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Apostates, Heretics, and Sectarians in Historical Context

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Abstract

This paper expresses the problem of maintaining the Messianic ideal of bringing together the Truth Traditions and Identities of Jews and Gentiles in Judaism and Christianity. It begins with an understanding of the common origin of these Truth Traditions, their separation and renewal following the destruction of the Second Temple and their respective struggles to maintain distinct identities. It then addresses the history of American religion to understand the context of the emergence of the Messianic Movement and why the struggle of Messianic Judaism is the struggle of heresy itself. It concludes with general conclusions regarding the careful way forward for the movement so that we do not destroy ourselves in the process.

Introduction

I struggled with this paper more than any other. I have written it three times. Each time I went a different direction. One was a scholarly attempt at defining heresy and apostasy in Judaism and Christianity. It was turning into a book with no conclusion. The second was a history of heresy in Judaism and Christianity. It was turning into a “who’s who” among heretics. But no conclusions could be made. Finally I thought I would define heresy and name heretics in Messianic Judaism. Then, I realized that most of you would be here, or would hear about it later, so that approach seemed problematic. Therefore I decided to be less scholarly or polemic and try to set a tone for this forum. This is a serious theme and if we come here with clear and full conclusions already in our minds, we may miss the very point of the discussion. So instead of conclusions, I am bringing to you my observations and suspicions regarding the subject of heresy and Messianic Judaism. Like all of you, I ache for a clear and authentic faith in the God of Abraham. I wish to see an authentic Jewish identity and Torah observance among messianic Jews. I am desperate for a Gentile role and expression of this faith that comes along side Messianic Jews and provokes the rest of Israel to envy and repentance toward God. I long for the Christian Church to drop its replacement mindset and behavior and not boast against the natural branches. I pray for the restoration of Israel, the return to the Land in the fullness of the promises of God and to see Israel as the head and not the tail of the nations. And I know that is your desire. I also know if I give any more detail about what I mean by these things that some of you will call me a heretic. The heresy is in the details. So what follows is my struggle with the history of Judaism and Christianity and the continuing emergence of the Messianic movement. It is over broad and lacking in documentation. It

is not where I want to be on this issue, but it is where I am. And I hope after this weekend we will be closer to some conclusions and closer to one another in true spiritual unity. I do not want to win an argument and lose a brother. That would not heresy, that is a violation of Torah and the New Commandment.

Truth Tradition and Heresy

The struggle between individual perception and group shared ideals is a fluid and difficult one. At some point the struggle is the result of human variability caused by linguistic diversity (idiolect and dialect) and human cultural variability caused by experiential uniqueness (contemporary and shared historical). Two persons, even from the same linguistic, cultural and social background may not see eye to eye on an issue because of this variability struggle. The dynamics of idiolect (unique vocabulary) and ambiguity of shared lexical usage which also includes variable affective (emotional) attachment to conceptual taxonomies will bring about serious differences of opinion about the exact same focal point. And even small differences can become overly significant and lead to major conflict and interpersonal difficulty. As the song declares... “You say potato, I say patato (sic), let’s call the whole thing off”.

The subject of apostasy, heresy, and sectarian division is as old as Truth and Tradition. Truth and Tradition is a system of worldview and behavior (usually called religion). Those who do not agree in general or in some major point may leave, sometimes taking others with them. This is apostasy. When someone stays and teaches or behaves in a manner that threatens the integrity of the group, that person and his followers are marked as heretics and removed. If the difference is tolerable, or if outside pressures make

removal of the other group a threat in itself, the group becomes a sect. In other words, in the maintenance of a Truth Tradition, the boundaries are fluid and allow for some flexibility. This allows sectarian differences. And some may leave to create their own community or join another through apostasy. And some must be removed to preserve the whole. This is the general use of heresy as we know it today. But it has been somewhat different in history.

The history of Truth and Tradition for Judaism, begins at Sinai. For Christianity, it begins at Pentecost. At Sinai and Pentecost, these two faith traditions see the founding of a “People of God”. A people held together by a common calling to know and live this Truth Tradition. I am fully aware that the Jewish and Messianic views of Pentecost are not the same as that of the Historical Christian view. Because I agree more with the Messianic perspective and do not accept the various replacement theologies of the Church, I will address this distinction later as needed. At this point I must deal with what is presently perceived by Jews and Christians – that they have separate but historically related faiths.

The notion of Truth and Tradition requires that something in belief and behavior be maintained with integrity. In the histories of Judaism and Christianity, Truth and Tradition are the foundation of faith and practice. The orthodox forms of Judaism and Christianity both view Truth as revealed Scripture (The Tenach for Judaism and the Holy Bible for Christians). But both also include Tradition (the Oral Law and Halakah in Judaism, or The Councils and The Magisterium in Christianity) as directly given by God and indispensable for understanding and obeying God’s will and purpose through the Scriptures. The history and division of these two great faith traditions from each other

and within each of them is the general subject of this paper. The primary focus will be to describe the authority, process and purpose of maintaining Truth and Tradition integrity, and the degree of toleration allowed within the Truth Traditions that will accept, with some reservation) sectarianism and reject heresy.

Any threat to the integrity of Truth and Tradition is met with direct opposition in both words and behavior. This is because the historicity, identity and legitimacy of the group (Judaism or Christianity) is dependant upon the maintenance of this integrity. And this legitimacy is critical to the claims of each religion to being a true religion. Therefore, it is necessary for the successful continuity of the group to protect the “identity boundaries” (membership) of the group by maintaining the Truth Tradition by use of an **authority** which establishes the **process** for determining when a variation has moved from the tolerable (though still distained) position of being a sect, to the damnable place of apostasy or heresy. The **purpose** of this process involves both function and motivation. These are related in purpose but are not identical. Functionality with regard to maintaining Truth Tradition is of two types. The first is the testing of adaptation which allows the Truth Tradition to survive in new contexts. This function is legitimate as it is impossible for a Faith Tradition to remain in exactly the form of its origin without imposed or voluntary isolation. Thus change and adaptation is required. The altars of Abram gave way to the altars of the Tabernacle and the Temples, and ultimately, to the Altar of the Sabbath table in Judaism. In Christianity, the language and liturgy of Greek gave way to Latin and then to English or the common tongue. Truth Tradition must be able to adapt to survive. This function is critical.

The second type of function is the protection from loss. The danger of adaptation is that the faith tradition loses something in every adaptation. So the function of maintaining the integrity of the Truth Tradition is also important. Baptism has undergone several adaptations in Christianity. Immersion has given way to pouring and sprinkling. In each adaptation, water is the primary symbol that has been maintained. But for some, the adaptation of Baptism has created loss - loss of unity and loss of meaning. Quakers rejected all forms of Baptism and Communion because they saw a loss of unity by having multiple forms. They are marginal but not heretical. Baptists believe that immersion is the only true form because it demonstrates death, burial and resurrection. But both Quakers and Baptists would reject the idea of using a casket, instead of water. The candidate could be placed in the casket, the lid closed and then opened again in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This would certainly show the death, burial and resurrection meaning, but would not use the appropriate medium of water. This demonstrates the problem of the two functions within the purpose of Truth Tradition. Adaptation and Integrity are always a struggle. They are almost always in conflict and require that the group maintain an authority and process for examination of the extremes of each.

Motivation also is related to purpose. One's motive for adapting or maintaining the integrity of the truth Tradition can be a love of truth (or God) or a love of position and influence. Love of truth is a motive that is concerned with the true integrity of the group or in the specific case of religion, of God. But one can be more concerned with power and influence being lost to oneself, rather than the group's integrity. History is filled with

the results of this error. Love of God usually leads to a motive of seeking His integrity and Glory. Love of self usually leads to a motive of preserving one's own reputation and standing in the community.

To summarize this introduction I am suggesting that the existence and survival of a group and particularly a revealed religion such as Judaism or Christianity requires that the Truth Tradition be maintained by avoiding the extremes of adaptation and innovation on one hand and the maintenance of integrity of the Truth Tradition by means of an authority and a process that determines when a belief or behavior is a tolerable (painful or painless) variant or is a serious threat by apostasy or heretical teaching to the historical identity integrity of that Truth Tradition. I will examine this in Judaism and Historical Christianity and then address the implication for Messianic Judaism and Judeo-Christianity.

Truth and Tradition in Judaism

The Truth Tradition of Judaism is made up of the Hebrew Bible and the Oral Tradition which has come to us in the Talmud. But Talmudic Judaism is not the beginning of Judaism. It is the present. To understand apostasy and heretical issues in Judaism, we must examine the Torah. The Torah, according to tradition was given to Moses at Sinai and then written by him. The traditional view is that the beginning of the Oral Law (Tradition) also begins with Moses. This is understandable. The written revelation would not be all that God gave. The details and implications of the commands as well as new adaptations would need to be developed and transmitted as culture change and history continued. This required both an authority and a process for the maintenance of the system. And the Torah provides this.

After the exodus and the giving of the Torah at Sinai, Moses was charged with the task of teaching the commandments of God and deciding cases when disputes arose. And there were plenty of disputes.

It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. "When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His Laws."

Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. (Ex. 18:13-18)

This passage clearly shows the basic tasks of maintaining the integrity of the group. It involves the teaching of God's commands. It also involves explanation as to how to keep the commands. It also involves the settling of disputes between members of the holy community.

Beyond this, the authority of Moses was also institutionalized through another incident. The Book of Numbers addresses this during a point in time when Moses was overwhelmed with the responsibility of taking care of this complaining horde of people. He is told by the Lord to gather "seventy men whom you know to be elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting and let them take their stand with you" (Numbers 11: 16).

The Scriptures then say, *So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord. Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and stationed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in a cloud and spoke to him. And He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again. (Numbers 11: 24-25)*

The Post Exilic Period

These elders ultimately became for Israel, the Sanhedrin, which served as the highest religious authority for post exilic Israel. It is uncertain how this body operated prior to the Babylonia Captivity but it certainly was the primary authority for Israel during the second Temple Period. This second temple period is one of serious and desperate survival mode for the Jewish people and the survival of their faith. The ancient world saw identity in peoplehood more than individuality. Thus shared identity usually involved a shared language, history, territory and god. Economic cooperation between people groups and war ultimately gave way to nations which were challenged by empires. An empire was a major conglomeration of peoples and nationals under a single dominant culture. Two major empires that would shape the national identity of Jews was the Greeks and the Romans. It is important to mention that these empires were different in their goal for subject peoples. The Greeks were largely an assimilation system which would attempt to ultimately Hellenize the world, including Jews. The Romans appear to be more pluralistic in intent. Render what is appropriate to Rome and you can keep you petty and private ways. This, of course includes that you maintain the peace of Rome (*Pax Romana*). Violation of this would mean sudden and swift destruction.

The Jewish response to Hellenization was bi-polar. Many assimilated and found a workable balance in the Greek world. But many refused. Among those who refused were the Maccabees. The revolt of the Maccabees held the tide of assimilation and established the Ceremony of Dedication (Hanukkah) which was fully institutionalized into Judaism's Temple system by the time of Yeshua (Jesus).

With the advent of the Roman Empire and a more tolerant diversity, Jews in the land were given a limited autonomy, under a puppet king and the Sanhedrin became the primary political arm of Israel under Roman occupation. Its authority was somewhat problematic in that the Sanhedrin ruled over several sects of Jews during this time. It is difficult to talk about Second Temple Judaism. It is more proper to speak of Second Temple Judaisms. Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes, Zealots (Nationalists), and Nazarenes all vied for influence and acceptance within this Torah and Temple system. Each distrusted the others but understood that they were connected by historical and identity contexts. Despite their theological variabilities, they were all Jews (not Roman or Pagans). Identity (peoplehood) in some sense was more important than theology. There were, however, those who were completely separated because of their belief and behavior. The Samaritans, though Torah observant and partially related as a people, were outside the Israel-Identity boundary. There were sects (weird insiders) and apostates (those who had gone too far to be included) in the Temple period. But they were outside more because of people identity issues than religious belief and behavior.

One additional task is implied in the authority of Moses. That is the punishing of those who violate the commands. Moses was certainly part of that process as seen in several other passages. This was carried on in the responsibilities of the Sanhedrin.

Apostasy and Heresy under the Torah was behavioral and doctrinal. Error in behavior or in belief could result in sanctions and when unrepentant, cut one off from the people. The Torah gave a process for this judgment.

If a prophet or dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder. And the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying “let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them”. You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul... If your brother, your mother’s son, or your son or daughter, or the wife you cherish, or your friend who is as your own soul, entice you secretly, saying Let us go and serve other gods (whom neither you nor your fathers have known of the gods of the peoples who are around you or near you or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other end.) You shall not yield to him, not listen to him, and your eye shall not pity him, nor shall you spare or conceal him. But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hands of all the people...If you hear in one of your cities which the Lord is giving you to live in, anyone saying that some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying “let us go and serve other gods” (whom you have not known), then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly. If it is true and the matter is

established that this abomination has been done among you, you shall strike the inhabitants of the city of that city with the edge of the sword.... (Deut. 13: 1-18)

The pattern here is clear. A violation of teaching and behavior is to be addressed. Even if it appears to be justified by a miracle, even if it is privately sought by a close friend or relation, or rumored in a city of your fellow Jews, it is to be investigated and checked out completely. If proven true, then death (or as often interpreted) excommunication is to follow. And there is to be no profit from the judgment. All the processions and spoil or booty is to be burned. This is about integrity, not hostile takeovers.

This Torah system has an Authority which protects the Truth Tradition using a system of witnesses and investigation and judgment motivated by Love of God and Truth which protects against belief or behavior which goes too far from the Truth Tradition. The History of Israel seems to indicate that when this system was not used by Israel, God sent Prophets and raised up leaders to bring Israel back to the Truth Tradition by removing the false teachings and changing the disobedience. Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezra and Nehemiah are classic examples of this.

Rabbinic Judaism

Rabbinic Judaism which took prominence and ultimately control of the Jewish Truth Tradition after the destruction of the Temple preserved the tradition through the development of the Mishnah and Talmud to approximately 500 BCE. This development was not about the survival of religion but of peoplehood. But the peoplehood of Israel had to maintain its historicity with Torah and Tradition. This Non-Temple Diaspora

Judaism was decidedly anti-Yeshuic (anti-Jesus) in its formation. This is probably a combination of conscious and unconscious motives that attempt to maintain Jewish identity by leaving out a group with a large common theology. But Yeshua faith was becoming a threat to peoplehood. Increasing numbers of Gentiles entering Judaism and the relational network of Israel was a threat to peoplehood and Jewish Identity. Even if the theology and peoplehood was largely shared, the threat was too great. If Gentiles joined Israel and Jewish identity was lost into some new man theology, there would be no Israel. The best way to prevent this was to cut Yeshua faith out of Judaism. As a result, the other remaining form of Temple Period Judaism, Nazarene Judaism (and related groups) was rejected. Jews who accepted the Messianic claims regarding Jesus were moved from sectarian status and placed in the heresy camp by the Rabbis. This required a hardening of the term heresy and a change in meaning which would be shared by the Gentile Christians who did not want a Jewish Identity in the emerging Christianity. The Rabbis became the authority for Judaism and the process of removal was by using self definition and the label of heresy. This wall became impenetrable. Even today, the greatest threat to Jewish integrity and identity in the Judaism Truth Tradition is belief in Jesus as Messiah. This boundary was placed in Rabbinic Judaism in the first several centuries of its formation.

In the centuries that followed the formation of Rabbinic Judaism, the Jewish Truth Tradition has had at least two religious splits resulting in Reform Judaism and Conservative Judaism. These traditions or denominations of Judaism are both distinct and connected to Rabbinic Judaism. Other variants come from variations within Orthodox

Judaism and the cultural and linguistic divides between Sephardic and Ashkenazi practices and liturgies. With the establishment of Israel after world war two, there is also a new tension between Secular Jews and Religious Jews and between Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

Between these groups there is disagreements and rejection of each others legitimacy. But there is no authority or process that can affect the purpose of judgment and rejection. The fact is, anti-Semitism and peoplehood survival demands that they accept each other in order for all to survive. Therefore, they work together, as Jews, both hating the others belief but depending on each other's identity to keep them united against anti-Semitism and assimilation. And from the outsider's perspective, they are all Jews with a common history, identity and, unfortunately, a common hatred by the world. So, they are in some sense, stuck with each other and form a common Jewry and a common Judaism – Rabbinic Judaism.

Truth and Tradition in Christianity

Historical Christianity as it is known today is not the faith of Jesus and the Apostles of the Second Temple period. I am not suggesting that there is no connection. I am, however, affirming that just as Rabbinic Judaism is not coterminous with Temple Judaism, Historic Christianity is not coterminous with the faith and religion of Jesus and the Apostles. After the loss of the Temple, both emerging faiths, Rabbinic Judaism and Historic Christianity made a claim. The claim is that they are each the sole continuity of the Abrahamic God and Faith Tradition as established in Genesis. Judaism believes that they are the continuation of that Faith and authentically express it through the Mosaic Covenant as understood at the time of the Temple but necessarily changed by the

destruction of the Temple. Historic Christianity believes that the faith of Abraham and Moses was brought to its New Covenant reality as promised by Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel in the person of Jesus the Messiah and the destruction of the Temple ended the traditional Torah faith by bringing a new faith tradition to the Jews (which the Church believes that they forfeited by rejection) and also the whole world. This new tradition is found in the New Testament Church and its apostolic expression.

But this Christianity is not merely a continuation of the first century Jewish religion. It is a transformation and adaptation of it developed by Gentile believers with a decidedly anti-Jewish bias. And it takes as its scripture, additional Jewish texts that are a continuation of one form of Second Temple Judaism. The New Testament writings are mostly, if not entirely Jewish writings with the intent of establishing a continuity of the Abrahamic faith within Jewry and extending it to the Gentiles as well. But it posits itself as firmly established on the Messianic claims of Jesus.

The New Testament documents address a parallel to the issue of apostasy and heresy that is almost identical to the Torah System. Again the issue is belief or behavior and is demonstrated in several passages.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus addresses the judicial process of the *ekklesia* with regard to disputes.

If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed." If he refuses

to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)

This procedure is about reconciliation but has a final option of excommunication if the offender refuses the judgment of the whole community. This is carried further by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 5 when he tells the congregation to remove a person from the assembly so that God's judgment will be upon him. Even this dismissal of a member has a reconciliation theme. In the Second Book of Corinthians, Paul appears to request that they now reaffirm their love for this one who, as a result of the greater punishment, has repented. (II Cor. 2:4-10)

The sixth chapter of First Corinthians continues with this issue of judging in the context of lawsuits between the brothers.

Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? Or, do you not know that the saints will judge the world. If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more matters of this life? So, if you have courts dealing with matters of this life, do you not appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren. But brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? (I Cor. 6:1-6)

Paul goes on to argue that among believers the wronging of one another should not take place in the first place. But it is made worse by dragging each other before unbelievers and secular courts. It has always been necessary for disputes regarding relationships and commandments to be addressed within the community of faith. The New Testament

establishes the authority for judgment as that of the Apostles and Elders as found in the controversy of Acts 15. The authority of this council was never questioned in Christian Tradition.

It is true that the Gospels have Jesus telling the people to follow the authority of the Jewish leaders based on Mosaic authority but he also warns about their motivation.

Matthew 23 as a chapter is the most scathing criticism by Jesus of the Jewish leadership.

He does not reject their place in the seat of Moses and tells the people to follow their explanation of observance but he says to not be like them in their hypocrisy and motives.

They are about power, privilege and authority. But the true servant of God is humble and serves. This is classical Torah teaching.

Post Temple Christianity

But the system was about to change. The Post-Temple Christians were mostly Gentiles outside of the Land of Israel. The Truth Tradition among the early Gentile believers was less connected to Torah and Temple - still less connected to the historic Jewish traditions.

They had the Jewish Scriptures (mostly Greek translations) and the New Testament documents (also in Greek). The Church Fathers, Greek and Latin (and other small groups), were significantly divorced from or biased against a Jewish Identity faith. The Messiah who would save His people (Israel) from their sins was becoming Christ, the Savior of the World - all except Israel. The Church Fathers assumed the practical rejection of Israel (Jewish Identity) and developed a replacement theology. And based on the conclusion of the Acts 15 council and a replacement reading of Galatians and Romans, the first and primary heresy of Gentile Christianity was any form of Judaizing (attaching Jewish Identity significance to salvation). Anything approaching Jewish

Identity that remained in the Gospel was suspect or reinterpreted in the emerging replacement theology of the Church as the Kingdom of God on earth. Jews could participate but not as Jews. And while Judaism was more tolerant of sub-doctrinal and behavioral differences as found in the Mishnah, Christianity became more and more centralized. The Bishop of Rome would ultimately become the Seat of Peter and be the replacement for the Seat of Moses as the Church replaced Israel. The Mishnah functioned more as a conversation about truth and Jewish Identity. But Christianity had a notion that Truth could be one form and one form only and Identity was Christ – not Jewish or Greek. To deviate toward any significance related to identity was not to seek better understanding but to destroy it completely. So while the Rabbis argued to understand the Truth better for Jews, the Church Fathers declared war against heresies and apostates who defiled and defied the Truth. The Ecumenical Councils of the fourth and subsequent centuries became the protectors of the Truth. As with so many issues, the Jewish and Christian emphasis on Identity and Truth made a polemic. But the Jewish zeal for identity survival and the Christian zeal for the precision in Truth are not to be isolated. Both are required to balance each other out. Judaism ultimately developed a religion of Jewish Identity. Christianity developed a religion of Creed. Heresy in Judaism is treason against peoplehood. Heresy in Christianity is theological.

Christian Diversity

In 1054 this need for common authority, power and zeal for the Truth split the church. Over several issues including the doctrine of the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Son in the Nicene Creed, the Church authorities in the East and West excommunicated each other over doctrine and practice and have never healed. The Western Church then split

again during the Reformation and subsequent to that the Free Church developed which gave rise to Baptists, Evangelicals and Pentecostals. These independent groups are so removed from Christian tradition that they sometimes create controversies that come from ignorance rather than real issues. What is interesting to note, is that the splits over theology resulted in Linguistic and ethnic separation. The Greek East and the Latin West split. Later the German, and English Reformation separated by theology but the ethnic and peoplehood notion was the actual separating lines. It appears that identity is not fully removed by shared theology after all.

Following the pattern of the Torah and Gospels, Christianity had developed an authority similar to Judaism. The Seat of Moses was replaced with the Seat of Peter and the Tradition of the Apostles. The Councils and creeds unified Orthodox Christianity against heresy and apostates until the Church split. Now, two authorities existed, then three - with the Protestant Reformation. East, West and Protestants were the Christian parallel to Orthodox, Reform and Conservative Judaism. But in Christianity there was a bigger problem.

Because identity was not well understood in Christianity, the issue of unity was addressed as theological rather than related to peoplehood. The issue of Nationalism (peoplehood) and Church (religious authority) created a Europe that oppressed religion and corrupted it. In the last century, it would be replaced by nationalism that attached to secularism and liberalism so that Post-Christian Europe would reject both Judaism through anti-Semitism leading to the holocaust, and reject Historic Christianity through democracy, socialism,

and communism. Most Churches in Europe today are museums. To the general populous of Europe, discussions of heresy are nonsense. Religion itself is heresy.

American Religious Identity

One cannot argue that the Free Church began in America. Its history lies in Europe with Anabaptists and others. But its coming of age is certainly tied to the New World. The attempt to make a nation with a healthy distinction of Church and State (a free church in a Free State) has made the United States unique. But it is unique in several ways.

Peoplehood in the United States was not ethnic or theological, it was individual and political. I am not suggesting that it was not affected by ethnicity or religion. That would be false. But it was an attempt to make individualism and freedom, under God (individually), with a minimal interference by King or Clergy. This meant that both political and ecclesiastical authority must be minimized and separated so that the individual could maintain some level of self-governance and freedom to thrive and worship as he chose. This and the need for pioneering development brought an opportunity for a less formal, more individualistic kind of Church and religion. And, as a result of the Modernist-Fundamentalists debates and the later rise of Evangelicals and Pentecostals in America, a new paradigm shift in religion and church was about to develop.

The 1950's and 60's created a climate for the return of group identity. The melting Pot America was about to give way to a Pluralistic one. The Melting Pot was actually an assimilation system toward individualism with a WASP default culture. I believe this was a Judeo-Christian Greco-Roman default. But racial types (Blacks, Asians, Native

Americans, etc) could not become individuals. They were always seen as belonging to a group. In addition, the unmeltables such as religious Jews and ethnic enclave dwellers in large cities created the hyphenated Americans. These two group identities, racial and linguistic-ethnic simply made the melting pot non-universal. So the culture shifted. The civil rights and youth movements with the anti-establishment and anti-war sentiments created new group identities (Hippies, Yippies, Jesus freaks, etc.). And with this came a major shift in religion. This was modeled after the para-church and youth group ministries that had developed during the wars. The new concept was a non-denominational congregation. No longer tied to the religious establishment yet organized better for “Jesus people” who decided that some structure might be needed, these churches combined all theological and liturgical structures into the general liking of the congregation. Congregations now served seekers rather than catechized converts. Democratic Religion has replaced the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The Will of God and the Faith Tradition could be altered or dropped by a two thirds majority of the independent congregation.

This paradigm shift also created a intersection between the emerging group identity in diversity and the non-denominational church. The ethnic church movement within denominational structures and the open worship seeker friendly church became related. Ethnic includes generation and interest. Group identity need not be ethnic or religious or anything. The content is purely functional. Groups can be based on “start trek” interest or a motorcycle church. My identity is now integrated with my faith. And sense both are eclectic and without need for group approval, I am who I say I am. The result is that

theological and personal, and group identity is now fictive. It is what I perceive. No operational definition can be placed on identity. Old traditional ethnic and racial and religious boundaries are no longer controlled by the group but by the individual. In the past, the group determined its boundaries by authority and used heresy and apostasy trials and label to maintain that. But no such authority exists. No process is in place to establish the determination of fact. And most people don't care anyway. Identity is in the eye of the beholder. In the Free Church, there is no heresy. We tolerate Benny Hinn because we have no control. There is no authority or process beyond the local church and the individual.

Truth and Tradition in the Messianic Movement

At the ragged end of this history of identity and religion an odd duck developed. The Messianic Movement began as a small notion of maintaining Jewish identity within denominational Christianity in Europe. It was an ethnic form of Historic Christianity and found its voice as the Hebrew Christian Alliance. But it never found a popular form and remained rather small and off the radar of both Judaism and Christianity. Its cousins, the Christian missionary organizations to the Jews were more popular because they were located in America and found a voice by connecting to the para-church and evangelical churches. In the Jesus movement, many partially and fully assimilated young Jews found an awakening in Jesus of Nazareth and oddly, he turned out to be a Jew. This icon of hippies and Jesus freaks, their Lord and Savior, was a Jew. At the same time, the Jesus movement also believed that Jesus was more than a carpenter. He was a Jew. His disciples were Jews and His teaching was Jewish. So, Jewish things became cool in Jesus

People Christianity. The idea of a revitalization of the first century faith that by-passed all history and establishment denominationalism was a powerful attraction. And “identity” as “Jesus people” was a way of avoiding the ethnic diversity problem and joining it at the same time. The Movement, however, had some voices that took history and Jewish Identity more seriously than simple family background. These Messianic Jews longed for a Jewish Christianity (clearly an oximoron⁰, maybe a Yeshuic Judaism (too ahead of its time), no, maybe a Messianic (Hebrew for Christian) Judaism. Judaism, what is that. Real Judaism? Maybe the most real Judaism - “Talk about Heresy”. The Messianic Jewish Movement started a shift, and dialog and struggle toward a Messianic Judaism. Some liked it. Others were afraid. Some were desperate for it and others despised it. The Movement that was born in the para-Church and non-denominational world was at odds with itself. It could not thrive in the existing Gentile churches. They would be seen as Judiazers, the only heresy that united evangelical Christians. And they could not bring Yeshua into a Synagogue. They were not that comfortable with Judaism and Yeshua was still Jesus (the Gentile god) and that meant heresy in Judaism.

But the movement was popular and thrived in two major arenas. The Missionary Organizations were able to connect well to Churches who once again saw the Jews as part of the whole of God’s plan. This was both an eschatological hope and a romantic notion that was revived by the establishment of the State of Israel and tourism. Those who wanted more authentic Judaism within their faith and those who were anti-church, moved toward the establishment of Messianic congregations. This made them feel the pressure of the non-denominational churches. Evangelistic missions, and congregational discipleship requires buildings and programs with trained leadership and cooperative

structures. Congregational Messianic Judaism created reform like, conservative like and even orthodox like congregations. And each in its own way survived and thrived. But the organizational system was about survival and many problems remained.

The foci of Messianic Jews have been a struggle with three major issues. The First is Identity. What is Jewish identity in the context of Yeshua as the Messiah? This is related to the problem of Gentiles in the movement. The second is the issue of connecting with the Church and Israel. What is the nature of the relationship of these to each other and Messianic Jews to both? Finally is the problem of Torah observance. Is the Torah adapted, replaced, renewed or all of the above? To what extent does Torah inform and create Jewish Identity and how does that address the first two concerns? Now, added to the struggle was the issue of missionary or post-missionary approaches. The differences within the movement were making it impossible to know who was legit and who was a nut.

Unity, Disunity and Name Calling

A brave attempt at addressing this was the Borough Park Symposium. This gathering brought together representatives from Missionary groups, congregational groups, and Diaspora and Messianic Jews from the Land. It had the potential of trying to address these issues in a safe and respectful context. But it failed for several reasons. One of those reasons was the egos of the representatives. Some came to be heard. Few came to listen. Discussion became debate and debate became dissention. I watched (as an observer, I was prevented from speaking at the sessions but could talk with members outside of the sessions) as persons were misunderstood, hurt and misrepresented out of frustration, fear and zeal. The real discussion did not happen. And how could it. The real issues were not

able to be addressed until trust was established. I could not help but feel that the Sanhedrin meetings of old were like this. People who have to work together because they are stuck with each other but do not trust each other. I was fascinated and disappointed and confused.

Not long after the symposium, I began to notice a public discussion of the meeting. It was not a move toward understanding what had happened and what had gone wrong. It was a public name calling session. I tried to address it privately but the name calling was all that seemed to matter. And the word heresy was being used. Misrepresentation was fed by fear and fundamentalist zeal. And intellectual snobbish quips were returned. But there was no where to go. The issue of heresy can only be addressed with an authority, a process and a purpose of integrity that is maintained by that process. The Messianic Movement has none of this. To whom can we appeal? The oldest and broadest organization among messianic Jews and Hebrew Christians is the IMJA. But it is weak and disconnected to many of the primary players. And in this case, threw the second, if not first stone. No appeal could be placed with it. Who could trust the results? The UMJC, MJAA, Chosen People, Jews for Jesus and other organizations have no common ground. If heresy exists in the messianic movement, and it certainly does at some point, the movement cannot address it. This is because the movement is not a unity (organizationally or in spirit). It is an evangelical Pentecostal non-denominational parachurch decentralized batch of gatherings based on self identity as Jews and truth. But it has no Tradition. And the Two Biblical Traditions that do have some sense of identity, Judaism and Christianity consider Messianic Judaism to be heresy itself.

Conclusions

As mentioned in the introduction, I have no conclusions but some suspicions regarding this topic as it relates to the Messianic Movement. The maintenance of a Truth Tradition involves a community unity that is cohesive to the point that while it has variability, that variability does not remove its essential oneness. Historically this is found in three structures – nationhood, peoplehood, and religion. And not surprisingly, these three structures all involve a sense of group identity which maintains boundaries from other nations, peoples and religions. Tied closely to this is the Language or terminology that shares the meanings of this identity. The struggle between the individual perception of this identity and the group itself has been a struggle against treason in nationality, Ethnic hatred in peoplehood and heresy in religion. Each system seeks to maintain the integrity of its boundaries and as a result its Truth Tradition.

In the case of Judaism and Christianity, the origins are of a small ethno-political religion that struggled to survive a hostile and larger world of nations, peoples and gods. But it did survive and maintained a Truth Tradition that set it at the center of human history and culture at the classical end of the ancient world. That world ended with two forms of Jewish identity that competed for independent survival after the destruction of its shared and focal point - The Land and the Temple. One Form, Rabbinic Judaism allowed the religion to centralize toward survival by placing Jewish identity and practice together in opposition to any threat of assimilation. This, of necessity, meant a rejection of Jesus and its Gentile Christian faith. The cost was the loss of some Jews and some Judaism – at least that which was in most contact with the assimilation threat.

The other form of Judaism was ultimately Greco-Romanized to the point that it needed to rid itself of Jewish identity to become a world religion. But it could not completely overcome language, cultural and national identity issues. But its cost was a loss of Jewish identity and destiny as the heart of the New Covenant. Its answer was replacement theology.

Both Rabbinic Judaism and Gentile Christianity agree that Jewish Identity belongs to Judaism. A Jew who believes in Jesus is a Christian (read Gentile). A person who follows the Torah is a Jew (read Judiazer). These boundaries are agreed upon by these two historic faiths. Those who grow up in those traditions see this clearly. But those who read Torah and Gospel independent of the Traditions, see something else. They see a necessity of the integrity of both Torah and Gospel tied to authentic Jewish identity and authentic Gentile identity that ultimately become united in the Messiah of Israel. But they have no independent tradition. They must weave for themselves a tapestry or coat of many colors from the various forms of Judaism and Christianity that maintains Jew and Gentile distinctive, maintains the Gospel and the Torah and preserves the faith and promises made to Abraham. And yet they must avoid the mixing of wool and linen. This means that they will have to revisit the rabbinic tradition and avoid the anti-Yeshua faith flavor. They must revisit the Church fathers and avoid the anti-Semitism. These questions led to death and separation when they were first addressed. We must be sure not to repeat such evil. But how does one address the Torah Commands with Christianity, or the Trinity with Judaism. How do we maintain boundaries without losing precious believers in the process. Should the Ephraimite Error be reconsidered by the UMJC. To some heresy is what you believe that I don't like. To some heresy is fear of error. To others it is a sword

to wield power. Without a unity of trust, we cannot appeal to a Sanhedrin or denomination or counsel. We have no authority. We have no process. And without those, we have no appearance of integrity. So we must act slowly and carefully, being respectful of those with whom we disagree. We need to listen to understand and speak to express, not condemn. And we need to remember the words of the one who at one time stood on both sides of heresy. He said, “*For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another*” (Gal. 5:14,15).