens and Jerusalem.” Though there are clear differences, and Hellenism must be critiqued, these counterpoints have often been wrongly framed as a black and white matter:

⁴ Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 67.

Hebraism is good; Hellenism is bad. However, a reflective caveat is needed here— there was surely a providential encounter between Biblical faith and Greek thought. The pivotal story of when the apostle Paul was barred from going further into Asia and was instead led through a vision to Macedonia, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” (Acts 16:6-10), is perhaps symbolic. Paul’s Jewish apostolic band entered the Greek world, and the developing Christian Faith was shaped for all time. We may identify this encounter as the beginnings of the synthesis between Christianity and Hellenism, which, though there are negatives, was not all bad. Jewish communities had encountered Greek thought two or three centuries earlier. Philo of Alexandria and others absorbed the Greek spirit.

Because the Greeks were created in the image of God, and because of general revelation (Rom. 1:19-20), the Greek thinkers were able to achieve a discipline of rationality or use of reason that, when used under the authority of Biblical revelation, was enriching to theological understanding. As is said, “All truth is God’s truth,” and rigorous use of reason to explore, investigate, hypothesize, and learn as much as possible about creation and about reality was an enrichment to people of faith.

The Great Commandment to “love *Adonai* Your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your understanding,” assumes a rigorous use of the mind, or reason as part of holistic devotion to God and stewardship of His gifts. Followers of Messiah will not espouse an anti-intellectualism that devalues higher education in the liberal arts, advanced scholarship and research in the social and natural sciences. The Jewish people are known as the “People of the Book.” They are also “people of books,” valuing literacy and education. The fact that we write and read systematic theologies is due to the Greek heritage. So as we seek to recover and embrace more of the Hebraic epistemology, it is not rejection of the rigorous intellectual disciplines of learning, but a matter of bringing them under the authority of the Hebraic revelation and integrating them in practice with the “Ten Narratives” in this essay.

The Apostle John chose the word “*logos*” to begin his Gospel. “In the beginning was the *Logos*. The *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God” (John 1:1). *Logos* means both “word” and “reason.” God is a God of reason, intelligible in His words and deeds. His character is intelligible. He does not act arbitrarily or inconsistently with His character. His created universe is intelligible; its principles and order can be known through the study of the natural sciences.



Greek Man and Hebrew Man

<http://www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XXIX/29-2.htm>

The New Covenant Scriptures are written in Greek, in God's providence, and they bear the imprint of the Greek spirit. Yet the Greek texts bear the imprint of the Hebraic mind of their authors. There is a harmony between the best in Greek use of reason and Biblical faith. The *integration of faith and reason* has served in the successful development of Western civilization and in the university tradition. This is a gift of the synthesis between Greek and Hebrew thought. I could not write this present essay without the benefit of the higher education in this tradition, which I was privileged to receive. Those who have benefited from a liberal arts education and engaged in advanced study and research at institutes of science and technology, have greatly contributed to human flourishing. We can be grateful for this for this integration, as we have reaped the fruits of their labor. However, as modern Western secular humanism advanced, Hebraic treasures were left behind.

Narrative 2: The Hebraic and Jewish Roots of Story and Storytelling

The Hebraic roots of storytelling pre-date the Written Torah by many centuries. The archetypal stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, of Noah and the Great Flood, of the Tower of Babel, the stories of the families of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were transmitted orally over generations by good storytellers before ever they were written down in the form we have them in the Torah.

As the literature of Israel and Judaism developed, two broad genres of writings emerged—*Halacha* and *Haggadah*. Chaim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), by all accounts modern Israel’s most celebrated national poet, wrote in 1917 a now classic essay entitled “*Halacha and Haggadah*.” He observed how often the two genres are considered antithetical—law and story—as if they are irreconcilable opposites.⁵ Bialik writes,

Halacha wears a frown, *Aggadah* a smile. The one pedantic, severe unbending—all justice; the other is accommodating, lenient, pliable—all mercy. The one commands and knows no half-way house; her yea is yea and her nay is nay. The other advises and takes account of human limitations; she admits something between yea and nay. The one is concerned with the shell, with the body, with actions; the other with the kernel, with the soul, with intentions. On one side there is petrified observance, duty, subjection; on the other perpetual rejuvenation, liberty, free volition. Turn from the sphere of life to that of literature, and there are further points of contrast. On the one side is the dryness of prose, a formal and heavy style, and gray and monochrome diction: reason is sovereign. On the other side is the sap of poetry, a style full of life and variety, a diction all ablaze with color: emotion is sovereign.⁶

Quite a colorful, expressive, lyrical description! You can tell Bialik is a consummate poet. And often we in the modern West have been taught to think in the dichotomy between reason (law, prose, philosophy, logic) and imagination (metaphor, poetry, story, drama). But Bialik insists that the two—*Halacha* and *Aggadah*— are interdependent and in dialectic relationship. He continues,

⁵ *Aggadah* or *Haggadah* (Heb. אגדה, אגדה; “telling,” “narrative”), one of the two primary components of Rabbinic tradition, the other being *halakhah*, usually translated as “Jewish Law.” The *Halacha* (literally “walking” so “how to walk”) contains the legal rulings of the rabbis, law codes, customs, and ethical rulings of the Talmud. Though the categories are broad with fuzzy boundaries, *Aggadah* is generally the non-legal literature of the Talmudic body of literature, the “Sea of the Talmud.” Broadly, “The *aggadah* comprehends a great variety of forms and content. It includes narrative, legends. Its forms and modes of expression are as rich and colorful as its content. Parables and allegories, metaphors and terse maxims; lyrics, dirges, and prayers, biting satire and fierce polemic, idyllic tales and tense dramatic dialogues, hyperboles and plays on words, . . .” “*Aggadah* or “*Haggadah*” in: http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0001_0_00525.html

⁶ Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays*, trans. Zali Gurevitch (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000), 45.

Halacha is the crystallization, the ultimate and inevitable quintessence of *Aggadah*; *Aggadah* is the content of *Halacha*. *Aggadah* is the plaintive voice of the heart's yearning as it wings its way to its haven; *Halacha* is the resting place, where for a moment the yearning is satisfied and stilled. As a dream seeks its fulfillment in interpretation, as will in action, as thought in speech, as flower in fruit—so *Aggadah* in *Halacha*.⁷

Bialik demonstrates, as only a poet could, that both these major genre of literature, both of these ways of teaching and knowing, are in Scripture and life; both are needed and need each other. He observes how in the collections of laws and manuals of instruction in the Torah (Leviticus) and Talmud, actually have “a kaleidoscope of pictures, large and small, of actual Hebrew life over a period of a thousand years or more.” He notes,

Do not open the *Mishnah* [the first major redaction of rabbinic oral law traditions, six tractates, mostly *Halacha*] with puckered brow. Tread leisurely among its chapters, like one exploring the *ruins* of ancient cities; ramble amid its rows of statutory enactments, set side by side as in a piece of masonry, flint-like in their compressed rigidity; look with a discerning eye at all the pictures, some small and some tiny, which lie scattered about promiscuously in their in their thousands: and ask yourselves whether you are not beholding the actual life of a whole people, ceased in its very progress and petrified in all the multiplicity of its detail.”⁸

Bialik asserts that behind every law or statute or instruction is a story. The laws are “bits of crystallized life.” If you look for the bit of life, the story, behind the law, it will be anything but boring. Will you ever look at a law or a precept the same way again?

Theology is embedded in the stories. Stories can be found in Scripture wherein are embedded concepts that will address any given category of systematic theology such as soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, eschatology, etc. Recalling the stories undergirding these more abstract concepts provides an anchor in the Hebraic narrative epistemology. Stories provide the grounded roots of the realities that are referred to or interpreted in the propositional statements. Story is always primary and primal; analytic propositions and deductions are derivative.

⁷ Bialik, *Revelment*, 46.

⁸ Bialik, *Revelment*, 75

It is the storyteller who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that the survivors must have - otherwise their surviving would have no meaning.

Chinua Achebe

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Narrative 3: Hear O Israel! Orality Is Fundamental to Human Communication

At the conclusion of the Fall feasts, the Jewish High Holy Days, is the feast of *Simchat Torah*. Traditional and Orthodox Jews passionately celebrate the gift of God’s Word. To witness the exuberant dancing and singing while carrying the adorned Torah Scroll at the Western Wall in Jerusalem shames the paltry expression of devotion to the Word that characterizes most of us late moderns. This is exemplary affirmation of the Written Word of God. Yet it is clear that the Word of God is in three forms:

- 1) The Living Word (the “*Memra*” in Aramaic [similar to Hebrew], comparable to the “*Logos*” in Greek), who became flesh (John 1:1-14)
- 2) The Written Word (in This Age, the final authority for faith and life)
- 3) The Oralized Word (Scripture brought to life through human communicators).

Oral language always embodies a personal address, the “I-Thou” dimension of personal relationship. God spoke into being all He created during the six days of Creation, including humans, thus humans came into existence by God’s oralized Word. An aspect of the image of God in humans, intrinsic to our personhood, is our capacity for speech. This embodies the essence of the intrinsic social nature of humans made in the image of God—humans are a bi-unity of two genders, reflecting the tri-unity of the three persons of the Godhead.

Anthropologists and cultural historians have clarified that oral speech is the fundamental and essential nature of human language. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) developed the study of phonemics, showing the way language is nested in sound, made up not of letters but of functional sound units or phonemes.⁹ Oralized, spoken language preceded writing by many millennia.

⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1982), 5.

In the last decades of twentieth century, the academic world was newly awakened to the oral character of language and the deeper implications of the effects on human consciousness of orality and writing.¹⁰ Non-literate people, who are oral learners, think and process information differently than people who are highly literate. Oral speech is primary; writing and reading are derivative. Oral expression can and has mostly existed without any writing; writing has never existed without orality.

Though it carries huge benefits, a downside of writing is that written discourse is detached from its author, the personal source of the message. The advantage of a book is that it provides the means for a speaker to be linked with a listener without being in the same room or the same century; the disadvantage is the loss of the personal dimension of a communication act.

Modern Western society is a literacy and text-dominant society. Israel was a hearing-dominant society. Though written or printed texts became very important later in Jewish history, the Hebraic tradition involves the hearing ear more than the distancing eye. Biblically, we see God always speaking personally to His people, not writing to them. The *Shema* reads “*Hear O Israel! ...*” not “*Read O Israel! ...*.” That Israel was a hearing-dominant society is in harmony with the way humans are made and how they most authentically communicate. There are very few times in Scripture where God or Yeshua wrote anything: The Ten Commandments, the handwriting on the wall in Daniel, and Yeshua writing in the sand in front of the woman caught in adultery. Yet the phrase “Thus says the LORD” is repeated over 400 times.

The God of Israel modeled for us how to embed something in the memory of a group or peoplehood. When God instructed Moses in matters pertaining the ongoing tutelage of Israel, He tells Moses the reason for the great “Song of Moses” which will follow in Deuteronomy 32. This song proclaimed God’s ways, his honor, his judgment, and his salvation. God wanted Israel to take this to heart, to internalize it. So he says, “I want you *to write down* this song and teach it to the children of Israel. Teach them *to sing it*, so it can be a witness for me against them” (Deut. 31:19).

They were to learn it by heart. So the “Song of Moses” is in memorable poetry, and was to be formally articulated in ways to facilitate memorization by the community. It was to be sung, oralized. But we note also that it was to be written down. The textual version of the poem was necessary for maintaining its permanence from generation to generation, to check its accuracy. Here we see the dynamic dialectic between the Written Word and the Oralized Word—the oralized word can be ephemeral, so must be preserved in writing. The written word is enduring, but must be oralized. Oralizing the printed word brings it to life; lets it take wings.

¹⁰ Ong, *Orality*, 5.



The Pauline epistles were circulated and read orally aloud in the churches. When the Apostle John sent the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, here were the instructions, “Blessed is he who *reads aloud* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who *hear*” (Rev. 1:3). Reading the Scriptures is not exactly equal to listening to God. To do the former is not *necessarily* to do the latter. Atheists can read Scripture.

The rhetorical and homiletical arts are always central to ministry. The oralizing of the Word described through the cluster of word gifts—teaching, exhortation, prophecy—are endowed by the Holy Spirit to equip the church for ministry (Rom. 12:6, 7; 1 Cor. 12:8, 10; Eph. 4:11). Bible storytelling is an expression of the gifts of teaching and exhortation, but in a form often not recognized as real teaching due to our Western orientation to use primarily the lecture and monologue method.

Why is orality (the oral-aural process) so singularly valuable? One reason is because of the interpersonal-relational contrasts highlighted by the following table.

TABLE 1 – CONTRAST BETWEEN READING AND LISTENING

Reading	Listening
Eyes	Ears
Read marks on a page	Attend to the sound of a voice.
A lone person with a book, written by someone miles away, or dead, or both.	An interpersonal, relational act.
The book is at the reader’s mercy. The book does not know if I am paying attention or not.	Listener is required to be attentive to the speaker, at speaker’s mercy. The speaker knows if I am paying attention or not.
The reader initiates the process; the reader is in charge.	The speaker initiates the process; the speaker is in charge.
<i>Images in life:</i> The stereotype of the husband buried in the morning newspaper at breakfast, preferring to read scores of yesterday’s sports events, and opinions of columnists he will never meet, than to listen to the voice of the person who has just shared his bed, poured his coffee, and fried his eggs, even though listening to that live voice promises love and hope, emotional depth and intellectual exploration far in excess of what he can gather informationally from the <i>New York Times</i> .	<i>Images in life:</i> All Israel assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai as Moses addresses them.... A first century Pauline congregation gathered to hear the oral reading of a letter from the apostle Paul... A soldier standing at attention, listening to the commands of his drill sergeant.... Boy Scouts around a campfire listening in rapt attention to a storyteller tell a ghost story... A family Passover Seder dinner, in which the father animatedly tells, once again, the Great Story of our Freedom, the children ask questions, the symbolic foods are eaten, and the songs are sung.

(Created by Bjoraker drawing from prose source in Eugene Peterson’s *Working the Angles*.¹¹)

Why is a joke always better told orally than when read from a page? Why is that that I can hear a song on the radio that I have not heard in thirty years, or an advertising jingle I heard in childhood on television, and still sing along word for word, never having written out the words, or read them? There are regions of the human brain that have neurons that light up and retain memory of story and song longer and deeper than most of the printed propositional prose that a person reads. God “wired” us as humans to connect at a deeper level than merely the cognitive.

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 88, 89.

We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.

Quote from The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human by Jonathan Gottschall

We cannot reduce the Word of God to paper and ink in a book. The Messiah said to his contemporaries who revered the Book, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39, 40). The Written Word is the means to an end; making it an end in itself misses the point or even becomes bibliolatry. The purpose of the Book of the LORD is to know the LORD of the Book. The Written Word begs for oralizing and points beyond itself to the Living Word.

The Rabbis and Oral Learning and Teaching

The existence of the Rabbinic tradition of Oral Torah (“*Torah sh b’ al peh*”) with its expansions and explanations of the Written Torah is testimony to Jewish awareness of the need for texts to be oralized and for the Word of God to reach into and speak to the ongoing human situations that arise in the complexities of life in the succeeding time periods. The oral origins of Rabbinic literature and its study are quite clear:

Even when put into writing, remained a record of oral discussions going on among multiple personalities.... In a *rabbinic* work, each contribution quoted comes originally from an oral context... and even if there are intermediate written sources, none of these sources has lost its oral atmosphere or its character as a record of oral discussions.¹²

¹² Hyam Maccoby, *Early Rabbinic Writings*, Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World 200 BC to AD 200, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8.

Yeshua's Oral Forms of Teaching

“In the beginning was the *Logos*” (John 1:1). In the Greek lexicon of the New Testament, the Greek word, “*logos*,” is denoted as an “utterance, chiefly oral.”¹³ In the modern West, we tend to think of it as a written word on a page. “The evidence from the Gospels is unanimous about the word *word*. When the context was the ministry of Jesus, *logos* (or *rhema*) denoted speech.”¹⁴

The oral origins of the four Gospels are evident within the Gospels. It was not until at least twenty years after Yeshua's public ministry that the first written accounts were inscribed. Yeshua's teachings were delivered orally and transmitted orally. His delivery system as a teacher was face-to-face and oral. His teaching methods were non-formal, mostly among the *am ha aretz* in the villages and countryside. But it was also highly intensive, twenty-four-hours per day, life-on-life, an apprenticeship model with much coaching and personal mentoring, and therefore highly oral and without the aid of books or classroom lectures. Yeshua did not write a book, he did not need to. He stated, “The words I speak to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63b). It was sufficient for His oral texts to remain oral.

He taught using many questions and stories, with a cohort of twelve adult learners for discussion learning. His method was effective, such that at the end of the three short years of training, He was able to report to His Father that, “I gave them the words you gave me and they have accepted them” (John 17:8). The young leaders He trained went on to change the world. A simple application for us today is that we need to recover the lost treasures of storytelling and the oral and relational teaching methods of Yeshua.

Narrative 4: European Enlightenment Epistemology

In order to compare and contrast the dominant modern Western epistemology (the study of how we know what we know, or the ways of knowing) with the Hebraic epistemology, I will first describe the Enlightenment epistemology. A major epistemological shift from medieval knowledge and learning to modern science (empiricism and rationalism) as the major way of knowing occurred during the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. It was a shift from reliance on authority as moral sources (Scripture, religious tradition, established venerated philosophers), to empirical observation (and application of the new rational scientific method of inquiry to interpret the data of experience) as the primary source of knowledge. The results of the new science then became the new dominant public source of authority in the West for several centuries, weakened only somewhat with the postmodern shift. The moral sources, in this case epistemological, become *disengaged reason ... [Definition: The concept of reason or rationality*

¹³ Walter Bauer and Arndt Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “Logos.”

¹⁴ John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 127.

*disengaged from external, objective and transcendent verities and/or moral absolutes that had served as guideposts (touchstones, anchors, tethers) for the practice of rationality and the ascertaining knowledge]... and the deliverances of such reason via the highly acclaimed modern scientific method.*¹⁵

Disengaged reason became supreme in Enlightenment thought such that all knowledge and any alleged authority had to pass the bar of this now presumed omni-competent reason. Starting from itself, this rationality was assumed to be able to ascertain certain, universally true, and objective knowledge. Reason was presumed to be unconditioned and to operate from a totally neutral vantage point, as a sort of “epistemological Switzerland,” as Paul Weston put it.¹⁶ Reason could be applied instrumentally, but of course also amorally. Rationality thus becomes rationalism; science becomes scientism—both are reductionist. Paradoxically, exalting reason too highly, or making it the be-all-and-end all, reduces the scope of reason and knowledge, rather than expands it. As modernity progressed, a dichotomy developed between *public facts* (viewed as the objective and neutral deliverances of pure reason via the scientific method), and *private values* (viewed as the subjective and relative beliefs based on religious texts or experiences, viewed pluralistically). This became the standard modern view.¹⁷

C.S. Lewis’s Epistemology and Apologetics

C.S. Lewis (1898–1963) was a modern Western thinker who was able to critically detach himself from the dominant Enlightenment epistemology. Lewis is well known for his great imaginative gift for storytelling, but many recognize his strength was his ability to present the Christian Faith both conceptually and imaginatively. He was a master of both reason and imagination. Michael Ward, a Lewis scholar, writes,

“His rational approach is seen in *The Abolition of Man*, *Miracles*, and ... *Mere Christianity*. These works show Lewis’s ability to argue: to set forth a propositional case, proceeding by logical steps from defined premises to carefully drawn conclusions, everything clear, orderly, and connected. And his imaginative side, so the argument goes, is seen in *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and, at a more accessible level, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. These works show his ability to dramatize: to set forth an attractive vision of Christian life, proceeding by means of character and plot to narrate an engaging story, everything colorful, vibrant, and active.”¹⁸

¹⁵ William D. Bjoraker, “Faith, Freedom and Radical Individualism in Late Modern America: A Missiological Evaluation” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2007), 365-66.

¹⁶ Paul Weston, “The Making of Christendom,” Zotero, accessed December 13, 2014, <https://www.zotero.org/groups/westminstercam/items/itemKey/WGKTDRUI>.

¹⁷ Bjoraker, “Faith,” 355-56.

¹⁸ Michael Ward, “How Lewis Lit the Way to Better Apologetics.” *Christianity Today* 57, no. 9 (October 2013): 38.

Many scholars consider Lewis's conceptual works and imaginative works to be dissimilar and distinct. They are two discrete modes in which he presented the faith. Often the imaginative works, the stories are considered *theology lite*, or for children only. It is understandable that we would think this way. Ward continues,

“The dichotomy between reason and imagination is how we have been taught to think ever since the so-called Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Reasonable people don't need imagination. Imaginative people don't need reasons.”¹⁹

This is far from Lewis's views, for Lewis was far from being an Enlightenment thinker. In fact, Lewis is quoted as saying, “A children's story that can only be enjoyed by children is not a good children's story in the slightest.”

When I (Bjoraker) personally developed storytelling as ministry several years ago, someone remarked to me, “Oh, how do you like doing children's ministry?” I said, “I don't do children's ministry. I do Bible storying with adults. The Bible is for adults. It takes a lot of contextualization to bring it down to children's level.”

Ward quotes from Lewis's *Selected Literary Essays*,

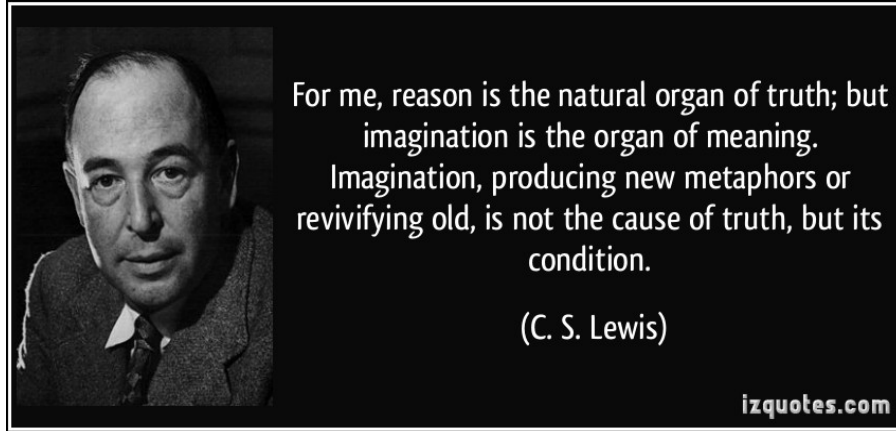
“All our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor,” Lewis wrote in his essay “Bluspels and Flalansferes.” Similitudes, seeing one thing in terms of another, finding meanings here which correspond with what we want to say there, are for Lewis the essence of meaningful thought. “*For me, reason is the natural organ of truth,*” Lewis wrote, “*but imagination is the organ of meaning.* Imagination . . . is not the cause of truth, but its condition.” In other words, we don't grasp the meaning of a word or concept until we have a clear image to connect it with.

For Lewis, this is what the imagination is about: not just the ability to dream up fanciful fables, but the ability to identify meaning, to know when we have come upon something truly meaningful.²⁰

Lewis's was closer to Hebraic man than to modern secular man. Lewis is an exemplar for us today, as we seek to retrieve the lost treasures of story, as we re-dig the wells of the Aggadic tradition and as we develop the arts of orality and right brain proficiencies for teaching and ministry today.

¹⁹ Ward, “How Lewis Lit the Way,” 38.

²⁰ Ward, “How Lewis Lit the Way,” 38.



Narrative 5: Hebraic Epistemology

“Language is the house of being,” said philosopher Martin Heidegger.²¹ If Heidegger is correct, then we can learn about the “being” of Israel from the nature of the Hebrew language. We learn about how the Israelites knew what they knew, and how they knew the world. Language is both the means for things to materialize in historical time, as well as a testimony to their entry into being. So the language of a people and their worldview and culture are integrally related.

The Hebrew language has at least these three characteristics relevant to story and storytelling. It is 1) concrete, 2) relational, and 3) it reflects experiential knowledge.

Hebrew is Concrete. From the very beginning, in the account of Creation, God pronounced the created physical world “very good.” (Gen. 1:31). This has echoed down through Jewish history in the Jewish affirmation of life, “*L’Chaim!*” Marvin Wilson quotes George Adam Smith as saying,

Hebrew may be called primarily a language of the senses. The words originally expressed concrete or material things and movements or actions which struck the senses or started the emotions. Only secondarily and *in metaphor* could they be used to denote abstract or metaphysical ideas.²²

Examples of graphic, vivid use of concrete language to communicate abstract concepts include the following: to look is to “lift up the eyes” (Gen. 22:4); to be angry is to “burn in one’s nostrils” (Exod. 4:14); to have no compassion is “hard-heartedness” (1 Sam. 6:6); to be stubborn is to be “stiff-necked” (2 Chron. 30:8); to be determined is “to set one’s face” (Jer. 42:15; Luke 9:51). There are also the anthropomorphisms of the living

²¹ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1977), 213-66.

²² Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 137.

God of the Hebrews. He is not a distant, ethereal deity, but “surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear” (Isa. 59:1). Also, “the eyes of the LORD are everywhere” (Prov. 15:3). These concrete images are common in Hebrew.²³ Stories tell real events and actions relayed by the sensory experience of the storyteller. Often metaphors and similes from the vernacular are the most expressive terms at hand.

Hebrew is Relational in Terms and Perceptions. German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) in his classic work, *I and Thou*, explains that “I-Thou” encounters with persons are fundamentally different than “I-It” relationships with things.²⁴ Persons know other persons by encounter. A major theme of Buber’s book is that human life finds its greatest meaning in relationships with other persons. Storytelling is inherently relational. A story is told *by* someone *to* someone. The hearers of the story vicariously encounter the characters in the story, identify with them, and have emotional and moral responses to them (positively or negatively), sometimes in life-changing ways.

Hebrew Reflects Experiential Knowledge. When thinking about God, Israelites don’t ask, “What is divinity?” (the philosophical essence of divine being). Rather they ask, “Who is God?” ... “Who is Yahweh? The Hebrew word, “*yada*,” refers to an experiential knowing, more than to mere cerebral cognition. Genesis says, “Adam knew (*yada*) his wife Eve, and she conceived” (Gen. 4:1). “This is eternal life that you might know (experientially) God and Yeshua the Messiah whom He has sent” (John 17:3). Stories relay real life experiences, encounters, first hand experiences, and often the accounts of eyewitnesses.

Narrative Epistemology: Story as a Way of Knowing

A story, in its telling and hearing, in its wholeness, imparts a quality of knowledge that is greater, thicker in description, comprehending more of reality, and fuller than all the sum of lists (or bullet points) of the summary phrases, or abstracted statements, propositions, or theses that could be derived from it. As someone has said, “We dream in story, not bullet points.”

American Protestant scholar Walter Brueggemann (b. 1933), widely considered one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the last few decades, recognized the importance of narrative as a way of knowing. He is known for his advocacy and practice of “rhetorical criticism” which studies how the elements of oral speech—in oral performances, texts, films, and discourse in general—work to affect and influence people through their imagery, symbols, body language, and other rhetorical elements.

This, of course, has everything to do with orality and storytelling. Brueggemann’s emphasis on the importance of knowing through oral methods brought into question the categories of modernity and the Enlightenment and how the Enlightenment epistemology has become a “tyranny of positivism,” generating “models of knowledge” which are

²³ Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, 137.

²⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone Books, 1970).

thought to be objective and neutral, but are actually dominating. He has championed that aspect of the postmodern critique and postmodern epistemological shift that allows for a loosening from the oppression and reductionism of the scientific method of modern rationalism (or positivism).

Brueggemann scholar and psychotherapist, Kevin M. Bradt, has researched and written on story as a way of knowing. Much of his research focused on Brueggemann's work on Israel's storying. Bradt observes how that when Enlightenment thought became dominant,

Debates raged about the historical facticity behind the biblical texts while the study of Israel's rhetorical practices, her long traditions of alternative speech, orality, and storying went into eclipse. Now all the wonderful, messy, contradictory narrative particularities of the biblical stories were seen only as intellectual embarrassments.²⁵

Brueggemann discovered how a *narrative epistemology* could sustain a community's sense of hope and history in the face of systemic repression and violence. Through Israel's tradition of storying, a defiant, shared imagination powerful enough to activate an alternative future reality had been born.²⁶

He is referring to Israel's sojourn as slaves in Egypt and how their alternative story transmitted from their patriarchs of God's relationship to them was able to defy the dominant mythic and ideological story propounded by the Pharaohs and legitimated and absolutized by their imperial state power. That mythopoetic ideology was the official sociology of knowledge that dominated the For all others in Egypt there was no alternative story to that of the Pharaohs. But Israel had another story! It empowered their dissent. They defied an empire and changed the world. Out of their story, the story of the Exodus was able to occur, the story of the birth of the nation that would impact human civilization more than any other in history. It was the story—or more accurately, the true and living God of Israel's story—that not only liberated and transformed Israel, but that defeated imperial Egypt, the most powerful nation on earth.

Furthermore, Bradt goes on to say,

The story of Israel and the land could not be reduced to a thesis. Only the narrative tension of the stories could hold together the complexity of the revelation of God's relationship with Israel.²⁷

For Brueggemann, the stories of the Bible reveal a relationship between Israel and her God that is so complex, inexhaustible, and fraught with all kinds of confusion, dark mystery, and shocking tensions that to try to reconcile what must ultimately remain irreconcilable can only be an

²⁵ Kevin M. Bradt, *Story as a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 127.

²⁶ Bradt, *Story*, 129.

²⁷ Bradt, *Story*, 131.

exercise in futility and madness. ...It is only narrative modes of knowing and relationship that can embrace and tolerate such ambiguity, wonder, paradox, pain, grief and surprise; it is only an alternative imagination called into existence through storying that can help us understand Israel's situation as a model of our own in this postmodern age.²⁸

Brueggemann calls story "Israel's primal mode of knowing," for it is the foundation from which come all other knowledge claims we have. ... "the story can be told as a base line."²⁹

The Hebrew slaves lived out of an alternative worldview, an alternative consciousness that enabled them to defy a totalitarian state power through faith in the God of their story. Their story has since empowered other oppressed people throughout history, e.g. the African American slaves in the antebellum South of the United States. Recall the "Negro Spirituals" which sang that overcoming faith. Think of "We shall Overcome," a protest song that became a key anthem of the African-American Civil Rights Movement (1955–1968).

What Israel knows is that if the story is not believed, nothing added to it will make any difference—not more commandments, rituals, or laws. ... Israel knows that pain like story, can never be abstract or universal, so she trusts the details of both. Israel knows that long after all the dissertations have been read, defended, and forgotten, her stories will remain. It is her mission.³⁰

Story in Israel is the bottom line. It is told and left, and not hedged about by other evidences... Israel understands them not as instruments of something else, but as castings of reality.³¹

In this vein, Michael Goldberg states, "there is no issue of theological substance detachable from the stories' substance. That is, these recounting of the Exodus and the Christ are not fables, such that once their point or moral has been gleaned, the actual narratives can then be discarded."³² We cannot cash in the stories for some abstracted universal timeless truth that leaves the story behind.

²⁸ Bradt, *Story*, 131-32.

²⁹ Bradt, *Story*, 15.

³⁰ Bradt, *Story*, 157.

³¹ Bradt, *Story*, 162.

³² Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight: The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 15.



Narrative 6: Jewish *Midrash* and Story

The Jewish hermeneutical tradition that goes by the acronym PaRDeS (*peshat*, *remez*, *darash* and *sod*) has relevance to story.³³ The Hebrew word for “orchard” is “*pardes*,” which offers the helpful image of the Bible as a fruitful orchard, with truths to be picked from the tress. I will focus here on *peshat* and *darash* methods (or levels) of Biblical interpretation. In that Jewish parlance, in Hebrew, the practitioner of *peshat* was called a “*pashtan*.” The practitioner of *darash* was called a “*darshan*.” The interpretive product of the *darshan* is a *midrash*. *Midrash* is from the Hebrew root “*drsh*” meaning “to search, to seek, to examine, to investigate.”

Pashtan and Darshan

The *pashtan* and *peshat* exegesis, like the modern evangelical “historical-grammatical” exegete, aims to uncover and elucidate only what he believes to be the authorial intent and original meaning of the passage, what it meant to the first generation of its hearers. This meaning is usually thought to be a one-and-only-true, authentic meaning. The tools of the *pashtan* are technical and objective—philology, grammars, and lexicons of the

³³ **Peshat** (פֶּשֶׁט)—“plain” (“simple”), literal, direct meaning; the historical-grammatical interpretation.

Remez (רֵמֵז)—“hints” at a deeper (allegoric, symbolic or typological) meaning beyond just the literal sense; type and anti-type.

Derash (דִּרְשָׁה)—Hebrew *darash*: “inquire” (“seek”)—the interpretation, applicational teaching (midrashic) meaning (a “*darasha*” is a homily or sermon)

Sod (סוּד)—“secret” (“mystery”) or the mystical, esoteric meaning. Proceed with caution at this level. The Kabbalah is rife with this approach and needs tethers, controls, and discernment.

original languages and historical, cultural, and archeological studies. The goal of the *pashtan* approach is to arrive at the accurate and final, best reading of the text.³⁴

The tools of the *darshan* tend to be more subjective—he applies creative imagination to the text in order to squeeze out more meaning. As he deals with the narrative genre, he will not be limited by the strict rules of the *pashtan*. He knows that every Bible story has large holes—there are things that are not told in a sparse ten or twenty or even a 100-verse story. To use the anthropological term for detailed cultural description, the Biblical stories are not “thick description,” they are often thin-on-the-ground. What are the features, the motives or goals of this or that character? How does he view his fellow characters? What psychological, cultural or other factors in the biography of each character are influencing him or her in the story situation? As Israeli literary scholar Meir Sternberg, a master of the literary art of the Biblical narrative states,

From the viewpoint of what is directly given in the language, the literary work consists of bits and fragments to be linked together in the process of reading: it establishes a system of gaps to be filled in. This gap-filling ranges from simple linkages, which the reader performs automatically, to intricate networks that are figured out consciously, laboriously, hesitantly, and with constant modifications in the light of additional information disclosed in the later stages of reading.³⁵

The *darshan* aims to bring the real people and events in the story to life for the present generation or audience. He believes it to be the right and obligation of every generation of Scripture interpreters to uncover meaning that is relevant to the hearers of any generation. He believes the threat of misinterpretation (which the *pashtan* fears) is less dangerous than the threat of irrelevance. He believes Scripture has a dynamism that is translatable to the needs of people of all ages and situations in life. The needs of God’s people call for the manna of fresh *midrash*, applicable to present needs of hearts and lives. A good example of the kind of existential pressures of life that provoke new meanings and answers, is when the matriarch Rebecca was bewildered by her unusual pregnancy (the battling fetuses) and sought *Adonai*, “*v’ tilech l’drosh et Adonai*” —her need moved her to inquire, search out, seek the LORD (Gen. 25: 22, note the same root “*drsh*” as for *midrash*). *Adonai* answered her and gave her meaning.³⁶

³⁴ Noam Zion. “The Origins of Human Violence and the Crisis of the Biblical First Family: Cain and Abel in Torah, Commentary, Midrash, Art, Poetry, Movies, and Thought.” Notes from a class taught at the Shalom Hartman Institute (Jerusalem, 2014), 22.

³⁵ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 186.

³⁶ Zion, “The Origins,” 22.



Midrash Aggadah, Broadly Considered

For an example of the gap-filling, consider the story of Noah and the Great Flood. The story comprises eighty-five verses (Gen. 6:1–9:17). So eighty-five verses cover decades of tumultuous life as Noah is commissioned to oversee the humanly overwhelming and daunting task of God’s near genocide of the human race, the destruction of the world. For this story, as for all the others, the *darshan* seeks to fill in the gaps, through *imaginative reconstruction* of the gaps in the text. Another way to describe a *midrash* is as a *narrative commentary* (as opposed to a critical, analytic commentary, with lexical studies, etc.) Such imaginative reconstruction together, with drawing out applications and relevance to today, is called “*midrash*,” or a *midrash aggadah*. *Midrash halacha* is a different style, which this essay will not address.³⁷

Jewish writers and producers Darren Aronofsky and Ari Handel put an example of a *midrash* on the Noah story to the big screen in 2014. Simply called “Noah,” and starring Russell Crowe in the lead role, the movie is a visual *midrash*. The Noah story is an epic,

³⁷ Other archetypal Genesis stories which have been treated in the form we may call a literary midrashic genre, broadly considered, are Genesis 3, the Fall of Man in Eden, by John Milton in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667); Genesis 4, Cain and Abel, by John Steinbeck in his novel *East of Eden* (1952); and Genesis 27–50, the Joseph Story, by Thomas Mann in his massive *Joseph and His Brothers* (1943).

archetypal story and begs for *midrash*. In the movie, after Noah has heard from God, his wife asks him, “Noah, what did he say?” Noah says, “He is going to destroy the world.” What kind of man was this, entrusted by the Creator with overseeing such a daunting, overwhelming venture? The human drama of this for Noah and his family, their relatives and neighbors would have included times of high anxiety, tension, and emotion. These were real flesh and blood people, like you and me. That Noah got drunk and naked in his tent after it was all over is surely human realism. After years of high stress, Noah unwound, released his inhibitions, his inner moral restraints had collapsed. Compare this with the Sunday School sanitized versions of saintly old Noah with his long white beard, with all the gentle animals, represented by this children’s song,

“The Lord told Noah to build him an arky, arky,
The Lord told Noah to build him an arky, arky,
Build it out of gopher barky, barky, children of the Lord.”

These are surely crafted and edited versions of the story, more distant from the way it most likely really was than is Aronofsky’s and Handel’s visual *midrash*. Brad Jersak commented on the “evangelical panic” caused by the movie in his blog after “Noah” was released,

I don’t think anyone should be surprised at the usual course of Evangelical reactions decrying the movie for its “biblical inaccuracies.” ... Of course, citing inaccuracies implies that the measure of faithfulness to Scripture is somehow photocopying Genesis 6–9 into the screenplay in a sort of word for word depiction. It’s this paint-by-numbers mentality that keeps many an Evangelical trapped within the lines of their own assumptions—as if taking the text literally was remotely akin to taking it seriously. Not so!³⁸

Those who love Scripture and want to see its stories reach the broadest possible audience have cause to applaud this visual *midrash*, the “Noah” movie. The *Christian Post* reported in the days following the release of the movie, “Two of the most popular online destinations for Bible readers reported robust increases in traffic in the first book of the Old Testament following the release of ‘Noah’ last week.”³⁹ YouVersion reported that “in the days after Noah hit theaters, people opening the Noah story in Genesis 6 increased about 300% in US & 245% globally on @YouVersion.”⁴⁰ Bible Gateway reported that “visits to the Noah story in Genesis 6–9 at Bible Gateway saw a 223% increase over the previous weekend.”⁴¹

³⁸ Brad Jersak, “Noah: Who Are the Watchers and Why the Panic?,” *Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, March 31, 2014, accessed December 14, 2014, http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/03/noah-who-are-the-watchers-and-why-the-panic-by-brad-jersak.html.

³⁹ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/noah-movie-sparks-massive-spike-in-global-reading-of-bible-book-of-genesis-117334/>.

⁴⁰ <https://twitter.com/YouVersion/status/451415236675764224>.

⁴¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2014/04/noah-generates-a-flood-of-bible-readers-over-the-weekend/>.

The *Christian Post* reported that “in addition to YouVersion, an app of the Scriptures which hit 100 million downloads last summer, and the website, BibleGateway, Google trends also showed a spike in substantial increase in search queries for the Old Testament text” as a result of the Noah movie.⁴² “Film analysts believe that ‘Noah’ attracted a wider audience, and not just the religious, due to Hollywood touches given to the film by Aronofsky.”⁴³ “‘It certainly feels like the “biggest” film of 2014,’ Tim Briody, analyst for Box Office Prophets, told USA Today.”⁴⁴

The movie stimulated the public interest in the story of Noah, making people wonder what the real original story is about, and why it is so compelling. It stirs people to go home and look it up in the Bible. Because this was a mainstream Hollywood film, the number of people and the demographic segment of people reached by this movie was far greater than would have been by a Christian movie about Noah. This gives Bible-believers opportunity to tell the more accurate story to those with awakened interest in the home and work places of social life. The producer of “Noah,” Aronofsky, is not a follower of Messiah Yeshua. This begs the question—*What if Messianic Jews would produce movies, which would be even more accurate to the Biblical text than Aronofsky’s production, but that would have as large a public impact?*

“Noah” was controversial and featured much imaginative reconstruction, some of which piqued some people’s sensibilities.⁴⁵ In the Jewish style of midrashic discussion, if one does not like someone else’s picturing of events to fill the gaps, they can offer their own; in synergistic conversation milking the story for all its true worth. This, while always avoiding notions that flatly contradict the text of the story, or the kind of fanciful allegorizations such as those spun out from the parables by many church fathers.⁴⁶ (See **Narrative 8** below).

⁴² <http://www.christianpost.com/news/noah-movie-sparks-massive-spike-in-global-reading-of-bible-book-of-genesis-117334/>.

⁴³ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/hollywoods-noah-tops-box-office-with-44m-debut-117091/>.

⁴⁴ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/noah-movie-sparks-massive-spike-in-global-reading-of-bible-book-of-genesis-117334/>.

⁴⁵ The “watchers” in the film were shocking to some. They were sort of sci-fi creatures, having fallen from heaven into molten lava. When the lava hardened to stone, they were lumbering rocky creatures. The angelic “watchers” are mentioned in canonical Scripture in Daniel 4:13, 17, and 23. They are featured in the apocryphal books of I Enoch and Jubilees. The New Testament epistles of Peter allude to angels who were disobedient in the days of Noah who had fallen (1 Pet. 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:4-5; Jude 6). The epistles state they are kept “in prison” and “Tartarus,” (in 2 Pet. 2:4, a term borrowed from Greek mythology, for a place lower than Hades), whereas Aronofsky and Handel’s movie has them wandering the earth, helping men, and some return to heaven in light form, escaping their stony condition. Jude cites 1 Enoch in Jude 14-15 directly (probably 1 Enoch 1:9), stating that Enoch (the great-grandfather of Noah) himself had uttered these prophecies. If Peter and Jude can allude to them, surely a visual midrashic version of the Noah story can legitimately do so and imaginatively depict what they were like. There is enough mystery here to allow speculation. No one owns or has copyright to the Biblical stories; they are surely in the public domain. And if they were thought to have ownership, they belonged to the Jewish people before ever they did to evangelical Christians.

⁴⁶ The teacher-storyteller is responsible to clarify and correct when a *midrash* or interpretation of a story is offered that does clearly contradict the authoritative inspired written text of a Bible story. In the

Known among some in the broader guild of Bible teachers are two helpful alliterative rules-of-thumb that provide hermeneutical tethers to restrain midrashic exploration, if we want to still consider a *midrash* within the pale of an application of the inspired Scripture. A tether is a rope or a leash that restrains, usually an animal. An interpretation, application or imaginative reconstruction of story may be tested by these “Four P’s” and “Four D’s”:

<i>Provable</i>		<i>Dogma</i>
<i>Probable</i>	OR	<i>Debatable</i>
<i>Possible</i>		<i>Doubtful</i>
<i>Phiction (Fiction)</i>		<i>Deniable</i>

When the midrashic exploration reaches the “Phiction” and “Deniable” zone, that is to say that it clearly contradicts the Biblical text, then the storyteller-teacher must state unambiguously that this is no longer the Biblical story; it is outside the pale of the Biblical account. One is free to write fiction, but such should no longer be considered an application of the Word of God.

We will always need careful *pashtans*, the strict exegetes and their technical tools to stay loyal to the historical meaning of texts, especially for the non-narrative genres. However, Messianic Jews and evangelicals today need to recover and ply the approach of the *darshan*—*imaginative reconstruction* of the Bible stories, using good questions to search out, and to squeeze out more and relevant meaning from the inexhaustible treasures of the Word of God. We need to fear less a misinterpretation of the historical-grammatical one-and-only true meaning (if there is such in stories) and fear more the relegation of Scripture to irrelevance. The stories are rich and deep, having multiple applications; they should not be reduced to or frozen to one exegete’s one-and-only true best rendering.⁴⁷

case of the Noah movie, the most glaring dissonance with the Biblical story was the way the character of Noah was portrayed as having so badly misunderstood the Creator that he believed that he and his family were also to be destroyed and only the animals were to be saved, this to the extreme point of planning to kill his two granddaughters to help the Creator exterminate every last human being. These notions clearly reach the zone of “Phiction” and the “Deniable” and the tethers apply (See alliterative “Four P’s” and “Four D’s” above). This confusion in Noah was perhaps because, in the movie, God never speaks audibly or in clear language to Noah. This contradicts the authoritative Biblical story that states in Genesis 6:9b “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.” (ESV). And it states God spoke clear and intelligible instructions to Noah, quoting the words of God, which included the promise of a covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:13; 7:1; 8:15; 9:1, 8, 12). However, considering the possible choices by the characters in the story, choices they could have made but did not make (such possible, hypothetical ones as portrayed in the movie), illumines on the choices they did make (as told in the Bible). Noah *could have* acted as confused as he was in this movie version, but did not. God *could have* been as silent as He was in this movie, but He was not. What light does this *midrash* then throw upon the way they did speak and act in the Biblical story?

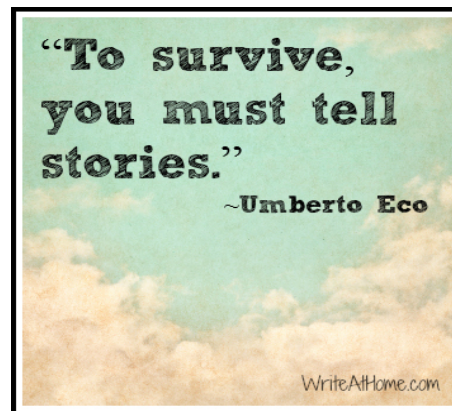
⁴⁷ In Jewish tradition there is the notion of “*Shiv'im Panim l' Torah* (לְתוֹרָה פְּנִיִּים שְׁבַעִים)”—“‘The Torah has 70 faces.’ This phrase is sometimes used to indicate different ‘levels’ of interpretation of the Torah. ‘There are seventy faces to the Torah: Turn it around and around, for everything is in it’ (*Bamidbar Rabba* 13:15). The Torah is a work of literary art, written by the LORD Himself, and therefore shares characteristics with all other works of art.” (Parsons, John J., “Hebrew for Christians,” accessed Dec. 14, 2014, http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Seventy_Faces/seventy_faces.html.) This should be

A good storyteller-teacher (*darshan*) will be able to guide a group's discussion if it gets way out of hand. We can trust the story itself and the work of the Holy Spirit to attend to His Word, applying it to the needs of the hearts and lives of any group who hears it, across cultures and generations, in multiple and various applications. Such formative work is divine and out of the *pashtan's* or the *darshan's* hands.⁴⁸

Narrative 7: The Power of Story

Victor E. Frankl (1905–1997), Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, is well-known for reporting that concentration camp inmates who maintained hope and meaning were likely to survive longer. Those who lost hope and meaning were likely to die sooner. A story is often what gives a person meaning and hope. So there is truth to this saying,

The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.⁴⁹



interpreted as hyperbole for those accepting the authority of the New Covenant Scriptures. Controls and tethers must be applied so as not to fall into a Kabbalistic, esoteric mode. However, the notion of the “70 Faces of the Torah” jars us away from the only-one-true meaning literalist mode when dealing with stories, and is a reminder of the depth and riches of the inspired Word of God. When interpreting the non-narrative genre, like the law codes of Deuteronomy or Pauline epistles, careful historical-grammatical exegesis must be used; but stories have multiple, many-faceted interpretations and applications.

⁴⁸ A missionary to Africa tells of the African bush lady who heard the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. She heard the story and then said, “I've never seen a man turn down such an opportunity. I want to know the God behind this man. This God must be very powerful to help Joseph turn down such a temptation.” The storyteller reminded her that this story was not evangelistic, but God used it to bring her to faith in Yeshua. The authorial intent of the Genesis story was to show God's power to preserve Joseph through the testing of Joseph's character to by resisting temptation, but the nature of story allows it to be used evangelistically. (Personal correspondence with Larry Dinkins, as told him by African indigenous Christian leaders in a “Simply the Story” summit meeting. Hemet, California, September, 2014).

⁴⁹ Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*. Illustrations by Tom Pohrt (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), 48.

Stories are innate and primal in human nature and experience. All human civilizations ever studied have had their bards and storytellers, persons who were repositories of the stories that gave meaning and identity to a people. Everyone loves a story. Every person's life is a story, with plot twists and a parade of interesting characters. Sharing stories brings people intimately together. When we hear stories, we identify with characters in the story who dealt with situations like we face. We learn vicariously through the truths we draw from the story. A story features real life, concrete situations like our own. A story touches us at deeper levels than abstract propositions or stated principles can. A story can penetrate our imagination, conscience, and emotions, touching us at a deep personal level. Someone has observed, "If a picture is worth a thousand words; a good story's worth a million pictures."⁵⁰

Insights from Rabbis about Story

According to a well-received Jewish tradition, it was King Solomon who, if not invented, popularized the parable, at least in Israel. "The Torah until Solomon's time," commented Rabbi Nachman in the *Aggada*, "was comparable to a labyrinth with a bewildering number of rooms. Once one entered there, one lost his way out. Then along came Solomon and invented the parable that has served as a ball of thread. When tied at the entrance to this labyrinth it serves as a secure guide through all the winding, bewildering passages."⁵¹

Taking up the thought, Rabbi Nachman's colleague, Rabbi Hanina, said:

Until the time of Solomon the Torah could have been compared to a well full of refreshing water, but because of its extraordinary depth no one could get to the bottom. What was necessary was to find a rope long enough to tie to the bucket in order to bring up the water. Solomon made up this rope with his parables and thus enables everyone to reach to the profoundest depths of the well.⁵²

Indeed, Story gives us "a rope long enough" to reach the depths. So actually, re-digging the wells of Story may actually mean simply reaching the bottom of the already existing wells of salvation. Poet Emily Dickinson put it well in saying, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." Often modern Western preachers and teachers think of stories as mere illustrations or "icing on the cake" of a lecture type sermon. The real cake, the substance they think, is the more abstract, propositional truth in logical, told in bald statement-of-fact form. Rabbi Hanina knew that stories were the rope that reaches to the profoundest depths of the well.

⁵⁰ <http://www.clickz.com/clickz/column/2216868/if-a-pictures-worth-a-thousand-words-a-good-stories-worth-a-million-pictures>.

⁵¹ Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York: Crown Publisher's, Inc., 1948), 56.

⁵² Ausubel, ed., *Treasury*, 56.

Rabbi Jacob ben Wolf Kranz of Dubno, known as the “Dubner Maggid,” was a Lithuanian-born preacher who lived from 1740 to 1804. “*Maggid*” is Hebrew for storyteller (from the same Hebrew root as “*Aggadah*” and “*Haggadah*”). A contemporary of the Vilna Gaon, the “Maggid” was famous for explaining Torah concepts by using a *mashal* or parable. Moses Mendelssohn named Kranz, “the Jewish Aesop.”⁵³ The Dubner Maggid was once asked, “Why do you always tell stories? Why are stories so powerful?” Kranz’s legendary reply was to answer by telling the following story. It is a story about the power of stories :

There was once a poor old woman. She was, well... ugly... very ugly. She had a bent back and hooked nose. Her chin was covered with warts and pimples. Her eyes bugged out. Her mouth was crooked and her teeth broken. She dressed in old rags that smelled. No one would listen to what she said or even look at her. If they saw her they would run away, or slam doors in her face. So she was very sad because all she wished for was some company, some companionship. But no one would pay attention to her or talk to her. So she wandered from place to place looking for friends.

She crossed a great desert and came to a city in the middle of the desert. She thought to herself “Surely I’ll find friends in this city. People in the desert know how hard life is and will take pity on me, and I’ll find a friend.” But, alas, this city was like all the rest. People ran away and slammed doors or closed their shutters. No one would talk to her or listen to her. She became very upset. “Why go on? What’s the point? Life is too hard. I think I should just give up on life” So she wandered out of the city and sat down on the dusty road just outside the city. She waited, watching life pass her by.

Before long a good-looking young man dressed in beautiful clothes arrived in the city and received a great reception. The people came out to shake his hand. Some even hugged him. They brought him food and drink and lavished him with gifts. The old woman said, “Life is so unfair. When you are young and good looking, everyone loves you, but when you are old, ugly and sick, they forget you and ignore you. It is so unfair!” After a while the young man gathered up his gifts, said “Good-bye,” and headed out of the city. He stopped on the dusty road and sat down opposite the old woman to pack up his gifts.

The old woman could keep her tongue no longer, “What is going on? What’s with you? Is it like this everywhere you go? Do you always get treated so well?”

⁵³ Eliezer Steinberg, ed., *The Jewish Book of Fables* (Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, 2003), xii.

The young man blushed and said, “Well... yes... I guess... Everywhere I go they treat me well.”

“Well, why? Why?! You must be someone special! Someone extraordinary,” said the old woman.

The young man said, “Oh, no, Ma’am! Actually, I am quite ordinary.”

“I don’t believe it. You must be an emperor, a king in disguise, or a prince or a general,” she said.

“Oh no...I am not like that...I am very common. You find me everywhere--me and my type,” he said.

“Well then, what are you? said the old woman. “Who are you that people are so happy to see you when you come along?”

“Well, I am a Story, and I think I am a pretty good Story at that. Because people like a good story they are happy to see me. But, old woman, what are you? Who are you? Why don’t people like to see you?” asked the young man.

“Ah, that is the problem. It’s what I am. I am Truth, and nobody likes to hear the truth.

(Narrator: This may seem a bit strange to some of you...but when you think about it what the old woman said is really true, isn’t it? ... If someone said to you, “I’m going to tell you what your friends really say behind your back. Do you really want to hear it? If you are destined to die a horrible death, or to die early, do you really want to know the naked truth about that now? No, some truth is ugly, especially truth about ourselves. We avoid it, we resist it, we don't want to know it).

The young man said, “I’m sorry about that.” He then began to think how he could help the old woman. “I’ve got an idea, old woman,” he said. “Let’s team up...let’s journey together! You and I can travel together and wherever I go, you’ll go. Anything I am given, I’ll share with you.”

“That won’t work,” she said. “They’ll see me. They’ll take one look and run away from both of us!”

“No, you don’t understand! You’ll hide behind me—behind my cloak. Whatever they give me I’ll share equally with you. Let’s try it.”

The woman agreed, and they partnered up and travelled together.
Wherever they went, the old woman hid behind the young man's cloak,
and anything he was given he happily shared with the old woman.

This worked out so well that their arrangement lasts to this very day. That
is why to this very day *the truth always hides behind a good story*.

(Above is Bjoraker's version of the tale that is told in many variants, often
under the title "Truth and Parable.")

This story has also been put nicely into verse form by Heather Forest, in "Naked Truth
and Parable."

Naked Truth and Parable

Naked Truth walked down the street one day.
People turned their eyes the other way.

Parable arrived draped in decoration.
People greeted parable with celebration.

Naked Truth sat alone, sad and unattired.
"Why are you so miserable?" Parable inquired.

Naked Truth replied, "I'm not welcome anymore.
No one wants me. They chase me from their door."

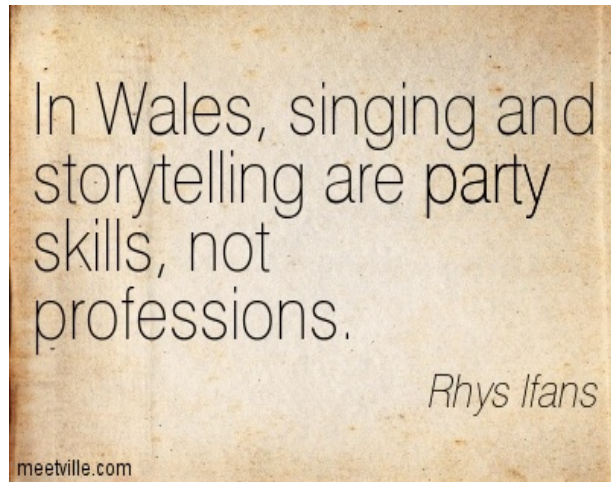
"It is hard to look at Naked Truth," Parable explained.
"Let me dress you up a bit. Your welcome will be gained."

Parable dressed Naked Truth in Story's fine attire,
With metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire.

With laughter and tears and adventure to unveil,
Together they went forth to spin a tale.

People opened their doors and served them their best.
Naked Truth dressed in Story was a welcome guest.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Heather Forest, *Wisdom Tales From Around the World* (Little Rock: August House, 1996), ii.



“Let Me Write the Songs of a Nation....”

“Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes their laws.”

“Let me make the ballads of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.”

The above are two variations on this saying are attributed to Andrew Fletcher (1653–1716), a Scottish writer, politician, and patriot As a politician he was a keen observer of what it takes to start a movement of social change, even revolution, in a society. Songs are surely more effective than laws to change the hearts and minds of the masses.

A good story is powerful in itself. Put it to music and verse and it heightens the power to cast vision, to inspire, and to motivate social groups. If you want to know what people hold as valuable, look to the songs.

King Saul, Israel’s first monarch, found this out as the increasingly storied David was celebrated in the streets, the women singing and dancing to,


*“Saul has slain his thousands,
David his ten thousands.”*

The story became a ballad that permeated and mobilized the whole culture. King Saul correctly observed after this, that “Now what more can he [David] have but the kingdom?” (1 Sam. 18:6-8). Saul’s “law” had been overtaken by the songs of the people.

For a culture-change phenomenon from our times, consider how powerfully the music of the 1960s (the debut of rock and roll to the masses) both expressed and shaped the culture then and until the present time. It is often underestimated just how powerfully that music shaped late modern culture. Award-winning British documentary film maker, Leslie Woodhead, produced a documentary entitled “How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin”

aired by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).⁵⁵ In 2009 WNET produced a documentary showing how the Beatles' music was a strong factor contributing to the collapse of the USSR. The film argues persuasively that their music—banned in the USSR and bootlegged by teenagers—inspired dreams of hope and freedom of expression for a whole generation, which eventually led to the demise of communism. Little did the dour totalitarian rulers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics know that their iron laws would be brought down (at least in part) by songs.

The Psalms are Israel's Song Book. They have been profitably put to music ever since the days of King David, by Jews and Christians. The Psalms express "an anatomy of all parts of the soul," according to John Calvin.⁵⁶ This feature of the Psalms is a major reason for their endurance and widespread popularity of the Psalms in every Jewish and Christian tradition. They help us express our souls *vertically*, to God. What if we could put the stories of Scripture into the contemporary and beloved and popular forms of music as inspired ballads, and into more dramatic visual and film media to express these stories (which reach all parts of the soul) *horizontally* to society today and to each generation?



“If you want to learn about a culture, listen to the stories. If you want to change the culture, change the stories.”

The Nathan Principle

What follows is a Biblical example of truth hiding behind a good story. Imagine with me: Had Nathan the prophet approached King David, after his sin with Bath Sheba, and told him the propositional truth—“You have committed adultery and murder, O King. You have broken four of the Ten Commandments.” Would the King have readily received this truth? Likely not. He may have rid himself of this troublesome prophet. Off with his

⁵⁵ <http://www.thirteen.org/beatles/video/video-watch-how-the-beatles-rocked-the-kremlin/>.

⁵⁶ John Calvin, *A Commentary On the Psalms of David* (Oxford: Talboys, 1840), 1: vi.

head! He did not want to hear the ugly, naked truth. But instead of presenting him with the naked truth, Nathan told him a story,

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him” (2 Sam. 12:1-14 ESV).

This story brought David into a house and opened a window for him to see. He could see vividly the injustice done. David bought into the story. He was caught in the powerful rhetorical trap of the story. The King became enraged and said, “*As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die! ... and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity*” (2 Sam. 12:5, 6). David thus judged himself. Nathan said, “*You are the man!*” Nathan has opened a window, which became a mirror to David. Herein is the power of story to bring truth home to the heart and core of a person.

A story is an oblique way of coming at truth and helpful in getting past the defenses of a hearer or audience. Bible storyteller and trainer Dorothy Miller calls this “the Nathan Principle,”⁵⁷ and adds this word as explicating its effect, “See, the Word of God is alive! It is at work and is sharper than any double-edged sword—it cuts right through to where soul meets spirit and joints meet marrow, and it is quick to judge the inner reflections and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12, CJB).⁵⁸ Direct route communication and processing uses argumentation; peripheral route processing circumvents argumentation to a deeper place in the heart. This is critically needed in Jewish evangelism because of the high resistance among Jewish people to direct communication of the Gospel. This is the “The Nathan principle.”

⁵⁷ <http://simplythestory.org/oralbiblestories/index.php/practitioner-audio.html>

⁵⁸ Dorothy A. Miller, *Simply the Story Handbook* (Hemet, CA: The God’s Story Project, 2012).

DATA SATISFY THE ANALYTICAL PART OF OUR BRAINS. 
BUT STORIES TOUCH OUR HEARTS. 

Narrative 8: Yeshua the Messiah: Master Teacher and Storyteller

In the Western tradition, especially following the Enlightenment, serious theology largely developed in the form of ideas held together by logic (linear, syllogistic logic) and reason. The more intelligent the theologian, the more abstract his writing became and difficult for the average person to understand—think of the German theologians of the 19th and 20th centuries. Whittaker Chambers commented on the deadening nature of much of this,

Theology is jawbreakingly abstract and its mood is widely felt to be about as embracing as an unaired vestry.... God has become, at best, a fairly furtive presence, a lurking luminosity, a cozy thought.⁵⁹

We can term these academic systematic theologians, *conceptual theologians*. This is not to say that conceptual theologizing and writing is wrong or without value. But in the modern West, we have majored on the conceptual in theological education, to the neglect of the more Hebraic concrete and narrative approach. Yeshua, by contrast, was not a conceptual theologian.

Jesus was a *metaphorical* theologian. That is, his primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, simile, parable, and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than like philosopher.”⁶⁰

In fact we are told, “He did not say a thing to them without using a parable; when he was alone with his own *talmidim* he explained everything to them” (Mark 4:34, CJB).

⁵⁹ Os Guinness, *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image*. Trinity Forum Study Series (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2000), 208.

⁶⁰ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 279.

Was Yeshua then but a simple teller of folktales for fisherman and farmers? Hardly. Could Yeshua have given the most erudite, learned, scholarly lecture of any of his contemporaries? ...or ours? Of course he could have. When he was twelve years old he amazed the learned rabbis in the Temple with the profundity of his knowledge and wisdom (Luke 3:46). He of course was the most profound of theologians. But his primary teaching method was through stories, word pictures, and metaphors.

A metaphor communicates in ways that a rational argument cannot. Recalling C.S. Lewis' insight here that "*reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition*"⁶¹—a word or concept takes on meaning when we have a clear image with which to connect it with. Recent studies in brain science confirms this—parts of the brain light up when meaning happens, when words stimulate images in the brain.

And when the listener or disciple discovers the meaning himself (the "Aha! moment), then he or she retains that truth much better, "owning" that truth. If facts are spoon fed in by lecture or monologue to a more passive mind or a mind that cannot connect a concept to an image (imagine it), they may "go in one ear and out the other" as the saying goes.

Yeshua's use of stories as His primary teaching method was not merely due to his cultural context; story is a more universal means of communicating. Stories are what stick in hearts and minds, because they address both right and left brain; intellect and imagination. In short, stories grip the heart, and as the proverb says, "... out of the heart are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23).

Another major reason Yeshua's method of choice for teaching is the story is that a lecture often only speaks to the mind; it provides data or information that may, or may not, not effect that person's heart or will. By contrast, a story with its characters with which the story-hearers will identify, either positively or negatively, evokes response. The choices of the characters evoke a heart response (emotions and conscience). Thus the story stirs and stimulates moral responses that can lead to change and character growth in the listener. Yeshua was after moral decisions and character transformation in his followers.

⁶¹ Ward, "How Lewis Lit the Way," 38.



If theology were only a matter of intellectual conceptualization, then unbelievers could be as good at teaching theology as are people of faith and devotion to God. All one would need would be a bright mind and a will to work. But Yeshua taught that there is a moral pre-condition or prerequisite to really understanding God and His ways. He taught this truth through the masterful parable of the sower:

When Yeshua was alone, the people around him with the Twelve asked him about the parables. He answered them, ‘To you the secret of the Kingdom of God has been given; but to those outside, everything is in parables, so that *‘they may be always looking but never seeing; always listening but never understanding. Otherwise, they might turn and be forgiven!’*” [Quoted from Isa. 6:9-10]. Then Yeshua said to them, ‘Don’t you understand this parable? How will you be able to understand any parable?’ (Mark 4:10-13, CJB).

Yeshua taught that this moral condition—a truth-seeking heart—is the key to all theological understanding, light and truth.

Yeshua did also make propositional statements and teach concepts, but he did so with those whose hearts were inclined to the truth. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” he said (Matt. 5:8). Jesus gave an example of a very clear propositional concept, actually an axiom, when he stated to the seeker Nicodemus,

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works

should be exposed. But whoever *does what is true comes to the light*, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God (John 3:19-21 emphasis added).

Only those who love the light and truth will come to see and understand it. As Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) deftly observed, “Things human must be known to be loved: things divine must be loved to be known.”⁶² And “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of. . . . We know the truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart.”⁶³

The Parable as a House

Often in the Western preaching tradition, preachers use stories as “illustrations” to exemplify, or represent an abstract idea, principle, or proposition. As Bailey points out, however,

A metaphor, however, is not an illustration of an idea, it is a mode of theological discourse. The metaphor does more than explain meaning, it creates meaning. A parable is an extended metaphor, and as such it is not a delivery system for an idea, but a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence.⁶⁴

Expanding upon Bailey’s metaphor of a parable as “a house in which the listener/reader is invited to take up residence,” that person is then urged by the parable to look on the world through the windows of the residence. We could say that the parable creates a worldview of its own and that the listener is encouraged to examine the human predicament and the worldview created by the parable (with its cultural and historical context).

In Western tradition the parables of Yeshua have been abused in two major ways. First, in the early centuries, allegory reigned supreme. The Greek Church fathers applied allegorization to the parables. Their fancies ran wild. So the fatted calf in the Story of the Two Sons (or “The Prodigal Son,” Luke 15) came to be a symbol for Christ, because Christ was killed. Or have a look at Augustine’s treatment of the Story of the Good Samaritan. Every detail of the story was given allegorical meanings by the readers; indeed, these special meanings kept accumulating over time. Here is a list of Augustine’s allegorizations:

The man going down to Jericho = Adam
Jerusalem, from which he was going = City of Heavenly Peace
Jericho = The moon which signifies our mortality (This is a play on the Hebrew terms for

⁶² Philip S. Moxom, “The Insufficiency of Religious Toleration,” in *Addresses Before the New York Conference of Religion*, ed. James M. Whiton (New York: The New York State Conference of Religion, 1903), 93.

⁶³ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal’s Pensees* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1958), 282.

⁶⁴ Bailey, *Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 280.

Jericho and moon which both look and sound alike)
Robbers = Devil and his angels
Stripping him = Taking away his immortality
Beating him = Persuading him to sin
Leaving him half dead = Because of sin, he was dead spiritually, but half alive, because of the knowledge of God
Priest = Priesthood of the Old Testament (Law)
Levite = Ministry of the Old Testament (Prophets)
Good Samaritan = Christ
Binding of wounds = Restraint of sin
Oil = Comfort of good hope
Wine = Exhortation to spirited work
Animal = Body of Christ
Inn = Church
Two denarii = Two commandments to love
Innkeeper = Apostle Paul
Return of the Good Samaritan = Resurrection of Christ ⁶⁵

One quickly sees the problem. How could this story have meant any of these things to the original hearers? With no hermeneutical tether or controls, it is a fanciful free-for-all. Secondly, and in reaction to allegorization, the twentieth century interpreters argued for “one point per parable.” They swung too far in the other direction to protect the parable from wild allegorizations. But if a parable is “a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence” then the one who takes up dwelling in that house will find that there are a variety of rooms in the house, from which he or she can look out on the world from different windows.

Among the audiences who listen to the story, there will be various needs, concerns, perspectives, and issues going on with and in that person. As the listener hears the story, he or she (with the aid of the Holy Spirit) will hear and apply aspects of the story that speak to his or her needs. There are rich moral and theological treasures in a Bible story or parable. Bailey calls this “*the theological cluster*” of themes in a given parable.⁶⁶ Each theme is in creative relation to the others. A hearer will latch on to that theme that resonates with his/her situation or need.

The content of the “cluster” (so as not to be wild allegorical fancy) must be controlled by: 1) What Jesus’ original hearers could have understood from the story, and 2) by what is consistent with the content of the whole story. In digging out the treasures in the story we should not find things that are not there (like the church fathers did), or contradictory to the story. We can ask, “Do you observe that in the story? Where do you see that in the story? Is the story really indicating that?” In application questions we can ask: “Are there

⁶⁵ Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 46.

⁶⁶ Bailey, *Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 282.

situations today in which people say, do and/or act the way the people in the story did? If so, what does that look like today?” And, “How does this story address that? What guidance, correction, or hope does this story offer for people in such situations today?” In the application, the Holy Spirit may apply an aspect of the story to hearts in ways the original hearers could not have anticipated.

It is said that, “*Story invites you into the room, but does not tell you where to sit.*” You will choose to sit near to, and to look out from, the window on to the world from the direction or angle of your needs, concerns, interests or situation in life. In this way the story, and the teacher through the story, gently respects the free will and dignity of the hearers. This is the genius of the story or parable as a teaching approach.

Narrative 9: The Postmodern Moment and Its Prospects for Story

The kind of knowledge and presentation of knowledge prized in the modern era since the European Enlightenment can be illustrated by this excerpt from John Steinbeck. It contrasts two ways of viewing the sierra fish—one is a scientific analytic view, the other is full-orbed, mediating a holistic experience of the fish; a storied view. Though such can easily be embellished into the proverbial “fish story” and become fictional, certainly the thick description, the storied view captures more reality than the scientific reductionist view.

The Mexican sierra [fish] has “XVII-15-IX” spines in the dorsal fin. These can easily be counted. But if the sierra strikes hard on the line so that our hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being—an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman. The only way to count the spines of the sierra unaffected by this second relational reality is to sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff colorless fish from the formalin solution, count the spines, and write the truth: “D. XVII-15-IX.” There you have recorded a reality which cannot possibly be assailed—probably the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself.⁶⁷

The philosophical and cultural trends that began in the Enlightenment (rejection of religious authority, utilitarianism, disengaged reason issuing into rationalism, scientism, and secular liberalism) played out to a crisis in the 1960s disillusionments, revolutions, moral decline. The baby boom generation was the first to experience at the popular cultural level the consequences of what is called the “postmodern shift,” or “late modernity” (because the postmodern is still also modern).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995), 2.

⁶⁸ Bjoraker, “Faith,” 9-74.

The consequences of the postmodern shift are mostly morally and spiritually negative from a Biblical worldview perspective. But the cultural shift also proffers opportunities. Sociologists concerned with the postmodern shift describe our times as being characterized by “incredulity to metanarratives.”⁶⁹ The grand metanarratives that have driven modernity— Progress and the Perfectibility of Man through Science, Industrialism, Communism, Fascism, and other “isms”—have largely become “wasms” at the turn of the 21st century; they have lost their compelling power, no longer holding the same credibility.

Thus, the Western world is searching for a new metanarrative. In the Middle East, Islamism, especially in the ISIS, or the Islamic State (IS) movement, is advancing a powerfully renewed metanarrative of the seventh century caliphate that shall rule the world by the sword. Western angry young men are susceptible to being recruited to this story because of the loss of a vital one envisioning and energizing them in the late modern West. There is a receptive climate in the twenty-first century in which to communicate God’s master story.

Daniel Pink has argued that our postmodern moment in Western history is a time of “right brain rising.” To put very simply the argument of his book: “*Left brain direction*” (rational, scientific, analytic, text-oriented, logical, linear, sequential, detail-oriented) was dominant during modernity. “*Right brain direction*” (artistic, aesthetic, emotional and relational expression, literary, synthesis, non-linear, context-oriented, big-picture, holistic, image, metaphor, and story-orientation) is rising in postmodernity out of human hunger for its lack during modernity. Right brain aptitudes are increasingly desired and needed. Left brain direction remains necessary, but it is no longer sufficient. We need a “whole new mind,” a holistic mind.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁷⁰ Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).



The larger metanarrative is the coming of Kingdom of God, His glory among the nations, inaugurated by Messiah’s first coming, advancing now throughout This Age, the restoration of Israel, and to be consummated as His Second Coming and into the Age to Come. A spiritual renewal of the Zionist story and the American founding story infused by the Biblical master story can bring national revitalization to Israel and the United States. Thus, our moment in history is an auspicious one for a renewal and revival of storytelling in Messianic Jewish ministry and for reaching the world.

From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg

Another dimension of the momentous shift of our times is the communications revolution. Our current digital revolution is certainly a cultural megashift. Communications theorists tell us that the world has experienced only three major communications eras. There have been only three inventions that have served as hinges of history: 1) Writing and Reading 2) Printing 3) Electronic Media. The printing press changed the world and marked the end of the Middle Ages and opened a portal to the “Gutenberg Galaxy.”⁷¹ The personal computer, made accessible to the masses, opened the portal to the “Digital Galaxy.”⁷² Note also that the “Digitality Era” has more similarities with the Orality Era than it does with the Textuality Era. This led Thomas Pettit to describe the Textuality Era as more of a “Gutenberg Parenthesis”, a mere interruption in the broader arc of human communication. Our digital media culture has brought us back again to a more original orality. The new kinds of literacy needed for the digitality era are in some ways closer to the orality era. The three communication eras are compared in the following table:

⁷¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

⁷² Charles Madinger, “A Literate’s Guide to the Oral Galaxy,” *Orality Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013).

TABLE 2 – THREE COMMUNICATION ERAS

Orality Era	Textuality Era	Digitorality Era
Invention of the alphabet & writing (circa. 2000 BC)	Invention of movable type printing (Gutenberg, 1437),	Invention of personal computers and the Internet (1980s)
Pre-literate	Print literacy	Digital literacy
Ancient	Modern	Post- or Late Modern
Events, Stories	Words, Ideas	Images, Stories, Ideas
Oral communication by all, Storytellers, oral tradition.	Books, newspapers, libraries, printed matter.	Television, personal computers, plethora of electronic i-devices, etc.
Right Brain Dominant	Left Brain Dominant	Left & Right Brain Needed
Oral Galaxy	Gutenberg Galaxy	Digital Galaxy

When media changes, people are changed by those media. A question many observers are asking is—will our dependence on this new media rewire our brains? Younger generations today, though they are literate, have been conditioned by the digital revolution to prefer to get their information not from reading print, but from other electronic media. This mentality is termed “secondary orality” by orality and literacy theorist Walter Ong, a term he coined for the new electronically mediated culture of spoken, as contrasted with written, language.⁷³ The new media advances secondary orality, and secondary orality in turn is decreasing print literacy. This is not an entirely happy development. The loss of literacy is not a good thing.



⁷³ Ong, *Orality*, 11.

One thing seems clear and constant, however. Humans are *homo narrans*. All humans are hard-wired for story, as part of the *Imago Dei* within us. Story and storytelling will always matter. And it matters more in the “Digital Galaxy” than it did in the “Gutenberg Galaxy.” Late modern people do not, will not read their printed Bibles as much as they read their smart phones. But they will engage with oral, face-to-face Bible storytelling, and through Facebook, YouTube, and Ning. Mark Zuckerberg invented Facebook, so Samuel Chiang of the “International Orality Network” deftly termed the transition we are experiencing as, “From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg.”⁷⁴ (Chiang 2014:4)



It is of interest that that Zuckerberg is Jewish. Jewish people, especially gifted in communication, have always been at the vortex of history-making movements and part of intellectual and culture-change movements. From the Israel’s prophets and the Messiah’s apostles, to journalist Theodore Herzl’s envisioning and writing “The Jewish State,” to the modern building of the Hollywood movie industry, Jewish people have been in the communications business, and in the storytelling business. May the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement be at the vanguard, at the vortex, leading the way in creatively re-telling God’s master story to the masses! The “People of the Book” are the “People of the Story.”

⁷⁴ Samuel E. Chiang “Learning from My Own Mistakes,” *Mission Frontiers*, May-June 2014, 1, accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/from-the-guest-editor>.

“If people aren’t taught the language of sound and images, shouldn’t they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read or write?”

George Lucas

It was left-brain genius and winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1921, Albert Einstein who made this astute observation about modern society, “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”⁷⁵

Narrative 10: Effective Use of Storytelling in Contemporary Jewish Ministry

Story and storytelling isn’t everything in the ministry of the Word. But, have we missed something in our homiletical and teaching approaches? If 70% of the Bible is in the story genre, a good rule of thumb may be to use storytelling in 70% of our teaching. The Hasidim were outstanding storytellers. Like Yeshua, they knew that stories can be life-changing. Storytelling constitutes a life-giving act in itself. Here is one retold by Martin Buber,

A rabbi, whose grandfather had been a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, was asked to tell a story. “A story,” he said, “must be told in such a way that it constitutes help in itself.” And he told this story: “My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher (the Baal Shem). And he told how the Holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather, though he was lame, rose as he spoke, and was so swept away by his story that he began to

⁷⁵ Cited in Manfred A. Max-Neef, “Foundations of Transdisciplinarity,” *Ecological Economics* 53, no. 1 (2005): 5-16.

hop and dance to show how the master (the Baal Shem) had done it. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness.”⁷⁶

The above Hasidic story about the Baal Shem illustrates a point: stories can help us transcend our current condition or circumstance. It is important to distinguish between a story told with a moral, or to illustrate, like this story (or an *Aesop's Fable*). These stories have value, and can even affect inner change. But if it is a *Bible story*, it is the Word of God. The Word and the Holy Spirit conspire together to impart faith for healing and transformative life-change. “So then faith comes by hearing, hearing the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

By “storying,” or Bible storytelling, I mean the entire process of the oral and visual communication of a *Bible story* (not folk tales) followed by group discussion—learning, interpretation, application, accountability to the truth in the story, drama, and/or song and the retelling of the story such that the story is internalized by the group and can be retold to others. The approach can be called *oral inductive Bible study*. When there is continuity (through a weekly, or regularly meeting group) such that there can be an accountability factor to the personal applications-to-life that are discovered in the small group discussion, storying is a very effective means of discipleship.

Oral inductive Bible study emphasizes that the story should be told, not read from a book. It should be told with the appropriate emotion, tone of voice, eye contact and eye movements, hand gestures, and body movements; all that best communicate the story. The story should be brought to life. When a story is read from a text (especially if in expressionless monologue) and then dissected and analyzed verse by verse, something is lost.

Miller uses this illustration in *Simply the Story* training workshops. Suppose you see a beautiful butterfly. You admire its beauty, so you decide to take it home and dissect it on a cork board. You pull out its wings, and put them together. You pull off its legs and put them in a pile to analyze them. You pull out its antennae—but what has happened in the process? You may learn more about the class of insects in the order Lepidoptera, and there is a place for that, but in the dissection, the butterfly dies. You can no longer enjoy its living beauty. Let the story fly in its living beauty or something is lost.⁷⁷

Storying is Jewish-friendly. No matter how religious or secular a Jewish person may be, virtually all, even if Biblically illiterate, know intuitively that these stories of the Hebrew Bible are their stories, the stories of their people, the stories of Israel. They are thus non-threatening and find a welcome response.

Storying is seeker-friendly. People of any faith or none can participate and not feel preached-to, or lectured-at. Anyone can hear and discuss the story. Seekers feel on a more level playing field, because everyone in the group is discussing the story just told.

⁷⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, xvii.

⁷⁷ Miller, *Simply the Story*.

All are looking for the treasures in the story together. And then the story does its work of speaking to hearts.

Conversational storytelling is a non-threatening, engaging means of Jewish evangelism. Simply described, conversational evangelistic storytelling is done on the go, in the streets and marketplaces. You are standing line at Starbuck's, or waiting to collect your luggage at the airport baggage carousel, you make small talk, looking for an opening to say, "Hey that reminds me of a story, do you mind if I tell you one?" Virtually every one will agree to hear it. You tell a five-minute version of a Bible story, and ask a question about it—and listen for the person's answer. Then you respond to that answer, and you will find yourself in a conversation about God. You let it go where it, or the Spirit, wills. Seeds are planted in that heart, a person is moved closer to Truth, to Yeshua.

There is a proper place and role for honest intellectual and public debates when the conditions are right for a genuine searching for truth. However, the value of storying for evangelism is that it bypasses the pitfalls of apologetics and argumentation that often go nowhere. Jewish people, and especially those schooled in Rabbinic thought, can argue and debate you to a standstill over who is the Messiah and theological issues. Head-to-head Messianic vs. Rabbinic apologetics can be the "naked truth" approach. It can become a fencing match, with each debater thrusting and parrying and unwilling to lose the match. In contrast, reflecting upon a story, and keeping the group focused on drawing out its treasures, shifts the matter to a whole different dimension. We let the story do the work of speaking to hearts, rather than us trying to convince a defensive rational mind.

We live in a moment of history that calls for a recovery of the lost treasures of Story and storytelling in the ministry of the Word. We need to re-dig the wells of Story, of Hebraic narrative epistemology that have been plugged by modernity's forces and trends. In this "Digitortality Era," a major way the Messianic Jewish movement will advance the Kingdom of God and be a "light to the nations" is through creatively re-telling the Biblical Story and stories of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to these late modern and the succeeding generations until Messiah returns.

In Conclusion: "A Rope Long Enough?"

Recall Rabbi Hanina's counsel that what is necessary to reach the depths of the well of Torah, of the Word of God, was "a rope long enough." He said that rope was parable and story. This essay has made clear in **Narrative 1**, sub-heading *Hebraism and Hellenism*, that rigorous intellectual scholarship, logic and analysis, including systematic theology has a proper place in loving God with all of our minds. Anti-intellectualism or obscurantism should have no place among followers of Messiah. We need both left-brain and right brain, both reason and imagination. But as we read and write and teach the "-ologies" (literally, from the Greek, *logos*, "words about"), they are "words about" the thing, not the thing itself. Every systematic theology category is at least one step abstracted from its primary source in story, and to some degree is a product of its times.

This factor relativizes our theologizing, and moves us always to go back to the canonical texts and stories, which are not relative, but are the infallible Written Word. Let us keep Bialik's counsel from **Narrative 2**, applied thus,

“Halacha is the crystallization, the ultimate and inevitable quintessence of Aggadah; ... Aggadah is the plaintive voice of the heart's yearning as it wings its way to its haven; Halacha [read: systematic theology] is the resting place, where for a moment the yearning is satisfied and stilled. As a dream seeks its fulfillment in interpretation, as will in action, as thought in speech, as flower in fruit—so Aggadah in Halacha [read: systematic theology].

Taking a cue from Bialik where, above he says *Halacha* is a “resting place” ... “for a moment,” all systematic theology is the expression of a “moment” in history, a generation, or at most a century. They are a “crystallization” of a generation or a century's, or a cultural context's or a region's work of abstracting, deducing, summarizing and systematizing their theological beliefs. If story is the “seed,” then the abstracted rule, proposition, lesson or application-to-life is the flower and “fruit.” The flower wilts and the fruit decays relatively quickly, but the seed (under the right conditions) lasts a long, long time. These “fruits” of *Halacha* and practical theology will be expressed differently a century later, even if they are a Jewish expression. The Jewish experience changes over time and also changes from one country to another; one can note the differences in American Messianic Jewish theology from Israeli Messianic Jewish theology.

A twenty-first century Messianic Jewish systematic theology is itself an expression of, and part of the story of a twenty-first century Jewish spiritual and social movement, from its historical context. In the same way that the “Book of the Covenant” (named in Exod. 24:7, but comprising Exod. 21- 23, containing the social, civic and religious laws of the first generation of Israel as a nation with laws), is a “theology” which is embedded in and a part of the story told in Exodus of that generation of Israel. Of course the book of Exodus is inspired, authoritative Scripture and our theologies today are not.

The canonical stories remain the “dream,” the “will,” the “thought,” and the “flower,” underlying a movement's systematic theologies' “interpretation,” “action,” “speech,” and “fruit” as Bialik so beautifully put it. The stories will remain. As Brueggemann said, “Story in Israel is the bottom line.” If we want to teach an “-ology,” let us find a biblical story or stories in which the doctrine is embedded, with story as base line, and let our hearers, with our help as teacher-storytellers discover those truths in their life situation.

Recalling from **Narrative 3**, that God said, “Hear O Israel!” not “Read O Israel!”... The Written Word must be continually be accompanied by the Oralized Word, in order to complete its intended divine purpose to change and transform lives. Can we shake the still dominant (and presumed to be certain) Enlightenment way of knowing described in **Narrative 4** enough to go back to the future to a Hebraic epistemology where, as is presented in **Narrative 5**, story truly is a way of knowing? **Narrative 6** sketches out

what a contemporary expression of what the oralized *midrashic* tradition might look like. Adonai told Moses, “Teach them to sing it...” (Deut. 31:19). “Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes their laws.” Let us find speech-places, thousands of places, in the highways and byways, in venues like Starbuck’s, on YouTube and blogs, in churches, synagogues and mosques, to oralize these stories— conversationally, as performance art, with or without media technology, in sermon and drash times, formally and informally.

Recalling that 60-70% of Scripture is in story form (and much of the remainder is full of metaphors and images), let us proportionately make 60-70% of our teaching and preaching ministry time and content be the stories of Scripture. Why do we usually invert that and make about 70% of our time and content from the New Covenant Epistles?

As **Narrative 7** suggests, in Jewish apologetics and Jewish evangelism, let us use “the Nathan Principle,” story as an oblique way to skirt and subvert Jewish resistance to the Gospel. From **Narrative 8**, comes a challenge—can we do better than Yeshua, who was primarily a metaphorical theologian, and used stories extensively? As **Narrative 9** intimates, we can we transition from the “Gutenberg Galaxy” to the “Digital Galaxy,” from “Gutenberg to Zuckerberg” in our postmodern moment by using media to oralize the ancient yet ever new stories of God. **Narrative 10** evokes promises of the life-giving, healing and transformative power of the *Ruach ha Kodesh* (Holy Spirit)-inspired Bible stories. Are our ropes long enough to extend the bucket to the depths of the well and so bring up lost treasures and the living water from the deepest springs?



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Naaman the Syrian: A Free but Costly Healing, One More than Skin Deep (2 Kings 5)

By Bill Bjoraker, PhD.

Background/Context: “Aram” was the name of the fifth son of Shem, and so **the Arameans** were a Semitic people. Aram was the Hebrew and Aramaic name for **Syria**, the land to the north of the land of Israel, was from the 12th -8th centuries BCE known as **Aram** or Aram-Damascus. This story takes place when Ben Hadad II (860-841 BCE) was king of the Aramean regime. At the time of this story, the Arameans were the greatest military threat to Israel. **Damascus**, was the major city then and is considered the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. It is still the capitol of modern Syria today. **Rimmon** (or Hadad-Rimmon) was a high deity of the Syrians. It is the Semitic word for “pomegranate,” and so is associated with fertility (its many seeds). Hadad was the storm god, usually identified with Baal. About the same level of hostility existed between Syria and Israel then, as does now between current modern Syria under Bashar al Assad and the modern State of Israel.

The **Abana River** (modern name: Barada River) began in the snows of the Lebanon mountains and flowed to Damascus. Its clear waters producing beautiful orchards and gardens. The **Pharpar River** flowed from Mount Hermon to the south of Damascus. Both were superior rivers to the muddy little River Jordan.

I Kings 22:34 describes Israel’s King Ahab’s death in battle by a “a certain [Syrian] bowman, who “drew a bow in “*tom*” (the Hebrew word *tom* can be translated “innocence, integrity, perfection, simplicity. Either of these is better than the word “random” which is usually how it is translated in English versions). The arrow “perfectly” hit the spot between King Ahab’s breastplate and his flexible scale armor and pierced his vitals. He was mortally wounded and bled out on the battlefield. Based on this, there is a rabbinic legend, also asserted by Josephus, that the bowman who thus killed king Ahab was none other than Naaman, then a young nobleman and warrior under Ben Hadad.

King Jehoram, a son of Ahab, reigned from 846- 842 BCE as king of the northern kingdom of Israel, in his capitol of Samaria, was king when this story takes place (I Kings 3:1). He worshipped Baal. Consider that Naaman was likely the one who killed King Jehoram’s father. **Elisha the Prophet** was in prophetic ministry and he befriended the king, and sought to speak truth to him. Elisha was protégé and successor to Elijah. Elisha matured from being a disciple of Elijah to the undisputed leader of the *Bnei Neviim* [disciples of prophets]. Elisha maintained a house in Samaria (2 Kgs. 6:32). He was a man who dedicated his life to one goal: the total elimination of Baal-worship in Israel. Elijah and Elisha, and their prophetic movement had struggled mightily against Baalism in Israel.

Elisha is notable for the high number of miracles he performed, his influence on royalty, and his high reputation beyond the borders of Israel in Aram. A master

storyteller who learned his skill from the author of the Book of Samuel tells his story in II Kings.

Tzara'at- the Hebrew word for a range of skin diseases of all kinds—psoriasis, eczema, and even baldness—are of great concern in God's purity laws and are described in Leviticus 13-15. This was not leprosy as we know it today (Hansen's disease). These diseases make a person ineligible to enter the temple, especially diseases with open sores and flaking skin. Israelites with such a skin disease are quarantined outside of the cities until it disappears and they become pure again. In addition to the hygienic purpose, these laws were intended as object lessons to teach the people about God's desire for purity and holiness. In the case of chronic diseases such as psoriasis, the sufferer is doomed to permanent exile and separation from the community of God people.

Territorial gods - Part of the worldview of the peoples then was the assumption that there are gods over every territory and those gods only had power over their own territory—your god is operative in your territory, our god is operative in ours. (See Kings 20:23-25; 2 Kings 5:17).

Gentile/Jew nexus – An important part of the message and application of this story comes from observing the Jewish and Gentile identities, the statuses and relationships between them, the spiritual consequences of their choices, and implications for their honoring or dishonoring God. Naaman was Gentile, the little slave girl was Jewish. Syria's king was Gentile, Israel's king was Jewish. Naaman's servants were Gentile. Elisha was Jewish, Gehazi was Jewish.

The name **Naaman** (נַעֲמָן), the masculine form of "Naomi," means "pleasantness" in Hebrew (Aramaic, the language in Naaman's country, is very similar).



Elisha refusing the gifts of Naaman, by Pieter de Grebber (1600-1653)

This story is especially instructive for: audiences who think that only the ways of their faith tradition are the right ones, who are mono-cultural in mentality, or ethnocentric with negative emotional generalizations or stereotypes of socio-cultural groups other than their own. It is especially relevant, *on the one hand*, to Christian traditions who embrace a **replacement theology or supercessionism** as regards Israel and the Jewish people, or who do not rightfully acknowledge the Jewish roots of Christianity, the church's debt to Israel/the Jewish people, and God's intentional purposes in the restoration of Israel today.

And, *on the other hand*, this story is relevant to those in the Messianic Jewish/Christian Zionists movements who may see Jewish culture as the only or superior way to worship God, who practice **an overly legalistic and/or ethnocentric Judaism that denigrates Christian traditions**. Jesus the Messiah drew attention to this story and made an application that enraged his Jewish audience (Luke 4:27-28), and it may find the same application today. Implications are drawn for the new missions frontier of "insider movements" to Jesus happening today in the Muslim and Hindu worlds (in **Special Missiological Applications, A and B** below, page 14ff.). It challenges and stretches us all to think "outside the box," and embrace all who truly confess faith in the One True God and His Messiah, regardless of their culture and diverse religious traditions (even those maintaining "non-Christian" or non-Jewish religious traditions after embracing Jesus). The story is also instructive in Honor/Shame dynamics.

THE STORY:

Text from "The Voice" - <http://www.hearthevoice.com/> - with slight rephrasing from the Hebrew, **bolding for emphasis and (comments in parentheses)**. By Bjoraker.

The text is in screenplay format, for easier memorization and as a prompt to oralize the story; tell it with gestures and emotion, don't merely read it.

This story, at 27 verses, is somewhat lengthy for telling and discussing in one session unless you have at least an hour. This can profitably be done in two consecutive sessions of one hour (or 50 minutes) for each of the parts, formatted below as ACT I & ACT II.

ACT I

Scene1

Naaman's master, the King of Aram, **before whom he stood**, considered him an extraordinary man. He was the chief military commander of Aram's army, and he had won many important battles for Aram by the power of the Adonai the Almighty God. He was greatly esteemed by his king. Naaman was a fierce warrior, but he also *tza'arat* (a skin disease).² Now *one time*, the Arameans went out in raiding parties and took a little girl from the Land of Israel as their prisoner. The little girl became a servant to Naaman's wife, and **stood before her**. One day, the little servant girl said,

Israeli Girl: *(to Naaman's wife):* ³“If only my master could be near the prophet in Samaria, the prophet there could heal my master's disease.”

Scene 2

⁴Naaman became hopeful, and he went and told his king what the little girl from Israel said.

King of Aram: ⁵“I am going to write a letter to Israel's king, and I want you to take it to him immediately.”

Naaman left with the king's letter in his hand, with his entourage of horses and chariots and wagons of gifts—**750** pounds of silver, **150** pounds of gold, and **10** sets of fine clothing. ⁶⁻⁷Naaman handed the letter to Israel's king, and the king read it.

King of Aram's Message: “The man carrying this letter is my servant, Naaman. He has a skin disease, and I request that you heal him.”

King of Israel *(ripping his robes, a sign of grief):* “What! Who does he think I am—God?! Why does Aram's king think I have the power to kill and make alive again? What in the world makes him think that I can heal you of your disease?! It is obvious that Aram's king is trying to create trouble between us!”

Scene 3

⁸Elisha, the man of God, received word that Israel's king had ripped his robes, so he sent a message to Israel's king.

Elisha's Message: “What has caused you to rip your robes? Tell the man who has come to you for healing to come to me. Then **he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.**”

⁹The king told Naaman to go find Elisha, so Naaman showed up at Elisha's door with his horses and chariots and wagons full of gifts. ¹⁰Elisha did not show his face to Naaman, but instead sent instructions: “*Wash yourself in the Jordan River seven times. The waters will heal you, and your skin will be back to normal. You will be cleansed.*” ¹¹Naaman boiled with anger as he left Elisha. He had come to his house expecting something much different.

Naaman: “What is this! I came here thinking that Elisha would come outside **to me** and call upon the name of the name of Adonai his God, and that Elisha's hand would pass over my sores and heal my skin disease, not the waters of the little Jordan River. ¹²The **Abanah** and **Pharpar** Rivers in Damascus are greater rivers than all the rivers of Israel combined, so why couldn't I just go bathe in those and be healed?”

Naaman then stormed away, boiling with anger. ¹³ Later his servants approached and spoke to him with respect.

Scene 4

Naaman's Servants: Father, if the prophet had told you to do some important thing, wouldn't you have done what he asked? Why is it difficult for you to follow his instructions when he tells you, "Bathe yourself in the Jordan River, and be cleansed? Why not just do it?"

¹⁴ So Naaman swallowed his pride, walked down to the Jordan River, and washed himself seven times, just as the man of God had instructed him to do. There, the miracle occurred. Naaman's disease was healed: his skin was as new and smooth as a baby's, and he was clean from the disease. ¹⁵ Naaman and all his entourage went back **and stood before** the man of God. He was overwhelmed with joy....

Naaman: "Oy! I am now convinced that there is no God who exists in the entire world except the True God in Israel! Please accept this gift from me, your humble servant!"

Elisha: ¹⁶ "As certain as the life Adonai **before whom I stand**, I refuse to take any gifts."

Scene 5

Naaman tried again to give Elisha a gift, but Elisha would not take it.

Naaman: ¹⁷ "OK. If you won't take my gift, at least allow me to take two mule-loads of earth. **I, your servant, will no longer give burnt offerings or sacrifices to other gods. Adonai, the Eternal One is my only God now.** ¹⁸ May Adonai forgive me when I walk into the house of Rimmon, the storm god of Aram, to worship there beside my master. As his first officer, I must be by his side wherever he goes, assisting him in all he does, and he leans on my arm, even when he worships. May Adonai forgive me for bowing down in that place."

Elisha: ¹⁹ Go in **shalom** about this matter."

So Naaman left and traveled some distance.

Act II

Scene 1

²⁰ About this time, Gehazi, who served Elisha, the man of God, had a wicked thought: “My master let **this Aramean** Naaman leave and refused Naaman’s gift! That means the gift is still with Naaman. As certain as the life of Adonai, I vow to go after him and **try to get the gift from him myself.**”

²¹ So Gehazi went after Naaman. When Naaman saw Gehazi chasing him, he stepped down from his chariot in order to greet Elisha’s servant.

Naaman: Is everything alright? **Is there shalom?**

Gehazi: ²² “Yes, **all is shalom.** Everything is fine, but Elisha told me to hurry after you and give you this message. He says, “Two young men who are the prophets’ disciples have just arrived from the hilly land of Ephraim. I request that you give them **75** pounds of silver and two sets of clothing.”

Naaman: ²³ “Of course. Please take **150** pounds.”

Naaman then put the **150** pounds of silver in two bags, along with two sets of clothing. He secured the bags, placed them in the possession of two of his servants, and gave them instructions to take the bags back to Elisha’s house with Gehazi. ²⁴ When Gehazi and Naaman’s servants arrived at the hill where Elisha’s house sat, Gehazi took the bags from Naaman’s servants and placed them in the house. He then told the servants to go back to Naaman, and so they went away.

Scene 2

²⁵ Gehazi then went to find Elisha.

Elisha: “I’ve missed you. Where have you been, Gehazi?”

Gehazi: “I’ve been here all along. I have not gone anywhere.”

Elisha: ²⁶ “You must not be aware that I knew where you were when Naaman stepped down from his chariot and asked you if everything was well. Do you think you are in a place to accept money, clothes, olive groves, vineyards, sheep, oxen, and servants on my behalf? ²⁷ Because you have sought to deceive me and have deceived Naaman, the skin disease that was washed away from Naaman in the Jordan River will now infect you and your descendants for all of time.”

Aghast, Gehazi turned and departed **from before** Elisha. By the time Gehazi had walked out of the room, the skin disease had entirely infected him, and his skin was as white as snow with the disease.

Spiritual Observation Questions for Discussion (STS [Simply the Story]

Type - <http://simplythestory.org/oralbiblestories/>) Using an Oral Inductive Bible Study approach (tell the story to a group and discuss it using good questions), we will dig for the treasures in the story using questions.

ACT I

1. Describe in a sentence or two what this story about? What is the tension or conflict? Where is the point of tension? Where is the energy in this story?
2. The Syrians were Israel's enemies. What can we observe from the fact that the Syrian general Naaman "had won many important battles for Aram (against Israel!) by the power of the Adonai the Almighty God?" Why would Adonai, the God of Israel give victory to Syria, Israel's enemy (an enemy military commander, comparable to a Hezb'allah or Hamas commander today)?
3. What might we learn about God's redemptive ways (seeking the lost), especially toward Naaman by the fact that the Israeli girl became a slave to Naaman and his wife? What if they had chosen a different captive, one who did not care enough for these enemy captors to speak to them about a way of healing? ... or one who did not have the faith to believe? What other choices did this Israeli girl have? In what ways might the whole action of chain of events in this story, hinge on this powerless girl's choices?
4. What might we learn about Naaman and his wife (recall they are Gentiles) by what the Israeli girl said to them? About their relationship? What were the results of Naaman's and his wife's relationship with the girl? Comment on how this Israeli girl may be considered an involuntary missionary, and how she is fulfilling the calling of Israel.
5. What might we learn about the Israeli girl by what she said to Naaman and his wife?
6. What might we learn about the moral character of Naaman by what he says and does when he hears the girl's advice? (His attitude to the girl? ... To his king?) Recall the hostility, or state of war between Israel and Syria; how might this factor have affected their personal relationships? Imagine and compare the context today of relations between Israel and Syria on the Lebanese border, where Israeli soldiers are sometimes killed, and to where Israel launches strikes at Hezb'allah in Lebanon (backed by modern Syria).

What other choices of response did Naaman have toward his wife's Israeli slave girl, than the response he did make?

7. What insight may be gained about the King of Aram/Syria from his reply to Naaman? What other choices did the king have?

8. What insight into Naaman do we gain from observing the lavish gifts he brings with him to see the king of Israel? What might be Naaman's view of healing, and how it is attained? What does he think it might cost?

9. What might we learn about the King of Israel from his angry response to the letter from the King of Aram? Did he have any other choices as to his response? What might this indicate as to his beliefs? The king sends him to Elisha; what other choices did he have?

10. When Elisha gets word about the king ripping his robes, and sends a message to the king to have Naaman sent to him, and "he will know there is a prophet in Israel," what may we learn about Elisha, his ways, and the ways of God, from this?

11. When Naaman arrives to Elisha's house, with his entourage, Elisha does not even come out to meet him personally, but sent a simple instruction, "Go wash in the Jordan River seven times and you will be clean." What may we learn about Elisha, his ways, and the ways of God, from this? What other options did Elisha have in response to Naaman?

12. Naaman is insulted and angered at Elisha's response. He expected to be honored by a personal audience with the prophet Elisha, and expected ceremony and ritual, and spiritual pageantry of some kind. What religious views do you detect Naaman has as his expectations?

13. The ancient cultures as well as today in the East and Middle East, honor and shame (having "face" and "saving face") were deeply embedded values (more so than guilt and innocence, as we have in modern Western culture). Love of honor was a foremost value, and could motivate the best and the worst behaviors. How do you see **honor and shame dynamics** come into play here? What may be the contrast here between how Naaman views honor and how Elisha/God view honor? What other response choices did Naaman have when he was snubbed, felt slighted and shamed by Elisha?

14. Naaman's servants intervene and beseech him to simply do the simple instructions from the Prophet. What insight does this give into the servants? What other choices did the servants have, other than to Naaman agrees, but what other choices did he have? What does this say about the moral character of Naaman? What might have been the factors that softened his heart and attitude? What does his response say about him? What might have been the result of choosing other than he did? What was the consequence of the choice he did make?

15. Naaman finally agrees, obeys, dips seven times and is healed. He goes back to Elisha and "stands before" him. He now has a new confession, "*Oy! I am now convinced that*

there is no God who exists in the entire world like the True God in Israel!... What insight does this give about what is going on in Naaman's heart? As in many animistic and polytheistic cultures, Naaman could have been thankful to Adonai the God of Israel, but kept his relationship to his other national gods. What might have been the factors that moved him so deeply? How might his understanding and beliefs have shifted so radically and decisively to Israelite monotheism? How do we know if he was truly and deeply converted to faith in YHWH? How deep was his healing? ... deeper than skin deep?

Recall this was the enemy's religion. Recall how that because of his worldview of "territorial gods," Naaman was being disloyal to his own people's god(s). Religion and national/tribal loyalty were fused. May he have had struggles with feelings of being a traitor? But was he embracing a new religion, or not?

16. How has he changed? What does this say about what he now believes about God and why? Why might his conversion— to Adonai YHWH, the God of Israel only—be remarkable and extraordinary? Might he view honor and shame differently now? What has radically shifted and been transformed in Naaman?



Naaman's putrefying, degenerating skin was restored "like the flesh of a little child." He was born again inside and he had a newborn baby's skin outside. Describe what he must have felt.

17. The second part of Naaman's words is, "*Please accept this gift from me, your humble servant!*" What does this say about his views and values?

18. What does Elisha's refusal to accept any gifts say about Elisha's view and values about healing? ... about God's ways?

19. Had Elisha accepted the gifts, what might this have meant, or communicated to Naaman and all who witnessed the healing?

20. What does the fact that Naaman persist and insists on offering gifts, say about him?

21. So the healing cost Naaman no money? But what did it cost him in other ways? What did Naaman have to surrender? How would it have been difficult for him?

22. What can we learn about Naaman from his final request of the prophet, “*OK. If you won’t take my gift, at least allow me to take two mule-loads of earth. I, your servant, will no longer give burnt offerings or sacrifices to other gods. Adonai, the Eternal One is my only God now.*”¹⁸ *May Adonai forgive me when I walk into the house of Rimmon, the storm god of Aram, to worship there beside my master. As his first officer, I must be by his side wherever he goes, and he leans on my arm, even when he worships. May He forgive me for bowing down in that place.*”

What does this say about Naaman’s faith and understanding?

What does the request for “*two mule-loads of earth*” indicate about what he believes about worshipping God. Recall how previous to the healing, he despised the muddy Jordan River; now he wants to take some dirt from Israel back to Syria! Is Israel’s dirt now holy ground to him, in a magical sense? Is there an issue of authority or power indicated here? Does this reflect the territorial gods idea? Or does Naaman simply want it in order to build an altar to Yahweh in Syria? (Exodus 20:24 legislates that altars be constructed of *adamah* [earth, soil], the same word Naaman uses).

Did Naaman have any other choices here, other than going back to his position and continue to assist his king, even in the king’s pagan worship? What does his decision to go back to his position after his healing and radical conversion say about him?

Naaman feels a need to ask forgiveness in advance for this, but yet fully intends to go through with the actions in the pagan temple? What is he thinking? Was this not a compromise or syncretistic mixing of worshipping the true God with pagan false religion?

23. Elisha responds to the request with “Go in shalom.” Elisha was known as a no-compromise zero-tolerance to idolatry kind of prophet. Yet, he does not warn Naaman against continued idolatry, or that he would be defiled were he to go into the pagan temple. He tells him to be at peace about this intended behavior when he returns to Syria. Does he give permission to Naaman to continue to enter the pagan temple with his master and even to bow down in that temple? What indications do we have from the story that might help us understand why Elisha might grant this permission? What indications do we have that Naaman will continue to be a faithful follower YHWH, the God of Israel, even though he, as a Gentile, non-Israelite, he continues in his society’s religious customs and traditions?

ACT II

Gehazi was servant and chief aide to the prophet Elisha. He had observed all these events and transactions. Though the story does not identify him in this role, He may well have been the servant that Elisha sent out to Naaman with the message to go wash in the Jordan. Gehazi knows intimately his master Elisha's faith and values. He has personally witnessed many supernatural miracles done by Adonai, the God of Israel through Elisha. He knows God is with Elisha. Surely he knew the power of God. Yet, he premeditatedly chooses this path of greed and self-aggrandizement.

24. Gehazi says, "*My master let this Aramean Naaman leave and refused Naaman's gift! That means the gift is still with Naaman. As certain as the life of Adonai, I vow to go after him and **try to get the gift from him myself.***"

What do we learn about the moral character of this man Gehazi from his thought and actions here?

25. What may have been Gehazi's first sin? How was sin working in his life and actions? Was there a series of sinful choices he made in this story? Could he have aborted the process of sin's path at any time?

26. What other choices did he have other than the ones he makes?

27. What are the immediate results of his choice? And what will be the ripple effects, the long-term consequences on whom and how many of this fateful choice?

28. We see Naaman willing to give even more than Gehazi asks for. Naaman honored Elisha as the one who not only brought him healing, but also brought him into contact with the true and living God. What could have been the impact on Naaman's new faith had Elisha accepted monetary gifts in exchange for his healing, or had he known that Elisha's servant was deceiving him?

29. When Gehazi reports to Elisha, the latter asks him where he has been. Gehazi lies and says he has been there all along. Elisha knew (supernaturally) not only that he was lying, but also what he had done. The pronouncement of justice was swift and terrible. Is there indication in the story as to why God's judgment was so severe?

30. What more can we learn about God's character and God's ways through this judgment on Gehazi? What about the skin disease being passed on to all his descendants? What truth about God's ways do we learn from this? How was this a "poetic justice" (fair and fitting)?

31. What abuses of power do you see in this story? Who has power? How does he use it? What are the consequences? Who is powerless in the story (servants, women)? What influence do they have?

32. What meaning might the phrase (Hebrew idiom) “standing before,” “before whom I stand” evoke? (see verses 1, 2, 16, 27)?

33. The chiasmic structure of the story helps us see the contrasts and highlights the themes. It highlights how that the path Gehazi took is a mirror image of the healing of Naaman:

- A. Naaman’s skin disease clings to him (v. 1)
 - B. The servant and the master (vv. 2-3)—an open conversation leading to healing.
 - C. Adonai’s healing is priceless (vv. 15-16)
 - D. “Go in shalom” (v. 21)
 - D1. “Is there shalom?” (v. 21)
 - C1. Putting a price on healing (vv. 22-23)
 - B1. The servant and the master (vv.25-26)—a deceptive conversation leading to disease.
- A1. Naaman’s skin disease clings to Gehazi (v 27)

Questions Arising from the Chiasmic structure:

- A. How did the moral character and responses of Naaman condition of prepare him for healing and shalom?
- B. How did the moral character and choices of Gehazi condition of prepare him for the terrible justice he received?
- C. Why might Gehazi have thought he could get away with his greed and lies?
- D. How does giving/generosity and humility go together in the story?... and how does greed and lying go together?
- E. What does the role of cost and money play in the story, in Naaman’s experience and in Gehazi’s?
- F. Compare and contrast the arc of the pride of Naaman with the arc of the pride of Gehazi...and the consequences for each man. What lessons can you draw?
- G. Naaman’s healing was free (priceless). Gehazi’s disease was earned. Comment on this.
- H. What might we learn of the connection between disease, shalom-healing, and justice from this story?
- I. How is the Christian (or Messianic) Paradox demonstrated in this story?

Definition: The Christian Paradox - The principle that when a goal, or object, or good is sought autonomously from (or inconsistently with) the given moral forms within which it is obtainable, that perceived good thing eludes the seeker. Humans naturally pursue many goods outside those forms. Yet humans obtain those goods only when they (often against natural inclinations) seek to attain them within these given forms. Human life purpose and life fulfillment can only be realized when sought according to God-given

given forms consistent with the human *telos* that apply to humans in their natural condition (the fallen world order).

This principle is paradoxical due to the fact that since the fall of man, human nature exists in moral dualism—in the condition of a divided self—where what is sought by the lower (egoistic) nature or self is destructive of what is sought by the higher (altruistic) nature or self. This inner contradiction and moral ambivalence is the universal human condition in its fallen state. Consequently, in the human pursuit of happiness (the sacred value of which is enshrined in the American *Declaration of Independence*) there is frequently a dimension of irony and unintended consequences that accompany that pursuit.

"Christian Paradox" is the term I use for this *principle of unintended consequences*, based on the dictum of Jesus the Messiah as recorded in all four Gospels (Mark 8:35, and parallels: Math.10:39; 4.17:33; John. 12:25),

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:35 NKJ).

Expanded as—

"Whoever seeks self-fulfillment directly as an end in itself, will lose it; but whoever will surrender his or her life for My sake and the gospel's will save it; will find a true life of flourishing and realize his or her intended life purpose." (Mark 8:35 Bjoraker free and interpretive translation).

The fact that this dictum is recorded in all the Gospels emphasizes that it is central to Jesus' life and teaching. It is a principle that works in every person's life. Jesus demonstrated it supremely in his own sacrificial substitutionary death on the cross and His resurrection. The principle's first application is to individual salvation through repentance and faith in the Messiah, by turning from one's sinful fallen nature to trust in Messiah as Savior. Jesus also applied this principle to other dimensions of life, we note how he stated it differently in this saying, *"Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you"* (Matthew 6:33). The "all these things" here is in reference to all the material goods that humans are anxious to acquire. They are promised as a byproduct of a higher pursuit, not by a direct and anxious focus on their acquisition. (Bjoraker dissertation, Fuller, 2007)

34. The healing was free (though not without cost). The disease was earned. Gehazi wanted what Naaman had; what did he get? What insights arise from this observation?

35. Now that we have absorbed much of the story, what might be the significance for this story and its message of the fact that the name **Naaman** (נַעֲמָן) means "pleasantness" in Hebrew (Aramaic is very similar)? What insight into the person of Naaman? What implications for Israel? For God's mission?

36. **Yeshua drew attention to Naaman.** Early in his ministry, Yeshua (Jesus) drew attention to a striking fact— “*There were many with tza’raat in Israel in time of Elisha the Prophet, and none of them were cleansed, except Naaman the Syrian*” (4:27-28). When Yeshua said this to his Jewish audience in Nazareth, they were enraged and sought to throw him out of the city. What was Yeshua’s purpose in saying this? What so enraged his Jewish audience? (they had an arrogant ethnocentric attitude that turned violent at the notion that God would give grace to the Gentiles). They were the elect covenant people. Naaman was a Gentile. Yeshua honors and commends Naaman’s faith here. God bypassed the Israelites during Elisha’s time, because of their unbelief. God appears to have sought out this Gentile Army commander in an enemy country, to show special favor on him and heal him. What is the message here to Israel/the Jewish people? What might this say about how Israel/the Jewish should hold their elect status before God? What does this say about God’s ways and purposes? About God’s heart toward people?

Application Questions for Discussion (STS Type)

1. Today, does God still “send” “little Israeli girls” as involuntary missionaries into dangerous places where they become the “mouth” of God to reach powerful and sinful people whom God is seeking to redeem? What does that look like today?
2. Does God still require powerful people to humble themselves and simply obey before they find shalom and healing?
3. What does that look like? Do you know any one or any situation where people today spoke, acted, made choices like the characters in this story did? What were the results? Who was impacted? How does this story instruct? Encourage?

Special Missiological Applications From the Story of Naaman

A. Major application of the story for the Church’s mandate to Israel/the Jewish people. God is the One who has made distinctions since original *Creation* (between darkness & light, sky & land, land & water, fish & birds & mammals, etc.) *The Israel/Jewish & Gentile distinction* is the major one in God’s plan of *Redemption*, including as it is addressed in the New Testament (e.g Romans 1:16). *Naaman*, a Gentile military leader and a powerful man, must go to Israel’s prophet to be healed. It is the waters of the Jordan alone that is instrumental in his healing, his coming to the true knowledge of God, and to his shalom. He had to seriously humble himself to wash in the muddy little Jordan, when he knew the rivers in Syria were superior. He had to overcome his snubbed sense (false) sense of honor, to come to know the true God—to honor Him and be accepted and honored by Him. Naaman, as a Gentile polytheist made a thorough and radical conversion to worship the God of Israel only.

It is the God of Israel alone YHWH, supremely revealed in Jesus the Messiah (not merely “God,” nearly every religion has “god.”) that the Christian Church still must learn to worship. The Hebrew Bible is a bulwark against the Church’s perennial tendency to syncretize her view or doctrine of God, with deficient God. The lesson Naaman learned is one that must be learned, or relearned by Gentile Christians of the “supercessionist” or “replacement theology” traditions within Christianity.

All who read the Bible have views and attitudes about Israel/the Jewish people, whether implicit or explicit, stemming from our family and faith tradition. There are many views about the place, significance and what may be the prophetic destiny of Israel. Gentile Christians in all the Catholic and Protestant traditions must humbly acknowledge that Israel/the Jewish people were the first elect people, that the Creator chose to be identified as the God of Israel, and to identify himself with the people of Israel. God's first and highest revelation of Himself was to Israel. The Holy Scriptures were given to Israel and Jewish scribes and scholars were their custodians who faithfully transmitted them to the world. The Savior of the all humankind, is first of all the Jewish Messiah. Yeshua and all his first followers were Jewish. The fundamental worldview of all Christianity is that derived from the Hebrew Bible (OT). And we must realize that Jewish people, with the possible exception of Luke, wrote the New Covenant Scriptures (NT).

The Apostle Paul's great metaphor of **the Olive Tree In Romans 11**, where the roots, trunk and branches of the Olive are Israel/the Jewish people, and the wild olive branches grafted in are Gentile Christians. Paul's teaching has generally been ignored by the major Christian traditions since the days of the church fathers, in what is called the "supercessionist" or "replacement theology" tradition. The church is viewed as having displaced Israel. Israel was Plan A; it failed. So the Church is Plan B; it succeeded. Israel and the Jewish people have no more theological significance; they are merely another people group, one that has had a chance to hear the Gospel and it sort of burnt over ground. And they are quite a small people group at that! But a merely quantitative accounting here misses an important theological accounting of the Jewish people.

What are the implications of our "Israelology" for the Church's mission to the Jewish people, for her mandate to win the Jewish people to the Messiah, by "provoking them to jealousy" (Rom. 11:11, 14) by what we as Christians have through their Messiah?

What is our practical response to the Apostle Paul's Olive Tree Israelology? Especially:

11 "So I ask, did they [*the Jewish people*] stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. 12 Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! 13 **Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry 14 in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.** 15 For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? 16 If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and **you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root 3 of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.** 19 Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but

fear. 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 22 Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. 23 And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, **how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree?!**

25 Lest you be wise in your own sight, **I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.** 26 **And in this way all Israel will be saved,** as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; 27 “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

28 As regards the gospel, **they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.** 29 **For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.** 30 For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” (ESV Version, **bolding** mine).

It is important to be aware that the exact phrase “new Israel” does not appear in the New Testament. But the word “Israel” appears 73 times in the New Testament, and it always means Jewish Israel not the “Church.”

In the Pauline Olive Tree Israelology of Romans chapters 9 to 11, several points stand out:

- **Paul’s Olive Tree metaphor shows that the Jewish people are still God’s chosen people.** Olive trees are very long-living. There are olive trees in Israel that are 2000 years old, and have been there since the time of Jesus. The roots and trunk of the olive tree God cultivated are the fathers— Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the everlasting covenant God made with them. From the roots grew the Jewish people. God the farmer has not devoted the same attention to the Gentiles: the wild olive branches. Jesus came to the center of the olive tree.
- **The natural branches of the tree are the Jewish people. Some were cut off, but not all.** Paul and the *early Messianic Jewish movement* were the natural branches that were not cut off. Those Jews who did not follow Jesus were cut off. But this means though that the roots and trunk of Israel still stand and still live. The Jews are still an elect people.
- **When Jesus instituted the New Covenant at his last Passover meal, it was with his twelve Jewish apostles who represented a re-newed Israel.** As Jeremiah had prophesied, the new covenant would be made “*with the House of Israel and the House of Judah*” not with the Gentile church (Jeremiah 31:31). Just as there are twelve tribes of Israel, so there were twelve Jewish apostles

- representing *the renewed Israel* (not a completely “New Israel”). The apostolate was transferred from Israel’s old corrupt leadership to the new leadership of the twelve Jewish apostles. The Gentile church did not displace the renewed Israel, but rather was grafted in to the renewed Israel, that is to the original Olive Tree.
- **The wild olive branches grafted in to the cultivated olive tree are the Gentile believers.** They feed upon the root. Gentile Christians must stay connected to the Jewish roots of their faith, rooted in the Hebrew Bible. God is committed by covenant faithfulness to redeem both the Jewish people and the Church and make them His people.

The following illustrations of Paul’s Olive Tree metaphor from Romans 11 help to illumine these matters (All illustrations by Brenda Green, in “*The Ruth-like Church: Discovering the Role of Christians in Israel’s Redemption*” by Matthew T. Wilson. Yeshua’s Harvest Ministries, Woodland Hills, CA www.YeshuasHarvest.org)

Paul’s Theology



Some branches from the natural cultivated tree on the left (Israel) were broken off, and some branches from the wild uncultivated tree on the right (believing Gentiles) were grafted in to the cultivated tree. Some of the natural branches remain in the cultivated tree. They represent the faithful remnant of Israel, along with the trunk and roots which are the patriarchs, prophets, the faithful Israelites and the Jewish apostles of Messiah.

Replacement Theology (a form of Supersessionism)



The wild olive tree on the right representing the Gentiles is “the Church.” In this theological view and ecclesial practice, faithful branches from the cultivated olive tree on the left are grafted into the Church. This assumes there is no more valid covenant-based corporate solidarity to Israel. Now for Jews who would be saved they must individually join the Church and become “Christians.” The Church tree is the new tree (“New Israel”) based on Gentile roots and no longer shares in the rich root of the cultivated olive tree. Israel, the original tree is left separate (superseded and forgotten) with no living branches on it. A form of this theology teaches that God will deal with the root, trunk and dead branches at the end of history, once the new tree is full and carried off to heaven.

The Progression of Replacement Theology and Practice



The three illustrations above show the evolution in history of the Olive Tree, as it progressed from 1) All original Jewish branches (left), 2) To a mix of mix of cultivated and wild branches where both could still be seen (identity of Jewish believers in the church was maintained and respected, as was the identity of Gentile believers), 3) On the right, the same original tree now has so many “wild branches” that the small number of natural branches are obscured. The only branches in the original tree which are visible are the dead “broken off” branches on the ground. This led many to believe that Israel/the Jews are only dead broken off branches.

So for many centuries of Christian history, Jewish people who believed in Jesus had to become “Christians,” i.e. Gentiles, and deny or renounce their Jewish identity and ties. By the nineteenth century, there were some at least who were known as “Hebrew Christians,” or “Christians of Jewish descent” or “Jewish background.” Jewishness of course in passé, obsolete, replaced by the Church (“the New Israel”).

So back to the applications from the Naaman story— Indeed, the church in every generation must humble herself “dip in the Jordan River” and acknowledging that her healing and salvation comes from Israel. She must listen to Israel’s prophets to find healing and shalom. She must give honor where honor is due. The Church “does not support the root, the root [Israel] supports the Church” (Rom. 11:18).

Nevertheless, for much of Christian history, the church was cutting off the Jewish roots of her faith:



This anti-Jewish tradition came to its logical conclusion in Europe in the mid 20th Century. It a major reason why the Holocaust occurred. Replacement theology became displacement reality.

In contrast, I offer here **“Five V’s”** for the church to ponder and then, like Naaman, humbly acknowledge that God made a distinction between Jews and Gentiles— that it would be through Israel that all that is for our eternal good has come. As Yeshua said, *“... For salvation is from the Jews”* (John 4:22b). Due to this election, there is still a distinction between the roles/calling of Jews and Gentiles though out This Age (at least):

Vortex – Definition: *“A...flow involving rotation around an axis: a whirlpool, a whirlwind”* (American Heritage Dictionary). The Jewish people have always been and remain today at the vortex of history. America has declared the “War on Terrorism”. Israel has been at this war for a long time, and remains America’s truest ally in the Middle East. Israel will be a key player in the outworking of God’ purposes in history. If you would have your fingers on the pulse of history, knowledge of Israel and the Jewish people is vital.

Vital- Definition: *“Of or characteristic of life; ..Necessary to the continuation of life; life-sustaining.”* (American Heritage Dictionary). Christians confess allegiance to the God of Israel, and the Messiah of Israel. The Bible is a Jewish book. Thus, all Christians implicitly or explicitly adopt some posture toward Jewish people. What is your posture? The church’s significant loss of connection to her Hebraic roots negatively effect aspects of her faith and life. For the sake of her own integrity and destiny, it is vital that the church recover her biblical and existential connection to Israel. To truly understand Jesus, we must understand His people and context. This quest is part of our life voyage.

Voyage- Definition: *“A long journey, usually to a foreign or distant land.”* (American Heritage Dictionary). Out of the mass ancient humanity, God called Abram the Hebrew to a journey that would permanently change human history. This journey marked the birth of time, as we know it in the West, and the “ worldview themes of progress and destiny. Those who follow the faith of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob, King David, and his Greater Son, are on a voyage of hope to God’s bright future. To fully understand this voyage of destiny, we must understand Israel and our Hebraic heritage. And this voyage is the virtual experience of our final destination.

Virtual- Definition: “Existing or resulting in essence or effect, though not in actual... form...” (American Heritage Dictionary). The unifying theme of the whole Bible is the Kingdom of God. Israel, as an example people, and the Church exist as virtual embodiments and signs to the world, in their “already-but-not-yet” form, of the full and final glorious coming of the Kingdom of God to Earth. For this, all Creation yearns. This is the overarching vector of human history.

Vector- Definition: “A quantity completely specified by a magnitude and direction.” . . . broadly, any force or influence.” (American Heritage Dictionary). All history has a flow, a trajectory in a certain direction, though there are ebbs and flows and detours. God is directing the forces of history toward His intended glorious End. However, the great Cosmic War between Good and Evil will continue to rage until that End. There will continue to be casualties. God is waging the war through His people. The climax of the vectors of history will be staged in the Middle East, at places called Har Megiddo (Armageddon) and Jerusalem. The broad confluences of historical forces are bound up with Israel and the Jewish people. Those who would be wise, and would be where that action is, will harmonize their lives with the magnitude of this vector.

B. Major application of the story for the Church regarding contemporary so called “Insider Movements” to Christ, especially in the Hindu and Muslim worlds.

When Naaman, the newly converted monotheist who worshiped only YHWH, asked pardon in advance for going into a pagan temple and assisting his king in bowing down to the god Rimmon, is it not striking that Elisha the prophet, known for his zero-tolerance of idolatry, says to Naaman about the matter “go in shalom”? This would have been Elisha’s moment to warn Naaman to not ever again go into a pagan temple or he would be defiled, ...or maybe even instruct him to stay in Israel, to separate from his pagan people, and become a proselyte to Judaism. But Elisha says none of these things. He rather tells Naaman to go back to his people and way of life.

Implications/Applications for the Great Commission and the *Missio Dei* today:

We have seen the emergence in recent years of “insider movements,” as a social phenomenon in the Hindu and Muslim worlds. Their legitimacy is quite controversial in the evangelical missions world. But consider the following as facts-on-the-ground, withhold judgment for a moment, and observe the phenomena. An “insider movement” can be defined as,

“... movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or *inside* their ancestral community. In any insider movement there are two distinct elements: 1) The Gospel takes root within pre-existing families, communities or social networks. These groupings develop into fellowships of believers as they become followers of Christ. These become the main expression of “church” in that context. Believers are not extracted from diverse social networks to create a “church.” New parallel communities are not created or introduced. 2) The

believers remain inside their socio-religious communities by retaining their God-given birth identity, while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.” (Lewis: *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (IJFM) 26:1, 2009, p. 16).



***Jesu bhaktis* (Hindu devotees of Jesus) sharing Communion or the Lord’s Supper using bananas and coconut milk (picture below) instead of bread and wine. If Jesus had come to India, would he have used the elements most common and at hand to symbolize his body and blood?**



Muslim followers of Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah) praying to Jesus with their community during prayer times, five times per day.

1. Herbert Hofer's *Churchless Christianity* (1991) concluded the number of Hindu Christ-followers exceeded the number of official Christians in the area he researched in S. India. Here is a review of the book (which is now apparently out of print):

<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/christ-followers-in-india-flourishing-but-outside-the-church>

2. According to Todd Johnson at the *Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*, as of 2010 about 5.9 million non-Christians were following Christ from within the context of their own religious and cultural traditions. These include *insider movements* as well as *hidden and secret believers*. The Center's estimate for the year 2000 for these types of believers was 4.6 million, which means that they grew at 2.5% per year from 2000–2010 or twice as fast as Christianity as a whole. 85% of these individuals are either Hindus or Muslims. Given current trends, these were expected to grow to 6.5 million by mid-2014. (cf. Todd M. Johnson, ed., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill). <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/Center-for-the-Study-of-Global-Christianity.cfm>)

So, we observe this is happening. What should be our response and evaluation as Bible-believing followers of Messiah Jesus? Here are eight theological and missiological factors to consider:

1. **The *Imago Dei* and General Revelation** - We can be sure that because the Image of God is still evident in humans, despite the effects of the Fall, human cultures and religions will reflect this in some measure. Also, because of *general revelation* (through nature and conscience, Romans 1: 19-20), people without the Bible, and/or who do not know God through Jesus, will still have some moral and spiritual insights, not just error and ignorance. Though this light is an insufficient source of truth without the special revelation given to Israel.
2. **God Gave Revelation to Select Individuals who were Outside the Stream of Abrahamic revelation** – Consider Abel, Enoch, Noah, Melchizedek, Abimelech, Job, Jethro [a priest of Midian], Rahab, the Queen of Sheba, Naaman the Syrian and others. None of these men and women were Israelite or Jewish, but seem to have been in right relationship with the True God, though they do not know all there is to know about Him. The Ninevites repented under Jonah's preaching and God relented from executing His intended judgment upon them. Though there were *proselyte* conversions, (Hebrew גִּיּוּר, *giyur*), formal conversion to the people and religion of the Israel/the Jewish people in Old Testament times, known as *gerim* (e.g. Rahab, Ruth), there were also ***non-proselyte conversions of which Naaman is a model***. Judaism also recognized Gentiles as related to God under the Noahide Laws. Later, there were "God-fearers" (*yirei Hashem*, "השם יראי") meaning "Fearers of the Name," Gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and the beliefs of the Jewish people, who joined themselves to the synagogue as believers in the God of Israel, but were not undergoing the proselytization to Judaism process (circumcision, etc.) A reference to these "God-fearers" is when Paul preached in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, and addressed the people, "*Men of Israel and God-fearers...*" (Acts 13 16).
3. **Outside Religious Influence Accepted in Israel's Religion** - There is unmistakable influence of other religions on Israel's religion in Old Testament times. Abraham and the patriarchs worshipped at or near Canaanite shrines such as at Shechem (Gen 12:6), Bethel (Gen. 12: 8), Hebron (Gen. 13:18), and Beer Sheba (Gen. 21:33). The patriarch Joseph accepted a daughter of the Egyptian priest of On, as a wife (Gen. 41:45). Coming in as immigrants from the desert

nomadic life, the Israelites assimilated into the agriculturalist culture, adopting some of their language, legal codes and values. The name for the Canaanite high god was “El” was appropriated for the God of Israel (“El”, “El Elyon”, “Elohim”), but rejected the Canaanite conception of God. Israel took over Melchizedek’s city of Salem. The Book of Proverbs reflects Israel’s willingness to incorporate Egypt’s wisdom literature (while rejecting its polytheism).

4. **Socio-religious Community versus Religion** – There is a difference between a socio-religious community and religion. Not seeing this distinction is a major difficulty to critics of insider movements. The question is asked, “How can a person be a Hindu follower of Christ, when Hindus are idolatrous polytheists who believe in reincarnation?” But this reflects an “essentialist” view of world religions, which holds that there is a stable set of core beliefs and practices and which are necessary to the identity of the religion, and these core beliefs monolithic throughout the religion, the essence of the religion that sets that religion in contradistinction to other religions. So there is thought to be a “true Islam” and a “true Hinduism.” This is the essentialist view of religion.
 - a. But the most recent research in the field of world religions, or a more cultural approach, finds that world religions are a conglomeration of diverse communities, defined more by traditions, history and customs than by a singular stated core theology. So to be accurate, we must not speak of Judaism, but “Judaisms,” not Islam, but “Islams,” not Buddhism, but Buddhisms, not Hinduism, but “Hinduisms” (or “Indian religions”). Hinduism is more accurately a civilization that contains a plurality of distinct religions. The rubric “Hinduism” is closer to the rubric “Americanism.” Think of the diversity of religious beliefs under each of those rubrics!
 - b. Judaism has always had great diversity. Think of the Qumran community’s self- perception as the pure and “true Israel” while many other forms of Judaism flourished in Israel. The early Messianic Jewish movement was considered a sect within Judaism, followers of the Way, or the “Nazarenes.”
 - c. Christianity is also a religion with great diversity. There is essential truth in the Bible. But a religion is always an interpretative implementation of the holy books revered by the adherents of the religion. Think also of the great diversity of Christian traditions. We also must speak of “Christianitys.”
 - d. Therefore, this sociological perspective helps us see that Jews, Muslims, Hindus or others outside of a standard, traditional, cultural expression of “Christianity” may be regarded as members of their socio-religious community, even though they do not adhere to a textbook definition of that religions beliefs. There is much plurality. An example is that Jewish people who are atheists (religious beliefs contradictory to most of their Jewish community) who are still considered part of the Jewish community, as long as they do not convert to another religious community. There are apparently also French Catholics who are atheists (they are part of a French Catholic community, but their beliefs are very unorthodox). So it is

with Muslims and Hindus who follow Jesus, and who remain part of their socio-religious community.

- e. There are three levels of life experience that can be depicted thus:

FAITH
RELIGION
CULTURE

So the seed of Gospel takes root at the **Faith** level, and then as the faith is worked out in the religion and culture. As the believers remain in their communities, they may retain any forms or practices in the **Religion** and **Culture** levels that are compatible with the Bible, and reject those elements that contradict the Bible. Religion is really a part of culture, in fact it can be said that “religion is the cult in culture.” Religion does not save—not even Israel’s religion, nor Christianity—only God saves through faith in Christ. Believers in Jesus may reinterpret forms (*forms* may be the same, but given different *meaning*) that are possible of reinterpretation. For example, Muslims may still fast during Ramadan, but not to earn merit with Allah, but to intercede in prayer in the name of *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah) for the salvation of their community. Practices that are dark, demonic, immoral or sinful or beliefs that are not Biblically true must be rejected.

5. **Dual Identity** – The earliest generations of Messianic Jews, retained their identity within Judaism, but adopted a second identity as members of the renewal movement (the Way) that was a sub-group of their corporate Jewish identity. So, members of insider movement who are true believers in the Islamic world and the Hindu world will have a dual identity— their first allegiance to fellow believers (in the Body of Messiah, whose citizenship is in Heaven), but also part of their socio-religious community here on earth.
6. **Witness-Bearing and Evangelism Facilitated by Insider Movements** - The important advantage for the advance of the Kingdom of God with insider movements is that it allows believers to bear witness to their community. If they are extracted from their community, gathered into separate “Christian” churches, they are perceived as traitors to their people and lose their witness and opportunity to win their people to Jesus. The contemporary Messianic Jewish movement has largely established itself outside the mainstream of Judaism (in their own self-perception and in the perception of mainstream Judaism), but there are Jewish believers in Yeshua who are regularly attending their neighborhood Orthodox Jewish synagogues, intended to more deeply identify with their ancestral community, and bear witness to them, and so catalyze a Jewish insider movement.
7. **Syncretism and Spiritual Journey** - Many evangelicals fear that affirming such insider movements is affirming *syncretism* (mixing and diluting biblical beliefs

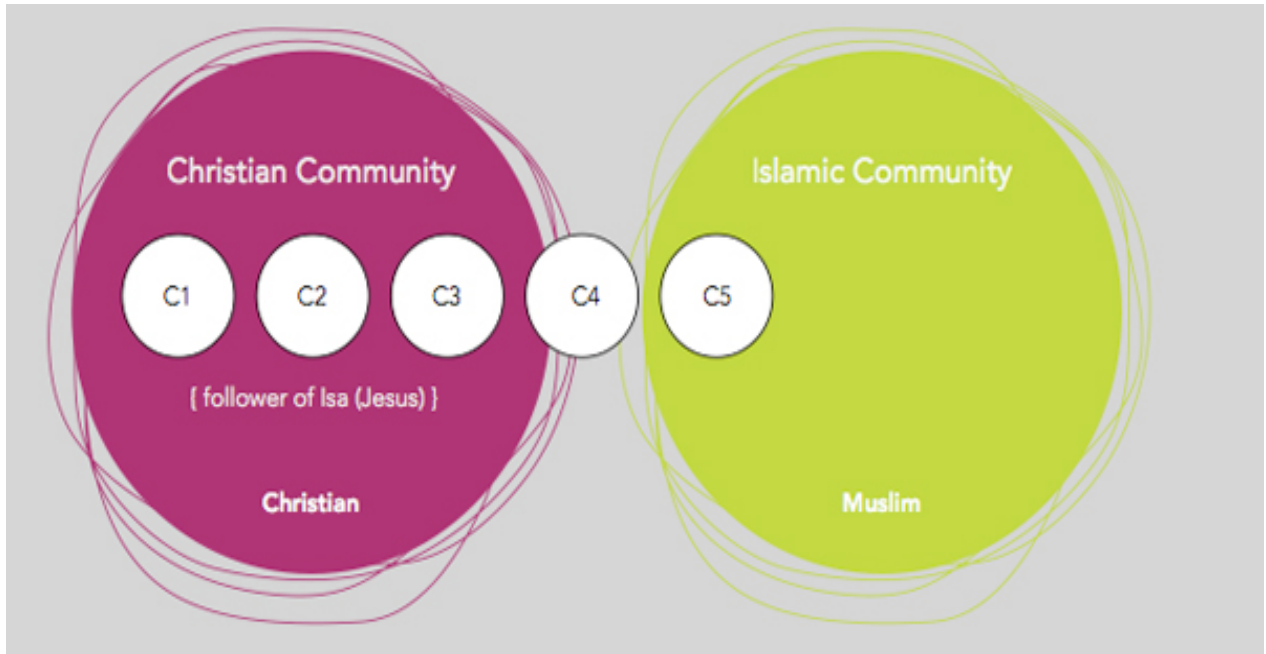
and practices with non biblical ones), or heresy. It is helpful to recall that the Creator accommodated to Abraham and the patriarchs' sub-biblical beliefs and practices (like polygamy); God began “where they were at.” He then led them on a journey into increasing light and holiness. So for many of those in the Muslim and Hindu communities who embrace Messiah, their insider identities and religious practices may be the starting point on their way to recognizing that the definitive acts of God are found in the story of Israel, climaxing in the story of Yeshua. They have saving faith now, but perhaps in a generation of or two (if they keep reading and believing the Bible and follow the Holy Spirit), their theology will be clearer and their religious practices purer, but would still reflect their culture. Where genuine conversion to Christ happens, new birth by the Spirit, can we trust this promise of God to them, “*He who began a good work in you, will be faithful to carry it on to completion until the Day of Jesus the Messiah*” (Philippians 1:6)? Surely there is also messy syncretism and failures and defeats as well—Birth, life and growth are messy; death and funerals are dignified.

*There is a place for helping insiders to be more Biblical (with a more critical contextualization), if they are open to hear outsiders . For example, with the *Jesu-bhaktis* pictured above in a Hindu context using banana and coconut milk for the Lord’s Supper. They do have unleavened bread in India. It is called *chapati* or *roti*. Does a banana and a coconut really convey the rich historical and theological meaning of the Lord’s Supper using unleavened bread, with its roots in the Passover, and Jesus as the “Bread of Life”? Why chose something different when a close or exact substitute is readily available? (If bread was not available in a region, that is a different matter).

8. **The Implications of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15** - The early Messianic Jewish movement went through an intense struggle but finally decided that the Gentiles coming to the Faith, did not have to become proselytes to Judaism, become Jews in every sense, in order to be fully accepted by God. James, the leader of the Jerusalem congregation, validated what they saw happening on the ground by referring to the Hebrew Bible (Amos 9:11-12 LXX), “in order that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name...” (Acts 15: 17-18). This gives validation to the Naaman-type *non-proselyte conversion model* that is followed in the insider movements.

In the first century AD the burning question was— “*Can a Gentile become a Christian without becoming a Jew?*” The Messianic Jewish apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem answered, “*Yes, they can!*” In modern times the question became just the opposite (in one of the great ironies of history)— “*Can a Jew become a follower of Jesus without becoming a Gentile?* Today, mainstream Judaism takes for granted the answer is “No.” They believe you can either be a Jew or a Christian but you cannot be both. However, the modern Messianic Jewish movement, since the 1960s is answering, “*Yes, we can!*” Jewish people are realizing that following Jesus— Yeshua the Messiah—is a very Jewish thing to do. As Messianic Jews, they continue to live a Jewish life and worship in the Jewish tradition. **Today the question is— Can a Jew... or a Muslim...or a Hindu become a follower of Jesus without becoming a “Christian”?**

Below is the “C1 — C6 Spectrum” developed by John Travis (pseudonym)
http://www.thepeopleofthebook.org/C1-C6_Spectrum.html



This continuum charts and compares believers and types of “Christ-Centered” (C) communities in the Muslim world. There are actually six types, if we include a C6 as which describes “secret believers.” The “C” can stand for the “Contextualization” degree or level of identification with the Islamic community. Language, culture, worship forms, degree of freedom to worship and religious identity differentiate the six types.

C1 - Missionaries establish a church that is basically identical to wherever they are from. Services are conducted in the language of the missionaries. They call themselves "Christians" and have very little cultural connection to the region where they plant the church.

C2 - The same as C1, except the services are conducted in the language of the region.

C3 - They have incorporated many non-religious cultural forms of the region into their community, such as dress, art, etc. They still reject any purely Islamic religious elements. They may meet in a traditional church building or in a more religiously neutral location. **They call themselves "Christians"** but try to have a more contextualized presence in the region.

C4 - They are similar to C3, but they incorporate some Islamic religious elements into their community – like avoiding pork, praying in a more Islamic style, using Islamic dress and employing Islamic terminology. They call themselves "Followers of Isa" or something similar. **They do not call themselves “Christians” (as many Messianic**

Jews do not call themselves “Christians.”) Their meetings are usually not held in traditional church buildings. They are not considered to be Muslims by the Muslim community.

C5 - They retain their legal and social identity within their Muslim community. They reject or reinterpret any part of Islamic practices and doctrine that contradict the Bible. They may or may not attend the mosque regularly, and they actively are involved in sharing their faith in Jesus with other Muslims. They may call themselves Muslims who follow Isa al-Masih, or just Muslims. Their community may view them as Muslims that are a little unorthodox.

C6 - They keep their faith secret because of an extreme threat of persecution, suffering or legal retaliation. They may worship secretly in small groups. They do not normally share their faith openly and have a 100% Muslim identity.

Back to our story, was Naaman a C6 ? Was he intent on being a “secret believer”?

I quote an author who has thought deeply and missiologically on the Naaman story,

“The petition to get earth of Israel indicates the clear intention to worship YHWH alone,” observes Daniel Baeq, and indicates that Naaman had no intention of being a “secret believer.” (It would have been well nigh impossible to keep his faith a secret, given the visible proof of his miraculous healing, his entourage’s hearing of his vow, the mules carrying dirt, and then a constructed altar). (Talman IJFM 30:2, 2013, p. 53)

Daniel Baeq states:

“Naaman knows that as the commander of the army and a notable and powerful official, he is unable to excuse himself from all the state functions, which usually entailed religious rituals. Thus, rather than trying to hide what he would be required to do, he is earnest and honest before Elisha, voluntarily informing Elisha of an unavoidable, inevitable activity in his home land. The fact that he even brought up this subject strongly indicates that Naaman had already considered the future and foreseen what serving YHWH would entail in his home country. In essence, Naaman is explaining to Elisha that even though he has to physically bow down before the idol, he is not worshipping the idol.” (Daniel Shinjong Baeq, “Contextualizing Religious Form and Meaning: A Missiological Interpretation of Naaman’s Petitions (2 Kings 5:15-19),” IJFM, 27:4, 2010, p.203).

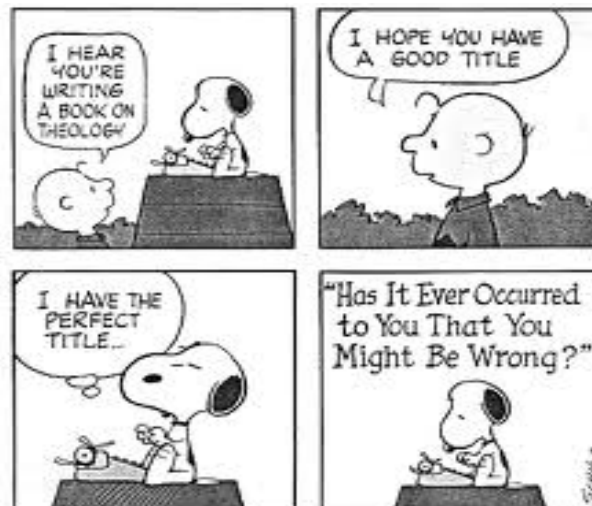
“The best interpretation of Naaman’s request for “forgiveness” was that he was seeking “understanding” from Elisha. As Frank Spina concludes: *The new convert wants to make sure Elisha realizes that, appearances aside, under no circumstances are his actions to be taken as sincere acts of worship...* His request is not for advance pardon of actual sin, but for the potential for misunderstanding based on mere appearances taken as sincere acts of worshipping” (Talman IJFM 30:2, 2013, p. 53).

Conclusion

We can consider Naaman the Syrian's experience to be a model of the *non-proselyte conversion*, a man who was genuinely and deeply converted to the God of Israel, but was not required by Israel's prophet to convert to the religion of Israel.

Today, as we see not only Jews, who in the Messianic Jewish movement, do not identify as "Christians," but also Muslims and Hindus who are converting to the Jesus the Messiah, but are not being converting to the religion of Christianity, and not joining the visible Christian church. Did anyone ever think the 1.3 billion Muslims are ever going to en masse identify as "Christians?" ... Are we who are the "prophets" of the Faith going to insist they become proselytes to Christianity? ... or are we able to say to them with Elisha, follow Jesus and "Go in shalom" ?

This Peanuts cartoon applies to us all.



I restate the two major missiological principles we have drawn from this story:

A. The Church's Mandate to Israel/the Jewish people, to repudiate replacement theology and embrace the Olive Tree theology of Romans 11. This is the call for the Gentile church to "*make Israel envious of what we have through their promised Messiah.*" A major way we do that is loving/honoring Jewish heritage.

B. The Church's need to be open to "Insider Movements" and "radical contextualization" as God's work of bringing people into His Kingdom. Messianic Jews (and Gentiles) need to understand this as a fulfillment of Israel's call to be "*a light to the Gentiles.*" It may well be that during this last era of world history, Israel fulfills her destiny to the greatest extent, by seeing the light she was given (in her Messiah Yeshua) reach finally to the greatest blocs of unreached peoples. Through this *radical contextualization* of the Gospel may come the final historic breakthroughs such that "this Gospel of the Kingdom will

be preached throughout the whole world, as a witness to *every ethne*, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14). See the **APPENDIX: ON “RADICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION”** below for more on this.

These two principles seem almost contradictory, and almost give us “whiplash” between the two poles (strongly Jewish, strongly non-Jewish). Talk about thinking outside the box! Surely it stretches our thinking, and prevents “hardening of the categories” for both “the Chosen” and the “Grafted In” believers among us. Nevertheless, these truths are not ultimately contradictory, however much they are held in tension. Those coming to faith in Jesus in **insider movements**, need to grow in their faith until they understand the Olive Tree theology of Romans 11. If they have the Scriptures in their language and as God raises up good teachers among them, they will increasingly understand the ongoing significance of Israel/the Jewish people,

For millions of these Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Chinese, there are no Jews within thousands of miles from them. But in this digital age and due to globalization, increasing numbers of them will learn about Israel and her enemies. Even if there are no Jewish people who live in their countries, they can still learn the attitude that *all* the church, *everywhere*, through *all* time should cultivate knowledge of, gratitude to, and respect and love for the Jewish people, since we are their debtors. And that *all* the church, *everywhere*, through *all* time should pray for the shalom of Jerusalem/the Jewish people, as commanded in Psalm 122:6.

On the other hand, if there are some of us in the **Messianic Jewish and Christian Zionist movements** who may tend to be ethnocentric, we need to understand that if people from “pagan,” hostile and anti-Semitic societies come to Faith in Yeshua, we must be ready to embrace them as brothers and sisters. As Yeshua said, “*Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.*” (Mark 3:35). God’s heart is to take a people to Himself from every people group on earth. The Creator affirms each people group and every person’s ethnic identity as part who they are, and their (our) identity will continue in the Age to Come. Ethnicity counts! The Day is coming when it shall be proclaimed,

“And they sang a new song with these words: “You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” (Revelation 5:9).

APPENDIX: ON “RADICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION”

The modern evangelical missions movement’s failure to reach large blocs of unreached peoples embedded in the major world religions has motivated a trend to a more radical contextualization. The late missiologist Ralph D. Winter (1924-2009), a few years before his death, wrote on several missionary frontiers at the edges of Kingdom of God expansion. He called these “Eleven Frontiers of Perspective.” This one, the fourth, he called the “Failure with Large Groups and the Off-setting Trend to ‘Radical Contextualization.’” I copy it here:

“The fourth shift had to do with the fact that all along our eyes had been peeled on mainly smaller groups around the world. This was because all the major groups already had been, supposedly, breached by Christianity in one form or another. We had beachheads, but, in the main, the major groups were continuing to be rather awesomely unfriendly to Christianity. For Example, Hinduism as a whole, and Islam as a whole just aren’t breached in any major way at all. We have only relatively small beachheads in these blocs. So we began to think, “Well, maybe we’ve got the wrong approach; we’re not *contextualizing* sufficiently.”

So here comes the idea of *radical* contextualization, and all of a sudden our eyes are opened to what is already happening. In Africa, 52 million people in the African Initiated Churches movement have radically contextualized. Or, take India. According to the Missouri-Synod Lutheran theologian/missionary, Herbert Hoefler, in his book *Churchless Christianity*, in the largest city of South India maybe four times as many Hindus are devout followers of Christ as the number of devout believers who are affiliated with the official Christian churches. In China, the swath of 50 or more million people in the so-called unofficial churches does not fit the pattern that we would consider normal Christianity. And in Japan, you know, we haven’t gotten anywhere. We are told that Christianity now includes only 300,000 people out of 130 million people in the country. Forget it. We apparently haven’t even got a truly Japanese church yet. I remember Phil Foxwell (a retired missionary from Japan) showing me an editorial written by a secular sociologist saying that there is not yet a truly Japanese church. What is there is just a Western church.

Thus, the idea of *radical contextualization* is an incredibly new frontier. It’s not just how many minority peoples are left. It’s how many large blocs are still untouched or unchosen. It’s how many peoples which are supposedly already “reached” that are not really reached.

Well, is it possible that within these large blocs of humanity we have achieved (with trumpets blaring) only a form of Christianity that ranges from “sturdy and valid but foreign,” to maybe “superficial or phony”? Do we have a church movement which from the point of view of these large blocs has been acceptable only to a minority and is not going anyplace? What is the meaning of the oft-quoted statement that Christianity in Africa is “a mile wide and an inch deep?”

Here is something to think about: Isn't it getting clearer that we're never ever going to persuade all the Muslims to call themselves Christians? Can't we recognize that it's not important, nor helpful—not merely impossible—to expect very many Muslims to identify with the cultural stream called “Christianity.” If someone is a born again believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, isn't that enough?

Take for example, the 19th Century Protestants in this country. As the Catholics from southern Europe streamed into this country after 1870, the Protestant churches over the next 50 years spent something like \$500,000,000 to win Catholics and yet after all that sincere home mission work only won a handful of families. That is, we can't realistically set out to win over people to a new faith *if we also require them to identify with a different community in a substantially different culture*—which is truly not a Biblical requirement. Thus, we can make Catholics into Protestants as soon as the everyday culture of the two become very similar. For the same reason, apart from those who want to be Westernized, we can't readily make Muslims or Hindus into believers in Jesus Christ if we also require them to come over into the cultural form of our Christianity.

This gives rise to the idea of a ‘Third Reformation.’ The first reformation was the shift from Jewish clothing to Greek and Latin clothing. The second happened when our faith went from Latin Christianity to German Christianity. Of course the latter Reformation” is THE Reformation that everyone talks about.

But now Western Christianity, if it really wants to give away its faith, is poised to recognize (and to become sensibly involved with) something already happening under our noses—a Third Reformation. Sorry to say, as before (both in the time of Paul and in the Reformation), this rising phenomenon probably will involve antagonisms. We have seen profound antagonisms between Jewish and Greek forms of the faith, and between Latin and German forms of the faith. In each case the burning question has been “Just how essential to Biblical faith is any particular one of these various cultural vehicles of the faith?” (Ralph Winter)

For the full two-part article comprising all eleven “Frontiers of Perspective,” See:

http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/20_3_PDFs/Perspectives.pdf

&

http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/20_4_PDFs/135_perspectives.pdf

For more in-depth analysis of the topics in this article, and for references cited, see:

“To the Jew First...” The Meaning of Jewish Priority in World Evangelism” by Bill Bjoraker:

http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/21_3_PDFs/110_Bjoraker.pdf

“The Old Testament and Insider Movements” by Harley Talman:

http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/30_2_PDFs/IJFM_30_2-Talman.pdf

“Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community” by Rebecca Lewis:

http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/26_1_PDFs/26_1_Lewis.pdf