

Negotiating the Rapids of Messianic Ministry:

A Personal Reflection

Wes Taber

LCJE North America Consultation

Dallas, TX – June 2021

Almost three decades ago Lori and I took our kids on a family vacation to East Tennessee. The nearby Wautaga River afforded our first whitewater rafting adventure.



Our friendly guide made sure we were properly outfitted with life jackets and gave us instructions on how to survive the experience.

Once launched in the river he began interspersing stories between shouted navigational instructions.

He began one story in a very matter-of-fact tone, “Once I was on a Class V stretch of river. I went over a waterfall and my kayak overturned at the bottom. I was upside down underneath the falls and the pressure from the water kept pushing me under. For the longest time I was tossed about every which way and I couldn’t catch a breath.”

He completed his saga with, “And then you’re hatin’ life.”

CLASSIFICATION OF RAPIDS

Whitewater rivers are classified by their level of turbulence, with Class I having easily avoidable obstacles and a very calm flow (think “Lazy River with ripples”). Our Watauga experience was mostly Class I and II, with one Class III “moderate” rapid to negotiate.

In contrast, Class V rapids include turbulent currents, boulders, vertical drops, and unpredictable hydraulics. They offer great potential for the “then you’re hating life,” “why’d I ever sign up for this?” kind of experience.

Class VI rapids are rarely challenged, even by experts, as “paddling errors may be fatal.”

ENTERING THE MESSIANIC MINISTRY RIVER

Over the years I’ve used the analogy of paddling in the river to describe what it’s like trying to stay balanced in Jewish ministry. In this analogy, we might think of two swiftly flowing streams merging into a roiling river. One river represents the Church, the other the Synagogue.

Both Lori and I are “Gentile preachers’ kids.” We launched out into ministry from the Church stream. We went to Christian colleges. We raised our support from typical Fundamentalist/Evangelical churches.

I already had a Bachelors Degree when I began Jewish Studies at Moody Bible Institute in January 1976. Michael and Eva Rydelnik were classmates; Dr. Louis Goldberg was our instructor. I was very comfortable in the solid Evangelical part of the stream where Moody was positioned.

Dr. Goldberg, however, brought an entirely new dynamic in my introduction to Jewish ministry. Before I knew it, my little river craft was in some pretty turbulent rapids.

- Yohanan ben Zakkai? *Never heard of the guy.*
- Maimonides – wait, *he’s the Rambam? What’s a rom-bomb?*
- Then who is this Ramban? Nachmanides? *Is he making this up? Please.*

The new vocabulary came splashing at me endlessly:

- Mishnah, Gemara; *amoraim, tannaim*. (*I've no idea what you mean.*)
- Pesach, Yōhm Key-poor (*is that the same as Yom Kipper?*).
- Shabbat, Shavuot, Sukkot (*or is it Shabbos, Shavuos, and Sukkos?*).
- Memra and Metatron. (*Bless the bed that I lie on.*)

OY! My hands blistered trying to paddle to catch up.

Hey, I've often said the only reason I knew the difference between a Yamaha and a yarmulke was...I had a Yamaha. (*And who's the wisenheimer who put an "r" in yarmulke – and decided to end it with an "e"?*)

What's this? The Father of the Reformation wrote "On the Jews and Their Lies?"

Wait, are you telling me the same Martin Luther who wrote "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" advocated burning synagogues, Jewish homes, and schools?

The "Here I stand I can do no other" orator advised confiscating rabbinic writings along with Jewish wealth? *I didn't learn ANY of this in Sunday School!*

The reading assignments offered no respite of familiarity. I paddled hard through *The Jewish Festivals* by Hayyim Schauss. Father Edward Flannery's *The Anguish of the Jews* traced a litany of "Christian" acts of antisemitism:

- Crusades, the Inquisition, and edicts of expulsion
- Black Plague, blood libels, and the deicide charge
- pogroms and the Holocaust.

This was not covered in my Christian liberal arts education.

Preparing for a Dr. Goldberg exam seemed like a Class IV whitewater experience for me. Or so I thought...until I arrived at the whirlpool labeled "Messianic Judaism."

MESSIANIC WHITEWATER

Dr. Goldberg convened a conference at Moody in 1977 to discuss issues being stirred up over the surge of interest in Jewish expressions of faith in Jesus.

New terms were being coined: "Hebrew Christian" was replaced by "Messianic Jew."

Saturday services were conducted in Messianic synagogues by rabbis, not by pastors in Christian churches on Sunday.

I don't know how the symposium's presenters were chosen for the various position papers and responses. I do remember thinking it was very unfortunate that all the "pro-Messianic Judaism" speakers were Jewish believers, and all who spoke against it (including my father-in-law) were Gentiles.¹

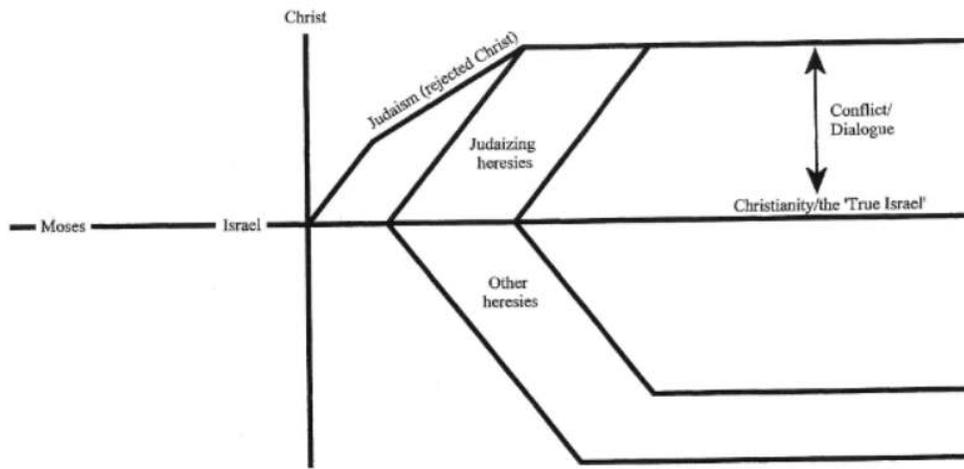
A lot of water has passed under my raft in the four decades since that conference. Lori and I have had the benefit of seeing the issues "up close and personal" in various ministry settings, including Israel.

MODELING A COMPLEX MATTER

Much scholarly work has been produced to help us gain historic perspective. E.g., Martin Goodman provides helpful models to help us understand the complexity of viewpoints on Jewish-Christian relations.²

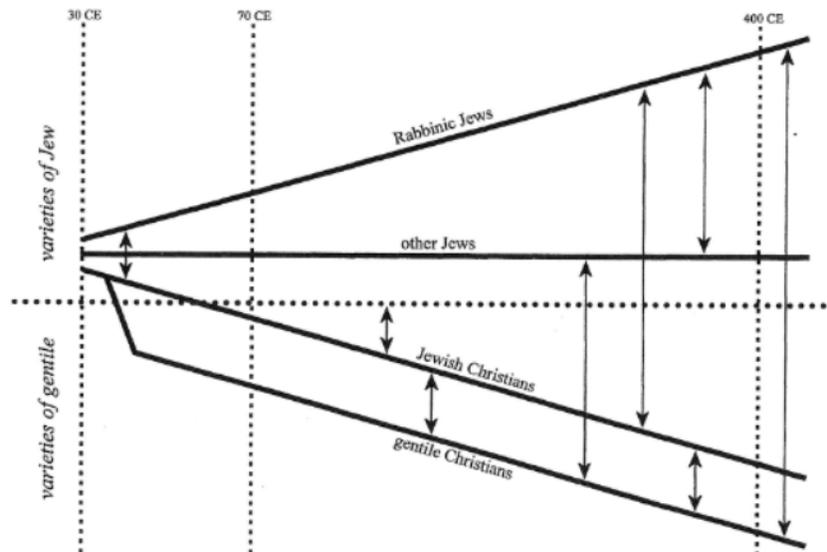
Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 265-339) modeled a straight line from Moses to Israel with Judaism branching off with the rejection of Yeshua as Messiah.

Eusebius' view of the "parting" (3rd-4th c.)

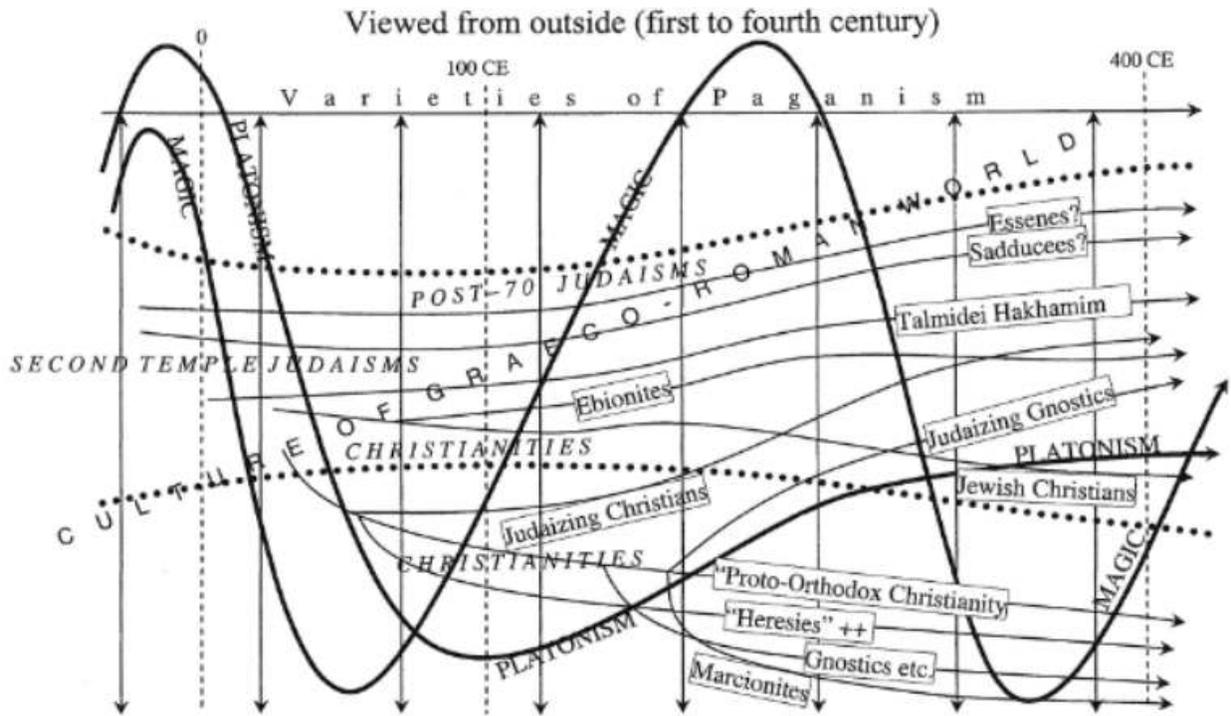


The straight line continues with Christianity. This supersessionist model does not reflect the diversity of Jewish religious expression when Jesus was born.

Martin Goodman's (admittedly "best guess") attempt to depict the varieties of social distance between Jews and Gentiles³ in the early centuries of the Common Era looks like this:



A further model⁴ shows the complexity of the intermingling streams of theological and philosophical expression in the 1st to 4th centuries.



Note in particular the use of “Judaisms” and “Christianities” and interplay of the wider cultural streams.

Here’s another viewpoint altogether, expressed by Daniel Boyarin. “Judaism...is not the parent religion to Christianity; indeed, in some respects the opposite may be as true. Nor can we speak of a religion, Judaism, at all in the sense of a bounded institution existing before the Christian era (and even fairly deep into that era)...⁵

Ioudaismos (2 Macabees 2:22 – 2nd c. BC) = Jewish culture vs. *Hellenismos*

Ioudaismos (Gal 1:14 – 1st c. AD) = Jewish belief, customs vs. *Christianos*

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

And, as with Judaism, Christianity developed its own tributaries.

	Roman Catholicism	Eastern Orthodox	Protestant Reformation
AD	313	1054	1517

Historic Development of Christianity

As if the existing major branches of “historic Christianity” (Roman Catholic – 313 AD; Eastern Orthodox – 1054 AD; Protestant – 1517 AD) with all their subdivisions (Lutheran, Anabaptist, Methodist, etc.) would not be confusing enough, we now add the “modern” Messianic Movement to the widening river.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT

Count Zinzendorf Germany	Christ Church Jerusalem	Joseph Rabinowitz Russia	Jesus People USA	Russian Revival FSR
1750	1850	1875	1975	2000

Historic Development of the Messianic Movement

Rich Robinson's *The Messianic Movement: A Field Guide for Evangelical Christians*⁶ was a helpful contribution to identifying varying elements and substantive issues. (LCJE gets a plug!)

If anything, expressions of Messianic faith have become even more diverse (some might say “messy-
anic”) over the decades.

MAPPING MESSIANIC THEOLOGIES

Richard Harvey undertook the challenge of mapping Messianic Jewish theology for us.⁷ With apologies to Richard for summarizing so briefly in this space, here are the categories he lists in his paper⁸ delivered at LCJE's International Conference in High Leigh in 2011:

- Type 1 – Jewish Christianity, Christocentric and Reformed (Maoz)
- Type 2 – Dispensationalist Hebrew Christianity (Fruchtenbaum)
- Type 3 – Israeli National and Restorationist (Nerel)
- Type 4 – New Testament Halacha, Charismatic and Evangelical (Juster, Stern)
- Type 5 – Traditional Judaism and the Messiah (Schiffman, Fischer, Berkowitz)
- Type 6 – ‘Postmissionary Messianic Judaism’ (Kinzer, Nichol, Sadan)
- Type 7 – Rabbinic Halacha in the Light of the NT (Shulam)
- Type 8 – Messianic Rabbinic Orthodoxy (Brandt, Marcus)

As befits a flowing river analogy, Richard recently stated, “A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since [I delivered that paper in] 2011.... A number of positions have changed since then, and I have reflected on whether I got it right at the time and how things have changed. I think the typology basically stands, but since then....”⁹ [I've footnoted specific changes he's seen in the last decade.]

One wonders what recommendations representatives from each stream would make today to help the Body of Messiah restore the Jewishness of the gospel.

Given the wide range of theologies and hermeneutical approaches, we would expect very diverse opinions on the subject. How we need Holy Spirit discernment to navigate these waters, to know what to embrace and what to reject!

“C-SCALE” (CULTURALIZATION SCALE)

Our theology is not to be merely theoretical, but practical. On the missiological level, how are we to effectively communicate gospel truth within a Jewish context? What forms do we adopt, adapt, or avoid?

Thankfully there is a growing corpus of missiological studies on cross-cultural contextualization¹⁰ that have been published – and hotly debated.

The “C-scale”¹¹ formulation has provided a vocabulary for discussing the issues. Initially developed for Muslim ministry, it is applicable to a Jewish context.¹²

We do well to acknowledge the complexity of our task. The simple “us vs. them” mindset leaves little room for nuance.

If we’re going to resort to labels, we would more correctly speak of “Judaisms” and “Christianities.” As you are well aware, the spectrum of Jewish and Christian expressions of faith is incredibly diverse, with the Messianic movement positioned at the convergence of the rivers.

Too often where the rivers of religion meet something worse than mere seasickness results. This is especially true when religion and culture are deeply embedded. In the extreme we get the Irish Republican Army and Islamic Jihad, to name two violent examples.

We’re well acquainted with competing truth claims and charges of “fake news” in our day. When the stakes are highest the threat of violence is greatest. And when core religious beliefs¹³ and eternal destinies are perceived to be at stake and cultural identities challenged, true believers may easily be roused to engage in Crusades, Inquisitions, pogroms, et al.

NEGOTIATING THE RAPIDS

Trying to navigate in the “church→ ←synagogue” intersecting point of Messianic faith isn’t at all easy, given where we are in the flow of history. Paddling in the whitewater of the confluence of two already-roiling rivers threatens to capsize any craft not held upright by biblical truth.

Does it not seem at times that our energies are more focused on fighting to stay afloat amidst the turbulence of ministry than on our primary LCJE purpose: bringing the message of Messiah back to His Jewish kinsmen.

Here are three questions for us to consider:

- To what extent is seeking to restore the Jewishness of the gospel to the “Gentile church”¹⁴ promoting our cause: great, moderate, negligible?
- To what degree can these efforts become a diversion?
- By what metric can this be measured?

With our “to the Jew first” gospel priority, finding the best approach to present Yeshua to Jewish people is admittedly a greater challenge for Gentiles raised with minimal contact with Jewish communities.

But our experience with On the Derekh, the joined ministry effort of several in this room to reach the Haredim, demonstrates how much more all of us need to learn about their worldviews and theologies as we seek to develop methodologies and approaches.

RECIPROCAL INFLUENCES OF JUDAISM & CHRISTIANITY

As to theologies, Israel Jacob Yuval, in *Two Nations in Your Womb*,¹⁵ is a leading Jewish voice speaking to the reciprocal influence of Christianity and Judaism. Where many have written over the centuries of Judaism as the parent to Christianity,¹⁶ Yuval makes the case that the rabbis' reaction to Christianity markedly shaped the development of rabbinic Judaism.

"The confrontation with Christianity is at the very heart of Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism, which deal intensively with a renewed self-definition of who is a Jew and what is Judaism, as part of determining the reverse definition – namely, who is not a Jew. It was essential to define this in relation to those who wished to see themselves as Jews and were rejected by the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud because of their belief in the messiahhood of Jesus."

As to methodologies and approaches, an example of a significant contribution to our understanding is Brian Crawford's recent lectures on "Haredi Theology and the Incarnation." His explication of the influence of neo-Platonism and mysticism in shaping the worldview of the Haredim¹⁷ helps us identify minefields and consider questions to ask when engaging the ultra-Orthodox.

Truth be told, we still have much work to do in promoting understanding just within the diverse Body of Messiah. How much greater the challenge in bridging the divide between Yeshua-followers and the variety of expressions of non-Messianic Jewish faith (or lack thereof, in the case of Jewish atheists, secular materialists, *et al.*).

A LEARNER'S MENTALITY

The ease with which we misunderstand one another's world view is not unique to Jewish ministry. Missiologists in recent decades have devoted much research to communicating cross-culturally. Here's an extended quote from an esteemed colleague, now in heaven, Steve Strauss:

"Every culture possesses positive elements, favorable to the understanding of the Gospel" (Padilla 1980, 69). The worldview, values, and images of each culture will help its readers see things in Scripture that readers from other cultures may miss.

...Robertson McQuilken provides an example of this. When he first went to Japan as a missionary, he was astounded

to discover that many things important to me were of little or no importance to Japanese: eternal life, propositional truth, individual freedom, forgiveness of sin, a personal God, history. These were things I had been trying to market [to the Japanese]. At the same time I found things important to the Japanese that were not priorities for most westerners, but I discovered, *things to which Scripture speaks*: approval and sense of belonging, security, relationships, feelings, honor of parents, present "salvation," obligations, loyalty, beauty, love of nature, and the value of suffering (1996, 166; emphasis added).

McQuilken's increased sensitivity to the Japanese context awakened fresh insight into aspects of the biblical text he had not previously noticed!¹⁸

In my personal experience, I found it both refreshing and challenging to read and discuss the New Testament at length with a *yeshiva bocher*. I marveled at the insights his fresh perspective brought and was startled at times to recognize how many preconceived ideas I read into the texts.

It's been helpful for me to observe that it's easiest for most of us, Jewish or Gentile, to stick close to the side of the river from which we've been launched. Yes, there are the adventurous among us who delight to taste new foods, experience new cultures, walk a mile in another's sandals.

And some of us "take umbrage" when "but we've always done it this way" gets challenged.¹⁹ Surely the majority of us are most at ease remaining in the familiarity of the environment in which we've been raised.

But we recognize the challenge of finding "the right fit" when searching for a spiritual landing place for someone raised in a far different setting.²⁰

WHAT ABOUT ME?

So, is there a point to all my musings? "Have you any takeaways for us fellow rafters out here on Messianic Ministry River, Brother Wes?"

Here are some diagnostic questions to consider individually and corporately on our adventure together:

1. *From where did I launch my raft?* It's important to recognize how much our origins and unique personality traits influence our approach to life. The mix of variables is endless: Jewish, Gentile, mixed marriage? Secular, mildly religious, strictly observant? Mono-cultural or multi-cultural environment in childhood?
2. *How far from my point of origin have I come (and in which direction)?* How long have you been on your journey of faith with Yeshua? How much have you experienced of other cultural expressions of faith – including Messianic/Christian? In what areas have you grown? Where do you remain stuck, tied to the familiar shore of your home culture and heart language? It's so easy to criticize – and shun – the "other."
3. *How much is my sense of identity informed by my ethnicity and cultural background, and how much by my faith?* Are you most comfortable with others who think and act like you do, regardless of their religious convictions, or do you find that a shared loved of Messiah is an even greater relational bond than is a shared cultural or ethnic background?
4. *Whose map of the river of life am I trusting; who is my guide on this journey?* Someone has rightly said, "Show me your authority and I will tell you what you believe." What particular philosophy, theological system, or world view most shapes my thinking? Where am I looking for truth: the Talmud, *kabbalah*? The Church Fathers, Calvin's *Institutes*? Rambam's *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Zalman's *The Tanya*? L.S. Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, MacArthur's commentaries?

The "I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Peter" (1 Cor 3:4) impulse persists. Do we filter extra-biblical writings (Talmud/Rashi/Rambam or Augustine/Calvin/MacArthur) through the "true truth" (Francis Schaeffer's term) of the inerrant and infallible Word of God? What evidence is there that Scripture has changed your perspectives in meaningful ways? To what degree is the Holy Spirit your teacher, illumining the Word of God to your mind and heart?

5. *What battles am I choosing to fight?* Not every stretch of whitewater rapids needs to be conquered as you navigate the river of life and ministry. Sometimes our blisters are self-

inflicted. Shaul/Paul wrote, “The Lord’s servant must not strive but live peaceably with everyone” (2 Tim. 2:24). And he also got up in Peter’s face for hypocrisy and was less than peaceable when calling out opponents of the gospel.

6. *With whom am I sharing the ride down the rapids of life?* We’re all in the same river even though we started at different points, informed by varying perspectives. We’re a diverse group, to be sure, but Yeshua prayed that His body would be united. *Hineh mah tov u’manayim shevet achim gam yachad* needs to be more than a song we sing.
7. *How am I doing in pursuing the “Greatest Commandments” while engaged in the “Great Commission?”* Does your life and ministry reflect Yeshua’s “Love God, love people” mandate? Would your audience say you consistently speak the truth in love? Is pleasing the Audience of One by loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength our highest goal? How well are we living out the reciprocal (“one another”) commands of Scripture?
8. *Am I aware of my own fallibility?* Some time ago I learned that *I should never underestimate my capacity to be deceived*. I’ve been mistaken too often about too many things – and sometimes astonishingly stubborn in giving up a wrongheaded notion.²¹ What course corrections would God have you make, starting today?

DANGER! CLASS VI RAPIDS AHEAD!!

We must recognize a serious element in our whitewater adventures. We do well to note the dangerous rapids which lie ahead. The content of our faith matters, and even more, the object of our faith, our Lord and Savior, Yeshua Hamashiach.

Lori and I personally know two women, both Gentiles, who have experienced spiritual shipwreck. One was a Jewish Studies classmate at Moody, the other an intern we took to Israel on a ministry trip. Each began with a love for the Savior and a heart for Jewish evangelism. Today each is married to an Orthodox husband and living a *halakhic* life that has no room for Yeshua.

In November 2020 a Jerusalem Post headline trumpeted, “Shannon Nuszen: From missionary to observant Jew.”²² Raised as the daughter of an Assemblies of God pastor, she grew up in a family that advocated for Israel and loved to tell Jewish people about Jesus. In her words:

As a teenager I was trained as a missionary to my peers and I was very good at it. Later in life as an adult I got into more of the messianic movement which was Christianity with a Jewish flavor to it; teach Jewish traditions and they would observe Jewish holidays which I loved. I liked learning the Jewish traditions behind many of the holidays and the things that Jews do. Learning to Evangelize Jews was different than I had learned as a teenager. As a typical missionary for Jews you needed to learn a little bit more about the Tanach, the Pentateuch, Jews seem to be more educated, so I needed to learn the verses that would prove that Jesus was the Messiah, if I were to convert any Jews. Which is what I did. Unfortunately, I was successful with less affiliated Jews and secular Jews.²³

Encountering Orthodox Jews, Nuszen discovered that a “Messianic proof text” approach was insufficient. Her arguments were met with charges that the verses she was quoting were out of context or mistranslated. Searching for answers, and unsatisfied with what other believers offered, she found a rabbi who offered to help.

For a while I went through a difficult time of feeling there is no God, I had given up on God. I decided to speak out directly to the rabbi whose lessons I had been learning and somehow he got through to me. He said if I could put Jesus aside, God was still very much there for me and he loved me. From that point on I decided I was going to study to learn the original Hebrew of the text and I was going to learn all over like a child going to Jewish day school. I wanted to learn the truth and beauty of Judaism. I had decided that Judaism was the path I wanted to take. I went first to a Reform synagogue, then fairly quickly went to a Conservative synagogue and started learning there.²⁴

Nuszen's search began in 2005; she eventually connected with Chabad and underwent an Orthodox conversion in 2009. Subsequently she founded Beyneynu, an anti-missionary organization dedicated to exposing evangelical efforts. She was investigating "Rabbi Michael Elk(ohen)," an American who adopted a Haredi persona in Jerusalem, when he was "outed" as a Christian missionary.²⁵

On May 31, 2021 the Jewish Telegraph Agency featured a story about Rabbi Stephen Slater who "talks a lot about God. He credits his Baptist missionary parents."²⁶ Stephen grew up in the Ivory Coast where his father, a medical doctor, headed up a mission hospital. Stephen's uncle, who pastors a large Evangelical church, has been a favorite speaker at our 2016 LIFE Staff Conference.

"I was a frum Christian before I was a frum Jew," Slater said. "...It really was a massive transitional moment when I committed to Judaism and dropped my commitment to Christianity."²⁷

A graduate of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School, Slater identifies as a Conservative Jew. This summer he is leaving the Birmingham, AL, synagogue he has led for three years to take on pulpit duties at Congregation Agudas Achim in Columbus, OH.

I won't pretend to know all the factors that cause professing Christians to value Judaism over Jesus. It would seem each began with a love for the Lord and His people. The desire to reach Jewish people with the gospel led to deep identification with them. This in turn morphed into assimilating into Jewish culture, then formal conversion into Judaism, including renunciation of Jesus.

The above examples of Evangelical missionaries now living the *frum* life apart from Yeshua should serve as a cautionary tale. What starts as a godly impulse to love Jewish people, combat antisemitism, teach the Jewish roots of our faith, and share Messiah among His own – all of which we would happily affirm – somehow leads to "man overboard" in multiple instances.

To be effective in communicating the gospel across cultures we need to properly contextualize. We have a tremendous advantage in putting the gospel in a Jewish context: according to our authoritative text, the Jewish Scriptures, our Jewish Messiah declares, "Salvation is of the Jews!"²⁸

A key question we continue to grapple with is, "Where does cross-cultural contextualization end and syncretism begin?" This, in part, is how we map our way around the boulders and sucking whirlpools of aberrant theology and praxis that threaten to pitch us overboard.

ANCHORING OUR SOURCE OF IDENTITY

It may be helpful in our whitewater rapids analogy to consider "whose raft am I in?" If the name "Messiah Yeshua" is painted on the bow, sides, and stern, then my identity truly is "in Christ."²⁹ The importance of our identification with Jesus cannot be overstated.

Practically speaking, how do I identify my primary source of identification? A good diagnostic question to ask is, “What is my motivation today?” Am I most interested in becoming more skilled in my profession, advancing in my career? Or is my greatest desire to abide in Messiah, to be conformed to the image of Yeshua, to be His useful instrument as His Spirit directs and empowers?

WHICH YESHUA?

How easy it is to focus on the external when depicting Yeshua. We cringe at DaVinci’s very Western European Jesus, complete with leavened rolls at the Passover table.

What was Leonardo’s motivation in “gentilizing” Jesus? (Or in presenting a 17-foot-tall David in all his uncircumcised glory, for that matter.)

Yeshua said, “If I am lifted up I will draw all men unto myself.”³⁰ Paul assures us that the God of Israel is the God the Gentiles also.³¹

We have all seen attempts to make Jesus relatable in various cultures. For example, a Black Jesus. A Hispanic “Hay-SOOS”. A Chinese Yēsū Jīdū.

Were you relieved when Dallas Jenkins, director “The Chosen,” cast Jonathan Roumie as Jesus instead of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian? (Jonathan’s mother is Irish Catholic; his Greek Orthodox father is from Egypt.) Or would we prefer all the cast were Israelis like Shahar Isaac who plays Simon Peter?

How do we best relate our Jewish Messiah across cultures and still retain His identity as the Son of David and Lion of the Tribe of Judah? Even clothed in His Jewish garb, should we expect a sea change in the level of acceptance among Jewish people?

Yesterday Alan Shore gave us insights into Sholem Asch’s Jewish Jesus. The distinguished Yiddish author’s sympathetic depictions of Yeshua aroused the fury of some in the Jewish community. Marc Chagall’s attempts to relate Yeshua to life in the shtetl met with similar responses.

I’m a fan of making the Messiah relevant to every culture. I also advocate preserving the Jewishness of Jesus. But I’m unconvinced that simply “degentilizing the gospel” is the key to wide acceptance by Yeshua’s kinsmen. Again, we paddle hard to find the middle of the stream amidst conflicting currents.

CHARACTER OVER CULTURE

But far more important than Yeshua’s culture is His character, His identity. Divinity was incarnated in the womb of a Jewish virgin. The union of two natures in one person challenges our limited intellectual capacities: sinless Son of God embodied in a baby circumcised on the eighth day.

Luke tells us Jesus “kept increasing in wisdom and stature”³² as a healthy boy should. We have no portrait of the adult Yeshua other than that painted by Isaiah: “He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.”³³

One day we will see our Lord face to face. To what degree will He recognize His image in us?

When I was a rookie intern studying at Moody I lived in the old AMF headquarters in Chicago. Mel Shelver, our aged bookkeeper, also was caretaker for the six-flat building which housed both staff and offices. Mel was a gentle, self-effacing man who diligently served out of the limelight – the kind of dependable worker who is the backbone of every thriving organization.

One afternoon I joined Mel in the basement where he was filling literature orders. He gave me a sideways glance and said, “I’ve been around here a long time, and I’ve figured out who is going to make it in this ministry.”

Wait, Mel knows the formula for success? I’ve gotta find out what it is!

“Really,” I said, trying not to appear overly eager. “So, what’s the secret?”

“I pay attention when the chores are handed out. The guys who say, ‘I don’t clean toilets!’ don’t last.”

I decided on the spot I would be the best toilet cleaner our ministry ever had.

Months later Lori and I moved to Miami for our first field ministry assignment. After the whirlwind of apartment hunting and bidding our departing ministry colleagues farewell, I found myself sitting behind the office desk on the first day, all on my own.

I realized I had no idea what to do next. So, I got up, walked over to the bathroom, and cleaned the toilet.

Not only are we *in* Messiah, we want Messiah to shine out *through* us. To do that we need to have His servant’s heart of humility as Paul describes in Philippians 2. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Messiah Jesus...(who) humbled Himself....”

GRASP YOUR PADDLE – LET’S GO!

You may be out floundering in the swift rapids today with no clue of what to do next in the specific challenges you face. Be assured the Lord knows your circumstances. And He has a purpose for His calling on your life.

May I quote God’s word to Moses: “What is that in your hand?”

Grab hold of that ministry paddle the Lord has entrusted to you, and:

- Humbly acknowledge your insufficiency for the rough waters ahead.
- Toughen up: blisters may form and muscles ache as you paddle to keep in the right current.
- Remember whose name is on your raft; you are indeed “in Messiah.”
- Trust your map, God’s Word. Hone your skills in handling the Scriptures. Proof-texting is what cults do. We must do better.
- Attune your ear to the still, small voice of your ever-present guide and comforter, the Holy Spirit.
- Seek to love sacrificially and serve wholeheartedly, mindful of those around you who are in danger of capsizing and going under.

After four and a half decades of Jewish ministry, I can testify that – despite the roiling river – life is an adventure when we paddle in humility, faith, and obedience.

The opposite is true when pride, doubt, and disobedience mar the journey – because “then you’re hating life!”

FORWARD TOGETHER

I’m glad we’re on this adventure together. I love that we are discovering new ways to work together. The In Search of Shalom³⁴ project is just one example of doing more together than we ever could alone.

Let's encourage one another and build each other up in our most holy faith.³⁵

I hear the roar of rapids just ahead! Let's paddle well in the current God has chosen for each of us.

And may we have real joy in the journey.

¹ I remember feeling particularly embarrassed for one of the Gentiles who in his presentation spoke out forcefully against "Judaizing." When the rebuttal presentation pointed out his mistaken views of various Messianic positions, his response was filled with, "Oh, I didn't know. I didn't understand...."

² Goodman, Martin, "Modeling the 'Parting of the Ways,'" in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 125.

³ Ibid, p. 126.

⁴ Ibid, p. 129.

⁵ Boyarin, Daniel, "Semantic Differences; or 'Judaism/Christianity'" in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 125.

⁶ Robinson, Rich, *The Messianic Movement: A Field Guide for Evangelical Christians*. Purple Pomegranate Productions, 2005.

⁷ Harvey, Richard, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2009 and updated 2018.

⁸ Harvey, Richard, "[Evaluating Messianic Jewish Theology Today](#) – have we gone too far or not far enough?"

⁹ Included in R. Harvey's modifications are these excerpts from a personal email dated June 2, 2021: "Gershon Nerel has come out with a docetic christology, that Yeshua was not truly human, so has removed himself from an orthodox position within the scale. I think the characterisation of his position – restorationist, apostolic, pre-millennial would be held by many others still today.... I might better have characterised [Mark] Kinzer's position as 'post-supersessionist' rather than...'postmissionary'. Kinzer is the leading MJ voice within this emerging and significant stream in Christian theology, and engaging with Jewish thinkers also.... [Uri] Marcus is clearly adoptionist in his christology, and has changed his views on several issues, but he wrote a lot of quotable material and I thought this was the best place to include him in the spectrum. But his position, like that of many of the others, had not really been developed into a fully coherent and complete theological position."

¹⁰ The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974 created "The Gospel, Contextualization and Syncretism Report" (1975, 1224-1228). I presented "[Current Trends in Cross-Cultural Contextualization](#)" at the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism CEO Conference in Dijon, France in May 2005. Much more has been published on this topic subsequently.

¹¹ In the October 1998 edition of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, John Travis introduced the "C-Scale" (Culturalization scale) as follows:

C1 – Traditional Church Using Outsider Language

C2 – Traditional Church Using Insider Language

C3 – Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms

C4 – Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms

C5 – Christ-centered Communities of "Messianic Muslims" Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior

C6 – Small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers.

¹² In 2010, Life in Messiah hosted a consultation on cross-cultural contextualization for our staff. Scott Moreau and Jim Kilgore provided missiological insights from an academic and practitioner's perspective. Dan Strull, Irving Salzman, and Sam Nadler shared from their experiences in Messianic congregations and Jewish evangelism.

¹³ Yeshua, the "Prince of Peace," acknowledged the reality that He was "appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Lu 2:34) when He stated, "I have not come to bring peace but a sword...", bringing division to the closest of family relationships (which some here have experienced). But His use of sword

was metaphorical, illustrated by His instructing Peter in Gethsemane to re-sheath his weapon, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52). His Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) – as of yet....

¹⁴ I don’t prefer “Gentile church” nomenclature, but since the fourth century the believing “Jewish remnant” has acculturated or assimilated far more into the Gentile world than Gentile believers have adopted/adapted to our Jewish faith heritage.

¹⁵ Beyond the scope of this paper, but closely related to the theme of this conference, is the matter of the influence of Judaism on Christianity and (perhaps surprisingly) vice versa. “The confrontation with Christianity is at the very heart of Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism, which deal intensively with a renewed self-definition of who is a Jew and what is Judaism, as part of determining the reverse definition – namely, who is not a Jew. It was essential to define this in relation to those who wished to see themselves as Jews and were rejected by the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud because of their belief in the messiahhood of Jesus. Self-definition is an extensive and open process, one based not solely on automatic denial, but also on absorbing new religious ideas, ceremonies, and symbols from the outside. The process of appropriation and the struggle over that which is appropriated characterize the world of anti-Christian polemic during the Rabbinic period. In the Middle Ages, however, the tendency of mutual denial came to dominate.” [Yuval, Israel Jacob, *Two Nations in Your Womb*. University of California Press: Berkely and Los Angeles, 2006, page 23.]

¹⁶ Alfred Edersheim’s *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* and Oskar Skarsaune’s *In the Shadow of the Temple* are classic examples of presenting our Savior and our faith in their Jewish setting. Theresa Newell’s presentation at this conference on “Jesus Masked: Anti-Jewish Theologies” documents intentional moves of “institutional Christianity” away from the Jewishness of the gospel.

¹⁷ Brian Crawford’s recent seminar presentations on *Haredi Theology and the Incarnation* were a great contribution to the effort to grow our understanding of the philosophies and mystical views of the ultra-Orthodox.

¹⁸ Quoted from a pre-publication draft of “Text and Context: An Evangelical Approach to Contextual Theologizing” by Dallas Theological Seminary Missions Professor Steve Strauss.

¹⁹ The “worship wars” in Evangelical churches are but one example. To cater to conflicting camps, many have a “traditional service” where the old hymns of the faith are sung; this is followed by a second “contemporary service” with “rock musicians singing 7-11 choruses – you know, the same seven words sung eleven times” according to the traditionalists. Many Messianic Congregations also seek a hybrid experience to accommodate differing expectations of what comprises an “authentic Jewish” experience.

²⁰ This was illustrated again recently when a ministry colleague, himself a Jewish believer, expressed a felt need to begin a Bible study “where Jewish seekers would feel more at home” than they would accompanying him to the very conservative Evangelical church where he personally feels most comfortable worshipping.

²¹ If interested, see Lori Taber, my faithful spouse of 45 years, for examples of my shortcomings, *faux pas*, and wrong-headedness. She could write a book....

²² Bingham, Walter. <https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/shannon-nuezen-from-missionary-to-observant-jew-647124>. November 1, 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sharon, Jeremy, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/haredi-rabbi-accused-of-being-a-covert-messianic-missionary-666517>. April 28, 2021.

²⁶ Harris, Ben, <https://www.jta.org/2021/05/13/united-states/rabbi-stephen-slater-talks-a-lot-about-god-he-credits-his-baptist-missionary-parents>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John 4:22.

²⁹ The importance and eternal value of being “in Messiah” is worthy of exhaustive study. Here’s a sampling of what we have ἐν Χριστῷ/בְּיֵשׁוּעָה: redemption (Rom 3:24); eternal life (Rom 6:23); no condemnation (Rom 8:1); God’s unconditional love (Rom 8:29); united in one body (Rom 12:5); sanctification (1 Cor 1:2); God’s grace (1 Cor 1:4); promise of resurrection (1 Cor 15:22); victory (2 Cor 2:14); new creation (2 Cor 5:17); justification (Gal 2:16); fulfillment of promise to Abraham of Gentile blessing (Gal 3:14); sonship with our Creator (Gal 3:26); unity of believers: Jewish/Gentile, male/female, slave and free (Gal 3:28); every spiritual blessing in heaven (Eph 1:3); surpassing riches of His grace (Eph 2:7); created for good works (Eph 2:10); Gentiles brought near and made fellow

heirs (Eph 2:13, 3:6); forgiveness (Eph 4:32); encouragement (Phil 2:1); righteousness (Phil 3:9); peace (Phil 4:7); all needs supplied (Phil 4:19); salvation and eternal glory (2 Tim 2:10).

³⁰ John 12:32.

³¹ Rom 3:29.

³² Lu 2:52.

³³ Isa 53:2.

³⁴ www.insearchofshalom.com. Currently three LCJE ministries are collaborating on content and responding to live chats. We welcome additional volunteers as traffic is increasing in response to creative videos like "[How Many Mitzvahs Make a Mensch](#)" and "[The Jewish Superman](#)."

³⁵ 1 Thess 5:11; Ju 1:20.

Negotiating the Rapids of Messianic Ministry:

A Personal Reflection

Wes Taber

LCJE North America Consultation

Dallas, TX – June 2021

Almost three decades ago Lori and I took our kids on a family vacation to East Tennessee. The nearby Wautaga River afforded our first whitewater rafting adventure.



Our friendly guide made sure we were properly outfitted with life jackets and gave us instructions on how to survive the experience.

Once launched in the river he began interspersing stories between shouted navigational instructions.

He began one story in a very matter-of-fact tone, “Once I was on a Class V stretch of river. I went over a waterfall and my kayak overturned at the bottom. I was upside down underneath the falls and the pressure from the water kept pushing me under. For the longest time I was tossed about every which way and I couldn’t catch a breath.”

He completed his saga with, “And then you’re hatin’ life.”

CLASSIFICATION OF RAPIDS

Whitewater rivers are classified by their level of turbulence, with Class I having easily avoidable obstacles and a very calm flow (think “Lazy River with ripples”). Our Watauga experience was mostly Class I and II, with one Class III “moderate” rapid to negotiate.

In contrast, Class V rapids include turbulent currents, boulders, vertical drops, and unpredictable hydraulics. They offer great potential for the “then you’re hating life,” “why’d I ever sign up for this?” kind of experience.

Class VI rapids are rarely challenged, even by experts, as “paddling errors may be fatal.”

ENTERING THE MESSIANIC MINISTRY RIVER

Over the years I’ve used the analogy of paddling in the river to describe what it’s like trying to stay balanced in Jewish ministry. In this analogy, we might think of two swiftly flowing streams merging into a roiling river. One river represents the Church, the other the Synagogue.

Both Lori and I are “Gentile preachers’ kids.” We launched out into ministry from the Church stream. We went to Christian colleges. We raised our support from typical Fundamentalist/Evangelical churches.

I already had a Bachelors Degree when I began Jewish Studies at Moody Bible Institute in January 1976. Michael and Eva Rydelnik were classmates; Dr. Louis Goldberg was our instructor. I was very comfortable in the solid Evangelical part of the stream where Moody was positioned.

Dr. Goldberg, however, brought an entirely new dynamic in my introduction to Jewish ministry. Before I knew it, my little river craft was in some pretty turbulent rapids.

- Yohanan ben Zakkai? *Never heard of the guy.*
- Maimonides – wait, *he’s the Rambam? What’s a rom-bomb?*
- Then who is this Ramban? Nachmanides? *Is he making this up? Please.*

The new vocabulary came splashing at me endlessly:

- Mishnah, Gemara; *amoraim, tannaim*. (*I've no idea what you mean.*)
- Pesach, Yōhm Key-poor (*is that the same as Yom Kipper?*).
- Shabbat, Shavuot, Sukkot (*or is it Shabbos, Shavuos, and Sukkos?*).
- Memra and Metatron. (*Bless the bed that I lie on.*)

OY! My hands blistered trying to paddle to catch up.

Hey, I've often said the only reason I knew the difference between a Yamaha and a yarmulke was...I had a Yamaha. (*And who's the wisenheimer who put an "r" in yarmulke – and decided to end it with an "e"?*)

What's this? The Father of the Reformation wrote "On the Jews and Their Lies?"

Wait, are you telling me the same Martin Luther who wrote "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" advocated burning synagogues, Jewish homes, and schools?

The "Here I stand I can do no other" orator advised confiscating rabbinic writings along with Jewish wealth? *I didn't learn ANY of this in Sunday School!*

The reading assignments offered no respite of familiarity. I paddled hard through *The Jewish Festivals* by Hayyim Schauss. Father Edward Flannery's *The Anguish of the Jews* traced a litany of "Christian" acts of antisemitism:

- Crusades, the Inquisition, and edicts of expulsion
- Black Plague, blood libels, and the deicide charge
- pogroms and the Holocaust.

This was not covered in my Christian liberal arts education.

Preparing for a Dr. Goldberg exam seemed like a Class IV whitewater experience for me. Or so I thought...until I arrived at the whirlpool labeled "Messianic Judaism."

MESSIANIC WHITEWATER

Dr. Goldberg convened a conference at Moody in 1977 to discuss issues being stirred up over the surge of interest in Jewish expressions of faith in Jesus.

New terms were being coined: "Hebrew Christian" was replaced by "Messianic Jew."

Saturday services were conducted in Messianic synagogues by rabbis, not by pastors in Christian churches on Sunday.

I don't know how the symposium's presenters were chosen for the various position papers and responses. I do remember thinking it was very unfortunate that all the "pro-Messianic Judaism" speakers were Jewish believers, and all who spoke against it (including my father-in-law) were Gentiles.¹

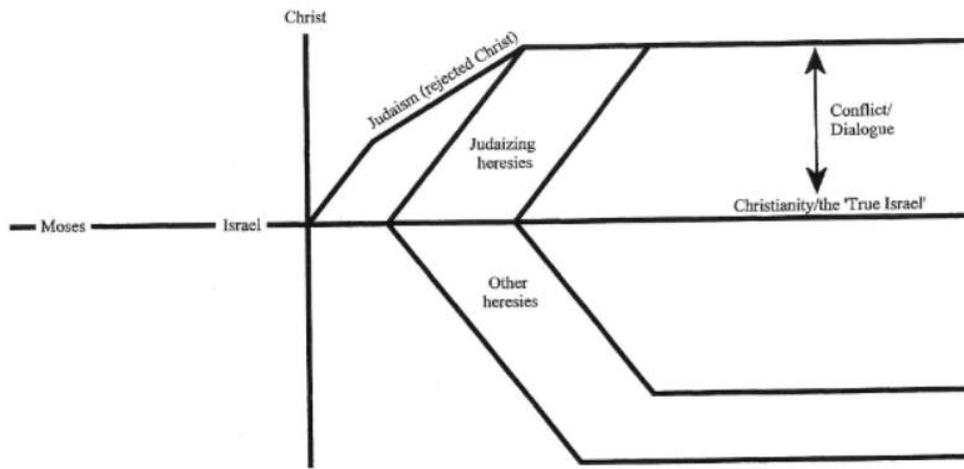
A lot of water has passed under my raft in the four decades since that conference. Lori and I have had the benefit of seeing the issues "up close and personal" in various ministry settings, including Israel.

MODELING A COMPLEX MATTER

Much scholarly work has been produced to help us gain historic perspective. E.g., Martin Goodman provides helpful models to help us understand the complexity of viewpoints on Jewish-Christian relations.²

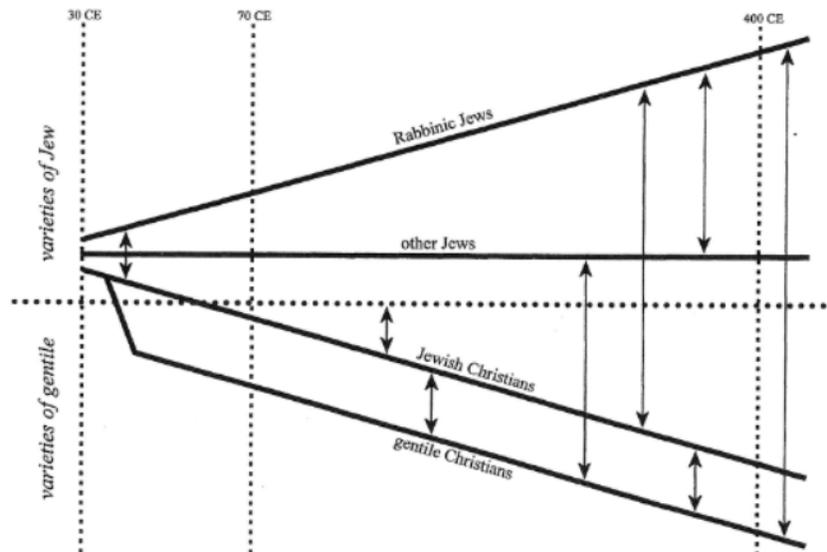
Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 265-339) modeled a straight line from Moses to Israel with Judaism branching off with the rejection of Yeshua as Messiah.

Eusebius' view of the "parting" (3rd-4th c.)

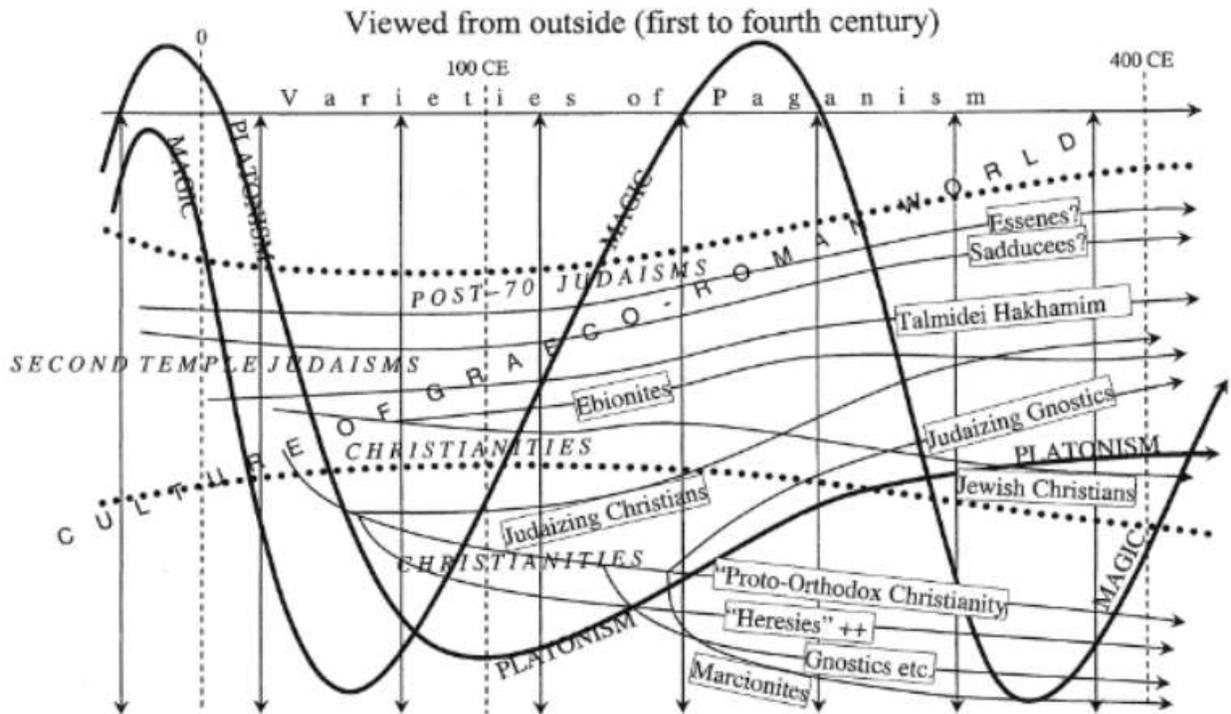


The straight line continues with Christianity. This supersessionist model does not reflect the diversity of Jewish religious expression when Jesus was born.

Martin Goodman's (admittedly "best guess") attempt to depict the varieties of social distance between Jews and Gentiles³ in the early centuries of the Common Era looks like this:



A further model⁴ shows the complexity of the intermingling streams of theological and philosophical expression in the 1st to 4th centuries.



Note in particular the use of “Judaisms” and “Christianities” and interplay of the wider cultural streams.

Here’s another viewpoint altogether, expressed by Daniel Boyarin. “Judaism...is not the parent religion to Christianity; indeed, in some respects the opposite may be as true. Nor can we speak of a religion, Judaism, at all in the sense of a bounded institution existing before the Christian era (and even fairly deep into that era)...”⁵

Ioudaismos (2 Macabees 2:22 – 2nd c. BC) = Jewish culture vs. *Hellenismos*

Ioudaismos (Gal 1:14 – 1st c. AD) = Jewish belief, customs vs. *Christianos*

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY

And, as with Judaism, Christianity developed its own tributaries.

	Roman Catholicism	Eastern Orthodox	Protestant Reformation
AD	313	1054	1517

Historic Development of Christianity

As if the existing major branches of “historic Christianity” (Roman Catholic – 313 AD; Eastern Orthodox – 1054 AD; Protestant – 1517 AD) with all their subdivisions (Lutheran, Anabaptist, Methodist, etc.) would not be confusing enough, we now add the “modern” Messianic Movement to the widening river.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT

Count Zinzendorf Germany	Christ Church Jerusalem	Joseph Rabinowitz Russia	Jesus People USA	Russian Revival FSR
1750	1850	1875	1975	2000

Historic Development of the Messianic Movement

Rich Robinson's *The Messianic Movement: A Field Guide for Evangelical Christians*⁶ was a helpful contribution to identifying varying elements and substantive issues. (LCJE gets a plug!)

If anything, expressions of Messianic faith have become even more diverse (some might say “messy-
anic”) over the decades.

MAPPING MESSIANIC THEOLOGIES

Richard Harvey undertook the challenge of mapping Messianic Jewish theology for us.⁷ With apologies to Richard for summarizing so briefly in this space, here are the categories he lists in his paper⁸ delivered at LCJE's International Conference in High Leigh in 2011:

- Type 1 – Jewish Christianity, Christocentric and Reformed (Maoz)
- Type 2 – Dispensationalist Hebrew Christianity (Fruchtenbaum)
- Type 3 – Israeli National and Restorationist (Nerel)
- Type 4 – New Testament Halacha, Charismatic and Evangelical (Juster, Stern)
- Type 5 – Traditional Judaism and the Messiah (Schiffman, Fischer, Berkowitz)
- Type 6 – ‘Postmissionary Messianic Judaism’ (Kinzer, Nichol, Sadan)
- Type 7 – Rabbinic Halacha in the Light of the NT (Shulam)
- Type 8 – Messianic Rabbinic Orthodoxy (Brandt, Marcus)

As befits a flowing river analogy, Richard recently stated, “A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since [I delivered that paper in] 2011.... A number of positions have changed since then, and I have reflected on whether I got it right at the time and how things have changed. I think the typology basically stands, but since then....”⁹ [I've footnoted specific changes he's seen in the last decade.]

One wonders what recommendations representatives from each stream would make today to help the Body of Messiah restore the Jewishness of the gospel.

Given the wide range of theologies and hermeneutical approaches, we would expect very diverse opinions on the subject. How we need Holy Spirit discernment to navigate these waters, to know what to embrace and what to reject!

“C-SCALE” (CULTURALIZATION SCALE)

Our theology is not to be merely theoretical, but practical. On the missiological level, how are we to effectively communicate gospel truth within a Jewish context? What forms do we adopt, adapt, or avoid?

Thankfully there is a growing corpus of missiological studies on cross-cultural contextualization¹⁰ that have been published – and hotly debated.

The “C-scale”¹¹ formulation has provided a vocabulary for discussing the issues. Initially developed for Muslim ministry, it is applicable to a Jewish context.¹²

We do well to acknowledge the complexity of our task. The simple “us vs. them” mindset leaves little room for nuance.

If we’re going to resort to labels, we would more correctly speak of “Judaisms” and “Christianities.” As you are well aware, the spectrum of Jewish and Christian expressions of faith is incredibly diverse, with the Messianic movement positioned at the convergence of the rivers.

Too often where the rivers of religion meet something worse than mere seasickness results. This is especially true when religion and culture are deeply embedded. In the extreme we get the Irish Republican Army and Islamic Jihad, to name two violent examples.

We’re well acquainted with competing truth claims and charges of “fake news” in our day. When the stakes are highest the threat of violence is greatest. And when core religious beliefs¹³ and eternal destinies are perceived to be at stake and cultural identities challenged, true believers may easily be roused to engage in Crusades, Inquisitions, pogroms, et al.

NEGOTIATING THE RAPIDS

Trying to navigate in the “church→ ←synagogue” intersecting point of Messianic faith isn’t at all easy, given where we are in the flow of history. Paddling in the whitewater of the confluence of two already-roiling rivers threatens to capsize any craft not held upright by biblical truth.

Does it not seem at times that our energies are more focused on fighting to stay afloat amidst the turbulence of ministry than on our primary LCJE purpose: bringing the message of Messiah back to His Jewish kinsmen.

Here are three questions for us to consider:

- To what extent is seeking to restore the Jewishness of the gospel to the “Gentile church”¹⁴ promoting our cause: great, moderate, negligible?
- To what degree can these efforts become a diversion?
- By what metric can this be measured?

With our “to the Jew first” gospel priority, finding the best approach to present Yeshua to Jewish people is admittedly a greater challenge for Gentiles raised with minimal contact with Jewish communities.

But our experience with On the Derekh, the joined ministry effort of several in this room to reach the Haredim, demonstrates how much more all of us need to learn about their worldviews and theologies as we seek to develop methodologies and approaches.

RECIPROCAL INFLUENCES OF JUDAISM & CHRISTIANITY

As to theologies, Israel Jacob Yuval, in *Two Nations in Your Womb*,¹⁵ is a leading Jewish voice speaking to the reciprocal influence of Christianity and Judaism. Where many have written over the centuries of Judaism as the parent to Christianity,¹⁶ Yuval makes the case that the rabbis' reaction to Christianity markedly shaped the development of rabbinic Judaism.

"The confrontation with Christianity is at the very heart of Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism, which deal intensively with a renewed self-definition of who is a Jew and what is Judaism, as part of determining the reverse definition – namely, who is not a Jew. It was essential to define this in relation to those who wished to see themselves as Jews and were rejected by the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud because of their belief in the messiahhood of Jesus."

As to methodologies and approaches, an example of a significant contribution to our understanding is Brian Crawford's recent lectures on "Haredi Theology and the Incarnation." His explication of the influence of neo-Platonism and mysticism in shaping the worldview of the Haredim¹⁷ helps us identify minefields and consider questions to ask when engaging the ultra-Orthodox.

Truth be told, we still have much work to do in promoting understanding just within the diverse Body of Messiah. How much greater the challenge in bridging the divide between Yeshua-followers and the variety of expressions of non-Messianic Jewish faith (or lack thereof, in the case of Jewish atheists, secular materialists, *et al.*).

A LEARNER'S MENTALITY

The ease with which we misunderstand one another's world view is not unique to Jewish ministry. Missiologists in recent decades have devoted much research to communicating cross-culturally. Here's an extended quote from an esteemed colleague, now in heaven, Steve Strauss:

"Every culture possesses positive elements, favorable to the understanding of the Gospel" (Padilla 1980, 69). The worldview, values, and images of each culture will help its readers see things in Scripture that readers from other cultures may miss.

...Robertson McQuilken provides an example of this. When he first went to Japan as a missionary, he was astounded

to discover that many things important to me were of little or no importance to Japanese: eternal life, propositional truth, individual freedom, forgiveness of sin, a personal God, history. These were things I had been trying to market [to the Japanese]. At the same time I found things important to the Japanese that were not priorities for most westerners, but I discovered, *things to which Scripture speaks*: approval and sense of belonging, security, relationships, feelings, honor of parents, present "salvation," obligations, loyalty, beauty, love of nature, and the value of suffering (1996, 166; emphasis added).

McQuilken's increased sensitivity to the Japanese context awakened fresh insight into aspects of the biblical text he had not previously noticed!¹⁸

In my personal experience, I found it both refreshing and challenging to read and discuss the New Testament at length with a *yeshiva bocher*. I marveled at the insights his fresh perspective brought and was startled at times to recognize how many preconceived ideas I read into the texts.

It's been helpful for me to observe that it's easiest for most of us, Jewish or Gentile, to stick close to the side of the river from which we've been launched. Yes, there are the adventurous among us who delight to taste new foods, experience new cultures, walk a mile in another's sandals.

And some of us "take umbrage" when "but we've always done it this way" gets challenged.¹⁹ Surely the majority of us are most at ease remaining in the familiarity of the environment in which we've been raised.

But we recognize the challenge of finding "the right fit" when searching for a spiritual landing place for someone raised in a far different setting.²⁰

WHAT ABOUT ME?

So, is there a point to all my musings? "Have you any takeaways for us fellow rafters out here on Messianic Ministry River, Brother Wes?"

Here are some diagnostic questions to consider individually and corporately on our adventure together:

1. *From where did I launch my raft?* It's important to recognize how much our origins and unique personality traits influence our approach to life. The mix of variables is endless: Jewish, Gentile, mixed marriage? Secular, mildly religious, strictly observant? Mono-cultural or multi-cultural environment in childhood?
2. *How far from my point of origin have I come (and in which direction)?* How long have you been on your journey of faith with Yeshua? How much have you experienced of other cultural expressions of faith – including Messianic/Christian? In what areas have you grown? Where do you remain stuck, tied to the familiar shore of your home culture and heart language? It's so easy to criticize – and shun – the "other."
3. *How much is my sense of identity informed by my ethnicity and cultural background, and how much by my faith?* Are you most comfortable with others who think and act like you do, regardless of their religious convictions, or do you find that a shared loved of Messiah is an even greater relational bond than is a shared cultural or ethnic background?
4. *Whose map of the river of life am I trusting; who is my guide on this journey?* Someone has rightly said, "Show me your authority and I will tell you what you believe." What particular philosophy, theological system, or world view most shapes my thinking? Where am I looking for truth: the Talmud, *kabbalah*? The Church Fathers, Calvin's *Institutes*? Rambam's *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Zalman's *The Tanya*? L.S. Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, MacArthur's commentaries?

The "I am of Paul; I am of Apollos; I am of Peter" (1 Cor 3:4) impulse persists. Do we filter extra-biblical writings (Talmud/Rashi/Rambam or Augustine/Calvin/MacArthur) through the "true truth" (Francis Schaeffer's term) of the inerrant and infallible Word of God? What evidence is there that Scripture has changed your perspectives in meaningful ways? To what degree is the Holy Spirit your teacher, illumining the Word of God to your mind and heart?

5. *What battles am I choosing to fight?* Not every stretch of whitewater rapids needs to be conquered as you navigate the river of life and ministry. Sometimes our blisters are self-

inflicted. Shaul/Paul wrote, “The Lord’s servant must not strive but live peaceably with everyone” (2 Tim. 2:24). And he also got up in Peter’s face for hypocrisy and was less than peaceable when calling out opponents of the gospel.

6. *With whom am I sharing the ride down the rapids of life?* We’re all in the same river even though we started at different points, informed by varying perspectives. We’re a diverse group, to be sure, but Yeshua prayed that His body would be united. *Hineh mah tov u’manayim shevet achim gam yachad* needs to be more than a song we sing.
7. *How am I doing in pursuing the “Greatest Commandments” while engaged in the “Great Commission?”* Does your life and ministry reflect Yeshua’s “Love God, love people” mandate? Would your audience say you consistently speak the truth in love? Is pleasing the Audience of One by loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength our highest goal? How well are we living out the reciprocal (“one another”) commands of Scripture?
8. *Am I aware of my own fallibility?* Some time ago I learned that *I should never underestimate my capacity to be deceived*. I’ve been mistaken too often about too many things – and sometimes astonishingly stubborn in giving up a wrongheaded notion.²¹ What course corrections would God have you make, starting today?

DANGER! CLASS VI RAPIDS AHEAD!!

We must recognize a serious element in our whitewater adventures. We do well to note the dangerous rapids which lie ahead. The content of our faith matters, and even more, the object of our faith, our Lord and Savior, Yeshua Hamashiach.

Lori and I personally know two women, both Gentiles, who have experienced spiritual shipwreck. One was a Jewish Studies classmate at Moody, the other an intern we took to Israel on a ministry trip. Each began with a love for the Savior and a heart for Jewish evangelism. Today each is married to an Orthodox husband and living a *halakhic* life that has no room for Yeshua.

In November 2020 a Jerusalem Post headline trumpeted, “Shannon Nuszen: From missionary to observant Jew.”²² Raised as the daughter of an Assemblies of God pastor, she grew up in a family that advocated for Israel and loved to tell Jewish people about Jesus. In her words:

As a teenager I was trained as a missionary to my peers and I was very good at it. Later in life as an adult I got into more of the messianic movement which was Christianity with a Jewish flavor to it; teach Jewish traditions and they would observe Jewish holidays which I loved. I liked learning the Jewish traditions behind many of the holidays and the things that Jews do. Learning to Evangelize Jews was different than I had learned as a teenager. As a typical missionary for Jews you needed to learn a little bit more about the Tanach, the Pentateuch, Jews seem to be more educated, so I needed to learn the verses that would prove that Jesus was the Messiah, if I were to convert any Jews. Which is what I did. Unfortunately, I was successful with less affiliated Jews and secular Jews.²³

Encountering Orthodox Jews, Nuszen discovered that a “Messianic proof text” approach was insufficient. Her arguments were met with charges that the verses she was quoting were out of context or mistranslated. Searching for answers, and unsatisfied with what other believers offered, she found a rabbi who offered to help.

For a while I went through a difficult time of feeling there is no God, I had given up on God. I decided to speak out directly to the rabbi whose lessons I had been learning and somehow he got through to me. He said if I could put Jesus aside, God was still very much there for me and he loved me. From that point on I decided I was going to study to learn the original Hebrew of the text and I was going to learn all over like a child going to Jewish day school. I wanted to learn the truth and beauty of Judaism. I had decided that Judaism was the path I wanted to take. I went first to a Reform synagogue, then fairly quickly went to a Conservative synagogue and started learning there.²⁴

Nuszen's search began in 2005; she eventually connected with Chabad and underwent an Orthodox conversion in 2009. Subsequently she founded Beyneynu, an anti-missionary organization dedicated to exposing evangelical efforts. She was investigating "Rabbi Michael Elk(ohen)," an American who adopted a Haredi persona in Jerusalem, when he was "outed" as a Christian missionary.²⁵

On May 31, 2021 the Jewish Telegraph Agency featured a story about Rabbi Stephen Slater who "talks a lot about God. He credits his Baptist missionary parents."²⁶ Stephen grew up in the Ivory Coast where his father, a medical doctor, headed up a mission hospital. Stephen's uncle, who pastors a large Evangelical church, has been a favorite speaker at our 2016 LIFE Staff Conference.

"I was a frum Christian before I was a frum Jew," Slater said. "...It really was a massive transitional moment when I committed to Judaism and dropped my commitment to Christianity."²⁷

A graduate of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School, Slater identifies as a Conservative Jew. This summer he is leaving the Birmingham, AL, synagogue he has led for three years to take on pulpit duties at Congregation Agudas Achim in Columbus, OH.

I won't pretend to know all the factors that cause professing Christians to value Judaism over Jesus. It would seem each began with a love for the Lord and His people. The desire to reach Jewish people with the gospel led to deep identification with them. This in turn morphed into assimilating into Jewish culture, then formal conversion into Judaism, including renunciation of Jesus.

The above examples of Evangelical missionaries now living the *frum* life apart from Yeshua should serve as a cautionary tale. What starts as a godly impulse to love Jewish people, combat antisemitism, teach the Jewish roots of our faith, and share Messiah among His own – all of which we would happily affirm – somehow leads to "man overboard" in multiple instances.

To be effective in communicating the gospel across cultures we need to properly contextualize. We have a tremendous advantage in putting the gospel in a Jewish context: according to our authoritative text, the Jewish Scriptures, our Jewish Messiah declares, "Salvation is of the Jews!"²⁸

A key question we continue to grapple with is, "Where does cross-cultural contextualization end and syncretism begin?" This, in part, is how we map our way around the boulders and sucking whirlpools of aberrant theology and praxis that threaten to pitch us overboard.

ANCHORING OUR SOURCE OF IDENTITY

It may be helpful in our whitewater rapids analogy to consider "whose raft am I in?" If the name "Messiah Yeshua" is painted on the bow, sides, and stern, then my identity truly is "in Christ."²⁹ The importance of our identification with Jesus cannot be overstated.

Practically speaking, how do I identify my primary source of identification? A good diagnostic question to ask is, “What is my motivation today?” Am I most interested in becoming more skilled in my profession, advancing in my career? Or is my greatest desire to abide in Messiah, to be conformed to the image of Yeshua, to be His useful instrument as His Spirit directs and empowers?

WHICH YESHUA?

How easy it is to focus on the external when depicting Yeshua. We cringe at DaVinci’s very Western European Jesus, complete with leavened rolls at the Passover table.

What was Leonardo’s motivation in “gentilizing” Jesus? (Or in presenting a 17-foot-tall David in all his uncircumcised glory, for that matter.)

Yeshua said, “If I am lifted up I will draw all men unto myself.”³⁰ Paul assures us that the God of Israel is the God the Gentiles also.³¹

We have all seen attempts to make Jesus relatable in various cultures. For example, a Black Jesus. A Hispanic “Hay-SOOS”. A Chinese Yēsū Jīdū.

Were you relieved when Dallas Jenkins, director “The Chosen,” cast Jonathan Roumie as Jesus instead of a blond-haired, blue-eyed Scandinavian? (Jonathan’s mother is Irish Catholic; his Greek Orthodox father is from Egypt.) Or would we prefer all the cast were Israelis like Shahar Isaac who plays Simon Peter?

How do we best relate our Jewish Messiah across cultures and still retain His identity as the Son of David and Lion of the Tribe of Judah? Even clothed in His Jewish garb, should we expect a sea change in the level of acceptance among Jewish people?

Yesterday Alan Shore gave us insights into Sholem Asch’s Jewish Jesus. The distinguished Yiddish author’s sympathetic depictions of Yeshua aroused the fury of some in the Jewish community. Marc Chagall’s attempts to relate Yeshua to life in the shtetl met with similar responses.

I’m a fan of making the Messiah relevant to every culture. I also advocate preserving the Jewishness of Jesus. But I’m unconvinced that simply “degentilizing the gospel” is the key to wide acceptance by Yeshua’s kinsmen. Again, we paddle hard to find the middle of the stream amidst conflicting currents.

CHARACTER OVER CULTURE

But far more important than Yeshua’s culture is His character, His identity. Divinity was incarnated in the womb of a Jewish virgin. The union of two natures in one person challenges our limited intellectual capacities: sinless Son of God embodied in a baby circumcised on the eighth day.

Luke tells us Jesus “kept increasing in wisdom and stature”³² as a healthy boy should. We have no portrait of the adult Yeshua other than that painted by Isaiah: “He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.”³³

One day we will see our Lord face to face. To what degree will He recognize His image in us?

When I was a rookie intern studying at Moody I lived in the old AMF headquarters in Chicago. Mel Shelver, our aged bookkeeper, also was caretaker for the six-flat building which housed both staff and offices. Mel was a gentle, self-effacing man who diligently served out of the limelight – the kind of dependable worker who is the backbone of every thriving organization.

One afternoon I joined Mel in the basement where he was filling literature orders. He gave me a sideways glance and said, “I’ve been around here a long time, and I’ve figured out who is going to make it in this ministry.”

Wait, Mel knows the formula for success? I’ve gotta find out what it is!

“Really,” I said, trying not to appear overly eager. “So, what’s the secret?”

“I pay attention when the chores are handed out. The guys who say, ‘I don’t clean toilets!’ don’t last.”

I decided on the spot I would be the best toilet cleaner our ministry ever had.

Months later Lori and I moved to Miami for our first field ministry assignment. After the whirlwind of apartment hunting and bidding our departing ministry colleagues farewell, I found myself sitting behind the office desk on the first day, all on my own.

I realized I had no idea what to do next. So, I got up, walked over to the bathroom, and cleaned the toilet.

Not only are we *in* Messiah, we want Messiah to shine out *through* us. To do that we need to have His servant’s heart of humility as Paul describes in Philippians 2. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Messiah Jesus...(who) humbled Himself....”

GRASP YOUR PADDLE – LET’S GO!

You may be out floundering in the swift rapids today with no clue of what to do next in the specific challenges you face. Be assured the Lord knows your circumstances. And He has a purpose for His calling on your life.

May I quote God’s word to Moses: “What is that in your hand?”

Grab hold of that ministry paddle the Lord has entrusted to you, and:

- Humbly acknowledge your insufficiency for the rough waters ahead.
- Toughen up: blisters may form and muscles ache as you paddle to keep in the right current.
- Remember whose name is on your raft; you are indeed “in Messiah.”
- Trust your map, God’s Word. Hone your skills in handling the Scriptures. Proof-texting is what cults do. We must do better.
- Attune your ear to the still, small voice of your ever-present guide and comforter, the Holy Spirit.
- Seek to love sacrificially and serve wholeheartedly, mindful of those around you who are in danger of capsizing and going under.

After four and a half decades of Jewish ministry, I can testify that – despite the roiling river – life is an adventure when we paddle in humility, faith, and obedience.

The opposite is true when pride, doubt, and disobedience mar the journey – because “then you’re hating life!”

FORWARD TOGETHER

I’m glad we’re on this adventure together. I love that we are discovering new ways to work together. The In Search of Shalom³⁴ project is just one example of doing more together than we ever could alone.

Let's encourage one another and build each other up in our most holy faith.³⁵

I hear the roar of rapids just ahead! Let's paddle well in the current God has chosen for each of us.

And may we have real joy in the journey.

¹ I remember feeling particularly embarrassed for one of the Gentiles who in his presentation spoke out forcefully against "Judaizing." When the rebuttal presentation pointed out his mistaken views of various Messianic positions, his response was filled with, "Oh, I didn't know. I didn't understand...."

² Goodman, Martin, "Modeling the 'Parting of the Ways,'" in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 125.

³ Ibid, p. 126.

⁴ Ibid, p. 129.

⁵ Boyarin, Daniel, "Semantic Differences; or 'Judaism/Christianity'" in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, p. 125.

⁶ Robinson, Rich, *The Messianic Movement: A Field Guide for Evangelical Christians*. Purple Pomegranate Productions, 2005.

⁷ Harvey, Richard, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2009 and updated 2018.

⁸ Harvey, Richard, "[Evaluating Messianic Jewish Theology Today](#) – have we gone too far or not far enough?"

⁹ Included in R. Harvey's modifications are these excerpts from a personal email dated June 2, 2021: "Gershon Nerel has come out with a docetic christology, that Yeshua was not truly human, so has removed himself from an orthodox position within the scale. I think the characterisation of his position – restorationist, apostolic, pre-millennial would be held by many others still today.... I might better have characterised [Mark] Kinzer's position as 'post-supersessionist' rather than...'postmissionary'. Kinzer is the leading MJ voice within this emerging and significant stream in Christian theology, and engaging with Jewish thinkers also.... [Uri] Marcus is clearly adoptionist in his christology, and has changed his views on several issues, but he wrote a lot of quotable material and I thought this was the best place to include him in the spectrum. But his position, like that of many of the others, had not really been developed into a fully coherent and complete theological position."

¹⁰ The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974 created "The Gospel, Contextualization and Syncretism Report" (1975, 1224-1228). I presented "[Current Trends in Cross-Cultural Contextualization](#)" at the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism CEO Conference in Dijon, France in May 2005. Much more has been published on this topic subsequently.

¹¹ In the October 1998 edition of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, John Travis introduced the "C-Scale" (Culturalization scale) as follows:

C1 – Traditional Church Using Outsider Language

C2 – Traditional Church Using Insider Language

C3 – Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms

C4 – Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms

C5 – Christ-centered Communities of "Messianic Muslims" Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior

C6 – Small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers.

¹² In 2010, Life in Messiah hosted a consultation on cross-cultural contextualization for our staff. Scott Moreau and Jim Kilgore provided missiological insights from an academic and practitioner's perspective. Dan Strull, Irving Salzman, and Sam Nadler shared from their experiences in Messianic congregations and Jewish evangelism.

¹³ Yeshua, the "Prince of Peace," acknowledged the reality that He was "appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed" (Lu 2:34) when He stated, "I have not come to bring peace but a sword...", bringing division to the closest of family relationships (which some here have experienced). But His use of sword

was metaphorical, illustrated by His instructing Peter in Gethsemane to re-sheath his weapon, “For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52). His Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) – as of yet....

¹⁴ I don’t prefer “Gentile church” nomenclature, but since the fourth century the believing “Jewish remnant” has acculturated or assimilated far more into the Gentile world than Gentile believers have adopted/adapted to our Jewish faith heritage.

¹⁵ Beyond the scope of this paper, but closely related to the theme of this conference, is the matter of the influence of Judaism on Christianity and (perhaps surprisingly) vice versa. “The confrontation with Christianity is at the very heart of Midrashic and Talmudic Judaism, which deal intensively with a renewed self-definition of who is a Jew and what is Judaism, as part of determining the reverse definition – namely, who is not a Jew. It was essential to define this in relation to those who wished to see themselves as Jews and were rejected by the Sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud because of their belief in the messiahhood of Jesus. Self-definition is an extensive and open process, one based not solely on automatic denial, but also on absorbing new religious ideas, ceremonies, and symbols from the outside. The process of appropriation and the struggle over that which is appropriated characterize the world of anti-Christian polemic during the Rabbinic period. In the Middle Ages, however, the tendency of mutual denial came to dominate.” [Yuval, Israel Jacob, *Two Nations in Your Womb*. University of California Press: Berkely and Los Angeles, 2006, page 23.]

¹⁶ Alfred Edersheim’s *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* and Oskar Skarsaune’s *In the Shadow of the Temple* are classic examples of presenting our Savior and our faith in their Jewish setting. Theresa Newell’s presentation at this conference on “Jesus Masked: Anti-Jewish Theologies” documents intentional moves of “institutional Christianity” away from the Jewishness of the gospel.

¹⁷ Brian Crawford’s recent seminar presentations on *Haredi Theology and the Incarnation* were a great contribution to the effort to grow our understanding of the philosophies and mystical views of the ultra-Orthodox.

¹⁸ Quoted from a pre-publication draft of “Text and Context: An Evangelical Approach to Contextual Theologizing” by Dallas Theological Seminary Missions Professor Steve Strauss.

¹⁹ The “worship wars” in Evangelical churches are but one example. To cater to conflicting camps, many have a “traditional service” where the old hymns of the faith are sung; this is followed by a second “contemporary service” with “rock musicians singing 7-11 choruses – you know, the same seven words sung eleven times” according to the traditionalists. Many Messianic Congregations also seek a hybrid experience to accommodate differing expectations of what comprises an “authentic Jewish” experience.

²⁰ This was illustrated again recently when a ministry colleague, himself a Jewish believer, expressed a felt need to begin a Bible study “where Jewish seekers would feel more at home” than they would accompanying him to the very conservative Evangelical church where he personally feels most comfortable worshipping.

²¹ If interested, see Lori Taber, my faithful spouse of 45 years, for examples of my shortcomings, *faux pas*, and wrong-headedness. She could write a book....

²² Bingham, Walter. <https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/shannon-nuezen-from-missionary-to-observant-jew-647124>. November 1, 2020.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Sharon, Jeremy, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/haredi-rabbi-accused-of-being-a-covert-messianic-missionary-666517>. April 28, 2021.

²⁶ Harris, Ben, <https://www.jta.org/2021/05/13/united-states/rabbi-stephen-slater-talks-a-lot-about-god-he-credits-his-baptist-missionary-parents>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John 4:22.

²⁹ The importance and eternal value of being “in Messiah” is worthy of exhaustive study. Here’s a sampling of what we have ἐν Χριστῷ/בְּיֵשׁוּעָה: redemption (Rom 3:24); eternal life (Rom 6:23); no condemnation (Rom 8:1); God’s unconditional love (Rom 8:29); united in one body (Rom 12:5); sanctification (1 Cor 1:2); God’s grace (1 Cor 1:4); promise of resurrection (1 Cor 15:22); victory (2 Cor 2:14); new creation (2 Cor 5:17); justification (Gal 2:16); fulfillment of promise to Abraham of Gentile blessing (Gal 3:14); sonship with our Creator (Gal 3:26); unity of believers: Jewish/Gentile, male/female, slave and free (Gal 3:28); every spiritual blessing in heaven (Eph 1:3); surpassing riches of His grace (Eph 2:7); created for good works (Eph 2:10); Gentiles brought near and made fellow

heirs (Eph 2:13, 3:6); forgiveness (Eph 4:32); encouragement (Phil 2:1); righteousness (Phil 3:9); peace (Phil 4:7); all needs supplied (Phil 4:19); salvation and eternal glory (2 Tim 2:10).

³⁰ John 12:32.

³¹ Rom 3:29.

³² Lu 2:52.

³³ Isa 53:2.

³⁴ www.insearchofshalom.com. Currently three LCJE ministries are collaborating on content and responding to live chats. We welcome additional volunteers as traffic is increasing in response to creative videos like "[How Many Mitzvahs Make a Mensch](#)" and "[The Jewish Superman](#)."

³⁵ 1 Thess 5:11; Ju 1:20.