

Are the Scriptures Alone our Sure Foundation or Do We Need Something More?

A Growing Crisis in the Messianic Movement

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Perhaps, after reading the title of this essay, you're asking yourself, "Is there really a crisis within the Messianic movement over the sufficiency of the Scriptures?" Yes, there is, and I hope to alert you to it in this essay. Remember that in the March Newsletter, I wrote about this issue because I was alarmed when I read how Mark Kinzer, a major voice in the UMJC, openly denies the sufficiency of Scripture as the means by which we may know God and obey His commandments.¹ He boldly affirms that in addition to the Scriptures, we must also rely upon the cumulative teachings of the Rabbis (the Oral Torah) as a necessary partner to the Scriptures. As the current President of the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute, Kinzer's position on the insufficiency of the Bible will doubtlessly be urged upon the students who attend his Institute.

But there is something even more subtle that undermines the sufficiency of Scripture, and this relates to the method some are embracing for interpreting the Bible, or what we call hermeneutics. I have been concerned as I have watched recent doctrinal shifts within the teachings of FFOZ. Setting aside for now their new position on the relationship of Gentiles to the Torah, their recent republication of Paul Philip Levertoff's *Love and the Messianic Age* and (even more) their *Commentary and Study Guide* on Levertoff's book, makes a clear statement about their willingness to embrace a kabbalistic hermeneutic as a valid method for interpreting Scripture. If you're wondering why I think this signals a crisis, please read on.

Biblical hermeneutics, the principles by which we interpret the Scriptures, is foundational to every aspect of our faith. If you don't believe me, just consider for a moment how the early emerging Christian Church began to dismiss the Torah as irrelevant. Using an allegorical hermeneutic, they quickly redefined many of the commandments in the Torah by allegorizing them as "inward" or "spiritual." For instance, they taught that God's distinctions between clean and unclean foods had nothing to do with the food a person ate. Rather, the commandments about food were to be understood allegorically as a prohibition against associating with ungodly people.² Likewise, they allegorized the Sabbath commandment so that it related only to inner, "spiritual" rest and had nothing to do with setting the seventh day of the week apart from the other six days of work.³ In short, the hermeneutic accepted by the early Church is the bedrock upon which all manner of anti-Torah theology (including replacement theology) is based. And this hermeneutic remains well entrenched in modern Christendom.

In our own era, Dispensationalism (another hermeneutical method) has given countless Chris-

¹ This does not mean that Kinzer denies the trustworthiness of Scripture. It means that he aligns himself with a basic tenet of rabbinic Judaism, that the Written Torah by itself is incomplete because apart from the Oral Torah, it cannot be fully understood or implemented.

² E.g., Epistle of Barnabas, 10:1-9.

³ E.g., Epistle of Barnabas, 15:1-9.

tians a clear conscience to disregard the authority of a great deal of Scripture by teaching that certain parts of the Bible, such as the Torah, “are not for our dispensation.” Many people who have accepted this way of interpreting the Bible are confident that God has “suspended” or even “abolished” the very commandments that the Scriptures clearly teach are eternal.⁴ I think you can see that one’s hermeneutic is important—very important, because it forms the basis for how one interprets and applies the very word of God. A faulty hermeneutic may actually nullify the authority of the Scriptures.

God’s Thoughts in Human Language

For many of us, the task of interpreting the Scriptures is more involved than interpreting other ancient literatures because we accept the idea, claimed by the Scriptures themselves, that the Bible is the product of dual authorship. That is, the text of the Scriptures embodies the thoughts of God transmitted through the agency of human authors, utilizing human language. One of the fundamental questions of biblical hermeneutics, therefore, is this: when God revealed His thoughts to the human author through the agency of the Spirit via inspiration and revelation, did the human author sufficiently understand the divine meaning? And if so, did the human author properly and fully convey that meaning by the words he chose to write? Or did the meaning of the Divine Author at times go beyond what the human author understood and wrote? In short, are the thoughts of God as revealed in the Scriptures accurately conveyed by the human author’s words or should we seek a “deeper, hidden” meaning? Is this supposed “deeper, hidden meaning” missed if one simply interprets the human author’s words literally, that is, in their historical, grammatical context? In Christian theology, the idea that there exists a “deeper sense” than the words themselves are able to convey is known by the Latin term *sensus plenior*, the “fuller sense.” Conversely, the belief that the words interpreted within an historical, grammatical framework accurately convey the author’s intention, is known as *sensus literalis*, the “literal sense.”

The major problem with holding that there is a “deeper sense” is that there are no objective criteria to determine what is, and what is not, a legitimate “deeper sense.” The allegorical way of interpreting the Scriptures leaves this “deeper sense” to the imagination of the interpreter. Even more nebulous is the notion that the “deeper sense” is discovered through mystical, religious experience. In the end, finding a “deeper sense” which lies beyond the clear meaning of the text, allows the interpreter to add whatever meaning he or she imagines. And since there are no objective means by which the “deeper sense” can be judged as right or wrong, utilizing such a hermeneutic effectively undermines the authority of the Scriptures.

Kabbalistic or Mystical Hermeneutics

A quote from the Forward of the recently published *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide*

⁴ For instance, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, in his study entitled “The Law of Moses and the Law of Christ,” writes: “The clear-cut teaching of the New Testament is that the Law of Moses has been rendered inoperative with the death of Messiah; in other words, the Law in its totality no longer has authority over any individual.” (accessed at <http://www.ariel.org>).

and Commentary (FFOZ, 2009) will demonstrate how FFOZ has now come to accept a mystical hermeneutic as valid for the study of the Scriptures:

Our writers have taken the time to explain Levertoff's concepts and to bring additional insights from the world of Jewish literature. More than that, they drew out intriguing parallels from the Gospels and Epistles. The final result is more than a simply commentary on another book; it is a plunge into the deepest waters of New Testament mysticism and apostolic theosophy. The short, bite-sized commentaries will also serve as a type of daily devotional. I hope you will find the commentary on *Love and the Messianic Age* as inspiring and revolutionary as I have.⁵

I am particularly struck by the phrase “a plunge into the deepest waters of New Testament mysticism and apostolic theosophy.” In short, “theosophy” is a philosophical approach to divine knowledge based upon mystical experience and esoteric texts. The *Oxford American Dictionary* gives this definition of “theosophy” – “Any number of philosophies maintaining that a knowledge of God may be achieved through spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, or special individual relations.”⁶ The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* gives this further explanation:

The Greek term θεοσοφία [*theosophia*], denoting knowledge of Divine things, is found in magical papyri and was taken up by the Neoplatonists; it was brought into Latin by John Scottus Erigena. In the 17th cent. it was revived in both Latin and vernacular forms to denote the kind of speculation, based on intuitive knowledge, which is found in the Jewish Kabbala. In modern times it has been used of the supposed hidden essence of all religions; it is believed to be an empirical philosophy handed down by wise men of all cultures and religious traditions.⁷

The idea that there exists a knowledge and experience of God that is obtainable only through mystical experience, encouraged Jewish and Christian scholars of the middle ages to look for a mystical way to interpret the Bible, that is, to find something in the realm of divine knowledge that existed “below” or “beyond” the text of Scripture itself. In medieval Kabbalistic hermeneutics, this desire to move from the literal sense to a mystical, deeper meaning developed into the so-called “Pardes” paradigm, in which the Hebrew word *Pardes* (originally a Persian word), meaning “garden” and especially the “heavenly garden” or “Paradise,” was used as an acronym for four levels of meaning: P = *pashat*, i.e., the “plain or literal sense”; R = *remez*, “hint,” i.e., a suggestion indicated by the text that hints at further meaning; D = *d'rash*, “interpretation,” i.e., an application of the text (often for homiletical purposes); and S = *sod*, “secret,” i.e., the hidden or esoteric meaning that one may derive from the text through mystical or other means.⁸ The goal of the Kabbalists and those who followed them was to move beyond the “plain sense” (*pashat*), which was considered the “entry level” of understanding, to the “hidden” or “secret” meaning of the text (the *Sod*), the meaning apprehended by those who were spiritually mature. Medieval rabbinic commentaries are well known for their penchant to extol the “secrets” of the Tanach

⁵ *Love and the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* (FFOZ, 2009), p. 9.

⁶ *Oxford American Dictionary*, electronic edition.

⁷ “Theosophy” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸ Moses de Leon is given credit for constructing the *PaRDeS* scheme of hermeneutics which flourished among the kabbalists of the Middle Ages, cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10.622–23.

which escape the uninitiated reader. Of course, not all of the rabbinic commentators adopted this multi-level hermeneutic, but many did. The *Zohar*, “the grand storehouse of Kabbalism,”⁹ is the most celebrated of the esoteric rabbinic works that purports to expound the mystical, hidden meanings of the Torah, and with it, the true manner by which one can know God (i.e., “see God”) through mystical experiences.

There are many spiritual dangers connected with Kabbalah, including its obvious connection to the occult and its utter denial of the immanence of God, referring to Him rather as the *Ein Sof*.¹⁰ But an equally dangerous aspect of Kabbalah, yet one that is far more subtle, is that it seeks to establish a mystical hermeneutic that all but disregards the clear meaning of the biblical text itself. In short, the Kabbalah and its related mysticism teaches that one simply cannot be satisfied with the plain meaning of Scripture. If one is to become “mature” in the wisdom of the Torah—if one is to understand its deeper, more sophisticated message, if one is to draw as close as possible to God, then one must utilize a mystical hermeneutic, for only in such a way can the Scriptures offer its true, mysterious revelation.

Clearly, there is a mystical aspect to our faith, that is, a non-physical reality that cannot be ascertained through empirical investigation. When Paul writes, for instance, that “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16), he is describing a relationship between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the believer that is of a mystical nature. But of utmost importance is this: such a mystical relationship with God through His Spirit is not based upon some mystical experience or esoteric writings, but upon the word of God. In other words, we know and believe that the inner urgings of the Spirit are indeed valid because the Scriptures have taught us that it is so: the Spirit “testifies with our spirit.” What is more, we judge our experience by what the word says, not *visa versa*, because we believe that the Spirit will always lead us in accordance with the very Scriptures He inspired. Thus, the Scriptures form our sole basis for judging whether our spiritual experiences are genuine or not. This is radically different than kabbalistic mysticism, which extols the pathway of mystical experience as superior to the Scriptures in terms of knowing God. Given this perspective, it is easy to see why Kabbalists would seek to interpret the Bible to coincide with their mystical experiences rather than critiquing their “spiritual ecstasies” against the standard of the Scriptures. After all, according to the Kabbalists, one comes to know God best through the mystery of ecstatic, mystical episodes with the Divine. And if one comes to know God best through such mysticism, then it is obvious that one’s experience should be the means of finding meaning in the biblical text, not *visa versa*.

One would naturally think that Messianic Judaism would have no time nor need to dabble in such mystical musings which disregard the clear and obvious meaning of the biblical text. Do we really think that some esoteric “deeper meaning” of God’s divine revelation may be derived from rearranging the letters of words, reading words backwards, linking words and phrases based upon numerical equiva-

⁹ Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development and Literature* (Longmans, Green, & Co., 1863), p. 85.

¹⁰ In Kabbalistic teaching, the true divine Being is referred to as *Ein Sof*, “there is no end,” or “the boundless one.” “In this boundlessness, or as the *Ein Soph*, he cannot be comprehended by the intellect, nor described in words, for there is nothing which can grasp and depict him to us, and as such he is, in a certain sense, not existent (*ein*), because, as far as our minds are concerned, that which is perfectly incomprehensible does not exist.” (from Ginsburg, *Kabbalah*, Op. cit., p. 88).

lences (*Gematria*), and a host of other novel interpretive inventions?

It is this very question that causes one to wonder why FFOZ would expend such energy and expense to republish Paul Philip Levertoff's *Love and the Messianic Age*¹¹ paired with an extensive *Commentary and Study Guide*. In this short book, Levertoff spends the majority of his time (pages 31–72) describing the mystical approach to God as taught in Hasidic, Kabbalistic, mystical texts. He then concludes the book with an eight page Epilogue entitled “Love in the Fourth Gospel.” It is clearly Levertoff's purpose in this short book to demonstrate how the mystical approach of Kabbalah is well suited to properly interpret the Scriptures as well to provide a deeper spiritual experience for believers in Yeshua. Indeed, the upshot of the book is to show that the manner in which one comes to know God in a deep, personal way is the same for the follower of Yeshua and Hasid alike. That in itself should raise additional questions.

According to Levertoff, this path to knowing God in a deep, personal way, is one of mystical rather than rational knowledge. Such mystical knowledge is based primarily upon one's personal, subjective experience with God rather than upon objective, propositional truth. Indeed, objective knowledge must be made subservient to the mystical knowledge gained through spiritual experience.¹² In other words, the primary question Levertoff asks at the beginning of *Love and the Messianic Age* is this: where is final authority to be found—in the objective, rational words of Scripture or in the subjective, mystical, and irrational religious experience? Should I judge my experience by the words of Scripture, or should I interpret the words of Scripture by my subjective religious experience? Quite obviously, Levertoff tells us that while both rational and irrational knowledge are important, it is the irrational or mystical side of our faith that is most important, because it is only in this realm that one truly knows God as He intends to be known.

It is no wonder, then, that a person with this perspective comes to the text of the Bible looking for more than the plain meaning of the words, for they are not satisfied with the “surface” or rational knowledge that the author's intended meaning provides. The mystic wants to find a deeper, hidden meaning that corresponds to his expectations of a mystical, irrational experience with God. How does he do this? He employs innovative and what can only be described as bizarre contrivances to find in the text that for which he is seeking. In short, the mystic often resorts to *eisegesis* (putting meaning *into* the text) rather than *exegesis* (deriving meaning *from* the text) when he studies the Bible.

Ginsburg, in his description of Kabbalistic methods of biblical interpretation,¹³ shows a number of commonly used methods by which the mystic finds the “deeper meaning” in the text of Scripture. These include the use of *Gematria*, which links words or phrases with the same numerical value together as bearing a similar meaning or explicating a single truth. Thus, for instance, the phrase “Behold, three men were standing by him” in Gen 18:2 has the same numerical value as the phrase “these are Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael,” from which it is derived that the three visitors at Abraham's tent were actually

¹¹ The original publication was made in London in 1923. Page numbers referencing *Love and the Messianic Age* (hereafter *L&MA*) are from the recent edition republished by FFOZ.

¹² *L&MA*, pp. 31–2 [pp. 1–2 in the original 1913 edition]. I give the page numbers of the original edition because the edition of FFOZ has made what appears to me some significant edits that obscure Levertoff's original teaching on this point.

¹³ Christian Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development, and Literature*, pp. 131–144.

the three angelic beings prominent in rabbinic literature. That, of course, is impossible, since one of them is clearly noted to be *Adonai* (Y-H-V-H, Gen 18:1, 3,¹⁴ 22¹⁵). But by using *Gematria*, the mystic feels empowered to import into the text one's own perspective and theology.

Another method of interpretation employed by the mystics is to take the letters of a word as an acronym for a phrase, letting each letter stand for the first letter of each word in the desired phrase. For instance, the opening word of the Torah, *bereshit* ("In the beginning"), consisting of the consonants *bet, resh, aleph, sheen, yod*, and *tav* is interpreted as containing the meaning "in the beginning God saw that Israel would accept the Torah."¹⁶ This canon of interpretation is called *notarikon*,¹⁷ from the Latin *notarius*, "shorthand writer," which referred to Roman scribes who abbreviated and used single letters to signify whole words.

Yet another canon of interpretation used by the Kabbalists is to take the first and last letters of words and use them to form new words and phrases. An example of this is the phrase from Deuteronomy 30:12, "who will go up for us to heaven?," from which is derived the word *milah* ("circumcision") and the divine Name (Y-H-V-H) and interpreted to mean the God ordained circumcision as the way to heaven.¹⁸

Other methods include joining two words in the same verse to make one new word, or transposing letters in a word or phrase to make new words, or even taking words as hidden codes to be decoded by "bending the Hebrew alphabet in half" and substituting corresponding letters. Ginsburg goes on to show that such methods should be entirely discounted "by every one who has any regard for the laws of language."¹⁹ So were the Kabbalists unschooled or inept in the Hebrew of the Tanach? No, of course not. They were often very astute in languages, and were well versed in the Tanach itself. So what would have been their motivation to wrest the text of the Scripture from its clear and obvious meaning? It was their starting presupposition, that the objective truth of Scripture could not be understood except through mystical, irrational experiences. They sought to bend the inspired text to accommodate their mysticism.

Daniel Lancaster, in his short video presentation entitled "Levertoff – Mysticism and the Gospels,"²⁰ makes a very interesting statement about the *Zohar*, the primary text of the Kabbalists. He states, in regard to FFOZ's position on the *Zohar*, that "we did not regard the *Zohar* as authentic or reli-

¹⁴ The Hebrew has אֲדֹנָי, *Adonai*, with *gametz* as the final vowel, which the Masoretes clearly identify as יהוה. The normal plural form of אֲדֹנָי, *adon*, "Master, lord" is always spelled with *patach* as the final vowel. See the Masoretic note at Gen 18:3.

¹⁵ The Masoretes note that the final phrase of v. 22 is one of the 18 *Tikkunei Sopherim*, changing the order of the words to "and Abraham remained standing before *Adonai*," from the original "And *Adonai* remained standing before Abraham," since "to stand before" denotes the position of an inferior to a superior, and they felt that original order was demeaning to the Ineffable One. This, in itself, shows that the ancient scribes understood that one of the three men who came to Abraham's tent was *Adonai*.

¹⁶ בראשית = בראשית ראה אלהים שיקבלו ישראל תורה

¹⁷ נֹטָרִיקוֹן, see Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, p. 886.

¹⁸ מי יעלה לנו השמימה = מילה + יהוה. The word מילה, "circumcision" (in Mishnaic Hebrew) is formed from the first letter of each word, and the divine Name, יהוה, is formed from the last letter in each word. Thus, the answer to the phrase "who will go up for us to heaven?" is "Adonai (ordained) circumcision" as the way to heaven.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁰ Available at: http://ffoz.org/blogs/2009/05/levertoff_-_mysticism_and_the.html

able, but simply used it as a source to understand the Orthodox Jewish perspective.” If, in fact, the *Zohar* is neither authentic nor reliable, one must question why FFOZ would go to such great lengths to republish Levertoff’s works when it is quite clear that he did consider the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic literature to be of great value, especially in helping to understand the message of the Apostles in the Apostolic Writings. In fact, when one reads the Commentary on *Love and the Messianic Age* just now published by FFOZ, it is clear that the purpose for the Commentary is not to help the reader understand Hasidic Judaism, but rather to offer a gateway for the readers into “the deepest waters of New Testament mysticism and apostolic theosophy.”²¹

So why would FFOZ republish a book that relies so heavily upon Kabbalistic works,²² including the *Zohar*, that they admit is neither authentic or reliable? At least part of the answer to this question, it seems to me, is their heartfelt desire to draw closer to God in a genuine, mystical experience and to lead others to a similar experiential, personally fulfilling spiritual walk with the Almighty.

Indeed, Levertoff does a splendid job of expressing the Hasidic longing to experience God in true fear and love for Him. It is this aspect of personal relationship with the Divine that makes Hasidic mysticism so appealing. The inexpressible desire to know God and be known by Him seems often to be best explained by the esoteric thoughts and mystical experiences of the Kabbalists. Moreover, Levertoff’s comments on Love as the central theme of the Gospel of John are sometimes profound and spiritually challenging. And this is why it is so easy to be enamored by the lofty words and deep meditations of the mystics, and thus to be persuaded that the mystical hermeneutic they employ, with its ability to unlock otherwise “hidden” meanings in the biblical texts, is valid and even preferable.

But such a hermeneutic is not only invalid, it is the very kind of thing that ultimately undermines the clear and meaningful message of the Scriptures. Rather than receiving the Scriptures as “incarnate” in the “flesh” of human language²³ and therefore understandable by the normal conventions of human language, the mystical hermeneutic of the Kabbalists often wrests the authorial intent from the inspired text and molds it to conform to a preconceived theology. Rather than submitting to the word of God as given in its historical and grammatical setting, a mystical hermeneutic gives the interpreter license to be the author and to ascribe his own meaning to the text.

Some might counter by claiming that the Apostles themselves engaged in a kind of “mystical hermeneutic,” but this is unwarranted because more often than not, such allegations confuse “meaning” with “significance.”²⁴ Aaron Eby²⁵ suggests that Paul’s use of “mystery” in Eph 5:32 indicates that he is

²¹ *Love & the Messianic Age: Study Guide and Commentary* (FFOZ, 2009), p. 9.

²² The various mystical texts that Levertoff often cites, such as *Likkutei Torah*, *Torah Or*, *Tanya*, are heavily dependent upon the *Zohar* itself. He references the *Zohar* itself a twelve times.

²³ Even as Yeshua Himself is the “Word” incarnate in common human flesh.

²⁴ See Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Zondervan, 1994), pp. 34–45.

²⁵ This is written in a blog accessible at: http://ffoz.org/blogs/2007/02/benefits_of_the_synagogue_litu.html. Just recently (June 23, 2009), another FFOZ blog entry entitled “Mysticism and the Messianic Faith” makes the bold statement that Paul departs from the plain meaning of the text when he quotes the Tanach. The upshot of this is apparently to show that if Paul “departs from the plain meaning of the text,” we have the right to do the same. But apparently the authors of this blog are unaware of the fact that a significant number of evangelical scholars would strongly disagree with bold assessment that Paul disregards the plain meaning of the text when he quotes the Tanach. Walter Kaiser, for instance, has

applying a mystical, almost Kabbalistic hermeneutic when he quotes Gen 2:24.

for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Messiah also does the church, 30 because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Messiah and the church. (Eph 5:29–32)

Far from using some mystical hermeneutic in which the original intent of the author is entirely glossed over or even changed, Paul applies to Gen 2:24 precisely its meaning in its original context. The statement of Moses in Gen 2:24 interrupts the narrative flow to emphasize a theological statement that brings together a number of themes presented in the creation narrative. Central to the creation of mankind is the statement in Gen 1:26 that God created mankind in His image, but the statement is in the plural: “Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness....” Moses’ statement regarding male and female becoming *one* in the covenant of marriage is therefore a further explanation of how mankind bears the image of God. Like God, Who reveals Himself as plural yet one, so mankind, consisting of male and female, is created with the ability to one.

When in Ephesians Paul gives an exhortation to husbands in regard to their wives, he does so in the context of viewing marriage as a divine illustration of the relationship of Yeshua to His bride. The fact that God’s covenant relationship with Israel is clearly spoken of in the Tanach by the metaphor of marriage forms the background for Paul’s assertion. Husbands are to love their wives in the same way that Yeshua loves His assembly (*ekklesia*). When Paul calls this a mystery, he is not resorting to some mystical hermeneutic, for a mystical hermeneutic seeks to invest the text with something more than what the author states. Paul recognizes that Moses, in Gen 2:24, is linking the oneness of man and wife with the oneness of God, both of which are in the context of plurality, and which are therefore connected by the fact that mankind is created in God’s image. Paul therefore reads Moses literally—he does not apply some mystical hermeneutic to inject a meaning foreign to Moses’ words. He simply emphasizes the mystery of God’s oneness which underlies and is foundational to the oneness in marriage. Paul gives Moses’ words their original meaning and applies them to a proper theological significance. He is employing a grammatical, historical hermeneutic when he reads Moses, not a mystical one.

Likewise, the notion that the use of a cipher in the biblical texts warrants a mystical hermeneutic is a gross misunderstanding of hermeneutics in the first place. Once again, the mystical hermeneutic employed by the Kabbalists imports meaning into the biblical text which could never be linked to the author’s own words or intention. It is pure *eisegesis*, not *exegesis*. When, however, John hides the identification of “the beast” by coding it via a number (Rev 13:18), this does not call upon the reader to employ a mystical hermeneutic. In fact, it requires just the opposite! It requires that the reader understand the author’s intended meaning contained in the cipher itself. What is more, John alerts the reader to the fact that he is using a coded message by stating “Let him who has understanding calculate the number....”

demonstrated in much of his work that the authorial intent of the Tanach as quoted by the Apostles is not disregarded at all, but forms the very basis for their use of the Tanach. See, for instance, Walter Kaiser’s work in Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde, eds., *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Zondervan: 2008). The FFOZ blog was accessed at http://vineofdauid.org/blog/teaching/mysticism_and_messianic_faith.html

John expected that his readers would have understanding (a rational function of the mind) and thus be able to interpret the number code as he, the author, intended it to be interpreted. He did not expect that his readers would require some mystical experience to ascertain what he had written! Indeed, it seems most probable that John's immediate audience would have found the name "Nero" in the numeric cipher he supplies, which explains the reason for using the code in the first place.²⁶ He doubtlessly reasoned that openly naming Nero as the "beast" would be like signing his own death warrant.

In the end, the claim, so often heard, that the biblical writers themselves do not employ a grammatical, historical hermeneutic when they quote the Tanach, is unwarranted. Though admittedly quotes from the Tanach in the Apostolic Scriptures present some hermeneutical challenges, a more thorough investigation of the quotes show that the Apostles did not violate the original author's meaning when they quote the Tanach.²⁷ Even when they use quotes from the Tanach in a midrashic fashion, they are not using a mystical interpretation, for their midrashic use of the Tanach is based upon the plain meaning of the text.

Founded Upon the Truth of Scripture

What followers of Yeshua need in our day is precisely what the early assemblies of "the Way" needed as they were founded in the Apostolic era: to be grounded and built up upon the foundation of the "faith which was once and for all passed on to God's people" (Jude 1:3, *CJB*). Like Timothy, who was instructed from his childhood in "the sacred writings," (2Tim 3:15), we too must commit ourselves to the inspired Scriptures as entirely sufficient for "teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteous," realizing that the Bible, implanted within our hearts by the Spirit, is fully adequate to equip us "for every good work" (2Tim 3:16). This is why Paul exhorts Timothy to "preach the word" (2Tim 4:2) and warns him regarding those who will not endure sound doctrine but,

wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2Tim 4:3-4)

Likewise, at the end of Paul's first epistle to Timothy, he writes:

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge"— which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. (1Tim 6:20-21)

²⁶ The best explanation for the variants that have arisen in the Greek manuscripts, some of which have the number as 666 while others have 616, is that the cipher was understood either as deriving from the Greek spelling of Nero (put into Hebrew letters, נרון קסר) or the Latin spelling (put into Hebrew letters, נירו קסר). See Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (UBS, 1971), pp. 749-50. To see the Greek and Hebrew equivalents, consult the article called "The Number 666 in Revelation 13:18," available at <http://www.torahresource.com/ArticlesEnglish.html>.

²⁷ A good example of how a more thorough reading of the texts themselves substantiates the integrity of authorial intention is Walter Kaiser's "The Current Crisis In Exegesis and the Apostolic Use Of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10" *JETS* 21.1 (March, 1978), 4-18.

What does Paul mean by the phrase “what is falsely called ‘knowledge?’” There have been various suggestions given by commentators, but many agree that Paul was combating the early theological and philosophical “seeds,” germinating within the Judaisms of his day, that eventually grew into Gnosticism in the subsequent centuries.²⁸ Such “knowledge” (Gnosticism is based upon the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge”) was based upon “speculations” (1Tim 1:4; 2Tim 2:23) and “myths” (1Tim 1:4; 2Tim 4:4; Tit 1:14) rather than upon the unchanging truth revealed in God’s word. It was this early Gnosticism that laid the foundation for the later, medieval Kabbalism that flourishes in Hasidic Judaism to this day. Indeed, Kabbalism and Gnosticism share many common elements.²⁹

So Paul’s exhortation to Timothy, to avoid “what is falsely called ‘knowledge,’” is just as relevant for us today as it was for Timothy in the 1st Century. Likewise, we should pay close attention to Paul’s admonition to the Colossians:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah. (Col. 2:8)

Don’t be pulled aside into mystical speculations about the text of the Scriptures, or be persuaded that some mystical, irrational experience will cause your spiritual life to blossom. Hold fast to the word of God. Read and study the Scriptures, letting them speak on their own terms as the authors intended. Put these eternal truths within your heart, meditating upon them and living them out by the power of the Spirit. Remember that by the energizing work of the Spirit, the word of God is alive and powerful (Heb 4:12). Be assured that the Scriptures are entirely sufficient to lay the solid foundation for your faith and daily walk in obedience to God.

A Final Word: Love, Unity, and Truth

I want to admit openly to you, the reader, that I have struggled over this essay. Not because I questioned what I should write but because it brings me no pleasure whatsoever to disagree so openly with former colleagues with whom I have worked, and whom I still hold in very high regard. For a number of years I was a regular contributor of articles, books, and seminar lectures with First Fruits of Zion. In fact, I was so often connected with the ministry of FFOZ that some people presumed I was a staff member of that organization even though I was not. Some still think of me in that way, and so the time has come for me to speak to this issue.

I would have been willing to remain silent had the doctrinal differences that have arisen between us been of a peripheral nature. Unfortunately, in my perspective, they are not. Even as a building is sustained by the foundation upon which it is built, so matters relating to our covenant status as believers in Yeshua (Jew and Gentile alike) and issues relating to the sufficiency and interpretation of the Scriptures are foundational to our faith and directly impact how we function within our respective Torah communi-

²⁸ See Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Some Alleged Evidences for Pre-Christian Gnosticism” in Longenecker and Tenny, eds., *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Zondervan, 1974), pp 46–70;

²⁹ See Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1987), pp. 21–24.

ties. What is more, of all the various ministries that exist within the wider messianic movement, FFOZ has been the flagship for Torah-based materials expounded from a historical, grammatical approach to the Scriptures. Likewise, FFOZ formerly was a primary voice for what has become known as the “one Law” position, which basically holds that the blessed obligations of the Torah are owned equally by Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua. That FFOZ’s position on these matters is now changing has left me no choice but to voice my disagreement and to affirm that we at TorahResource remain fully committed to (1) the equality of Jewish and Gentile believers within the covenant obligations of Torah, (2) the utter sufficiency of Scripture for faith and *halachah*, which means that the inspired Scriptures remain the sole divine authority against which all else is to be judged, and (3) of the need to interpret the Scriptures in their plain, literal sense, utilizing a well-informed historical, grammatical hermeneutic.

Some may consider this essay to be divisive or somehow to be a roadblock to unity. I do not mean it to be so, but rather to be a call for clear thinking and honest investigation into matters that are foundational for our walk with God. It is far too easy in our times for people simply to accept what a known teacher, author, or ministry is saying and teaching. I hope that this essay will encourage you to do as the Bereans did (Acts 17:11), who, as Luke notes, were “noble-minded,” for “they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” Likewise Peter, who stood on the mountain and witnessed the visible glory of Yeshua (Matt 17:1–9), writes of his experience in his second epistle:

For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2Pet 1:17–21)

Surely what the disciples experienced on the “holy mountain” was similar to the experience of Moses as he ascended into the cloud on Sinai. Yet in spite of this “mountaintop experience,” what does Peter conclude? “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word!” Peter considers the word of God to be more certain than the personal experience he had on the mount of transfiguration.

This, then, is my burden: that you fully embrace Peter’s exhortation to hold the Scriptures as being more sure than even a mountaintop experience, and that you “pay attention” to the Scriptures “as to a lamp shining in a dark place” — that you accept the Scriptures as the final authority against which you judge all else, including this essay. May the Almighty embolden all of us to continue forward, steadfast in our faith, standing firm upon the infallible, inerrant, inspired word of God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for

“ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS.

THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD REMAINS FOREVER.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you. (1Peter 1:22–25)