

The Purpose of Jewish Followers of Yeshua in God’s Providential Design

Paper prepared for the Helsinki Consultation, Moscow, June 2015

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The writing of this paper is an opportunity to organize and articulate previously scattered, loosely structured thoughts and ideas. Posed as a statement, the title implies at least three major propositions – 1. God is a God of order and has providentially designed all that exists, 2. Jewish followers of Yeshua is a legitimate theological category, 3. their existence is meaningful.

Beginning with the last phrase of the title “God’s providential design,” this paper will set the context for responding to the central question implied in the title – what is the purpose of Jewish followers of Yeshua? The paper will then examine the existence of Jewish followers of Yeshua within the framework of the Body of Messiah and will further examine their purpose through the lens of Eucharist remembrance as a witness and a sign of God’s providential design.

Divine Providence in Jewish Thought

God’s providence is a broad philosophical/theological category that has engaged generations of philosophers and theologians, both Jewish and Christian. Jewish thought, rooted in Torah, from Philo to Maimonides until the present, maintains that God’s providence implies his oversight and engagement with creation. “‘Providence’ is employed to connote (1) God's “*actio æterna*” (His foreknowledge and His dispositions for the realization of His supreme will [*πρόγνωσις* and *πρόθεσις*]), and (2) God's “*actio temporis*” (His power to preserve and to control the universe and all that is therein).”¹

Providence is listed as one of Philo’s five articles that are the chief tenants of Mosaism i.e. Judaism.² Maimonides in “Moreh,” part iii., has a lengthy exposition of providence.³ The Talmud includes reflection on the subject of providence,⁴ “Everything is in the control of God

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12402-providence> accessed, May 28, 2015

² “Philo enumerates five articles as embracing the chief tenets of Mosaism: (1) God is and rules; (2) God is one; (3) the world was created; (4) Creation is one; (5) God's providence rules Creation.”

³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12402-providence> accessed, May 28, 2015

⁴ (Ta'an. 2; Lev. R. xiv. 2-3). Serpents, lions, even governments, work harm only under God's decrees (Eccl. R. x. 11). Tan., Piqqude; Yalk. ii. 716). "B. H." i. 1; Pirke R. El. xxxii.).

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12402-providence> accessed, May 28, 2015

save the fear of God” (Ber. 33b; Meg. 25a; Niddah 16b). Jewish liturgical prayers frequently express reflection on the providence of God, particularly in relation to the existence, preservation and purpose of Israel in God’s design.⁵

Modern Jewish philosophers are deeply engaged with the theme of God’s providence. Abraham Heschel, among others, grapples with the issue, seeing polarity and paradox as the basis of God’s providential engagement with Israel and the created universe.

Even God’s relation to the world is characterized by the polarity of justice and mercy, providence and concealment, the promise of reward and the demand to serve Him for His sake. Taken abstractedly, all these terms seem to be mutually exclusive, yet in actual living they involve each other, the separation of the two is fatal to both.⁶

Commenting on the role of Torah, his statement “There is an objective coherence that holds all episodes together,” reflects his view of God’s ongoing activity and involvement (via Torah) with his creation.⁷

From his reading of tenach, Michael Wyschogrod understands the providence of God, his design and purposes, to be self-evident. He, therefore, evidences no need to examine these issues. Wyschogrod’s thought centers on the issues of God’s unfathomable, preferential love towards Israel and her irrevocable election.⁸

Divine Providence in Christian Thought

Christian thought throughout the centuries has consistently engaged with the subject of providence and God’s providential design. The idea of Divine Providence carries with it the corollary of providential design. This paper will use the terms more-or-less interchangeably. The term “providence” is first found in Genesis 22:14: “So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide (יהוה ירא).’” The Latin Vulgate translated it as *Deus providebit*. From this, the English word “providence,” based on the Latin verb *provideo* meaning “to provide for” or “to foresee”

⁵ See the Yozer Oz, Ahava Rabba, Ahavat Olam, the Rosh Hashanna liturgy, etc.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, Noonday edition 1976) p. 341

⁷ Ibid. p. 301

⁸ See Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (The Seabury Press, New York, 1983) pp. 58-70

began to be used. The theological doctrine of providence emerged out of and developed from biblical texts that indicate God's sovereign rule over all things.⁹

God's design and his resulting sovereignty over all things were affirmed by many of the early Christian theologians. Origen, in the third century spoke of “dispensations of Divine Providence.” Tertullian further distinguished between what God “permits” and what He “absolutely wills.” Augustine developed the doctrine along the lines of a providential view of history in his most celebrated work, *The City of God*. Aquinas also affirmed that God is the cause of everything except sin and evil, that He works out His purposes through man's will, and that nature and history both are obedient to God's plan and governance.¹⁰

Protestantism further developed the doctrine of divine providence. Luther stressed God's governance of the world; and the Reformers, Zwingli and Calvin, developed the doctrine more fully. Calvin (1509-1564) saw God's providence as both “general” and “special,” including direction of individual lives. (Prov. 16:1, 9; *Inst.* 1.16.4-6). The legacy of Calvin is an in depth exploration of the providence of God and is a key element in Reformed Protestant theology.¹¹

Contemporary Catholic theology also engages with the issue of divine providence. A recent paper from the International Theological Commission on Communion and Stewardship, entitled *Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, deals extensively with the issue in the context of the purpose of humanity and its relationship to God.

Here lies the profound meaning of the words of *Gaudium et Spes*: “Man is the only creature on earth that God willed for his own sake” (24). Created in God's image, human beings assume a place of responsible stewardship in the physical universe. Under the guidance of divine providence and acknowledging the sacred character of visible creation, the human race reshapes the natural order, and becomes an agent in the evolution of the universe itself. . . . In the providential design of creation, the triune God intended not only to make a place for human beings in the universe but

⁹ Ps. 104; 91; 77, Mt. 10:29-31, Eph. 1:9-12, Rom. 8:28-39, 2 Tim. 1:9, Ps. 22:8, Rev. 11:15, etc.

¹⁰ “. . . the causality of God, Who is the first agent, extends to all being, not only as to constituent principles of species, but also as to the individualizing principles....It necessarily follows that all things, inasmuch as they participate in existence, must likewise be subject to divine providence” (*Summa theologiae* I, 22, 2).

¹¹ <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=154> accessed, May 28, 2015

also, and ultimately, to make room for them in his own trinitarian life. Furthermore, operating as real, though secondary causes, human beings contribute to the reshaping and transformation of the universe.¹²

Orthodox theology has consistently engaged with the subject of God's providential design. It could even be said that Orthodox Christianity has a preoccupation with the matter of design; albeit their theology is not ordered along the same lines as the systematic theology of the West. Eastern Orthodoxy in all its forms is deeply grounded in an understanding of the inherent design and beauty of God, his creation and his purposes for humanity. From Maximus the Confessor¹³ in the sixth century to David Bentley Hart¹⁴ in the twenty-first century, the great minds of Orthodoxy have consistently focused on matters of God's providential design.

Russian Orthodox theologians have also written on the subject of Divine Providence. St. John Damascene (696-754) writes, "Providence, then, is the care that God takes over existing things. And again: Providence is the will of God through which all existing things receive their fitting issue."¹⁵ Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736) authored "*On Creation and Divine Providence*," and Alexander Men, when asked if he was optimistic about the future is quoted as having said, "I believe that Divine Providence will not allow us to perish, and call on all who have God's spark in their hearts not to yield to terror and panic."¹⁶ In a sermon on eternal life, Father Men

¹²http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html accessed May 27, 2015

¹³ "Regarding the ontological order of the cosmos, the order of providence takes precedence over the Dionysian hierarchy of being and illumination. Maximus' emphasis upon the Incarnation highlights the order of the *logo* – the divine *willings* or intentions for each created being united in the divine *Logos* – of providence, which directs creation toward its full expression as the likeness of God. The incarnate Word and the divine providence, which guides creation toward this *telos*, hold precedence in Maximus' manner of speaking of divine immanence in creation." <http://www.faith.org.uk/article/november-december-2008-maximus-on-the-incarnation-as-key-to-hierarchy-in-church-and-creation#en17> accessed June 5, 2015.

¹⁴ ". . . he (God) is himself the logical order of all reality, the ground both of the subjective rationality of mind and the objective reality of being, the transcendent and indwelling Reason of Wisdom by which mind and matter are both informed and in which both participate." David Bentley-Hart, in *Being, Consciousness and Bliss*, Harvard University Press, 2013, quoted in *Metaphysics and the Experience of God: The Meditations of David Bentley Hart*, by William Carrol, <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2014/01/11916/> accessed June 6, 2015

¹⁵ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf209.iii.iv.ii.xxix.html> accessed June 5, 2015

¹⁶ From *Conversations with Father Men, Selected and translated by Steve Griffin from "Kultura i dukhovnoe voskhozhdenie (Moscow 1992)"* http://www.alexandermen.com/From_Conversations_with_Father_Men accessed, June 5, 2015

comments, “We are born under God’s providence and live under the protection of His love (whether it is spent in sorrow or joy, illness or health).”¹⁷

Jewish followers of Yeshua as a legitimate category

Throughout church history, there has always been a remnant of ethnically Jewish followers of Yeshua, many of whom continued to express their Jewish spiritual and cultural identity following their faith commitment to Yeshua.¹⁸ They have been variously referred to as Conversos, Marranos, Jewish Christians, Christian Jews, Hebrew Christians and Messianic Jews; the language reflecting both historical context and theological bias. Focused study of Jewish followers of Yeshua shows little sign of disappearing. Rather, interest in the persistent phenomenon of Jews who follow Yeshua and retain their sense and practice of Jewish identity is increasing. The Helsinki Consultation is but one example of current interest in these matters. Today, Jews who follow Yeshua are to be found in every branch of Christianity and are increasingly found in specifically designated “Messianic” frameworks.

From early schism that separated Judaism from Christianity, to excommunication, vilification, persecution and death for many who refused to abandon Jewish practice following their faith in Yeshua, the ecclesia of the circumcision has not only survived, but has become a growing, vibrant faith community in today’s world. Their enduring presence in the mosaic of faithfulness to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Yeshua and Paul remains a conclusive argument for their existence and signals their purpose in God’s providential design. Many questions can and are being raised by the fact of the growing presence of such Jews who evidence commitment to Yeshua as well as to covenant faithfulness as members of the people of Israel. Contrary to the views of many, this does not present an irresolvable incongruity.

The identity of a Jew who follows Yeshua is complex. He is spiritually¹⁹ part of two communities. As ethnic Jews, many identify as members of *klal Israel* while simultaneously seeing their identity as members of the transcultural, transgenerational, multi-ethnic body of Messiah. Their spiritual heritage is rooted in the patriarchs, prophets and sages of Israel together with the early church fathers, martyrs, saints, and theologians of the Church.

¹⁷ http://www.alexandermen.com/Sermons_on_the_Gospel_Readings_Set_Three accessed June 5, 2015

¹⁸ See: *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oscar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, (Hendricson Publishers, Massachusetts, 2007)

¹⁹ This also has implications for social identity.

Although much of contemporary literature on the subject is written from the perspective of justifying the continuing existence of Jews in the church (Jewish followers of Yeshua), the issue is inverted in the scriptural writings. The question then was: how can non-Jews become members of the people of God, whereas today the question is: how can Jews be part of the body of Christ whilst retaining their identity as Jews. In reality, although one question is the inversion of the other, the underlying assumption is that one cannot simultaneously have two primary spiritual identities. The corollary that seems to automatically follow is – in order to be authentic, one must decisively choose one and reject the other.

A clear example of this mentality is found in a conversation with Fr. Alexander Men. His response to the question: *Don't you think that in becoming a Christian you have cut yourself off from your people* was:

Not at all. I consider my membership in God's chosen race an unmerited gift, a sign of additional responsibility before God. He called Israel to serve Him, and Israel's history is sacred history, and it continues today. If the majority of my fellow Jews have not accepted Christianity, that is just the next chapter in the drama which is unfolding between God and the world. It began in Bible times, and it is taking place among other peoples too, many of whom have partially left Christianity. I am happy that with my weak efforts I can serve the God of Israel and his Church. For me the Old and New Testaments are inseparable. In any case, that's an indisputable argument in Christian theology. . . I value and love the culture in which I was raised and which has given me so much, but I will not forget for a moment the responsibility and vocation laid upon me as a member of the Jewish race.²⁰

It is precisely to this dilemma that the New Testament addresses a response, albeit phrased in the language of mystery. Continuing to unfold the drama of God's providential design from creation, the New Testament unequivocally maintains the unity of Christ's body and God's design to reconcile the entire created world to himself.²¹ The fact of differentiation, beginning in Genesis 1:1 ultimately accedes to a reconciliation of all things in Messiah. This reuniting of creation includes time, space, humanity (gender and race), Israel and the nations. The polarity of corporeal existence submits to God's original intention to unite all things in himself in a dynamic, compound unity where particularity exists within the divine unity – much like the

²⁰ http://www.alexandermen.com/From_Conversations_with_Father_Men accessed June 8, 2015

²¹ Colossians 1:20

relationship within the Godhead itself. Further, God's own glory is manifested in the corporeality of incarnational solidarity with humanity (in this case Jewish humanity) as well as with the all of the created universe, including its destiny as revealed in his providential design. This points to the fact that the continuing existence of the Jewish people, and in particular Jews who follow Yeshua, is a sign of the eschatological event of the second coming when God will physically indwell the New Jerusalem²² as a consummation of his providential design begun at creation.

From creation, mankind, male and female, was created in the image and likeness of God. Further differentiation occurred with the allotment of the nations in Genesis 10:5-32, the creation²³ of Israel: the calling of Abraham and the covenants with the people of Israel. Whether the covenants remain in effect is a question for many, but the point here is that unity predated all differentiation and will once again be the state of all things at a future point when Yeshua hands everything to God and He "becomes all in all."²⁴

To grasp the continuity and therefore the legitimacy of Jewish followers of Yeshua, the primary document is the New Testament. The narratives of the book of Acts and the theological expositions of the meaning of incarnation in the epistles, Pauline and others, grapple with the meaning of the "mystery" of Jew and Gentile as one in Messiah.²⁵ This is portrayed as a matter of cosmic import.²⁶ The particularity of each is retained and united in the one body of Messiah. Distinctions do not cease to exist but are reconciled. That they continue is a witness and a sign of God's providential design for the world. It is also a reflection of God's love for the world, his commitment to diversity, and his affirmation of the uniqueness of individuality within an all-inclusive unity. Such a grand design discloses the relational core of God's interaction with the world he imagined and created.

Eucharist as witness and sign to the purpose of Jewish followers of Yeshua

To understand any faith community, an encounter with its liturgy, how it worships, will reveal as much if not more than the community's theological writings reveal. Liturgy celebrates

²² Revelation 21:23

²³ Isaiah 43:1,7,15 Israel is the only people who was created (ברא)

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:28

²⁵ Ephesians 2:16

²⁶ Colossians 1:15-20

remembrance and is a key for understanding the meaning of individual and communal faith. Historically, the central focus of Christian liturgy has been and continues to be celebration of the Eucharist/Communion. In addition, the prayer for unity in John 17 is the heart of Eastern Eucharistic tradition. The central focus of Jewish liturgy is the declaration that God is one.²⁷ However, Jewish liturgy also looks to the inclusion of all nations in God's ultimate design for mankind. The Aleinu prayer,²⁸ recited at the end of all synagogue services states:

For you spread out the heavens and established the earth; Your majestic abode is in the heavens above and Your mighty Presence is in the loftiest heights. You are our God and there is none else. In truth You are our Sovereign without compare, as is written in Your Torah: Know then this day and take it to heart that Adonai is surely God in the heavens above and on the earth below. There is none else. Thus it has been said, Adonai will be Sovereign over all the earth. On that day, Adonai will be one, and God's Name will be one.²⁹

Looking at both foci, the question arises – is there a point of convergence? Do these two liturgical traditions in some way have the same purpose? To respond to the questions, it is important to note the injunction to celebrate the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) was given to both Jewish and Gentile followers of Yeshua. The Jewish disciples received it directly from Yeshua as did Shaul/Paul, the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, who passed it on to the non-Jewish followers of Messiah. However, while given separately, the import of the act of remembrance was that Messiah's body and blood was equally given to and for both. The experience of those who first followed Yeshua was that very quickly the community ceased being entirely ethnically Jewish and experienced itself as a mixed community, made up of Jews and non-Jews.

As it is for twenty-first century Jewish followers of Yeshua, so it was for first century Jewish followers of Yeshua: the centrality of the *Shema* is unquestioned. Gentile followers of Yeshua had no such tradition and many were coming out of idolatrous traditions that venerated many gods. The New Testament record shows, given their diverse backgrounds, the many tensions between the two groups. Obedience to Yeshua's command to "remember Him" in the sharing of

²⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God the Lord is One."

²⁸ Traditionally originating from 70 AD.

²⁹ <http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/prayers-blessings/shabbat-morning-worship-services-aleinu#sthash.vIRw6Jm4.dpuf>

his body and blood was vital for the realization of communal life for the new mixed community of those who followed Yeshua.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and John in 1 John 1:3 speak of fellowship or communion with one another as followers of Yeshua. This points to the fact that the New Covenant Lord's Supper is based on the common bond of having accepted the Messiah Yeshua and his sacrifice. Accepting his shed blood as *kaparah* (atonement) and sharing the one bread bears witness to the mystery of the unity of all followers of Yeshua.³⁰

The Eucharist/Lord's Supper not only recalls God's deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, itself a prefiguring of God's deliverance in Christ of mankind from the bondage of sin; it also commemorates Yeshua's sacrificial passion, and is a proleptic celebration of the eschatological Messianic banquet.³¹ Eucharistic theology is multifaceted, being at the same time grounded in physicality and is deeply symbolic. With the exception of Mark Kinzer, few Messianic scholars have written deeply on the subject of Eucharist. As a torah observant Jew, Kinzer sees the sacramental celebration of the Eucharist by both Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Yeshua as vital for the wholeness of the ecclesia.

Eucharist is a re-presentation before God of the atoning death of Jesus as part of a prayer for the final coming of the Messianic Kingdom. Jesus' act of martyrdom – in Hebrew, *kiddush Hashem* ("sanctification of the Name") -- was the culmination of a life lived in accordance with the *mitzvot*, an act which represented the fullness of that life and the fullness of the *mitzvot*. . . . However, if the Eucharist is almost never offered with genealogical Israel in view, and if the *mitzvot* are almost never practiced by Jews within the *ekklesia*, something fundamental is lost from the Church's life.³²

Jews who follow Yeshua together with non-Jews who follow him are therefore a sign and a witness to the unity of God who is One and his people who are one. The synoptic Gospel

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:17 "Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread."

³¹ Isaiah 25:6, Luke 14:15 This theme is found in the Essene literature of the 2nd Temple period as well as in Jewish and Christian thought.

³² Mark S. Kinzer, "The Enduring Sacramental Character of Jewish Life in the Messiah A Messianic Jewish Perspective." Unpublished paper, (5-28-13)

narratives of Yeshua's final meal with his disciples have as their context his new commandment to love one another. Table fellowship has always been a sign of unity and love and has frequently been fraught with difficulty. Acts chronicles the growth and development of the new community of Yeshua followers in mixed groups. "Breaking of bread", eating together, was a main activity of these new Yeshua followers. The Didache (65-80 CE ?) records the prayers in use in the early communities of the predominantly non-Jewish followers of Yeshua. The Christian Eucharistic prayers themselves are related to the Jewish table prayers still in use.

Messianic scholar, Richard Harvey maintains, "Messianic Jews will wish to emphasize not only the spiritual prefiguration of the Passover in the teaching of Jesus on his death and resurrection, but the embedding of his life, teaching, death and resurrection in the ongoing story of Israel."³³ He then asks two cogent questions concerning the spiritualization of the Passover/Lord's Supper that appeals to images of bread, wine, and feeding on and receiving the word: how can continuity be maintained between biblical and modern Israel; and today, in what way can Passover/Communion "be seen as the redemptive action of the saving God for the Jewish people?"³⁴

These are issues of import for the Jewish follower of Yeshua as he seeks to remain connected to this Jewishness within the body of Messiah. Harvey sees an integral connection between the Eucharist and ". . . its theological significance in the ongoing purposes of God for His people Israel, and in the connection of the Passover with the eschatological fulfilment of the election of Israel and the ingathering of the nations."³⁵

Jews who follow Yeshua find their spiritual homes in a wide variety of liturgical settings, often struggling with issues of identity and faithfulness and as well as, in Father Men's words, the "responsibility and vocation laid upon me as a member of the Jewish race."³⁶ The Russian Orthodox Jewish scholar, Dominic Rubin has written on the image of blood in the Eucharist, seeing in the liturgy an essentially Jewish way of understanding the Eucharistic mystery. Rubin

³³ Richard Harvey, PhD, Preserving the Roots: A Messianic Jewish Response to "Eucharist, Communion – Roots in the tradition of Israel," Unpublished paper, (2011), used by permission.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ http://www.alexandermen.com/From_Conversations_with_Father_Men accessed June 8, 2015

captures the dilemma many Jewish followers of Yeshua experience: to be faithful to God in Christ while remaining faithful to their Jewishness.

Now the aspect of John that I chose to focus on was Christ's call to his followers to "drink my blood and eat my flesh." Often, this has been seen as a very unJewish command and so as an import from a Hellenistic mystery religion. But I began to wonder whether the command to drink blood may not in fact have an overlooked Jewish meaning. . . . John's high Christology - so high that some people have seen the Jewish Jesus being utterly eclipsed by a new Hellenic Christ - has real roots in an ancient Judaic mysticism going back to First Temple ideas of deification and divine-humanity, so that high Christology is in fact very Jewish. Perhaps then the central Eucharistic moment in John has a similar lineage - so that a Jewish Christian today can feel that a high Christology and Eucharistic theology are not a contradiction to his strivings to be faithful to his Judaism.³⁷

It is in the Eucharist that the Jewish follower of Yeshua demonstrates his dual faithfulness to God in Christ and also to his Jewishness. In this, the purpose of the Jewish follower of Yeshua becomes clear on a personal and a corporate level. To share in the Eucharist is to remember the sacrifice of Yeshua in the context of the Passover narrative of deliverance while simultaneously bearing witness to the mystery of the unity of Messiah's body. In the Eucharistic celebration, the partaker retains his distinctive identity as Jew or Gentile in that one body. It is a testimony to the wisdom and power of the Almighty that Jew and non-Jew can each serve the purposes of God by being faithful to their callings.

The shared body and blood are richly symbolic of the outworking of God's providential design for humanity and the cosmos. In the Eucharist, Jews and non-Jews are united by the body and blood of Messiah as a sign of the world to come in which all things are reconciled and God's creation design comes to consummation. In this eschatological reality, the purpose of Jewish followers of Yeshua finds its full expression as a sign and witness to the unfathomable wisdom of God.

³⁷ <http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/888630/24154825/1388968981820/Rubin+Eucharist+and+Torah+some+reflections+on+John+and+Messianic+Judaism.pdf?token=TztrbPcMyrUuB6c3SFChbNpJS7A%3D>
accessed June 9, 2015