

## **Slippery when All Wet, or Duplo Dogma**

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Do you remember Duplos (the big, clunky toys made by Lego)? My kids used to play with them when they were little. You can have a lot of fun with them, especially when the kids are into it, but the color and size options are very limited and whatever you build will soon fall apart anyway. Moreover, as my kids grew, their motor skills became more refined and their interests moves to more specialized Lego sets with smaller (and easier to lose!) pieces, from which much more intricate and magnificent creations soon emerged. There are even Robot Legos now!

I liken some of our religious terminology to giant Duplo pieces. Take “Judaism” and “Christianity” for instance. How much stock should we place in these terms? Do they help us think clearly, or do the ideas we build with them always fall apart? When it comes to religion, they can sometimes get so slippery they’re almost of no use at all.

I’m not saying we should get rid of these terms; only that they have their place and that their place is limited. Case in point: There are Christians who will proudly call themselves Christians. But there are also people who identify as Christians that other self-identifying Christians will say are not truly Christians. In the same way, there are Jews who call themselves Jews. But there are self-identifying Jews that other Jews will say are not “really” Jews. To add a layer of complexity: there are Christian Jews who proudly call themselves Christians, and there are Jewish “believers in Yeshua” who don’t want to be called Christians but want to be called Jews (especially by other “real” Jews). If you’re like me, you probably know or have met people from each of these categories. So what’s going on here? How helpful is it for us to use terminology that isn’t all that helpful? What are we trying to accomplish here anyway?

Now let’s add “Messianic” to the mix. There are apparently Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles. Some say Messianic Jews belong in Judaism and Messianic Gentiles belong in Christianity. That sounds nice and orderly. But if this is the

case, in what way is the term “Messianic” even helpful? And who gets to define “Christianity” and “Judaism” anyway?

Duplos, all of them.

In the first century, such struggle to define terms was very real. In this case, the terms were not like our slippery notions of “Christianity” and “Judaism.” They were much more specific and critical. Paul’s wonderful Epistle to the Galatians is a great example. Keywords like “Messiah,” “Gospel,” “Torah,” “Son of Abraham,” “Jerusalem,” “Sinai,” “Circumcision,” and “Foreskin” were all highly charged symbols that had already circulated throughout the Greek speaking Diaspora for centuries. They were “hot” in the market of Jewish speculation about redemption and the promises of God. Groups were not arguing whether or not these symbols were in fact “Jewish.” Rather, they argued about what these symbols meant; what “true” significance they held within God’s unfolding plan. Different groups had different takes, but they more or less agreed on what terms were in the vocabulary. These keywords had what I call ideological currency. In other words, Jews didn’t have to sell that there was a Torah or a messianic hope or even a *Ioudaismos* (Greek term from which we get the English word Judaism). What they sold was the “spin”; the “true” Torah, and the “correct” Messiah, “proper” Sabbath observance, the “real” Israel, etc.

In the midst of all this zeal to bring clarity to these common and powerful Jewish symbols, the first believers in Yeshua knowingly risked everything by making a bold, life-endangering assertion. Speculation was over. The widely recognized hot-topic word “Messiah” (big “M”!) was once-and-for-all identified with a certain flesh-and-blood person: Yeshua of Nazareth. Unique among all the messianic movements of antiquity, Yeshua’s disciples continued to call Him “Messiah” long after His death. They didn’t go out and find a “replacement” leader or dissolve the company, as other groups did. No! They continued, in the face of great persecution, to proclaim that the Psalms (2 and 110, for instance) and other Scriptures had been fulfilled. Yeshua had not only risen from the dead, but had ascended to the right hand of the Father! Praise Adonai!

“Messiah” is not the only term they clarified. The “Gospel” was for the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike. All His disciples, regardless of ethnicity, were

taught and aspired to walk in His Torah. By faith in Messiah Yeshua, individuals become “children of Abraham,” and were recognized so by the community of believers. Of course, none of these “definitions” sat well with Jewish authorities, but Yeshua anticipated this conflict. The “rule” of His community would reflect a new expression of love, holiness, and humility: Any who would seek to leverage their “Jewishness” to justify exclusion of a Gentile would find quick, and sometimes harsh, correction. Gentiles, taking note of the many worldly and/or “unbelieving” Jews, might boast that God had entirely forsaken them and now favors Gentiles instead. This attitude would be corrected also. (On the contrary, the Gospel was to be preached to Jews first!) In seeking to obey the Torah of the Messiah, insecure Gentile males sometimes felt they had to follow the teachings of Jews that were not committed to the Gospel message but yet seemed to teach the “real” Torah. This too was corrected.

As time went on, Messiah’s words became fulfilled. Believers in Yeshua, Jews and perhaps even some Gentiles, were expelled from the synagogues. This is an important point to remember. Yeshua did not teach that there would be a “parting of the ways,” or that “Christianity” would separate from its mother religion “Judaism,” or any other of the popular models you might hear or read today. No! He said that His followers would be kicked out of the Jewish communities, and that the leaders doing so would believe it was God’s will. Saul of Tarsus was one of the more zealous Jews with this type of thinking, persecuting and putting to death believers in the name of God and the traditions equated with “Torah.”

But in his epistle to the Galatians, Paul makes it absolutely clear that he had been dead wrong. Same symbols, but wrong spin. In his letters, the Apostle goes to great lengths to clarify for us the meaning of central Judaic symbols in light of the revelation of Yeshua the Messiah. Often we find him directly or indirectly engaged polemically with groups that are peddling other, contrary definitions. It gets heated! For Paul, his were not “optional” definitions, or “possible” interpretations among many. He was specific, precise, and exclusive. The truth of the Gospel was at stake.

We will give account for every idle word we speak. Let us not settle for Duplo thinking, but rather strive to be clear in our communication. If we don’t fully grasp a concept, or if we find a term particularly “slippery,” let us remember to slow down, take some time, and seek Adonai. Ask Him for patience and understanding. Talk to a friend or a teacher. Give yourself permission to ask whether you’re im-

posing a slippery word or concept where it doesn't belong, or even whether the person confusing you is "all wet"!