

Borders, Boundaries, Wells and Fences
A Response to Dan Juster's "Apostates, Heretics, And Sectarians In Messianic Jewish Context," Delivered at the Hashivenu Forum, January, 2009, Pasadena, CA

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In his "Apostates, Heretics, And Sectarians In Messianic Jewish Context," Dan Juster does what we have come to expect him to do so well, presenting a historical retrospective on the Messianic Jewish Movement within the context of a far-ranging familiarity with church history, ancient, Reformational, and modern, and evangelical norms. His paper, all thirty-seven pages of it, illustrates his wide reading, broad learning, and extensive experience. It would take another paper of equivalent length for an adequate response point for point. Since I am limited to a twenty-minute response, after some brief comments on assumptions which I view to be unhelpful clutter, I will focus on one recurring aspect of his argument, the language of boundaries and borders. I will then explain and advocate an alternative model borrowed from the writings of Missionary Theologian Paul Hiebert, and modeled in our Scriptures.

Clearing Away the Clutter

Early in his paper, Dan speaks of how the Orthodox arrogate to themselves the role of establishing norms for the Jewish world. While such behavior is well known, especially in Israel, too many wrongly imagine that Jewish norms are simply the outward manifestation of some Orthodox Jewish power play. This is not true, nor can it be so. From the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE until 19th century, all we had was Orthodox Judaism. To imagine Orthodox norms to be arbitrary and fascistic is like imagining that nomadic sheiks in the Sahara conspired to keep their people on sand. Orthodoxy was all we had, with the exception of the short-lived protest group, the Karaites. It is far more helpful to remember that it is the tradition, not today's Orthodox, that sets the standards. True, the Orthodox view themselves especially to be the custodians of that tradition, but it will do no good to confuse the museum (the tradition) with the curator, (the Orthodox, especially).

Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Judaism were born yesterday, when compared to millennia of prior traditional Judaism. Doesn't it seem presumptuous to assume that Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and certainly Messianic Jews have as much right as anyone else to establish norms? No, it is community conduct and debate over time that establishes norms, and the Orthodox have been around longer.

Dan suggests that the Zionist founders defined Jewish identity and thus the Law of Return in a manner so as to include Yeshua-believing Jews, and that the Supreme Court of Israel, acting out of prejudice, violated the will of the Founders in their interpretation of the Law of Return. I will have to check with Tsvi Sadan on this matter, but I doubt both that the Founders would have naturally included Yeshua believing Jews, and that the Supreme Court sought to ignore their preference on the matter. Here again, I worry that we Messianic Jews, as a marginalized group, wrongly construct Jewish establishment conspiracies and motives, mirages festooning our wilderness wanderings.

Boundaries and Borders

Turning now to Dan's major focus, he speaks extensively about boundaries and borders, using the terms, in singular or plural form, ninety-six times. Throughout his far ranging panorama of history and theology, both Jewish and Christian, this remains his focus, and will therefore be mine as well.

Is it Subversion or Renewal?

While I appreciate Dan's ethical sensibilities on the unacceptability of subversion from within, matters are not so simple. Experience proves that one person's subversion is another person's restoration or renewal. Martin Luther was viewed as subversive by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but viewed himself as seeking restore, reorient and renew the Roman Catholic Church. Similarly, John Wesley sought to foster a renewal movement within the Anglican Church, and never dreamed of leaving it. Nevertheless, historical factors and ecclesial politics made him to be the Father of the Methodist denomination, and outside the Anglican communion. The Hasidic movement was a renewal movement within Judaism, regarded as such today, but was viewed by the *mitnagdim* and censured by the Gaon of Vilna as heretics, and therefore subversives. And what of the Messianic Jewish movement? Some view us as subverting Christianity, rebuilding the middle wall of partition that Christ tore down, while Jewish anti-missionaries and even irenic figures like Yitzchak (Irving) Greenberg speak of us as more pernicious than Jews for Jesus, a group he censures harshly:

Jews for Jesus—people who believe that Judaism is superseded, and Jews have no right to exist as Jews anymore . . . believe that Christianity has taken over Judaism like some succubus that must now govern the behavior of its host body, (and) seek to abolish the Jewish religion. Messianic Jews are even more abusive in that they use Jewish rituals and symbols as masks for a supersessionist Christianity in order to facilitate Jewish abandonment of Judaism. . . . One cannot be a Jew and a Christian at once.¹

So what are we? Subversives or agents of renewal? Heretics or heroes? It depends who you ask, what criteria are used, and what are the political perspectives and interests of the persons judging. And this is true not only of the judgments made by others about Messianic Jews: it is also true of how Messianic Jews judge one another.

Is it Politics or Purity?

I insist that much of the doctrinal debate and polarization in and around our ranks is driven by the same concerns: who's judging, by what criteria, in protection or advancing of what political interests. I define politics as "the accumulation and protection of power and influence for oneself and one's cronies, while seeking to deny that influence and power to those one resents, fears, or opposes." I know this sounds unspiritual of me, but

¹ Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 97-98.

I do believe much of the discomfort, and doctrinal chatter in our ranks is political—based on resentments, fears, and power concerns. I don't mean to be insulting, and I hope I am not. But this is how I see things, and I think no good purpose is served by denying that this is the way things work. And yes, I could give examples. I would say also that those who would accuse me of being political in the same manner, are probably right, although I do not see it, any more than they see it of themselves. Perhaps this is one reason we need one another, and need to listen to each other more: because we cannot see or admit things about ourselves that are nevertheless true.

Is it About Building the Kingdom or Protecting our Comfort Zones?

Turning away from political concerns, consider the issue of perfection and application. It does little good to imagine that boundary setting and enforcement is a science. It is neither that nor a perfected art. Dan will agree as will other leaders in our Union that it is one thing to identify and enforce such boundaries as a matter of theory, and quite another to apply such tests and standards in real life. It is too easy for those of a philosophical bent to engage in something of a neo-Platonic endeavor, imagining a perfect world, with neatly defined categories, projections of our philosophical or theological constructs, while ignoring the nuances and infinite varieties of human experience. But when viewed from an historical distance, much boundary setting and protecting activity can be seen to have been a philosophical castle in the air, or some combination of self-serving, political, narrow-minded, and naïve activity, devising and enforcing somewhat arbitrary categories badly.

Yes, I recognize that some boundaries are necessary, yet I challenge all of us to realize how boundary setting is seductive and often more about in-group comfort zones than the concerns of the Kingdom. Let me illustrate.

I remember a conversation at the Boro Park Symposium with an old friend, a member of the Association of Messianic Believers, who sought to convince me as to how much the UMJC needed more well-defined doctrinal boundaries if there was to be any sort of communal cohesion. It was so seductive—I could smell the smoke of C. S. Lewis's White Witch in *The Silver Chair*. It is so comforting to draw a circle in which I can hang out with "me and mine," sheltered from the hostile world of "outsiders." But at what cost? Isn't it true that time and again we have seen boundary setting to be a means of self-comfort, self-protection, and excluding others who are servants of Messiah, and do we not realize what a sterile endeavor this can be, unable to model or reproduce the dynamics of the Kingdom? And has this behavior really been driven by a concern for growing the Kingdom of God? Not as often as we might imagine.

Despite the rhetoric of being biblically concerned, or doctrinally mature, what I most often detect is more a matter of politics on the one hand, and comfort on the other. And here I speak of two kinds of comfort—the comfort of being with those who are most like oneself, and the avoidance of the discomfort of dealing with others who don't quite fit one's pet categories. This is especially a problem for those who do not handle ambiguity well.

Some may want to form tightly defined associations or congregations for reasons of political or doctrinal homogeneity, or to form groupings that manifest some sort of preferred purity or well-defined commonality. There may well be a place for such groups, so that like minded people may reinforce one another and learn to better identify, evaluate,

experience, express, and serve what they hold in common. However, if we are builders of the Kingdom, we must ask, “Are such structures the best way to draw Jewish people more deeply to the knowledge and service of Israel’s God through Yeshua the Messiah?” In many cases, I don’t think so.

Think of some Messianic Jewish association that is the purest of the pure doctrinally. In one of these I could mention, someone who is known for his attacks on the UMJC for what he perceives to be its doctrinal apostasy was a member. This association which he joined withdrew from other associations because it wanted to nurture and protect a narrow sort of doctrinal homogeneity and purity. In fact, when this very pure fellow turned out to be an annihilationist, one who believes that the lost do not suffer everlasting conscious torment, but are rather destroyed by the fires of perdition, this purest of the pure was put out of this association for not being pure enough.

Now here is my question: is there anyone here who believes that such associations, as purity and doctrine focused as they are, are proportionately better at building the Kingdom of God? (Such organizations claim to be such, but is it really true?) Is there anyone here who believes that there is a direct correlation between a fixation on doctrinal rectitude and Kingdom building? Isn’t the reverse often true, that such associations, preoccupied with defining who is “us” and who is “non-us,” and in protecting their boundaries, fail to attract and indeed repel all but those who are already believers in their image, and/or those who are somewhat punctilious by nature or religiously fixated?

If you are still not persuaded, continue following my argument. Especially pay heed to the sources I have consulted on this matter.

Contrasting Two Models

The issue of just how fruitful a restrictive boundary oriented community will be has been explored with great finesse by Mennonite Mission Theologian Paul Hiebert in his seminal article, “The Category ‘Christian’ and the Mission Task.”²

Hiebert, who died this past year, was known for his ability to build a bridge between the world of science and that of theology. In this essay he borrows from the world of mathematics, and what is termed “set theory.” He discusses three kinds of sets, bounded sets, centered sets, and fuzzy sets, of which only the first two need concern us today.

Bounded Sets

Bounded sets have sharp boundaries, and centered sets have boundaries as well but the emphasis is placed on that which centers the set rather than the boundaries surrounding it. For example, a bounded set in this room would be all women who live on the West Coast, or another set would be the set of all people under the age of 35 who have college degrees, or all the people who are staying at the Westin Hotel and are from out of town. In each case, the set is easily defined, the boundaries easily enforced. You

² *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994). This article first was first published in *International Review of Mission* 72 (July 1983): 421-27.

are either in the set or out of it according to well-defined criteria which can be easily policed.

Hiebert lists five characteristics of such bounded sets:

1. The category is created by listing the essential characteristics an object must have in itself to belong to the set.

2. The category is defined by a clear boundary. . . . The central question, therefore, is whether an object is inside or outside the category.

3. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics - they constitute a homogeneous group.

4. Bounded sets are essentially static sets.

5. Bounded sets, as we use them in the West, are ontological sets. They have to do with the ultimate, changeless structure of reality, which is defined in terms of unchanging, universal, abstract categories. (Hiebert, 112-3)

If we define the term “Christian,” or, in our case “Messianic believer” or “Messianic Jew,” or even, “trustworthy Messianic Jewish leader” as a bounded set, we get some interesting results. John Morehead lists them as follows:

First, since we must classify objects in the set by their essential nature, in this case, whether someone is a Christian, in the absence of omniscience and a window into the human heart, we focus on external characteristics, such as assent to doctrinal orthodoxy, or adherence to certain moral behaviors, or both. Second, with a bounded set sharp boundaries are drawn between Christians and non-Christians. Hiebert states that with this emphasis, "we would work to maintain this boundary, because the boundary is critical to maintaining the category." From this perspective great emphasis is placed on determining who's in and who's out of the clearly bounded set.³

It should be apparent that this is precisely what I was speaking of in discussing that nameless association of Messianic believers that was formed to preserve and protect doctrinal purity, and which was quick to both detect and to expel someone who no longer fit the set. These are the kinds of associations, missions, and congregations such people build.

But does such activity build the Kingdom, and are such definitions helpful in defining who is in the Kingdom and who is not? Some of us, steeped in bounded set thinking, may imagine that what I am proposing is “unbiblical.” Let’s look at that for a moment.

While Yeshua walked among them, the apostles were bounded set people. But he was of another mind:

³ johnwmorehead.blogspot.com/2005/08/bounded-sets-centered-sets-and.html accessed on line January 15, 2009.

He sat down, summoned the Twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." He took a child and stood him among them. Then he put his arms around him and said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me." Yochanan said to him, "Rabbi, we saw a man expelling demons in your name; and because he wasn't one of us, we told him to stop." But Yeshua said, "Don't stop him, because no one who works a miracle in my name will soon after be able to say something bad about me. For whoever is not against us is for us (Mk 9:35-40; see also Lk 9:46-50).

You can see here that the Apostles had a hard category as to who had a right to cast out demons in Yeshua's name—such persons have to be one of "us." But Yeshua had a broader category, and it was not so much doctrinal as relational. He was prepared to be irenic toward persons whom the disciples wanted to exclude and forbid. They focused on what the people were like and unlike (they are unlike "us")—he focused on what such people were about. His was a centered set mentality.

Centered Sets

This takes us from the realm of bounded set thinking into Hiebert's suggested alternative, the centered set. This he defines as a grouping of things "on the basis of how they relate to other things, not what they are in and of themselves."

The characteristics a centered set are as follows:

1. A centered set is created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship to that center.
2. Centered sets do not have sharp boundaries that separate the set from those outside it. The boundary emerges automatically by the relationship of the object to the center.
3. The variables of centered sets are membership and distance from the center.
4. Things headed away from the center can shift and turn toward or away from the center. (Hiebert, 123-4)

Hiebert then discusses the concept of "Christian" as a centered set. From this perspective Christians and Messianic Jews primarily define themselves as followers of the Messiah as the defining center of their lives. Second, and very importantly, Hiebert notes that while there is still a clear separation between Yeshua-believers and those who are not, "the emphasis, however, would be on exhorting people to follow Christ, rather than on excluding others to preserve the purity of the set." This has huge implications in how it applies to our congregational life and life within our Union. I submit that this is riskier, and uncomfortable for evangelicalized people used to distrusting and stigmatizing the "other." But this smells more like the Kingdom of God than the kind of political wall-building and boundary protection that we too often settle for. Additionally, we do well to remember that bounded set thinking, this preoccupation with who is "us" and who is "non-us" has no cachet with younger people today.

I think nothing is to be gained and much damage can be done by simply writing off this perspective as “relativistic” or “post-modern.” I don’t think Jesus was relativist or post-modern, nor is this perspective

Sheila Pritchard writes of how much more suitable centered set thinking is to the realities of the Christian life, or in our case, Messianic Jewish life, and the life of the Kingdom:

In bounded-set thinking, it is quite possible to stop moving towards Jesus without any great sense of concern. Whereas in centred-set thinking it is that very movement from "one degree of glory to another" that marks us out as those whose life comes from "the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3.18).

In Philippians 4.10-15 Paul gives his own view of spiritual growth:

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this also God will reveal to you.”

Movement, development, dynamic growth are at the heart of every stage of a centred set approach to Christian life.⁴

Southern Baptist theologian Robert E. Olson underscores the chief danger of a bounded set mentality.

The bounded set model ends up allowing little or no distinction between the center (the gospel) and the boundaries (orthodoxy). It also leads inevitably to obsessive boundary maintenance and inquisitorial judgments about whether persons and groups are Christian or not.⁵

What a fascinating critique: confusing the gospel with orthodoxy! I never heard anyone point that out before. While there is some overlap between the two, as I mentioned in my Boro Park Symposium paper, the gospel is a larger category than our bounded set categories. The people of God are bigger than our cliques and coffee klatches. God’s Kingdom and purposes are not well served when members of our Union and our Movement refer to people with whom they differ as “Liberals” or “dangerous” or

⁴ “Digging Wells or Building Fences: The Risk of Spiritual Growth.” <http://homepages.which.net/~radical.faith/misc/pritchard.htm> Accessed January 15, 2009. This article was first published in REALITY Magazine Feb/March 1994, <http://www.reality.org.nz/>

⁵ Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*, (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

even, “heretics.” And perhaps more to the point, there is a pervasive mistrust and epidemic of faint praise afoot among us that does not smell like the Kingdom of God. The core question that should be asked is “Does this person love and serve the Messiah and are they working toward the consummation God has promised Israel?” Whenever the answer is “yes,” but we still write off and distance ourselves from such individuals, we sin and are being stupid at best, while we undermine and weaken the Kingdom enterprise we claim to serve. My experience bears out Olsen’s trenchant observation that that a bounded set model “leads inevitably to obsessive boundary maintenance and inquisitorial judgments about . . . persons and groups.”

Concluding Recommendations

Sheila Pritchard uses a metaphor helpful to capture the difference between centered sets and bounded sets.

A visitor to an Australian outback cattle ranch was intrigued by the seemingly endless miles of farming country with no sign of any fences. He asked a local rancher how he kept track of his cattle. The rancher replied, “Oh that’s no problem. Out here we dig wells instead of building fences.” . . . The implication, I hope, is obvious. There is no need to fence cattle in when they are highly motivated to stay within range of their source of life.⁶

I am recommending that the Union of Messianic Jewish congregations learn to dig wells instead of fences—that we adopt a centered set model and learn to gently but decisively set aside the more familiar but stultifying bounded set models we have inherited. What might this mean?

1. We need to realize there is a problem. If we are going to simply listen to Robert Frost in “Stopping By The Woods on a Snowy Evening,” believing that “good fences make good neighbors,” then this entire paper is irrelevant. But if we recognize that building fences, protecting borders, etc., has a down side and is a problem among us then we can go to step two.
2. We need to study Hiebert on the issue of centered sets and bounded sets, and also writings by missiological thinkers evaluating and applying the model, seeking to reach an understanding of the model and its implications for us.
3. We need to identify the hot dynamic center of what God is calling our community to be about. I suggest that the New Messianic Jewish Agenda, summarized in Ezekiel 37:21-28 and mapped out in my recent publication, *Christians and Jews Together*, is an excellent and comprehensive place to start. What is needed is a hot molten core of meaning and communal engagement that is both faithful to the current purposes of God for the Messianic Jewish Remnant, and attractive to those of our people whom Hashem is drawing to His Kingdom. What is the

⁶ Pritchard, op. cit.

- core—what is the hot molten dynamo of meaning that should get us out of bed in the morning and that motivates our sacrifices and decisions as a Union?
4. We need to come to terms with our own conduct, and evaluate if indeed bounded set thinking has been comfortable, convenient, but an obstacle to our faithful effectiveness.
 5. We need to practice better verbal hygiene in our ranks, and enforce a code of conduct which precludes defaming or negatively categorizing persons with whom we disagree in a manner which calls into question their service to Messiah and His Kingdom and our mutual status as members of the same family accountable to the same Father.
 6. Appropriate bodies should be established to pursue these matters, and mechanism established to move toward their successful implementation if such success is judged reasonably possible.
 7. Documents will need to be redrawn and the Union reconceived.

As the Apostles Peter, Paul and Mary reminded us, “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well.” It wasn’t a fence! I suggest he will meet with us too, if we will but dig the kinds of wells I advocate here.