

Making Israel's Story Our Own: Toward a Messianic Jewish Canonical Narrative

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For Hashivenu Forum IV

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The Importance of Narrative

When my colleagues first suggested the theme for this Forum, I only dimly realized how crucial and central this topic is to the maturation, self-differentiation, and communal life of Messianic Judaism. However, since then, what was once dim now shines more brightly than halogen lights; indeed the reality is now as bright as the kind of arc-lights used to light up the clouds at theater openings. I have seen the light. It is now clear to me that communal narrative is indispensable and central to community formation, community identity, community survival, and community life. It is an issue that could mean everything to the future of Messianic Judaism.

Assembling Personal Identity

Indeed, I would say that our narrative deeply shapes not only what we do, and how we think: it actually shapes who we are and what we become.

Perhaps some of you saw the recent motion picture, *Memento*. The main character is a man whose accidental injury has rendered him incapable of forming new memories. His actions day by day are determined by the story he weaves together from the fragmentary information captured in polaroid pictures he takes situationally, brief labels he attaches to these photos when first taken, and notes to himself that he tattoos on his body. In the movie we follow him closely as he assembles reality from the fragments he gathers. And his understanding of his identity and of his task in life is entirely the product of that story.

So it is with us all, although our process of assembling identity is more communal than is his. We too take the fragments of experience and from them assemble a narrative which defines and determines who we are and what is to be our task in life.

Perhaps a microcosmic illustration will help to bring home the importance of this issue.

An Illustration From Day to Day Life

There comes a time in every parent's life when children begin to ask questions of identity, "Mommy, what am I? Daddy, what are we?" A wise parent will do more than simply supply a label. Rather, the parent will seek to more deeply understand what exactly is at the heart of the question, why the child is asking. Then, in responding, in giving a full answer, every wise parent will tell the child a story: the story not simply of his or her own birth, but also the account of how Mommy and Daddy met, and who came before them, where these people in turn came from, and the experiences and influences which are regarded as having shaped their lives and identities. Instinctively parents realize that identity is shaped by story. I would put it more strongly than that: identity and story are one.

Existentially and socially, if not ontologically, we are the stories we tell about ourselves: and the stories we tell about ourselves are who we are. Nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else.

An Illustration from Scripture

One is reminded of Jacob's words to Joseph in *Parshat Vayechi*, as he blessed Ephraim and Manasseh:

The God in whose presence my fathers Avraham and Yitz'chak lived, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has rescued me from all harm, bless the bless these boys. **May they remember who I am and what I stand for, and likewise my fathers Avraham and Yitz'chak, who they were and what they stood for.** And may they grow into teeming multitudes on the earth [Gen 48:15-16, emphasis added].

In other words, his prayer was that his story, and that of his father and grandfather, might become Ephraim and Manasseh's story as well—not simply in memory but in experience. As the movie *Memento* reminds us, it is memory that shapes experience and identity.

Narrative is remembrance, and remembrance shapes who we are.

Not Simply for Individuals

And what is true for children in particular is true also for communities. Our narrative tells us and tells others who we are: and as we recount our narrative, we become our stories and our stories become us. However, I can only know who I am by knowing who the "we" is of whom I am a part. [This is why parents tell the story of the family when they answer identity questions for children].

This question of who "we" are is also trans-temporal and trans-generational. I am who I am, we are who we are, because of who they were who we view as having come before us in the line of tradition and identity we claim as our own. And looking toward the future, I am who I am, and we are who we are, for the sake not only of ourselves, but for others who will come after us and claim us as part of their story.

Identity is inseparably narrational. Identity is inseparably communal. And identity is inseparably indebted to the past and responsible for the future.

But where do we get that "story" that we tell ourselves about ourselves, that we tell our children about themselves, and that they tell to the next generation?

We get that story in at least five places.

The Scripture as the Locus of our Story

Of course the Scripture is one place. But we must not be so naïve as to think this is a simple and self-evident matter. None of us is 20/20 objective when we read Scripture: all of us

see and interpret the Scripture through the lenses of other areas of our life. And because the "lens" or perspective of evangelicalism has become some ingrained in us, we in Messianic Judaism will need to make monumental efforts and experience significant paradigm shifts if we are to read the *Tanakh* as fundamentally the story of Israel--the seed of Jacob whom God formed for Himself that they might show forth His praise.

We have been taught by the Church to see the Bible as "His-story" as the story of Yeshua in promise and fulfillment, and to see the *Tanakh* as prefiguring and prophesying His coming. But to read Scripture in this manner is to see the Bible through the Church's eyes. What we fail to adequately understand is that when the Church sees the Bible as essentially the foreshadowing, promise and fulfillment of Yeshua's coming, the Church also understands and presents the Bible as fundamentally the story of the Church as Yeshua's people. More than we realize, we have internalized this view as our own, a view that makes our Jewish identity secondary at best, and even implies or insists that that identity is a hindrance to solidarity with the wider Body of Christ. We may even come to see the assertion of our Jewish identity as "rebuilding the middle wall of partition," and as being spiritually suspect, immature, "fleshly," and antithetical to the "One New Man" mentioned in Ephesians.

In my research, I have discovered that there is little if any common ground remaining between most of the Church and the Messianic Jewish community in matters of ecclesiology. More than most of us ever dream, there is literally no place in most Christian theologizing for Israel. Israel's story has simply become the Church's story, and ethnic Israel is most often reduced to the status of a vestigial organ that was once useful but now unnecessary.

I will not here retell the story that R. K. Soulen tells so well in his widely read "The God of Israel and Christian Theology." However, one good illustration will demonstrate the validity of his premise concerning how the Christian story of the Bible displaces Israel. Consider this quotation from Eugene Boring, in his commentary on the Book of the Revelation, where He gives

an amazing summation of the meaning of the Bible that totally accords with Soulen's grim scenario:

Although the Bible is a 'library' of 'books' with a variety of theologies, the Bible as a whole is also and primarily one book with one story. In a helpful oversimplification, it can be seen as a narrative drama in five acts, with God as author, producer, director and the main character:

1. Creation (Genesis): God created all that is.
2. Covenant (Exodus—Malachi): When creation was spoiled by rebellious humanity, God created a people, Israel, to be his agents and witnesses and bearers of the promise of Gods salvation to come. [Notice they are not the recipients or objects of that salvation. They are simply the Parcel Post People of God, delivering God's message and package of salvation to the nations].
3. Christ (Matthew—John): God came himself, in the person of his Son the Messiah, to accomplish salvation and mediate reconciliation.
4. Church (Acts—Jude): God has continued Israel's mission in the church by creating an inclusive community from all nations to be witnesses and agents of his saving act already accomplished for all people.
5. Consummation (Revelation): God will bring history to a worthy conclusion when the creation which de jure belongs to God's kingdom will de facto 'become the kingdom of our LORD and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever' (11:15) [Boring 1989:1-2].

Clearly, such a portrait is inadequate to support a robust Messianic Judaism and Messianic Jewish communal identity. But what alternative shall we pursue?

I believe that Messianic Judaism must learn to see the Bible through the eyes of Israel, as fundamentally the continuing story of God's faithful engagement with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for the sake of the world. To paraphrase Soulen, we might say that our narrative considers how **"The God and Father of Yeshua the Messiah is working among the children of Jacob for the sake of all."**

Certainly this is the perspective of the Jewish canonical narrative. As the midrashic literature expresses it,

...why is he [Abraham] called the greatest man? Because he was worthy of being created before Adam, but the Holy One, blessed be He, reasoned: 'He may sin and there will be none to set it right. **Hence I will create Adam first, so that if he sins, Abraham may come and set things right.**' [Midrash Rabbah/Genesis Rabbah 14:6, emphasis added].

Abraham is the one in whom God sets right the consequences of Adam's fall! In fact, one can see from Torah that Noah is in a sense a second Adam, Abraham as the third Adam, and in a sense, for us, Yeshua is the fourth Adam! Here and so many other places, the career of Abraham and his descendants is expressed in the context of Israel's role in its own redemption and that of the entire cosmos.

Soulen is firm on the fact that Scripture does not see humanity as an undifferentiated mass, nor does Scripture divide humankind into the ranks of the saved and unsaved as does some evangelical thinking. Rather, in what he calls the "grammar of redemption," Soulen points out that always the Bible divides humankind into Israel and the nations. And he is among those who are saying, as should we, that God has continued and will continue to work through Israel for the sake not only of Israel and the nations, but also the entire cosmos, as Paul makes clear in Romans eleven.

Paul would side with the Jewish canonical narrative which sees the cosmos still awaiting that eschatological blessing which will come through the nation Israel. It is not Jews alone who see the Scriptural narrative in this light. Lutheran biblical theologian Richard Nelson says this:

In Isa. 66:20-21 foreign nations carry home Judah's lost kindred from exotic lands just as someone might bring a sacrifice to the temple. Some of these foreigners will even be appointed as priests. In a similar vein, Mal. 1:11 envisions world-wide, universal sacrifices to Yahweh in the context of the prophets call for the resacralization of Judah. Depending on how it is understood, Exod. 19:5-6 may refer to a universalistic conception of Israel's role among the nations. Yahweh has chosen Israel as a "kingdom of priests." Some interpreters take this to mean that as a nation Israel serves Yahweh in a special priestly way, in contrast to all other nations, which nevertheless also belong to Yahweh. In other words, Israel is to be the priestly member of the community of nations, uniquely dedicated to God's service. Such a metaphor would deftly link the special election of Israel to Yahweh's universal lordship over all peoples. [Nelson 1993:108-109].

This is a story that includes Yeshua, but for Messianic Jews, Yeshua must be seen in relationship to *HaShem's* enduring faithfulness to the collective people of Israel. As Messiah, in whom all the promises of God are "Yea and Amen," he is the one in whom all of God's promises to Israel are to be fulfilled. Israel is not simply one of the nations in the multi-individual and multi-national *ekklesia*: Israel is the chosen nation, set apart for a unique instrumentality and destiny within the will of God.

. I am not simply saying that we must reserve for the Jewish people a big place in the purposes of God. Even Dispensationalists say that. I am saying that, if we are to be a Messianic Judaism, we must see the Bible in concert with the way our people view it, as the story of *HaShem's* elective purposes for and continuing engagement with the carnal seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This will mean seeing the Bible as part of the Jewish story, not simply a Jewish-style story, and not simply the story about the Jewish Messiah who is in reality more deeply the Savior of the World.

I am advocating for a Messianic Jewish re-reading of Scripture, and a Messianic Jewish re-engagement with Israel as the continuing people of God, even if hardened in part towards the Gospel. We must see the Jewish people as our continuing people, and as the continuing people of God, and the Bible as their continuing story, a story which includes the revelation and accomplishment of *HaShem's* purpose for the nations, but never ceases to be the story of Israel's risings and fallings, and ultimate national and eschatological resurrection which the entire cosmos awaits with eager longing.

Continuing Jewish History as the Locus of Our Story

Our communal identity is shaped as well by seeing the continuing history of the people Israel [the Jewish people] as our history. Although the Bible speaks of *HaShem's* engagement

with Israel, this divine engagement is not limited to the events recorded there. *HaShem's* engagement with Israel, and his engagement with the world by means of Israel, is also spoken of by the book of historical events. In this view, the Bible is meta-historical: it stands alongside and above the book of history, shedding light on that book that we might see something about ourselves, about God, and about reality there. God is not absent from history, and we are not derelict in seeking him there!

If we would be true Messianic Jews, we must not limit our engagement with our people to the pages of the Bible. We must see their continuing story as also our story, their continuing community as our community, and in a very real sense, see unfolding events as the story of their continuing engagement with the One whom we call "*Adon Olam*," the Lord of the universe, of eternity, and of history. This means not simply that the Holocaust is our tragedy as well as theirs, and the Land of Israel, our land as well as theirs. This also means that all of Jewish religious history is also ours, calling for our engagement, our interpretation, our opinion. This means that we must not treat the categories of "sacred" and "secular" as inviolate. It means that we stand to learn something about God, ourselves, reality, from all the byways our people are taking, even if the lessons we learn are negative ones. It means that the Talmud and the books of religious Jewish life are our books as well as theirs, for these books as well record Israel's and *HaShem's* mutual engagement.

In history, as in Scripture, we repeatedly see Jacob renamed Israel as the Holy One comes again and again to wrestle and to bless.

Making Israel's story our own requires a re-reading of the Bible, a re-engagement with Jewish history, and a re-identification with our people past, present and future. But in addition to that, making Israel's story our own requires of us that we engage more intentionally and more honestly with our people's liturgical tradition. This is the third circle in which the Jewish narrative is expressed and Jewish identity formed.

Liturgy as the Locus of Our Story

In his masterful book, The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only, Lawrence Hoffman takes us deep into this territory. In devouring and digesting his book for a recently taught course, I have come to see as never before that our people's liturgical heritage is nothing less than the story we tell ourselves day by day about *HaShem*, the cosmos, Israel and the nations, the past, the present, the future. The liturgy is Israel's fundamental religious perspective on what the Bible and history have to say about *HaShem*, Israel and Torah, about past, present and future.

A selection of quotations from his book will help to bring this home for all of us.

We recite the lines of liturgy not as solitary individuals saying them for the first time, but as the latest links in the chain of a faith community that has said these things for centuries. They are the community's lines, not just our own. The chief character in the liturgical story that we repeat whenever we meet for worship is...the entire Jewish people--not just now, but forever...[Hoffman 1999:155].

Through adopting the liturgy as our own, we are affirming a primary linkage with the Jewish people throughout time. We are affirming that this linkage is not simply instrumental [that we might 'witness' to them], nor subjective ["I feel so close to the Jewish people"] but ontological ["We understand ourselves to be one with the Jewish people--The Jewish people are our "us."].

The words of worship are artistic constructs. They fill in the background of the community through which we descend; they describe the heroes or martyrs whose memory we hold dear as if they are our own extended family; they remind us of our story, the events of our corporate life as a people..., without which we would not be praying here as we do [Hoffman 1999:155].

In liturgy we claim Jewish history, Jewish values, Jewish martyrs as our own. In the process we are affirming who we are in solidarity with them.

...in worship, we cannot see the history that formed us into the Jewish people...But we can reenact or recollect that history, making it our own [Hoffman 1999:156].

This 're-enactment' is not play-acting. It is standing up and being counted. It is showing up for duty as Jews.

Each worship service is a rereading of a sacred script and the establishment of a new sacred reality, a world that did not exist until we willed it to, one that we establish anew with every sacred performance. Part of the script rehearses history as we choose to see it, the people of the past as we care to recollect them, and a selective perception of the events that made us what we are. [Hoffman 1999:156, emphasis added].

We only fool ourselves when we imagine that we can escape the subjective nature of theological affirmations and constructs. We need to be honest enough to admit that our historical perspectives, theological affirmations and ecclesiological constructs are our chosen way of seeing ourselves and our world. They are not born in us without great effort, and it is as we give birth to them that they change who we are. Again, it is what we give birth to that changes who we are. It was the birth of Chaim, our eldest child, that made Naomi a mother and myself a father. Yes, we birthed him as a child, but equally, he birthed us as parents. So it is with our liturgical affirmations: we conceive and birth them, but in the process we are irrevocably and forever determined and transformed. Even when liturgy is our baby, it exerts inexorable power to change us forever--and it always does.

Deleted: we lay claim to

Hoffman examines the role of liturgy not simply as it considers the past and shapes the present, but also as it impacts the future.

Worship establishes a present and links us to a past. But it also has an impact on our future. The story we establish as our own has consequences for what we will become, not just for what we were. For analogies, look again at literature. Even in fiction, characters once established are not free to do whatever they wish. Their characters and accumulated experiences determine, to some extent, what they will do.

In the world that we weave through our prayers, we too formulate a character that is our own. We become ...Jews of such and such a stamp by virtue of the story that we say is ours. To invoke prophetic vision is at the same time to implicate ourselves as believers in all that flows from that vision. To begin the story and then to take it all the way up to the present is also to expect it to end, and not just in any way, but according to the cues for ending that were established along the way. As a work of art, the constructed world of reality that our liturgy gives us must be both comprehensive and coherent. By 'comprehensive,' I mean that the story told in worship does not end abruptly in the middle, without the realization of the dramatic foreshadowing given us earlier in the text. By 'coherent,' I mean that it must be consistent [with the kinds of behavior the character development has led us to expect] [Hoffman 1999:157-158].

The words of prayer locate us in a continuum between a sacred past that we identify as our own and a vision of a future that we hope to realize as the logical outcome of the story of our lives.

That is how worship ought to work. Regularly going through a sacred script, week in and week out, should commit us to a world that the script brings into being: a world of transformed identity, stories and history, promise and hope. None of these are so much objective things that liturgy reflects as they are institutional facts that worship establishes.... [Hoffman 162:1999]:

This of course takes us into Mark Kinzer's paper on eschatology, and I will of course leave that "undiscovered country" to him. But the point must be made here: our liturgical affirmations are not merely notional and subjective. They are not a temporary cloak to be thrown over our shoulders like a synagogue *tallis* borrowed for use in *shul* and then left behind when we walk out the door. Rather, our liturgy creates our past, colors our present, and conditions our future. Liturgy creates a lens through which we interpret our history, life experience, and all of our narrative reality, including Scripture.

These various narrative circles of which I have been speaking are actually lenses through which we see ourselves and all of reality. All of these lenses work in concert and determine what we see and interpret reality. And since we look through all of these lenses simultaneously, we cannot separate the effect of one from that of another. Each lens effects how we see, and each lens is involved in symbiosis with the others. I see myself and my world in Scripture the way I do because of the lens of liturgy. Also, I see myself and my world in the liturgy the way I do because of the lens of Scripture and of history.

Ritual as the Locus of Our Story

A fourth lens which determines our perception is that of ritual. We might define ritual as the habitual, scripted and repeated patterning of time so as to communicate, preserve or create meaning and achieve satisfaction by means of anticipation and fulfillment in a context of shared understanding. To put it briefly, ritual is what we habitually do at established intervals as a means of conveying or preserving community values, meaning and identity.

Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, neatly illustrates for us the interfacing of Scripture, liturgy and ritual. In a *drash* concerning *Shavuot*, he found remarkable the relative paucity of ritual for *Shavuot*, as compared to *Sukkot* and *Pesach*. He mentioned how the tradition responded to this paucity by supplying the ritual of *Tikkun L'eil Shavuot*, a ritualized reading of Torah and of other sacred texts throughout first night of *Sukkot*, as if the participants were attentively awaiting the gift of Torah on Mt. Sinai.

He comments,

...Usually done together with at least a minyan of participants, the rite, like the Seder, is one of re-enactment. With the first crack of dawn, group study turns to communal prayer, culminating in the reading of the Ten Commandments given at Sinai in the unnamed third month of Sivan after the exodus (Exodus 19:1). The combination of extraordinary acts - an all-nighter followed by a sunrise service - created exactly the kind of experiential ritual able to express the particularity of *Shavuot*. In the last decade both in Israel and America, the ritual in one form or another has caught on among non-Orthodox Jews in ever widening circles. Many synagogues are now lit throughout the night and have multiple services in the morning for early birds and regulars.

Later in the same article he discusses the transformational power of such rituals:

Indeed, the Torah became the bedrock of Judaism not so much by assertion as by ritual. Liturgy reinforced the claim to canonical status. The progressive chanting (not reading) of Torah from beginning to end every Shabbat in the synagogue, whether annually as in Babylonia or triennially as in Palestine, **transformed the Jews into a people imprinted by a book. Its narrative functioned as the unifying metahistory of the nation and the building blocks of public discourse**, even as its legislation garnered widespread acceptance and adherence. **The synagogue developed into the national theater in which Scripture and liturgy converged to reenact weekly the awesome transmission of Torah at Sinai. Every aspect of the ritual was meant to convey the numinous quality of the original drama.** [Schorsch 2000:1, emphasis added].

Confirming and integrating what I have been saying so far, Schorsch affirms how Scripture, liturgy, history and liturgy all have roles to play in shaping Jewish communal identity in the theater which we call Jewish community, worship and life.

Family as the Locus of Our Story

We come back now to where we began, to the family as the locus of identity-formation through story. The family context has virtually absolute power to either confirm or negate the

identity-narrative promulgated by the loci/circles/lenses mentioned here. No identity-formation can take hold merely through ritual, Scripture, or liturgy in the congregational context unless that message is confirmed and lived out in the family context. When this does not happen, the congregation becomes the place where we "play" at being Jews until we return home to resume our "real" identity in the midst of "real life."

This pattern of negation and disconfirmation is widespread in the wider Jewish world, and even more so in the Messianic Jewish context. It constitutes a form of hypocrisy ["play-acting"] in its purest form and guarantees failure in transmitting meaningful Jewish identity. Beyond that, it involves treating holy things in a cavalier manner. It is actually a form of *hillul HaShem* ["desecration of the Divine Name"] since one uses the name of God to ratify commitments in congregational worship which are negated at home and treated as a different realm. .

In order for our narrative to take hold and for a healthy Messianic Jewish identity to be shaped, transmitted, and maintained, there must be a thorough congruence between congregational liturgical, Scriptural, and ritual statements, and the family lives of congregants.

This involves what Hoffman terms "meta-communication," by which he means what we communicate about what we are communicating. Hoffman teaches that when there is a disparity between the communication [the intended message], and the meta-communication [the behavior of the messenger relative to the message], the "audience" is sure to emulate what is done or not done [the meta-communication] over what is said [the message]. When we teach about Jewish life and thought in the congregation without being shaped by that life and thought at home, we only teach the irrelevance of what goes on at the synagogue. That irrelevance is the message our children will "get."

I am reminded of the wise words often heard which state that if we teach our children about Jewish life without being observant ourselves, we are only teaching our children to teach their children about Jewish life without being observant themselves. In other words, when push

comes to shove, the next generation is going to take its cues from what we do regardless of what we and our institutions say.

This issue of home-life confirming or on the other hand undermining the narrative also touches upon the issue of intermarriage. Intelligent discussion has begun in some corners of our movement concerning conversion ceremonies to normalize the status of non-Jewish partners in intermarriages. Although I have argued and can still argue forcefully against this idea, it seems incontrovertible to me that if intermarriage is to remain a reality in our context, which most assuredly will be the case, then the meta-communication which takes place in many or most of such homes is sure to sabotage the Jewish identities of their children. This is because, in almost all such families, there is a strong disincentive to invest in ethnic particularity and in religious depth, lest the non-Jewish partner and his/her relatives [the in-laws] be made to feel outsiders. The problem is not solved by Gentile partners whole-heartedly embracing Jewish life, for to do so without a rite of passage to normalize Jewish status for such parties sends one of two undesirable messages to children: either Messianic Judaism is something we invent ourselves independent of or in defiance of what the wider Jewish community might do, or, Messianic Judaism is a form of superficial play-acting.

I think all of us will agree that neither approach is acceptable. On the other hand, were we to institute a regimen of demanding, meaningful and halachically oriented conversion, the meta-communication of conversion by non-Jewish partners will communicate to all concerned that we indeed do take Jewish life, norms and identity seriously. In such cases, the home continues to be a place where the narrative message is confirmed by our meta-communication, the narrative of behavior.

A Word About Presuppositions

On the next page is a diagram called "The Telescope of Narrative" that graphically portrays what I have been saying so far in this paper. Included in the diagram is reference to ones

"Presuppositional Filter" that also shapes our view of who we are and which conditions how we interpret our narrative and identity. I include paradigms and worldviews under the heading of "presuppositions." There is an extent to which all of us see things not as they are but as we are. There are things we take for granted that are all the more powerful because they are subconscious.

This is certainly not the place to explore these at length, but one juicy quotation from Richard D. Nelson should drive the point home:

Do we really have any clear ideal how our theological thought has been shaped by such typically Western cultural categories as cause and effect, unidirectional linear time, alienation, or relative probability? Certainly a wide exegetical gap has been created between the Hebrew Bible and its modern readers by our culturally based notion that rationality is divine, but feeling and passion are human categories inappropriate for God! [Nelson 1993:110].

And to this delicious mouthful, much more could be added. It is fascinating to contemplate the profound extent to which our view of the world, reality, and the Faith is preconditioned if not predetermined by subconscious assumptions, as well as axiomatic truths which are suspended in thin air.

I direct your attention to the diagram on the following page to help integrate your thinking on what has been said so far.

Having laid some crucial groundwork, we turn to an examination of the lens of Scripture, as informed by the other lenses we have discussed, and to the task of proposing a Messianic Jewish canonical narrative, as a suggested step toward truly making Israel's story our own.

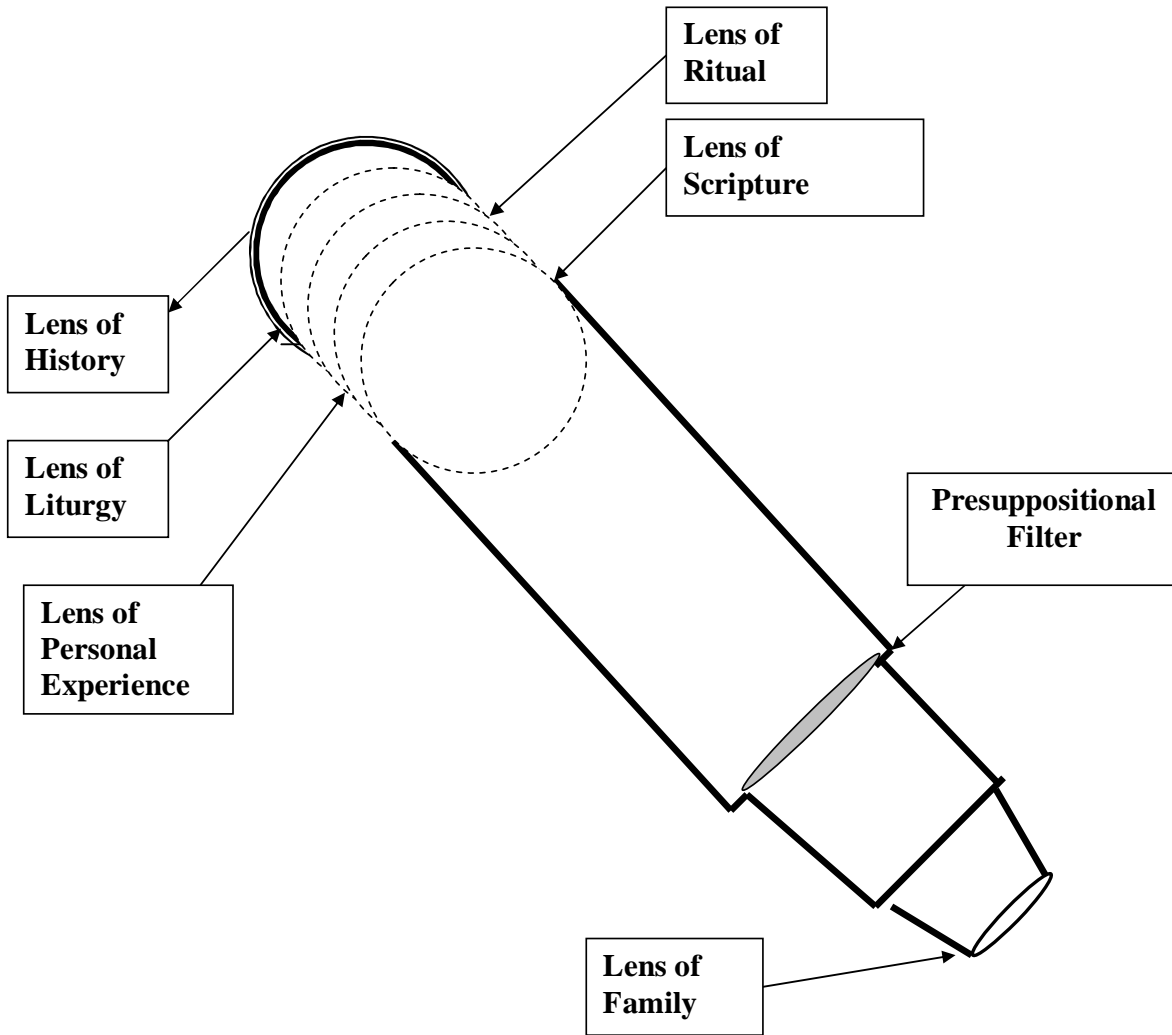


Figure 1.
The Telescope of Narrative:
The Lenses Through Which
We See and Know
Who We Are

The Chosen Patriarch: Abraham

To understand Israel's mission and her canonical narrative, we must go back to the Rock from which we were hewn, “Avraham [our] father and Sarah, who gave birth to us” [Isa 51:2]. Of course Abraham does not appear out of nowhere. Rather, Torah sets the stage for his appearing and for the calling of the Jewish people in him. The first eleven chapters of Genesis may be seen as establishing the context for the great drama about to begin. The first eleven chapters speak of unfaithfulness and sin--Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, the world in the time of Noah, the people of the Tower of Babel story--all are characterized by unfaithfulness. But Abraham will be different.

Yet, even Abraham is not the heart of the drama in Torah. As the first eleven chapter so Genesis set the stage, so the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and his brothers is all prologue to the children of Egypt arriving in Egypt. It is from there that *HaShem* will deliver them in fulfillment of His promises to the Patriarchs, after which he will bring the people of Israel into the bond of the covenant at Sinai.

But before going there, let us look more closely at Abraham, for he is not only prologue: he is also paradigm.

Abraham: Called

In Torah, Abraham is the next major righteous figure mentioned after Noah. The two were each righteous in their generation: but the contrasts between them are considerable.

David Novak [1995:115] teaches us to distinguish between the election of Abraham and that of Noah. In the case of Noah, even before his election, his righteousness commended him in his generation. No such statement is made for Abraham. In Torah, the righteous standing of Abraham is subsequent to his election.

This phenomenon of election without any stated cause is consistent with the record of the Creation preceding Scripture's portrayal of both Abraham and Noah. We are not told why God

created, nor what His thoughts were before Creation. Leapfrogging for the moment over Abraham, in speaking of *HaShem's* covenant relationship with Israel as reported in Exodus 19:5, Deuteronomy 7:6-8, and 10:14, Torah does not specify why *HaShem* chose the people of Israel or indeed why he chose any people at all. All we are told after the fact is that He did in fact choose a people and what His will is concerning them.

Abraham: In Covenant Relationship

From the experience of Abraham we learn something that will be true throughout Israel's experience:

Election is primarily generic and only secondarily individual. Abraham is elected as the progenitor of a people. Every member of this people is elected by God and every member of this people is called upon to respond to his or her generic election [Novak 1995:117].

This is a line of thinking explored in great depth and with much elegance by Michael Wyschogrod in [The Body of Faith](#). Just as Abraham is chosen previous to and apart from his merit, so also is Israel. And this chosenness is for service--indeed, priestly service. As Wyschogrod states it:

The foundation of Judaism is the family identity of the Jewish people as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Whatever else is added to this must be seen as growing out of and related to the basic identity of the Jewish people as the seed of Abraham elected by God through descent from Abraham...

...The election is that of the seed of Abraham. A descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a Jew irrespective of what he believes or how virtuous he is. This reflects the fact that the initial election of Abraham himself was not earned... We are simply told that God commanded Abraham to leave his place of birth and to go to a land that God would show him. He is also promised that his descendants will become a numerous people. But nowhere does the Bible tell us why Abraham rather than someone else was chosen. The implication is that God chooses whom he wishes and that he owes no accounting to anyone for his choices.

Israel's election is therefore a carnal election that is transmitted through the body.

...God chose a carnal people, whose physical being in the world is a sign of the existence of God. This people is in the service of God no matter what ideas it embraces or rejects. It cannot escape the service of God because its face is known in the family of man as that of the people of God [Wyschogrod 1996:57, 176-7].

Putting it briefly, once cannot improve upon the words of Jacob Neusner:

“Israel” in Judaism refers to the holy people of God, children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who stood with Moses at Sinai and received the Torah and entered into covenant with God [Neusner, Chilton 1996:18-19].

Yes, from the beginning, God made a covenant with Abraham, the individual. But equally true, ~~from the beginning, Abraham’s descendants were included in the covenant blessing: “I will make of you a great nation” [Gn 12:2], “to you and your descendants forever” [Gn 13:15].¹ And it is through Abraham and through his descendants/seed that blessing is to come to the nations, “kol mishpachot ha-adamah--all the nations of the earth.” It is interesting that the term “adamah” is used here. That is the term used for the dry land that appeared after the waters of the Flood receded. The Torah is reminding us that the blessing to come through Abraham and his descendants/seed will be a blessing to all the descendants of Noah--all the peoples left on the earth after the Flood. Just as *HaShem* was in the blessing business with Creation and with Adam and Eve, so was he in the blessing business with Noah and his family as they came out of the Ark, and so would he be in the blessing business in relationship to Abraham and his descendants/seed, through them blessing all the families of the earth.~~

Deleted:

Abraham was called into covenant relationship, but it was a covenant made with a community. It is crucial to contrast this with common Protestant individualism, part of the legacy of the Enlightenment. A Jewish, and I dare say, Biblical and Messianic Jewish view of Israel sees us as *a people* with whom God entered into covenant, rather than as a group of individuals, even elect individuals. As individual Jews, together with other Jews, we derive our covenant status and obligations from membership and participation in the covenant people Israel; it is the group’s identity that gives identity to the individual rather than vice versa.

Eugene Borowitz says it this way:

¹ See also 15:5; 17:2, 4; 18:; 22: 26:4 to Isaac; 28:13-14; 32:12; 35:11; 46:3; 48:4, Jacob retelling the promise to Joseph; Gn 48:19, speaking of Ephraim; Dt 1:10-11; 13:17; 26:5; Josh 11:4; 24:3; 2 Sam

. . . the individual Jew's direct personal relationship with God is not begun by that Jew but by the historic experience of the Jewish people into which the contemporary Jew is born. (There is obviously a major difference here between Christian notions of 'getting faith' and the Jewish sense of entering the Covenant.) Individual Jews then, are immediately involved in a dialectic not only of self and God . . . but of the self and the Jewish people in relation to that God . . . [1983:283-284].

Judaism is unembarrassed by particularism, while Christianity and Greco-Roman-Western civilization favors and indeed insists upon homogeneity, collectivism and universality. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks addresses this with characteristic brilliance, speaking of how the Bible begins with the universal [Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, the Tower of Babel] and moves toward the particular. Discussing the divine dispersal at Babel and *HaShem's* confusing of the tongues, Sacks remarks

...it is at that point when mankind is de-universalised, de-constructed, that God chooses not man in general, not humanity in general, not Adam, not Cain, not Noah, etc. He chooses somebody in particular. He chooses Avraham and Sarah, who do not represent all of humanity, who are just one couple, one family, ultimately one tribe - a bunch of tribes, a nation - who will remain distinctive, singular, particular, an *am segulah*, a particularly cherished people. As Balaam put it in *am levadad yishkon* - people that dwells alone....

...here in the Bible is a counter-narrative. A narrative that runs in exactly the opposite direction to Plato. A journey which is not from the particular to the universal but from the universal to the particular. The Bible regards the universal as somehow 'beneath', more primitive than the particular...[Sacks 2000:6].

In Jewish thought, despite the primacy of group in matters of election and covenant, the individual is by no means ignored. *Midrash* sees it as right and crucial that we interest ourselves in Abraham as an individual, and in his reasons for responding as He did, for he is paradigmatic of all other individuals in the covenant as well as for the nation as a whole. As Novak puts it,

. . . Projecting our own reflection on the human conditions for election back to Abraham retrospectively is essential midrashic thinking. Without it, we would lose our singular connection to the text of Scripture. It would become merely a datum among other data rather than *the* datum for us [1995:118].

17:11; 1 Kings 3:8, 4:20; 1 Chron 27: 23; 2 Chron 1:9; Neh 9:23; Psalm 107:38; Isa 6:3; 10:22; 18:19; 51:2; 54:3; 60:22; Jer 33:22; Micah 4:7.

Because God has placed us within the covenant, the matters recorded there concerning the quill and ink characters in the drama are always addressed to us as a covenant people and as individuals within that covenant people.

Abraham: Custodian of the Ways of God

Abraham is of course the chosen one to whom God revealed Himself [see, for example, Gn 12:7; 15:1-21; 17:1-22; 18:1] and to whom He disclosed his will [Gn 12, 15, 17, 22, 18:17 ff. where God decides it would not be right to hide from Abraham, his covenant man, that which he was about to do]. In addition to revelation concerning the divine nature and the trajectory of history for Abraham's descendants [see Gn 15], from the beginning, *HaShem* also reveals a way of life [Gn 18:19].

This revelatory and custodial function persists in every other covenant context as well. Terrence Fretheim [1990:209] reminds us that even the Sinai Covenant, that very revelatory covenant is “a specific covenant within the context of the Abrahamic Covenant.” The revelation at Sinai of God’s person, of his historical intentions and of his ways is organically part of Abraham’s covenant relationship with God and of God’s revelation of His person, and His ways to Abraham. Although distinguishing between times and between covenants proves useful to discipline theological thought and discourse, one ought not to lose sight of how in Scripture the covenants are organically related to one another, and the covenant partners make no apologies for referring back to earlier covenants as their basis for confidence in and expectation of God. This is especially so of the Abrahamic covenant, which may be rightly seen as the seed-bed of all later covenants.

Here it is helpful to coalesce what we have been saying into a terse summation of the Messianic Jewish canonical narrative. In doing so, it is helpful to contrast and connect this summation with that offered by R. K. Soulen who summarizes the gospel in this fashion: “The God of Israel has worked in Jesus Christ for the sake of all.” In counterpoint with that, we might

say that our view of the message of the Bible and the good news of salvation in a Messianic Jewish canonical narrative is this: **"The God and Father of Yeshua the Messiah is working in the descendants Jacob for the sake of all."**² I would submit that this is the core of our canonical narrative.

Abraham clearly foreshadows the priestly role of the nation that will arise from his loins. Abraham's call adumbrates that of Israel: a priestly nation through whom ALL the nations of the earth are to be blessed.

Abraham a Custodian of Blessing, But Not for Himself and His Descendants Alone

Novak points out that preceding entering into covenant, Abraham had to have anticipated some good which would have motivated him to accept its terms. Here the universal applications of the particularistic calling of Abraham and his descendants come home to us:

It seems to me that the reason for Abraham's answering the electing call of God, and thus the paradigm for all subsequent Jewish answering of it, can be seen in the promise made in the initial call itself that Abraham and his progeny will be the source of blessing for all of humankind. Accordingly, Abraham's relationship with God is correlative to his relationship with the world [1995:120].

This is a crucial statement, and a reality central to the divine purpose for Abraham's election and that of his seed, the people of Israel. As we will have occasion to comment later, responding to the call to draw near to *HaShem* always entails an increased responsibility for others. This was true for Abraham, for Moses, for Israel and for all of us. And this call to draw near is a call to priesthood.

The call to covenant is inseparably a call to priesthood. In Abraham's story, this aspect of priestly identity is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his dialogue with *HaShem* at the Oaks of Mamre. *HaShem* says

² I chose not to use the term "Israel" here because the term has, for many people, a wider reference than the carnal seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am siding here with Wyschogrod, Neusner, and Soulen, et al.

Should I hide from Avraham what I am about to do, inasmuch as Avraham is sure to become a great and strong nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by him? For I have made myself known to him, so that he will give orders to his children and his household after him to keep the way of *Adonai* and to do what is right and just, so that *Adonai* may bring about for Avraham what he has promised him” [Gn 18:17-19]

Novak points out that God does not say “I know about Abraham” but rather, “I know him.”

The Torah uses a very marital and covenantal term, yadah. This kind of knowledge is a precondition to Abraham’s being able to recognize and keep the way of the *HaShem*. This “knowing” by God is of the nature of presence [Novak 1995:122]. This may also be seen in as true of Israel in Amos 3:2 “Of all the families on earth, only you have I intimately known.”

. . . God shares a unique intimacy with Israel that is the basis for the unique claims he makes upon her. The claims are because God cares for Israel. Since these claims are made in the context of covenantal intimacy, the prophet then says in the very next verse, ‘Can two walk together if they have not met each other? . . .’ [Similarly] Israel is intimately known by God and is to act based upon her intimate experience of that knowing. . . . It is a divine reaching out to embrace a human thou who then chooses to be so embraced” [Novak 122-123].³

Summary

Abraham our Father is an intermediary, a teacher and a custodian of revelation of God’s nature, his revealed will and of a stipulated way of life, living under Divine mandate. In such a capacity he prefigures the priestly function and identity of Israel.

Implicit in the intimacy with God which Abraham experiences as a called covenant partner is a responsibility for others. Abraham’s relevance to the nations is prefigured in his dealings with Abimelech, and with Sodom and Gomorrah. In the latter context, he is a classic priestly intercessory intermediary, pleading for God’s mercy to the cities of the plain. In this role, it is imperative that he be a man of obedience. As with any priest, his faithfulness--or the lack of it--has sweeping implications [see, for example, 1Samuel 2:27-36]. That Abraham’s faithfulness is a

³ Although I will not treat this matter at length in this paper, the convergence of covenantal language, especially at Sinai, and marriage as a covenant is explored by some scholars. See, for example, Knight 1959:219 ff. and Sohn 1991:10-43, 138-153.

source of blessing to others is most clearly expressed in the aftermath of the Akkedah, where Abraham is told

...I have sworn by myself—says *Adonai*—*that because you have done this, because you haven't withheld your son, your only son, I will most certainly bless you, and I will most certainly increase your descendants to as many as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants will possess the cities of their enemies, and by your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—because you obeyed my order* [Gn 22:16-18, emphasis added].

Abraham's obedience has everything to do with the God's self-revelation, and with the progress of His will for the world [and indeed the cosmos, as Paul will state in Romans 11]. He is a man called into intimacy with God; but with this intimacy comes a responsibility for the well-being of his own descendants and the nations. The call to draw near always involves and increases one's responsibility for others and requires of those called a priestly concern for purity and kedusha, dedicated separation unto *HaShem*.

But what might such a calling mean for Israel?

The Chosen People: Israel

As Abraham was called, so the people of Israel are called. As Abraham stood in the presence of *HaShem* for the sake of others, so was it to be for his descendants, and so must it be for us. Priesthood--the privilege and responsibility of access--is not only the inheritance of Jacob, but is more deeply the heritage and responsibility of Messianic Jews and derivatively, the Church.

Israel: Called

There are a variety of texts, chiefly but not solely from Torah, that serve well to highlight Israel as God's chosen people, called to priesthood. Sohn takes special note of two:

In Lev 20:26, Yahweh commands Israel, *Thus you are to be holy to me, for I Yahweh am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be mine*

Furthermore, in Deut 14:2, Yahweh says: *For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God; and Yahweh has chosen you to be a people for his own possession out*

of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth [Sohn 1991:94, emphasis added].

He points out how in these two verses, the holy God separated and chose Israel to be His people from all the peoples on earth. Consequently, Israel became his holy [set apart] people who were expected to live in a holy manner. What is implied here and which must not be missed is that this chosenness and holiness [kedusha] is for priestly service. The term most commonly used for this choosing is bakhar, the verb most familiar to us through its use in the blessings over the Torah.⁴

Terms of Separation

God's calling forth his people out of all the nations on earth brings us into the realm of election and holiness, under the general umbrella of "separation." Sohn highlights three roots are used in the OT to indicate this choosing as separating out: *hibdil*, *haflah*, and *kadash* [1991:94-98]

***Hibdil* - God Separating Out a People**

Hibdil, meaning "to make a distinction" or "to divide," is used for the most part as a ritual term for making a distinction between clean and unclean things (Lev 10:10; 11:47; 20:25; Ezek 2:36; 42:40). . . . Sometimes, the term is used of selection for a special assignment. For example, Moses was to separate the Levites for the service of the tent of meeting according to the commandment of Yahweh (16:9; Dt. 10:81 1 Ch 23:13). And, David and the commanders of the army set apart (*hibdil*) the sons of Asaph and Heman and of Jeduthan for the service of singing and playing musical instruments in the house of Yahweh (1 Ch. 25:1) [Sohn 1991:94-95].

⁴ Sohn reminds us that this term is one the most important terms used for election in the Hebrew Bible. Used some 198 times in its various forms, it generally means "to choose, to select." In many cases it is used of levying or recruiting soldiers [as in Ex 17:9; See also Ex. 15:4; 18:25; Josh 8:3; 1 Samuel 17:1; 2 Samuel 10:9; 1 Ch 19:10, 2 Sam 17:1]. Thus the term has the connotation of selection for a strategic purpose. And this is certainly the case with the choosing, the selection of people of Israel [see Sohn

In Lev 20:26, God more clearly specifies his purpose for separating Israel out from among the nations: it is for the sake of intimacy, of relationship: “You are to be holy to me, because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.”

Solomon uses the same very same term in 1 Kings 8:53, where he states, “For you made a distinction between them [*ki atta hivdaltam*] and all the peoples of the earth by making them your inheritance, as you said through Moseh your sevant when you brought our ancestors out of Egypt, *Adonai Elohim.*” *Hibdil* is an election term, and election is for revelation, for relationship, and ultimately, for the sake of others in priestly service. *Hibdil* is an election term, and election is for revelation, for relationship, and ultimately, for the sake of others in priestly service.

***Haflah*: The Difference God Makes**

Another term used of Israel, but generally in an indirect sense is *haflah*, meaning “to deal differently, distinguish, make a distinction, or set apart.” It is used of God making a difference between the flocks of Israel and those of Egypt, between the land of Goshen and the land of Egypt, and between the people of Israel and the people of Egypt during the Exodus [Exodus 9:4; 8:18, 11:7].

In Exodus 33:16 we discover that the difference that ultimately distinguishes the people of Israel from the other nations is the presence of God in the midst of His people. The verb *palah/haflah* is used here : “What else will distinguish me and your people from all the people on the face of the earth?” It is crucial to note that here too the well-being of others is in view. Somehow, there needs to be an observable difference about the Israelites which will be apparent to other peoples. This difference is the manifest presence of God, reflected in holy living--a holiness comprised not only of ethics but also of ritual, a holiness which not only glorifies God but is also for the sake of others.

1991:45-46]. Other texts from Deuteronomy which highlight this strategic choosing, employing the verb *bakhar* include 7:6-7, 4:37, and 10:15.

Kadash: Be Ye Holy for I am Holy

Perhaps the richest and most characteristic term for separation is the term for holiness--*kadash*, the meaning of which by its very nature is sure to elude one's grasp. Rabbi Jacob Milgrom is one of the reigning authorities on Leviticus and issues pertaining to sacrifice and priesthood. He takes us into the realm of the holy better than most could:

Since for Israel the holy is the extension of God's will, it means more than that which is "unapproachable" and "withdrawn," Holiness means not only "separation from" but "separation to." It is a positive concept, an inspiration and a goal associated with God's nature and his desire for humans: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." That which humans are not--nor can ever fully be--but that which they are commanded to emulate and approximate, is what the Bible calls qadosh "holy." Holiness means imitatio dei--the life of godliness.

. . . The Biblical ideal, . . . is that all Israel shall be "a royalty of priests and a holy (qadosh) nation" (Exod 19:6). If Israel is to move to a higher level of holiness, then, it must bind itself to a more rigid code of behavior. Just as the priest lives by severer standards than his fellow Israelite, so the Israelite is expected to follow stricter standards than citizens of other nations. Here again, holiness implies separation. . . [1990:187-188]

Israel's call to live according to the stricter code of a priestly life is modeled after the strictures required of a priest is more than a matter of resorting to a handy metaphor. Rather, there is an organic and foreordained connection between the role of the priests and Levites as a class and that of Israel as a people. The role of the priest in relation to the people of Israel is a microcosm of the role of Israel with respect to the nations

Another text highlighting these realities is Deut 26:16-19:

Today *Adonai* your God orders you to obey these laws and rulings. Therefore, you are to observe and obey them with all your heart and all your being. You are agreeing today that *Adonai* is your God and that you will follow his ways, observe his laws, *mitzvot*, and rulings; and do what he says. In turn *Adonai* is agreeing today that you are his own unique treasure, as he promised you; that you are to observe all his *mitzvot*, and that he will raise you high above all the nations he has made, in praise, reputation, and glory; and tht, as he said, you will be a holy people for *Adonai* your God.

This text is especially important because of its terminological linkage to Exodus 19:3-6, which is perhaps the key text underscoring the priestly call of Israel. Particularly, two key terms

are found in Deuteronomy 26:16-19 which are also found in Exodus 19: *segulah* [moveable treasure], and *am kadosh* [holy people].

Israel: In Covenant Relationship

For Jewish communal self-awareness, no texts are more central than those dealing with the events at Mount Sinai. Remembering how Neusner and Chilton define Israel "the holy people of God, children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who stood with Moses at Sinai and received the Torah and entered into covenant with God," [Neusner, Chilton 1996:18-19], it could hardly be otherwise.

But in considering the purposes of God for Israel it is also crucial to note that this is the key text underscoring Israel's call to priesthood. Clearly, priesthood is at the center of Israel's identity.

Exodus 19: Not the First Time at Sinai

Exodus 19 is clearly related to Exodus 3 through God's promise to meet with Moses and Israel at the Mount after the Exodus. We must also not miss the fact that the purpose of the meeting is worship: "Your sign that I have sent you will be that when you have led the people out of Egypt, you [Israel as a people, note the plural, *ta'avdun*] will worship God on this mountain" [Ex 3:12]. This again takes us into the realm of priesthood: drawing near to God in worshipful service

In looking at Exodus 19:3-6 itself, priestly imagery leaps out for those with eyes to see. From 19:3 onward, Moses functions as a priest, entering the presence of God for the sake of others. Our text says that Moses "went up" to God. The chapter [and chapter 24 as well] is full of going up, and coming down--entering in and out of the presence of God, repeated directional terms describing movement toward and away from the presence of God, and terms of

comparative distance, specifying different proximities to the divine Presence for different classes of the people.

In verse 4, God uses directional terms Himself, speaking of how he brought Israel out of Egypt and brought them to himself. It is almost as if Mount Sinai is the Holy of Holies to which God has brought his people to worship Him. Of course the people can only come near the Holy of Holies; they may not enter in. While his brother mobilizes the bacchanal at the foot of the Mount, Moses, acting in the role of High Priest, goes into the presence of God, experiencing intimacy and making intercession. He then goes out of the presence of God with revelation for the people to whom and for whose sake he ministers. We cannot miss the connection between the greater intimacy with God which Moses experiences, and his greater responsibility for them. Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, increased intimacy entails increased responsibility for others and entails custody of revelation for their sake as well.

God has brought Israel to himself. But for what purpose? In 19:5 and 6, this purpose is brightly portrayed.

Now if you will pay careful attention to what I say and keep my covenant, then you will be my own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you will be a kingdom of *cohanim* for me, a nation set apart. These are the words you are to speak to the people of Isra'el.

If-Then.

Israel's covenant relationship with God is to be a structured one in which expectations are spelled out. Nahum Sarna expresses it this way: "Israel is chosen to enter into a special and unique relationship with God. This bond imposes obligations and responsibilities" [1991:103]. The emphasis here is upon God as the initiating covenant partner who chooses Israel for a special and unique relationship with Himself. The obligations and responsibilities come with the territory, in view of who *HaShem* is, and what he has done for lowly Israel. This is of course the normal pattern for a suzerainty treaty.

But what will be the consequences for Israel of being in such a relationship? The LORD specifies three

A Treasured Possession

The first consequence is that Israel will be to God an “am segulah”—a treasured people. The term is used four times in the *Tanakh*: [Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18-19]. The term “expresses God’s special covenantal relationship with Israel and His love for His people. At the same time, those Biblical texts . . . all uniquely emphasize the inextricably association between being God’s *segulah* and the pursuit of holiness” [Sarna 1991:104].

Agnon sheds charming light on the possible import of *am segullah*:

A treasured possession among all the peoples”—just as a person’s most treasured possession is beloved of him, so Israel is precious to Me. Concerning this a parable is drawn: To what may the matter be compared? To a person who has inherited a great deal of land but nevertheless goes out and buys an additional field, which becomes his favorite. Why? Because he bought it himself. Similarly, although the whole world belongs to Him-Who-Spoke-And-The-World-Came-Into-Being, He only loves Israel. Why? Because He Himself took them out of Egypt and redeemed them from the house of bondage. That is why it says, ‘You shall be to Me a treasured possession among all the peoples.’ [1994:86, quoting from *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim’on Bar Yochai*, a homiletical midrash on Exodus, dating from the tannaitic period but redacted after the 4th century].

A Kingdom of Priests

With this phrase, “*mamleket kohanim*,” we hit pay-dirt discussing the priestly role of Israel. This is the *locus classicus* of the priestly status of Israel. Accordingly, much has been written on the meaning and implications of the phrase.

Daniel Polish, after speaking of chosenness as being a form of selection, and having compared the selection of Israel as a nation to that of the Levitical priests as a class, comments:

. . . Israel, in its covenant relationship with God, is identified as a totally priestly community: ‘You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people’ [Ex. 19:6]. The specialized function of one tribe becomes generalized and is applied to the entire people. The function of the people becomes a universal mission ‘to be a

light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to set the prisoner free' [Isa 42:66-7]. By analogy, then, the chosenness of Israel is related to the fulfillment of certain priestly functions. This is stated specifically in Deuteronomy 7:6. [1975:44-45].

Jewish classical sources pursue this matter as well. One source quotation will have to suffice for now:

And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests. In this fashion you will be the treasure of them all by being a *kingdom of priests* to understand and teach the entire human race that all shall call in the Name of *HASHEM* and serve Him *in one accord*, as shall (indeed) be the (role) of Israel in the future, as it says, *...But you shall be named priests of HASHEM* (Isaiah 61:6), and as it says..., *For out of Zion shall Torah go forth...* [Sforno ad locum]

Summary

It seems incontrovertible that the people of Israel are collectively called to priesthood, and that this is at the core of the Jewish canonical narrative. We have been called into covenant relationship with God, custodians of revelation, but not for ourselves alone. Rather this is to be a kingdom of priests, with access to God and commandments from God which oblige us to be a holy nation, living a life of *kedusha*, serving as priests to the world which He has established according to His will.

Chosen Priests and Levites

The relationship of the priests and Levites to the Jewish people as a whole has much to teach us because it serves as a metaphor of Israel's call and of her responsibility to the nations.⁵ Christoph Barth, with characteristic acuity, takes note of the organic connection between the priestly people and the office of priest and Levite.

No human being but LORD, the God of Israel, and he alone, installed the priests. Installation by the people could only acknowledge and confirm God's prior installation. The original installation took place at a specific point. It coincided with God's adoption of Israel as his people at Sinai. Adopting the

⁵ In addition, the role of rabbis and other leaders in the Messianic Jewish congregational context is comparable to that of priests and Levites in the Tanakh. Therefore, studying the roles performed by the latter is most instructive for the former.

people, God instituted the only legitimate priesthood. God separated the priests or set them apart (Num. 8:14), he took them (3:12), chose them (16:5, 7), and consecrated them (Exod. 31:13), as he also did Israel as a whole. Installation was not set over against adoption. God separated, took, chose and consecrated both the larger circle of the whole people and the smaller circle of the priesthood, with himself at the center of both circles. The priests might be described as especially holy, but their purer holiness was only a symbol of the holiness of all God's people. There might also be special covenants with the priests and Levites (Num 25:12-13), but these special covenants can be understood only within the context of the general covenant that God made with all Israel [Barth 1991:153].

This is a remarkable paragraph. Barth here integrates for Israel and the priesthood parallels in terminology [separation, setting apart, taking, choosing, consecrating/making holy] and parallels in priestly function.⁶

Barth postulates two concentric circles, one representing the whole people whom God took, chose and consecrated, and the other representing the priesthood, whom he likewise took, chose and consecrated. In each case, God Himself is the center of the circle. Graphically, this is the result.

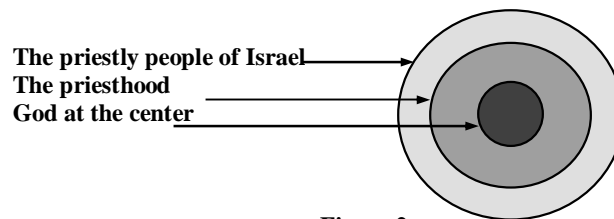


Figure 2

**Graphic Presentation of Christoph Barth's Conceptualization
of Israel the Priestly People and the Old Testament Priesthood
as Both Centered Around God**

At the heart of my own research is the contention that a model similar to but more complex than Barth's can help us understand Israel as the people of God in both Testaments.

One might productively the People of Israel in the *Tanakh* in the following fashion.

⁶ These parallels are at the very heart of my doctoral work.

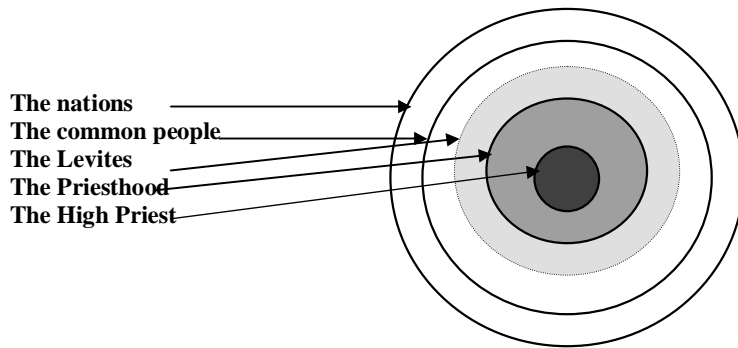


Figure 3

**The People of Israel in the *Tanakh*
Gathered Around the Holy of Holies and the Ministry of The High Priest**

It is clear that the well-being of the entire community depended upon the service rendered by the High Priest. Indeed it was by virtue of his being the High Priest that there was any derivative priestly status for the sons of Aaron, the Levites or the common people. And of course, as was the case with the encampment itself, each of these circles represents a diminution of holiness as one moves out from the center, or, conversely, increased holiness as one moves toward the center.

One might even see this diagram as a model of the leadership structure of the encampment of Israel. The High Priest had the greatest responsibility and authority, and the other circles gathered around him had authority and responsibility in proportion to their distance from the center and respective position in the hierarchy.

Confirmation and Further Implications of This Model

Remarkably, confirmation of this sort of interlocking model comes from yet another quarter, from the rightly respected Jewish scholar, Jacob Milgrom, who uses a similar model to

suggest that Torah portrays humanity as tripartite [adaptation of his Diagram 1: Humans, 1990:179].

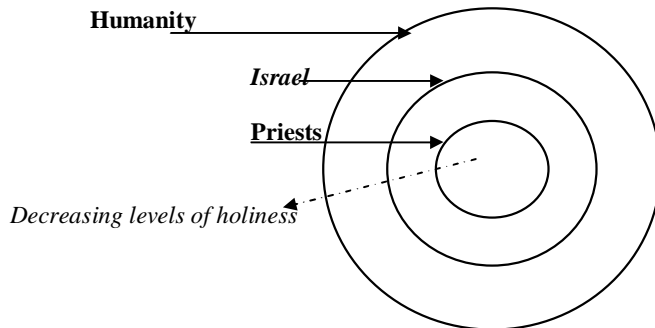


Figure 4

Adaptation of Milgrom's Diagram 1 - Humans [1990:179]

He explains his model as follows:⁷

... According to P, the tripartite division of the human race corresponds with three of its covenants with God: all humanity (Gen 9:1-11, including all animals), Israel (that is, the patriarchs, Gen 12:1-3, Lev 26:42), and the priesthood (Num 25:12-13, Jer 33:17-22). The three human divisions are matched by the three animal divisions: All animals are permitted to humans (except the blood, Gn 9:3-5), the edible few to Israel (Leviticus 11), and of the edible, the domesticated and unblemished as sacrifices to the *HaShem* (Lev 22:17-25) [1990:179-180]

He then shows how the same defects forbidden in sacrificial animals are forbidden in priests—the same blemishes disqualify both [1990:180-181]. Additionally, the firstborn males of both humans and animals are the *HaShem*'s property [Ex 13:2]. (See Figure 5).

⁷ His model and conclusions remain useful even if one rejects the Documentary Hypothesis imbedded in his discussion.

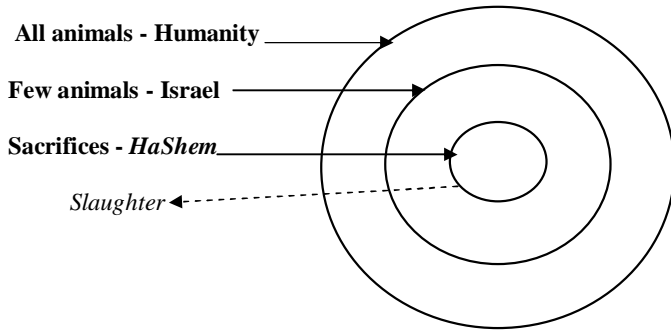


Figure 5

Graphic Adaptation of Milgrom, Diagram 3 - Space [1990:181]

Milgrom interprets this diagram in a manner which underscores how intrinsic such a model is to the worldview of the Pentateuch, and, we should note, to later Judaism:

The innermost circles . . . are not fixed and static. For both human and beast there is a centrifugal movement to the outer circles. According to the Holiness Code, although priests are inherently holy, all of Israel is enjoined to achieve holiness (e.g., Lev 19:2; see also 11:44). Israel achieves its status as a holy people not through the priestly regimen, but by scrupulously observing God's commandments, both morally and through ritual [1990:181].

Again, Milgrom is demonstrating the interlocking nature of these circles and their interaction as intrinsic to the worldview of the Pentateuch. Notice in his quotation the direct parallels between the regimen required of the priest and the adherence to Torah required of Israel, the priestly people. The way of life required of the priests was a more concentrated or more demanding version of that required of the people. In turn, the people were to model their own lives on the lives and words of the priests.

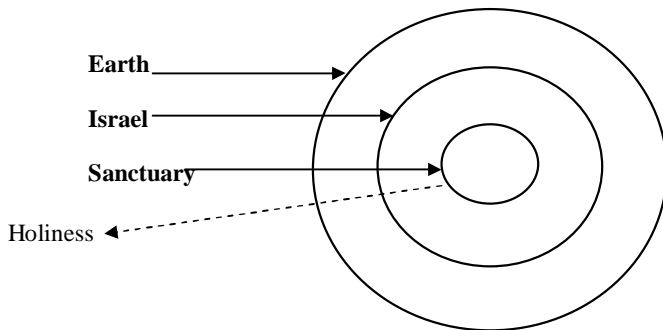


Figure 6

Graphic Adaptation of Milgrom, Diagram 3. Space - [1990:181]

Of this diagram, Milgrom says,

The Priestly material contains an old tradition that the entire camp of Israel in the wilderness could not tolerate severe impurity (Num 5:1-4; cf. 31:19). This tradition is echoed in D, which states explicitly that the camp must remain holy (Deut 23:10-15). It is H, however that extends this view logically and consistently to the future residence of Israel--the Promised Land. Hence, impurities produced in Israel by violating the LORD's prohibitions--both moral and ritual--pollute not only the sanctuary but the entire land. . .

Comparison of the two middle circles of the human and animal realms yields the following unambiguous relationship: as God has restricted his choice of the nations to Israel so must Israel restrict its choice of edible animals to the few sanctioned by God. The bond between the choice of Israel and the dietary restrictions is intimated in the deuteronomic code when it heads up its list of prohibited animals with a notice concerning Israel's election: 'For you are a holy (qadosh) people to the LORD: the LORD your God chose you from among all the people on earth to be his treasured people' (Deut 14:2). Furthermore, Israel's designation as 'a holy (qadosh) people' concludes the deuteronomic diet list, thereby framing it as an inclusion (Deut 14:21).

. . . What could be clearer! Israel's attainment of holiness is dependent on setting itself apart from the nations and the prohibited animal foods. The dietary system is thus a reflection and reinforcement of Israel's election [1990:181-182].

These comments illustrate how the concepts underlying these diagrams interlock with the worldview and ritual life mandated in Torah and conveyed down through the ages as the Jewish way of life. Both Milgrom's and Barth's constructs underscore the integrated and all-encompassing nature of the priestly identity of the people of Israel and what this implies for ritual life, for Israel's identity and narrative, and for Israel's positioning as a priestly people in service to the nations and the cosmos. These models are all grounded in a cultural map, a worldview, which is evident not only in Scripture, but is also the warp and woof of the Judaism, Messianic and otherwise.

Integrating It All

As was the case with Abraham and Israel as a nation, so the priesthood within Israel is demonstrably chosen, in covenant relationship, custodians of the ways of God, experiencing an intimacy with God which is not for itself alone.

Barth seems especially sensitive to this:

By instituting the priesthood God fulfilled the promise that he made to Abraham (Gen. 17:7-8) and repeated to Moses: "I will adopt you as my people, and I will become your God" (Exodus 6:6...The priesthood was instituted because God had adopted Israel, It existed for the sake of the people . . .

All Israel was adopted, but it had the priests as its representatives [1991:153]

Here it is fascinating to note how *Barth relates the priesthood both to Abraham and to the experience of Israel as a whole at Sinai.*

A Messianic Jewish Model of Israel

But how does this Older Testamental model, this model underlying Jewish life, interface with Messianic Judaism and "New Covenant realities," to borrow Dan Juster's felicitous phrase?

Quite well, I would say!

Consider the following model.

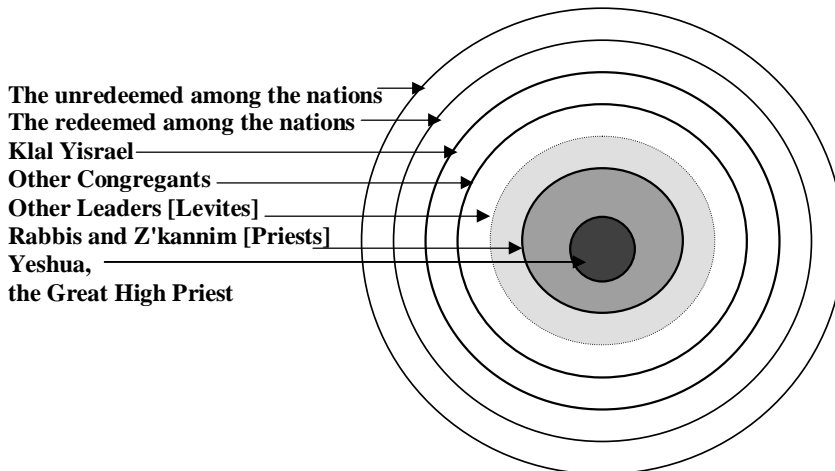


Figure 7

**The People of Israel in the New Covenant and Beyond
Gathered Around the Heavenly Holy of Holies
and the Ministry of The Great High Priest**

Clearly, when we see ourselves in the context of this model, all aspects of our ecclesiological associational world are included without our leaving "Jewish space." The model is firmly grounded in *Tanakh*, true to the New Covenant, and intrinsically "Messiah-centered." Yeshua is neither extraneous nor peripheral,

As in the case of Israel in the *Tanakh*, the High Priest, in this case, Yeshua, the Great High Priest, is central to the model, and upon his ministry the well-being of the entire community and context depends. Gathered around him are the *z'kannim* and rabbis of our movement, whose responsibilities are analogous to those of the Priests in the *Tanakh*.

Space and time considerations do not permit here a detailed description of priestly roles, but they are extremely varied. Among these are revelatory oracles, blessing the people, teaching the word of God, being custodians and interpreter of the tradition, ruling on matters of clean and unclean, holy and profane, judicial judgments, facilitating worship, offering sacrifices, collecting taxes, prayer, pastoral care, administrative functions, and more. In short, the roles that priests performed are fully reflective of the roles congregational leaders ought to perform in a Messianic Jewish context that has made Israel's story its own. This is at the heart of my dissertation research. As an added bonus, the roles rabbis perform in the wider Jewish world are historically and functionally derived from those performed by priests.

Among the advantages of seeing our leadership role as it is represented in this model is the fact that on the one hand, as Rabbis/Elders/Priests, our worshipful attention and dependence is upon Yeshua the Great High Priest. On the other hand, our responsibility is to go forth from that place of nearness and dependence to be a blessing to those "behind" us in the model. Again, the greater the access the greater the responsibility for others.

Commenting on the roles performed by priests, Roland deVaux points out how all of the roles performed by priests are in some sense mediatorial, something which is also intrinsic to the

priestly identity of the people of Israel in their responsibility to the nations. And as we discovered, this was also true of Abraham and of Moses, among others.

All of these various functions have a common basis. When the priest delivered an oracle, he was passing on an answer from God; when he gave an instruction, a torah, and later when he explained the Law, the Torah, he was passing on and interpreting teaching that came from God; when he took the blood and the flesh of victims to the altar, or burned incense upon the altar, he was presenting to God the prayers and petitions of the faithful. In the first two roles he represented God before men, and in the third he represented men before God; but he is always an intermediary. What the Epistle to the Hebrews says of the high priest is true of every priest: 'Every high priest who is taken from among men is appointed to intervene on behalf of men with God' (Heb 5:1). The priest was a mediator, like the king and the prophet. But kings and prophets were mediators by reason of a personal charisma, because they were individually chosen by God; the priest was ipso facto a mediator, for the priesthood is an institution for mediation [deVaux 1965:357].

Like priests, Messianic Jewish rabbis and elders are custodians of the oracles of *HaShem*, interpreters of a holy tradition, ritual specialists, called to holiness, people who stand close to God for the sake of others. Gathered around the Rabbis/Elders/Priests are other circles, likewise dependent upon the ongoing ministry of the Great High Priest, even if they are unaware of this. And just as the roles of priest and Levite tended to overlap in Scripture, so in our context, the roles assigned and performed by *shammashim/shammashiot* sometimes overlap. The model fits this reality well.

Just as all Israel was called into the kind of priestly service exemplified by priests and Levites, so the wider circles represented in our diagram are called upon to imitate the dedication and value system of the leaders.⁸

The advantage of this model is that it represents us as relating primarily to our own immediate congregational context, and also to the wider Jewish world, and then to and through the redeemed from among the nations, the wider Body of Messiah, to the other nations.

This model keeps us in our context, supporting a Jewish liturgical and ritual life, as well as a thoroughly Jewish canonical narrative. Clearly, in this model, the Jewish people are "us," Jewish ritual, narrative, and identity are ours, and the Messiah is the life-sustaining center

⁸ It should be noted that Judaism as it developed under the Pharisees and beyond involved a conscious transference of priestly categories and ritual life to the people as a whole. In Second Temple Judaism and

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This model focuses on one wing of the binarian model of which Mark Kinzer speaks--the Jewish wing. We Messianic Jews would see ourselves within Israel, at one with the wider Body of Messiah in ways that we are not at one with wider Israel, but also at one with wider Israel in ways that we are not at one with the Church. It is beyond the purview of this paper to construct an analogous concentric model for the other half of the binarian people of God, the Gentile-dominated wing, except to say that in that case as well, Messiah would be central.

And how would the two circles, the two wings of the *ekklesia* relate to one another? I would suggest that instead calling them "wings," we might call them "wheels of God's purpose," and if this were the case, their interrelationship could be represented as in the following diagram.

beyond, the priestly identity of all Israel and its accompanying responsibilities greatly intensified and became institutionalized.



**The People of God, Israel
And Their Surrounding World**

**The People of God, The Church
And Their Surrounding World**

Figure 8

**The Dual Contexts of the Binatrian Model
“The Wheels of God’s Purpose”**

In this model, on each side, only certain inner circles would be seen as comprising the *ekklesia*, although the boundaries of those circles ought not to be hard-line defined. We ought to adhere here to a centered set or perhaps a fuzzy set model rather than a bounded set model.⁹ This means that in the nature of the case, boundaries are hard to define and easy to misattribute in this model. As Yeshua said, "Many who are first will be last, and many last, first." In this model, each wing of the *ekklesia*, functioning within its own circle, would be centered in Yeshua the Messiah, and in special kinship with the other side of the model also centered in Messiah, without forsaking a deep contextual and ecclesiological commonality with its own circle as primary human context.

The model underscores the interdependence of both wings of the one *ekklesia*. Neither wing can function alone, no more than a car or cart can function having lost one of its wheels. The model also demonstrates what Scripture affirms, that it is Messiah Himself who is our peace. It is not organizational structures and lowest-common-denominator-agreements that unite us but

⁹ See Hiebert, Paul G. "The Category 'Christian' in the Mission Task." In Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994:118-136.

rather our trust in and allegiance to the living resurrected Yeshua that is both essential and sufficient to bind us together in the ongoing purposes of God.

The Priestly Identity of the Messianic Jewish Movement
Within The Context of Klal Yisrael: Messianic Jewish Prayer as a Test Case

As we have seen, Jewish narrative of the *Tanakh* focuses on the call of Israel at Sinai, and the material from the first chapter of Genesis to the nineteenth of Exodus may be seen as preparation for that great event. David Noel Freedman [2000] takes us a bit further in our understanding. He refers to the first nine books of the *Tanakh* in the Jewish order [the Torah plus Joshua, Judges, and the Books of Samuel (as one book, which it was before being translated into Greek) and Kings Samuel (as one book, which it was before being translated into Greek)] as the Primary History of Israel which goes from creation [in Genesis] and covenant [Exodus 19 ff.] to a consideration of how Israel violated her covenant responsibilities, commandment by commandment, each in turn, culminating in the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple and the Exile. In his words,

The story is that of repeated violations of the covenant terms and persistent rebellion against the Lord of the covenant until the inevitable final punishment was inflicted on the people of the covenant and the national enterprise was terminated violently by the capture of the city of Jerusalem, the razing of the Temple, and the exile of the leading citizens [Freedman 2000:179].

For Freedman, the entire narrative of the *Tanakh* is geared toward answering the question, "What happened that our Temple was destroyed and we were exiled to a pagan land?"

No Temple, No Sacrifice

Of course the destruction was a tragedy for Israel on many levels. That it was the center of her community and religious life is most obvious. But perhaps the central tragedy of the Temple's destruction lay in the consequent impossibility of offering sacrifices in the one place

that the LORD had chosen to make His name to dwell, sacrifices of atonement and all the other sacrifices as well which were the context of interaction between the people and *HaShem*.

Solomon's words crystalize for us this aspect of the tragic nature of the destruction not only of the Temple that bears his name, but also of the Second Temple. In dedicating the Temple he implores *HaShem* to keep his covenant with Israel concerning the succession of Davidic kings culminating in Messiah [1 Kings 8:25-28], and to listen as Solomon prays from this house, when the people of Israel pray toward this house concerning forgiveness of sin, victory over enemies, the need for rain, deliverance from famine, plague, blight, windstorm, mildew, --regardless of what prayer the people of Israel might pray toward that house, and even when the foreigner who is not from among Israel prays toward that house too [1 Kings 8:41-]. But why toward that house? Not only because this is the place from where *HaShem* said he would make his name to dwell, but also because this is the place of sacrifice. The text of Solomon's prayer includes conclusive evidence for this interpretation, in that Solomon made these pleas from a strategic place: "Then *Shlomo* stood before the altar of *Adonai* in the presence of the whole community of Isra'el, spread his hands toward heaven, (and prayed)" [1 Kings 8:22]. The reason he is standing at the altar is that this is in a sense the portal between heaven and earth, the meeting place between *HaShem* and his people, by virtue of the sacrifices offered there.

Prayer and Sacrifice

But one must not miss what should be obvious: the axiomatic connection between prayer and sacrifice throughout the *Tanakh*. From the time of Abram who built altars and called upon the Name of *HaShem*, prayer and sacrifice went together. And after the building of the Temple, prayer, even prayer offered elsewhere, was linked temporally and conceptually with Temple sacrifices. *Tanakh* indicates that when Elijah built his altar on Mt Carmel, after the sacrifices had been prepared and doused with water according to his instructions, that he waited to call upon *HaShem* until "when it came time to offer the evening offering" [See 1 Kings 18:36-39].

Elijah waited until the priests would be offering *mincha* in the Temple, and he knew that this was the most appropriate time to offer this crucial prayer. And even after the destruction, Daniel prayed three times a day toward the Holy City because of the connection between those times and the ancient sacrificial calendar. And as we all know, this remains Jewish practice to this day.

By New Covenant times the connection between sacrifice and prayer was so established that we read of the *Sh'lichim Yochnnan* and *Kefa* going up to the Temple "one afternoon at three o'clock, the hour of *mincha* prayers" [Acts 3:1]. This was the hour of prayer because it was the time of sacrifice.

And so it is that all Israel offers sacrifices of prayer at these times down to the present day. And this is her priestly responsibility as a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation. Priests must bring sacrifices and the sacrifices of Israel are the sacrifices of prayer. And just as our forebears offered sacrifices not only for their sake, but also for the sake of the world, so the prayer responsibility of Israel is a continuation of that priestly calling toward *HaShem* and for Israel and the nations.

Priestly Access and Proximity *Kedusha*

This brings us into the realm of what Mark Kinzer calls "proximity *kedusha*," something which moderns and post-moderns don't easily grasp. We tend to collapse all of God's holiness into the category of morality, something which Scripture emphatically does not do. Proximity *kedusha* is something else, and no less real than the matchless goodness of *HaShem*. It means this: God is so holy that all humanity stands in peril not simply due to His wrath, but also to His otherness. It is like mixing matter and anti-matter. As priests we stand between as intermediaries buffering the zone of danger between the world as it is and God as He is. This liminal in-between zone is fraught with danger. We are only safe there because *HaShem* has bidden us to draw near in our priestly role. Just as the Levites could draw near to the Holy One the way the average

Israelite could not, and just as the priests could draw near to Him the way the average Levite could not, and just as the High Priest could draw near to Him in a manner unique to himself, Israel to a degree and Messianic Jews to a far greater degree can draw near to God with great intimacy because God has bidden us to come. And we come near as priests to preserve the world as well as to praise our God.

By divine choice, the people of Israel as a whole participate in this mystery. Although they do not realize it, it is only through the ministry of Yeshua the Great High Priest, that the prayers of Israel have any efficacy, just as Israel in the *Tanakh* depended upon the ministry of the High Priest for the acceptability of her prayers. But this has long been God's call on our people: to offer prayers, praises, thanksgivings, petitions, as the people of *HaShem*. As Messianic Jews. We knowingly approach *HaShem* through Yeshua the Great High Priest. This gives us greater access, greater intimacy, and greater responsibility. In the Divine design, the reasons for these kinds of prayers and intercession is that God's redemptive plan might go forward, and the entire universe eventually be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. Somehow, through our prayers, we participate in hastening the consummation of all things.

But what does Yeshua have to do with all of this and what is the particular duty of Messianic Jews as a community?

Yeshua, Messianic Jews, and Jewish Prayer

It is through Him, through faith in Him and in his atonement that we approach *HaShem* in prayer as our priestly duty: "Through Him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice or praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His Name" [Heb 13:15]. Yeshua is our Great High Priest who establishes for us safety with God so that we might approach Him without terror. This he does through his sacrifice for our sins and his intercession for us.

But we must not imagine that atonement exhausts the relevance of Yeshua for our prayer lives. Yeshua, as Messiah, is the One Man Israel, who in Himself perfectly embodies all that

Israel was meant to be and to do [see Isa 49:1-7]. He is that "Israel" in whom God is truly glorified, and who will bring the people of Israel back to *HaShem*. Yes, as High Priest he offers to *HaShem* the sacrifice of Himself, but he offers as well the sacrifices of his praises and his thanks and his petitions for the sake of Israel and the world. This is what Hebrews is speaking of when it borrows the language of *Tanakh* and puts these words on the lips of Messiah: "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you" [[Heb. 2:12]. He is in the midst of the congregation of His people praising His Father. We as His priestly people are meant to join Him. In all respects, and in all aspects of the liturgy, we come to *HaShem* in Him, with Him and through Him. As He is, so are we: as He does, so must we--in Him, through Him, and for the honor, glory and progress of the purposes of *HaShem*.

Yeshua is engaged in loving agony for the culmination of *HaShem's* saving purpose for the world. In Scripture, *HaShem*, Messiah, the Holy Spirit, and God's faithful people are all described as being engaged in longing and struggle toward the consummation of all things [see for example Romans 8:22-27].

In Colossians 1:24, Paul links his own struggles to those of Messiah, using terms not easily understood unless this chain of loving agony is kept in mind: "in my flesh I am making up what is lacking in Messiah's afflictions for the sake of His Body." The point is that just as Messiah participates in *HaShem's* struggle and agony for *tikkun olam*, the redemptive consummation of all things, so Paul participates in these struggles, and so should we. And Messianic Jewish prayer, certainly including liturgical prayer as a surrogate sacrificial act, is part of this struggle.

In the *Tanakh*, all sacrifices were to be seasoned with salt. Within the context of a Messianic Jewish canonical narrative, we are the salt on the sacrifices of the prayers of Israel--that is part of our function in the world. In keeping with our identity as part of *Klal Yisrael*, Jewish statutory prayer should be a fixed duty in our lives. That is, if we have truly made Israel's

story our own. The only remaining questions are these: Do we know who we are, and will we play our part?

APPENDIX – CHARLES ANDERSON ON HEBREWS

This appendix is added to address certain questions concerning a New Covenant perspective on the matters discussed in my paper. The appendix is excerpted from chapter four of a five chapter tutorial, "Common Holy Ground," concerning the priesthood of the people of G-d in the New Covenant and the question of whether the tradition of Christian theologizing has supports or undermines a Messianic Jewish ecclesiology. I comment here on the unusual and welcome work of Charles P. Anderson in his article, "Who are the Heirs of the New Age in the Epistle to the Hebrews?" in Marcus, J., and M.L. Soards, eds., Apocalyptic and the New Testament (Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn), JSNTS 24. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989: 255-277. His work models the kind of in context thinking we need to pursue as we seek to make Israel's story our own.

Unique among all the scholars I consulted, Charles P. Anderson sees Hebrews in a Jewish communal context. It is as if all the other commentators have been wearing sunglasses, and only he is wearing clear lenses. All the others see the recipients of Hebrews as Christian individuals of Jewish background rather than as a group of Jews who see themselves in the context of their community with each other, with the wider Jewish world, and with their people throughout time. His perspective is in my view the right one, his argument convincing and illuminating. Throughout my research on Hebrews I was longing to find someone who saw things this way. Finally, toward the end of my research, I found Anderson's brief chapter.

It was worth the wait.

Charles P. Anderson is Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. I am reproducing here a large body of quotations from his article "Who are the Heirs of the New Age in the Epistle to the Hebrews?" Especially when read against the background of common assumptions concerning the Letter to the Hebrews, his perspective stands out as something fresh, and to me, thrilling. I would hope that all who read his article and these quotations from it would be moved to say, "Why didn't I see this before?" The answer to that question is "Because of the Christian exegetical tradition."

Again, these quotations are extensive, but this is the best way to convey the strength and substance of Anderson's argument.

Anderson on the Ethnicity of the People of G-d in Hebrews

In order to put the issue in its simplest and at the same time its broadest possible form, let's reduce it to this: [in the Letter to the Hebrews] what is the assumed ethnic identity of those who are regarded in Hebrews as heirs of the new age, the descendants of Abraham? Are they Jews or gentiles or both? Granted the emphasis in this writing on the sharp distinction between the two covenants. What are the nature and limits of that distinction and how do they related to the practical matter of mission? This is not intended as a sociological question. The issue is not the closely related but distinct question of the actual ethnic composition of the Hebrews community, but rather the assumptions of the author concerning the ethnic identity of the people of G-d.

It may also be helpful to formulate the question in different ways. For example, does the new covenant imply a new people of God in Hebrews, totally discontinuous from those of the first covenant? Alternatively, does Hebrews stay within the limits of a radical but still 'in-house' critique of the cult as found at Qumran? Does 'today' [a key term in the Letter] imply continuity with the Jewish people and its Torah? Or is there a total and irrevocable separation between the past when the Mosaic law was the standard of observance for the people of G-d and 'today' when the Torah is rejected by a community which does not consider itself part of traditional Israel? Are gentiles now eligible as gentiles, as in Paul's gospel? Has ethnicity become irrelevant? [256].

[The] writer [of Hebrews] assures readers that Christ is not concerned with angels but with the seed of Abraham [2.16]. Some commentators see the term as applying to Israel, others in a Pauline sense as applying to all believers regardless of their ethnicity [258-259].

The Letter to the Hebrews refers to Abraham five times. [There is] no case where Abraham appears as a generalized type of faith applicable to gentiles as well as Jews. He is placed consistently within Jewish history, and no inferences for gentiles are ever drawn from his faith. Even when interpreting a passage in which the nations are mentioned, such as Genesis 22, the author of Hebrews ignores that aspect of it. Abraham is nothing else than the faithful, enduring, righteous father of the Jewish people. The question of election within the Jewish people is not directly addressed in Hebrews, though one might infer the author's position from, for example, the distinction he makes between those who serve the earthly tent and those whose altar is in the true tent (13.10). Swetnam argues for a 'spiritual' meaning of the 'seed of Abraham' in Hebrews, similar to that found in Rom. 9.7 in which he sees the 'seed' denoting 'persons constantly chosen by God on an individual basis'. Even so, these 'spiritual seed' are Jews, as Swetnam recognizes.

"When compared with the selection and interpretation of Abrahamic passages by Paul, the implication of the Abrahamic passages in Hebrews for our questions is clear: the appropriate object of mission is Israel. Israelites or Jews are the 'seed of Abraham' (2.16) with whom Christ is concerned; they are his 'brothers' (2.11), the 'sons' (2.10) and 'children' (2.14) whose transgressions under the first covenant are expiated by his sacrifice (9.15; cf. 2.17). Paul's concern with gentiles is conspicuously absent from Hebrews. The two writers focus on different Abrahamic texts, Paul on Genesis 15 and 17, the author of Hebrews on Genesis 22. Whereas Paul finds in his selected texts warrant for his gentile gospel, the author of Hebrews gives not a hint that his gospel was directed to other than the children of Abraham in the traditional sense" [268].

Once one reads these quotations it becomes obvious that the standard reading of Hebrews is done through Pauline glasses. The standard construal of this letter misses entirely its context, its meaning, and its implications. For Anderson, and, it seems, for the text of Hebrews, "the children of Abraham with whom God is concerned are the Jews."

I am not pointing this out so as to disinherit the gentiles, who are the central concern of Paul's mission. Rather, I am seeing in Hebrews and in Anderson's analysis a needed corrective to the disinheritance of the Jewish people which forms the basis of most Christian ecclesiology. After Anderson, I am pointing out that the New Testament is by no means as supersessionist in its perspective as has been later Christian theologizing. And in that I am pointing out negatively that much Christian theologizing is only selectively Biblical, and that Messianic Jewish theologizing and ecclesiology has a legitimate base that has too long been neglected.

But read on.

Anderson on the Law That Has Been Done Away With in Hebrews

Here again it becomes obvious that the standard view of the letter is distorted due to the presuppositions and the Paul-colored glasses worn by exegetes and indeed by the Western theological tradition.

Scholarly works on Hebrews characteristically see in it the gospel of Christ set over against the Law of Moses, and the church against Judaism" [256].

However, it is my conviction that Hebrews neither makes nor assumes a wholesale onslaught against the Law as such, nor against Judaism as such.... Likewise, it is not simply fortuitous that gentiles are never mentioned in Hebrews. The terms of opposition, in my view, do not follow the lines of gospel versus Law, nor Christianity versus Judaism. In this paper a different case will be argued. Rather than 'Judaism' being considered a foreign religion in Hebrews, the epistle testifies to a type of 'Christianity' which is oriented primarily if not exclusively toward Jews. This form of Christianity, while opposing cultic or temple Judaism in the strongest possible terms, nevertheless considers itself Jewish, not just in a metaphorical but in a quite literal sense [258].

Here we deal with questions such as the following: "Does the community envisaged in Hebrews keep the whole Torah or any part of it? What

is the relationship in Hebrews between covenant, the people, and the Torah?' [269].

Here again, Anderson amazes and excites me with his willingness to see the Letter to the Hebrews solidly within the context of Jewish communal and theological concerns. And he does so in an unforced manner. Indeed, I would suggest that it is the theological tradition of the West which has wrested the text from its context, missed its meaning, and used the text as a pretext for statements which go beyond and away from the intended meaning of the author.

For example, Anderson affirms that Hebrews 7:11-12 refers only to a change in legislation as it regards the cult, sacrifice and priesthood, not to a wholesale jettisoning of the Law of Moses.. Discussing the use of the passive verb of *nomotetheo* as used in this context, Anderson states

7.11 refers to specific commandments concerning the Levitical priesthood and their sacrificial service to the people, nothing more. . . . The meaning is not that the Torah was given on the basis of or under the Levitical priesthood, but rather that the people received commandments regarding the priesthood. Those commandments were of course part of the Torah, but not its totality. The author is simply stating an obvious fact as a basis for the next stage in his argument legitimating the priesthood of Jesus. Having demonstrated the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham and therefore to Levi and his descendants (7.1-10), the author now deals with the questions of priestly laws. The Torah as such never enters the picture [269-270].

The 'change in the Law' in 7.12, therefore, refers to priestly law. The argument is that a change in priesthood, from the order of Aaron to the order of Melchizedek (7.11), is paralleled by and requires a change in the laws governing the priestly order as such. Priesthood itself is not in question. Indeed, it is essential to the teaching that leads to maturity. [What a sharp contrast this is to those 19th century assumptions which yet linger in academia and which relegate priesthood to a primitive period of religious development which is superceded by the prophetic spirit. You won't find grist for that mill here!] What has been changed is the order or type and therefore the effectiveness of priesthood and the priestly act. Since Torah contains specific commandments and regulations regarding sacrifice, including priests, materials and site, it is obvious to the author that those parts of Torah have been changed by God. What is referred to in 7.12 is the one elemental discontinuity permeating the epistle, the cultic life of Israel. If Jesus is the one true, effective sacrifice for the cleansing of the conscience, opening the way to God, then other [expiatory] sacrifices are no longer valid. It is 'liturgical law' (8.2.6), and only liturgical law, that is changed in Hebrews. Inferences concerning other aspects of Torah or the Torah as such are unwarranted" [270, emphasis added].

The transition from the Levitical to the Melchizedekian order is, for our author, implied by Ps. 110.4 The law appointing Levitical priests (the 'former

commandment'. . .), having proved itself useless, is now withdrawn (7.18). That 'the law'...of 7.19 does not refer to Torah as such but only to those aspects of it regarding the appointment of the Levitical priests, is verified in 7.28, which summarizes the basic argument of this portion of Hebrews: 'Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests but the word of the oath (i.e., Ps, 110.4), which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever'. In this context, 'law' is used in a way similar to commandment...but in a generalized sense to cover all specific commandments dealing with or assuming the legitimacy of the Levitical priesthood. It does not refer to the Torah as such, the totality of Jewish law and teaching governing all aspects of life, but to those laws specifically concerned with the prevailing Jewish priestly order" [271].

Just as the 'word of the oath' of Ps. 110.4 implies a change in the commandments concerning the appointment of priests from the tribe of Levi, likewise other elements of the sacrificial arrangements established in the Torah have now been changed. The overall term employed in Hebrews to designate the totality of those arrangements is 'covenant'. In Hebrews 'covenant' designates a divinely instituted soteriological order of arrangement. Whereas it includes the entire sweep of Mosaic legislation (9.19-20), the regulations governing the sacrificial system, especially priesthood sacrifice, and tabernacle are the author's primary interest.

Anderson on the Contrast of Covenants in Hebrews

While the Torah as a whole has not been replaced, only changed' in the sense that its parts dealing with sacrifice required re-legislation, the same cannot be said about the covenant. This is partly due to the fact that there is only one Torah but two covenants. Further, covenant is not law, but the framework in which law has its significance. But both covenants are given by God to Israel, and while they point to two different religious systems, there is considerable overlap between them, despite the antithetical position they are given in Hebrews. In particular, the 'new' covenant does not imply a new people. But it does imply a 'change in the law' because the new covenant brings perfection of the conscience and all that requires while the first covenant failed in purifying the conscience from sins.

The arguments in Hebrews could be extended to cover gentiles as well as Jews, as they have been by most modern interpreters of this writing. But the author himself does not do so, and such an extension requires considerable readjustment of his tightly woven logic and scriptural interpretation [272, emphasis added].

Because Anderson's argument contravenes many Christian assumptions concerning the correct vantage point and interpretation of core texts in Hebrews, his views are at first apt to be discounted. However, I believe that as soon as one has adopted this new paradigm, this new vantage point, all things begin to look different, and their internal logic becomes more apparent.

The theological tradition of the West has for so long accepted as axiomatic the abolition of the Law of Moses and the Church's usurpation of the position formerly held by ethnic Israel. Often, the Letter to the Hebrews has been quoted as a prop for these positions. Anderson has rightly called these efforts erroneous and false to the truth

Summary of Anderson's Argument in his Own Words

Whereas discontinuity between the former and the present times is vigorously affirmed in Hebrews it must not be extended beyond the limits set for it there. Rather than covering the entirety of Torah, it applies only to cultic legislation. And rather than proclaiming, as Paul did, a new ethnic principle inherent in the new covenant which constitutes a fundamental departure from the first covenant, Hebrews contains no evidence of an envisaged rupture between traditional Israel and the heirs of the new age. In Israel then and now are found both those whose apostasy ('unfaithfulness') barred them from inheriting the rest and those whose faith qualified them for it. The 'seed of Abraham' (2.16), whose salvation is at stake, is 'Israel.' [272-273]

The arguments in Hebrews regarding Law and covenant are misunderstood if confused with Paul's argument concerning the incorporation of the gentiles into faithful Israel. The religious world of Hebrews is narrower and more traditional than Paul's. With the one fundamental exception relating to the cult, the Torah is still valid for those to whom it was given by Moses. No break with Jewish tradition apart from priesthood, sacrifice, and temple is assumed in Hebrews. Discontinuity centers upon cult, not Torah. Of course, cult implicates Torah. But Torah is a larger category, and apart from priesthood and other cultic aspects, is left untouched by the critique of Hebrews. The new covenant does not imply a new Torah, but a 'changed' Torah in which earlier cultic legislation is replaced. What distinguishes the two covenants is their relative efficacy to purify the conscience from sin. Thus there is a close relationship between the 'change in the law' and the transition to the new covenant. Jesus is the mediator of both.

The author of Hebrews goes much further than the Qumran community in his critique of the sacrificial cult. It is not just the current administration of sacrificial practices that is rejected, but the 'earthly' sacrificial cult itself. In this sense, Hebrews is radical. But Judaism was more than the temple cult, as it demonstrated following the destruction of the temple and the cessation of its services. In Hebrews we encounter a set of arguments designed, among other things, to justify transfer of support and commitment from the sacrificial system to this new sect which believed that a new set of sacrificial rules had been divinely instituted. For its members, the death of Jesus had replaced all other sacrifices concerned with sin.

Who are those to whom missionary activity should be directed according to Hebrews? Ethnically, they are the same as those indicated in Mt 10.6: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. The heirs of the new age envisaged in Hebrews are among those 'lost sheep' (cf. Heb, 13.20). They have no need to use the term 'seed of Abraham' metaphorically, nor to be blessed through Abraham's

descendants. They are descendants of Abraham and therefore the primary heirs of the promise [273-274].

What To Do With Such Information?

In the search for "common holy ground" people like Anderson help to provide from the Christian side a place for Messianic Jews to stand. If we were to liken the Christian theological tradition to a mountain, Anderson's thesis is a bare ledge to which we may cling. There are others like him who have begun to see and declare matters long neglected by the Church. Among these are Richard Bauckham, whose studies on the Letter of James are no less significant for our purposes than are those of Anderson on Hebrews. As with Anderson, so with Bauckham, reading his material partakes very much of the nature of a paradigm shift: once one sees things from his perspective, one cannot ever again simply see things as they used to be.

Such new perspectives destroy and create worlds.

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