

Messianic or Hebraic?

by Art Katz

The Messianic movement has too great an identification with Judaism, which is a man-made system that is under judgment, and we need to restore the true Hebraic reality to the church.

Scripture: Revelation 22:1

Topics: "Authentic Spirituality", "The Messianic Movement"

Description

Art Katz explores the Messianic movement, urging believers to seek a deeper, authentic spirituality that transcends cultural practices associated with Judaism. He critiques the tendency to adopt Jewish customs without understanding their origins and warns against the dangers of soulishness that can corrupt the river of Life flowing from God. Katz emphasizes the need for a genuine connection to the throne of God, advocating for a Hebraic reality that reflects true devotion and obedience to God rather than mere imitation of cultural practices. He calls for a purification of the church's understanding and approach to Jewish traditions, encouraging believers to seek the pure waters of Life that come from God alone.

Transcript

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A Critique of the Messianic Movement

There are large segments of the essentially Gentile church that are a little mystified by the Messianic movement. They do not know quite how to assess it, how it fits in, and how it relates to what they are about. This message is more of an exploratory word, and is not, by any means, a definitive or exhaustive statement. It is a word intended for all those who share a messianically-Jewish orientation, whether they are Jewish or Gentile believers, and I trust it will have a healthy influence for the church as a whole in the nations. Let us receive any caution that the Lord wants to give us in order to purify our hearts and understanding. We need springs of living waters in our midst, in our fellowships, and in our life together. We need to keep the source pure, that we ourselves might become life-giving, and not be stagnant or corrupt, and degenerate into something less than God's intention for His church.

And He showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

There is a necessary connection between the waters of Life and the throne of God. Throne implies the authority or lordship of God. We can veer away from that lordship in many ways, and become and live independent of God--even in things that have biblical elements and seem to honor the Jew and Israel. Bringing a note of revival to the church, even a note of excitement and enjoyment, or some play on Jewish culture in elements that we think need to be reintroduced to the altogether too Gentile Church, may well be removed from the throne of God and have its origin in us. If the Lord Himself has not been the author of that direction, and if it was therefore only coined out of our own thought and will, then we are going to be at a distance from the purity of His water. Something will flow, but it will not be life-bringing. It might even be excitement-bringing, but Life is something else, something ultimate, something urgently needed, and something we must not attempt to fabricate. Life must come from the throne, issuing out of God, who Himself is the source of that Life.

In chapter 7 of Revelation, we see verse after verse referring to the throne of God:

And they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying...(vs. 10-11).

For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life...(vs. 15-17a).

With this in mind, I want to give certain observations and thoughts that I have about the Messianic movement or Messianic Judaism in general. This movement, in my opinion, has too great an identification with Judaism itself. Being a former atheist and Marxist, I flinch at anything that ends in "ism," whether it is Marxism or Judaism. The ending "ism" denotes something that has its origin in man, whether it is Karl Marx, or the famous rabbis at Yavne in Israel in 90 A.D, a city not far from Tel Aviv, where present-day rabbinical Judaism was born. The Jews of that era had a dilemma: Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D, just as Jesus prophesied. Not a stone of the temple was left standing. The temple was the dwelling place of God, and central to the whole religious system that God had ordained in Scripture itself, where daily sacrifices were to be performed--even the annual Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement] of God. How could God allow that temple to be destroyed?

If there was no prospect at all for sacrifice, how then could there be atonement with God? The altar was gone, the building was gone, the priests themselves were scattered, and therefore could not offer the required altar sacrifices. Even the records of priestly lineage were consumed in the fires of 70 A.D. Untold numbers of Jews died standing on the roof of the temple, thinking that this was the safest possible spot. Was it not much more than human presumption? Ought that to not sober us Jews--even to this day? Can we bring ourselves to consider that the sins of Israel were so horrendous, and had been so long in continuance, that God was not holding back a judgment of such severity? Apart from the Nazi Holocaust, there has not been a greater trauma of devastation in Jewish history than the destruction of the temple.

How then was Jewish life to continue without a temple? In the city of Yavne, a particular rabbi and his colleagues devised what we know as present-day Judaism, better called rabbinical Judaism, rather than biblical Judaism. In the absence of the temple, the synagogue, though existing in the time of Jesus, came into the fore, of which the rabbis were the prime movers and authorities. This then became the prevalent institution of Jewish life throughout the world, and practices had to be innovated so there could be some coherent program by which Jewish life could be continued, the most tragic of which is what we call today Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The rabbis concluded that a day of fasting, synagogue attendance and prayer, and mitzvot [good deeds] would be an acceptable substitute.

My own suspicion is that God never gave His approval to that pitiful and inadequate substitute for the biblical atonement, which was effected once and for all by the Lamb of God in the shedding of His own blood. But that pharisaic dimension, which despised Jesus, and was threatened by Him, conceived of the system that is today called Judaism. Through the ages, Jews have not known anything else, and assume that this is the normative and definitive way of God. But I am saying that Judaism is the way of man, and especially man under judgment.

In synagogue practice, a yarmulke, or kippah, was adopted. The word is related to Yom Kippur [Day of Atonement or Covering]. Men wear the kippah because they know that they cannot stand naked before God. If they have not received the true Yom Kippur of God in Messiah's blood, then the wearing of the kippah is an unconscious reflex action that recognizes it has no authentic covering for sin! At the Western Wall in Jerusalem, which was better known throughout all the centuries as the Wailing Wall, you can today find pious Jews standing by it, praying and wailing. This wall is the last remnant of what remains of the earlier temple that was a glory to Israel, where atoning sacrifice had been performed. There was a high priest who could go in once in the year with the blood of an unblemished animal, having laid hands upon the goat, the scapegoat, and made sacrifice for himself and for the nation for their sins.

In the absence of those biblical institutions, rabbis had to develop a system to regulate Jewish life. Present-day Judaism, its practice and life, the whole corpus of Talmudic commentary, and the remarkable Halachic development of Law, are the result of that system. It is one thing for Jews to wear a kippah, but for believers to wear it, who have received the atonement of the Lamb, is something that needs to be questioned. In other words, it is too much of a contradiction to the once-and-for-all sacrificial atonement of the Lamb of God.

Do we realize how much the present synagogue phenomenon has come into Jewish life through judgment? There is always a danger when we are motivated to imitate a people whose practices are themselves under judgment. And if we touch it, we need to touch it with caution, because accessories like the kippah (yarmulke) and the tallith (prayer shawl) are not little harmless objects; they carry a certain spirit influence. And if you are naïve about this, and want so much to derive some benefit from these practices, then something will affect your spirit. The river of Life that flows from the throne will become corrupted, and if you carry it on long enough, and unthinkingly, our actions may actually impede and stop the river of Life altogether! In the last analysis, whether it is rabbinical or messianic Judaism, it is a culture of a kind that I would consider soulish; very attractive, very beguiling, very moving, which is exactly the character of anything that is soulish. There is only one problem with soulishness--it is in direct opposition with the Spirit.

I am a little concerned that a number of my fellow believers, Jewish and otherwise, are willing and anxious to be called "rabbi," the justification being that they are teachers. Rabbi does in fact mean teacher, but

unbelieving Jews see our taking of this title as fraudulent, phony, and play-acting; they look with contempt at our wearing their garb, or adopting other of their practices. In most cases, it evokes their disdain, not their admiration or emulation.

How then are we to witness to Jews if we are not wearing or bearing an external and overt witness that they can see and identify with? The answer is a deeper and more authentic spirituality of a Hebraic kind. "Jewish" is cultural, and a culture of exile and dispersal, but Hebraic is something out of the nature and essence of men like King David, the sweet singer of Israel, the psalmist of God. He drew from the spring of the pure waters of Life. God wants us to come into an authentic mode of being that is older than Judaism, older than Jewishness; it goes back to a beginning that is Abrahamic in its obedience and Davidic in its devotion. It is a posture and a place where the sense of very God Himself is found. It is Hebraic in that it mediates the divine nature and communicates God as He is. It is not a cultural phenomenon at all, but a spiritual reality that cannot be imitated, or practiced by wearing certain outward garb, or by having all the nomenclature of Judaism. It is deeper and much more real--it is the nature of God Himself.

In the New Testament, it is interesting to read how Jesus conducted Himself. He did not violate the practices of His people, but I do not get the sense that what he was depicting was "Jewish," but rather another orientation altogether, which I would call heavenly. And this ought to be our model. He was the Son of God, the High Priest and the Sacrifice, who even violated the Shabbat to make a greater point. The dancing, the music, the prayer shawls, and the yarmulkes are wonderful, and we enjoy them. But I am wondering if these soulish practices, this imitation of what we think constitutes Jewishness, actually inhibit the authentic Hebraic thing. Now, I love the Shabbat and the biblical feast days, and I do not think they ought to be the unique possession of Messianic congregations. They are the inheritance of all the saints, and should come into all the church. But instead of developing a movement that is unique and separate to the church, I am suggesting the Messianic movement should consider dissolving itself, and bring their influence and emphasis into the church at large--but in a Hebraic reality. To cease as a movement may require a sacrifice on our part, but I have to confess that I am not too happy with movements of any kind, nor do I see them in Scripture.

The true Hebraic reality needs to be restored to the church, for the church itself has become a culture of a Gentile kind, rightly shrinking from anything that can be considered "Jewish." But they need to see something that is incontestably biblical, bearing the aura of God's presence and Spirit, not in the kind of soulish excitement that we ourselves can generate, but that which comes from the river of Life. Only that river can purify the corrupt stream, and bring fruit to the trees by the riverside, making them fruitful.

Jesus said, "Learn of Me." Though He was careful to observe the things that were the custom, culture and tradition of His people, there was something so transcendent about Him. He was respectful, but He was not bound or limited by His environment. He brought a reality, a heavenly dimension into the earthly place, deeper than what can be called Jewish. It was a reality nurtured by being under the wings of the Almighty, in the secret place, in communion with the Father, requiring a daily devotion. I am recommending another direction where the waters of Life are to be found, near the throne of heaven, to those who are related to the throne, and to the authority of the Lord.

Many of us live without even consulting Him! We take our note from what others do, and imitate that--never asking what pleases Him. For what is a true Shabbat if we don't inquire? We are told to "cease from our own pleasure, and doing our own thing, and speaking our own words." What is His pleasure? What is "His thing" on any particular Shabbat? We can only know it in one place and in one way--by our

proximity to the throne and by seeking His face: "Lord, what is Your good pleasure on this day?" And what may be His pleasure on this day will not necessarily be so on the next Shabbat. If we will not ask, we will find ourselves institutionalizing it, and make of it a religious practice, rather than the expression of a vital, intimate relationship with God.

Our Jewish people are dying, both in time and for all eternity, and they need a witness of an ultimate kind that cuts through the prejudice of generations and the instinctive rejection to the name of Jesus [Yeshua]. For Jews, the name of Jesus brings up painful, historic memories of what we have suffered at the hands of Gentiles, whom we automatically assume to be "Christians." As we approach the end of the Age, and are at the threshold of a new time of trial for Jews worldwide, what kind of a witness will it take to bring them through the veil of prejudice and misunderstanding to the recognition of our faith, the faith of Abraham? It will not be by some deviant alternative, or an attractive cultural approximation, but the river of Life Himself, flowing through us, because we have not allowed it to be corrupted. It is a Life that issues from the throne, where we submit every question to God, even our present practices, even those we so much enjoy and think to be God-honoring. Have we really submitted them to Him? How jealous are we for the pure water of God, the waters of Life, and not allow it to be corrupted in any way, or defiled, or mixed? Let us allow the river to retain its purity.

Prayer:

Lord, we love our Jewish people. Guard us from any condescending or superior attitude. Our hearts go out to them; they are doing the best they can in what they know. These are the traditions that have come to them, that have kept them through the ages, through much opposition and persecution; but it is not the pure thing. It is tradition fashioned by well-meaning men, rabbis, having to devise an answer to the predicament of a destroyed temple and priesthood that would give coherence to Jewish life under rabbinical authority. Lord, are we to model ourselves after that? Or is there another model? Something pure, something deeper, something holier that we are prevented from inquiring or even seeking, because we are so enamored, captivated and impressed with the cultural thing? And we think that that represents what is identifiably Jewish!

Show us what is authentically Hebraic, authentically Davidic--the pure stream that has gone through the patriarchs, the prophets and the psalmists of old. Let us find our way into those waters, which we have woefully neglected. Create a thirst in us for the pure waters of Life. And let not our thirst be quenched by any other substitute, but be zealously insistent for what is pure and holy. This jealous insistence is itself the heart of what is Hebraic, and we don't have to be more "Jewish" to find it. It's for all the people of God. Bless this word, Lord, clumsy and exploratory as it was. We want to be the serious people of God in an urgent hour, when calamity shall again come upon the Jewish people worldwide. Perfect this reality in us, which will require suffering and the knowledge of You in the fellowship of Your sufferings. Spare us from the easy, the convenient, and the things that we can imitate or put on. Let something come into us because we are drinking of the pure waters of Life and will not consider any other. Give us answer, Lord, help us in the way. And we thank and give You praise, in Jesus' name. Amen.

From a transcribed and edited message spoken in a messianic congregation - Oct. 2002

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