Women as Leaders: Contemporary Perspectives on the Roles of Women in Messianic Judaism

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Abstract

This article explores the role of women in contemporary Messianic Judaism. The prevailing view is that a woman cannot be a leader because her primary role, as ordained by God, is to be a good wife and mother. The article examines the present situation, drawn on existing studies and reports from the USA and supplemented by materials from a number of interviews with Messianic Jews in Britain. The discussion situates the debates within the Messianic movement against the background of Jewish and Christian teachings and identifies how these teachings are being interpreted, expressed and practiced in today’s Messianic Jewish community.

Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of Messianic Judaism throughout the world. Messianic Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah and practice a lifestyle which they consider to be within the framework of the Torah. The roots of contemporary Messianic Judaism are Hebrew Christianity, which began in Britain during the early nineteenth century in response to the activities of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews (founded 1809). Similar developments followed in other parts of the world. The emergence of Messianic Judaism started during the 1960s in the USA with a movement known as Jews for Jesus founded by Moishe Rosen. Jews for Jesus grew out of the socio-political and cultural upheaval, which took place throughout USA society at that time. Jews for Jesus is now only one of the many ways in which Jews can express a belief in Jesus.

Since the 1980s one of the issues with which Messianic Judaism had to confront is the growing tide of debate and controversy within its own ranks about the role of women, based on the understanding of early Jewish and Christian writings. In USA Messianic Jewish congregations, women are challenging what they perceive as a fundamental imbalance by arguing that women should take leadership roles in the movement (Harris-Shapiro 69-71). This article explores the current situation by drawing on existing studies and reports from the USA, along with materials from a number of interviews with Messianic Jews in Britain. The discussion places the current debates in the context of some of the classical Jewish and Christian teachings on women and aims to identify how these classical teachings are being interpreted, expressed and practiced in today’s Messianic Jewish community.
Interviews and discussions carried out by the author were done in two phases, between 2003 and 2004 and in 2006. The total number of interviewees was eighty, (fifty-five females and twenty-five males). The bulk of the material was collected from one on one meetings; a small number of interviews took place by telephone and e-mail, with specific open-ended questions focusing on key aspects of teachings found in Jewish and Christian writings, but also using follow-up questions. The questions meant to explore both theological and socio-cultural aspects of this topic.

The selection of the interviewees was random; no criterion of age, gender, sexuality, economic status or nationality was specified. Over half (60%) of the interviewees were originally from Orthodox Jewish backgrounds with the remainder coming from Reform or Liberal Judaism.

The Beliefs and Practices of Messianic Jews

In order to contextualise the situation of Messianic Jewish women, the beliefs and practices of Messianic Jews need to be compared to non-Messianic or normative Judaism. The term non-Messianic Judaism refers to all movements of Judaism which do not embrace a belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

Messianic Judaism varies in the way beliefs are practiced and interpreted. The common denominator of most manifestations of contemporary Messianic Judaism is the identification of its members with the first Jewish followers of Jesus who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Therefore, contemporary Jewish followers of Jesus argue that on this basis, like their predecessors, their belief is an authentic expression of Judaism. But by accepting Jesus as the Messiah, Messianic Jews are viewed as having crossed over the theological boundary into Christianity (Harris-Shapiro 166-174).

Studies show that Jewish lifestyle and life-cycles are a very important part of Messianic Jewish identity, although Messianic Jews, like many contemporary Jews, vary in their degree of observance. (Cohn-Sherbok; Harris-Shapiro; Feher) Brit Milah (Covenant of circumcision) is observed within Messianic Jewish communities because it is commanded by God as symbolic of the covenant with the people of Israel. Circumcision of the flesh is placed alongside spiritual circumcision of the heart, based on Romans 2: 28-29. The Jewish Sabbath and festivals are also considered by Messianic Jews as a valid and important aspect of their beliefs and practices. Maintaining some, if not all aspects of Jewish lifestyle, are considered to deepen and enrich the Messianic Jew’s faith and identity. This is also reflected in Messianic Jewish worship where traditional Jewish prayers and
blessings are accompanied by others that refer to Jesus. Passages are read from the Torah as well as the New Testament, which they call the Torah of the Messiah. In sum, the beliefs and practices of Messianic Judaism reflect elements of contemporary Judaism and Christianity, in particular evangelical Christianity.

**Relevant Texts**

Daniel Juster, founder and president of the American Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, upholds the traditional position of both Judaism and Christianity when stating that women cannot be allowed to be rabbis, elders, priests or ministers. He argues that, "...man and woman are equally valuable in the eyes of God, but different." (Juster 2). Juster notes that the creation story in Genesis 2:18-25 confirms the difference between the sexes and at the same time teaches that women cannot be leaders because their singular role is to help men.

Juster believes that his reading of the Jewish Scriptures regarding the role of men and women is in line with the teachings of the Jewish Sages. However, Juster’s position seems to contradict Neusner’s (1982) argument that in the Mishnah women were pre-dominantly given a second-class status. In other studies of rabbinic writings, legal and aggadic texts show that rabbinic views on women’s roles differ and that during the early rabbinic period there were discrepancies between what the rabbis taught and the actual daily life of women.¹ Rachel Biale (1984) argues that there is flexibility in rabbinic thinking that “reflect[s] development, change and controversy in the Halakah…we can see a gradual and persistent effort to redress the fundamental imbalance in power between men and women which characterises biblical law.” (Biale 5). This flexibility appears to be related to the fact that “many of the sources are difficult to understand and ambiguous in meaning” (Biale xv).

Judith Baskin talks about the evolution of Jewish women’s status “during the formative period of Judaism” and of the need to look at rabbinic thought “as a cultural system” in the context of other social systems “found in societies throughout the world” (Baskin 8). Baskin’s viewpoint reflects another dimension of the discussion within Judaism about women’s status, both past and present, on whether the key issue is either a theological or sociological one. For Cynthia Ozick (1986) and Blu Greenberg (1981) the main issue is sociological; whereas Judith Plaskow (1983) argues that it is theological.

Carol Calise, one of the very few Messianic women rabbis, based at Beth Emanuel Messianic Synagogue in New York City, describes a combination of these perspectives when commenting on some of the texts dealing with women. She maintains, contrary to Juster’s opinion, that the Hebrew word for “helper” [ezēr] does not "...carry the connotation of subordination." (Calisle 3) She also points out that in Genesis 1:28 God told them, male and female, to rule over the earth and every living creature. (Calise 3) Tim Hegg, a biblical scholar and non-Jewish member of a messianic synagogue in Washington State, claims that in the first chapter of Genesis there is no hint to the inferiority of woman: "In the study of male and female relationships the main message of Genesis chapter one is equality." (Hegg 5) He also states that Genesis 2 demonstrates the relationship between a woman and a man and not her inferiority or total subordination to the man. Moreover, this text emphasises the unity and equality of men and women, while at the same time identifying a distinction between their roles. (Hegg 7).

The interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis was discussed with interviewees in the UK. Over half of those interviewed (55%) expressed views similar to Hegg’s. However, some of these interviewees pointed out that this distinction, based predominantly on biological difference, led to the development of different social roles and therefore to the view that women are inferior to men. Hegg believes that this view contradicts the meaning of the texts: "The ruling over creation is the mutual purpose of man and woman and they function together as distinctly male or female to accomplish this agenda. It is not primarily man's agenda which woman aids in accomplishing – it is their agenda which they work together in achieving." (Hegg 7) Hegg’s observation does not go as far as saying that women can be leaders but it does illustrate that male dominance and subordination of women is against the spirit of the scriptures. Others within Messianic Judaism express the position of contemporary Judaism and Christianity which portrays Eve as weak, gullible and naïve, and qualifying this as the reason for why women should not be in leadership roles. The misogynist interpretation of the Fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3 and 4:7) was accepted by a majority of the UK interviewees (80%), of whom two-thirds were originally from an Orthodox Jewish background. The rest of the interviewees (20%) disagreed with this interpretation. One woman from a Messianic Community in Israel felt that interpreting the Adam and Eve story in a way that presents the woman as the inferior of the sexes failed to grasp the reality that Adam was just as weak, gullible and naive. Hegg expresses similar sentiments when he writes that there is nothing explicit in the text to suggest that Eve was the weaker of the two, "In fact, she argues with the serpent from an
intellectual standpoint, something not found in Adam's silent acceptance of the fruit." (Hegg 8)

**Biological Differences Between the Sexes**

The stories of the Creation and the Fall continue to be regarded by Messianic Judaism as indicators of biological and/or physical differences between the sexes. All the male interviewees supported the view that the role of a woman is to be a good wife and mother; she is designed to bear and nurture children, to serve the Lord and be in submission to her husband at all times. Women’s role as mothers is interpreted from the following passage in Genesis:

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it. (Genesis 1:27-28)

Many leaders within Messianic Judaism read this verse as meaning that, "A woman is called to partner with a husband, raise children and create a God-fearing home." (Kavanaugh 1) The importance of motherhood was accepted by nearly all of the female interviewees, except two, and all male interviewees. One of the female interviewees who rejected motherhood as the prime function of women did so because she felt it perpetuated the outdated idea that only men, based on their biology, are suitable for headship.

The unsuitability of women on biological grounds is a view that Juster supports:

the wife-mother role, "...is part of the biological and psychological constitution of women," whereas the man has been given physical attributes by God to carry out the roles, "...of husband headship, fathering, family headship, governance in the Body of the Messiah, and general, but not exclusive leadership roles in society." (Juster 2-3)

Accordingly, the biological constitution of men, genetically and hormonally produce inherent leadership qualities. (Juster 3) Rachel Wolf, the wife of a Messianic Rabbi at a Cincinnati synagogue, supports the observation that the physical make-up of men corresponds with that of leadership, "...leadership naturally befits the man. His lower voice, stronger muscles and greater height gains him the innate respect of others....God has so arranged things to make us inherently predisposed to look to men as ultimate leaders." (Wolf 6) This view is challenged by Gretchen...
Hull\(^2\) when she recalls the story in 1 Samuel 16. The house of Jesse receives a visit from Samuel who was sent by God to anoint the new king. All Jesse's sons, except his youngest son David, meet Samuel who is impressed by their physical appearance and is convinced that one of them must become the new King. However, God speaks to Samuel and tells him not to be concerned or impressed with physical appearance and height because it is not a person’s outward appearance that matters but what is in one’s heart. Consequently, Hull argues that physical appearance is not used by God to determine a person’s suitability for leadership and the view that women cannot be leaders on the basis of their physical constitution is not a valid one. (Hull 24) On the other hand, Juster equates size with "...a God intended sociological order of leadership where the male is more orientated to strength, power and authority." (Juster 6) In keeping with normative Judaism, the Messianic believer should "...seek the wise counsel of his wife", because it is better to be united as a couple, and a woman's wisdom cannot take precedence or threaten her husband's authority. (Juster 6).

The views of Juster and Wolf are influenced by the Mishnah where "Sexuality accounts for the deliberate exclusion of women from participation in those aspects of Israelite culture that take place in public forums" (Wegner 18). According to Judith Romney Wegner, the Mishnah presents sexuality as the key to whether a woman is treated as a chattel or person:

> Whenever some man has a proprietary interest in the sexual and reproductive function of a specified girl or woman, the Mishnah’s framers treat the women as that man’s chattel in all matters that affect his ownership of her sexuality; in all other contexts the dependent woman is treated as a person. When, by contrast, no man has a legal claim on a woman’s sexuality, the system always treats her as a person, both in sex-related and other matters. (Wegner 19)

In the public domain the participation of the dependent and independent woman is severely restrained, “Thus, in the last analysis, a woman’s sexuality lies at the root of limitations on her personhood in both the private and public spheres of mishnaic culture” (Wegner 19). The limitations on a woman’s personhood continue in the present day in some Jewish movements. And some Orthodox Jewish writers, such as Jacob Berman, recognise the fact that the Halakah did teach certain restrictions on women. It exempted them from certain activities, particularly in the

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religious community to ensure that “no legal obligations interfered with a role which was centred almost exclusively in the home.” But the Halakah also recognises that women can be disadvantaged and therefore attempts to compensate them (Berman 15). Berman acknowledges the central role women play in the home but supports the need for a change to enable women to have more involvement in religious life. The need for change is proposed by Rachel Biale who argues that even though there is a need to “reject the traditional view of women in favour of equality, we need not reject the halakhic framework.” (Biale 265).

Proverbs 31: 10-31 is a popular text, describing the role of a wife and mother who manages her home and family efficiently and wisely but accepts her husband’s authority. Such a woman is given the title of The Woman of Worth [Eshet Chayil]. One of the female interviewees, commenting on the text, said, “I think we have to admit that this is an idealized, romanticized, unrealistic male portrayal of what Jewish women, wives, and mothers are called to be.” Several Talmudic writings depict women as vain, lazy, frivolous, sexually dangerous and unteachable (Yer.Ket.V.30a; Bavli Ket. 61a; Bavli Meg. 14b; Bavli Nidd. 45b; M.Avot 2:7; M.Ket. 5:5; Genesis Rabba 17 and 45; Bavli Kiddushin 80b).

Stereotypically, the Jewish woman is described as loud and overly emotional. This stereotype was discussed with the interviewees who all agreed that they knew Jewish women who fit this description. With the exception of two of the female interviewees, the rest were eager to stress that this was not an acceptable way for Messianic Jewish women to behave.

Other key aspects of Talmudic teachings on women were discussed with interviewees: (a) activities outside of the domestic role were not normally acceptable unless they were essential for economic reasons; (b) men should not spend time speaking with women because women are a sexual snare to men and the seductive powers of women are too great for most men to withstand; (c) women must cover their heads in public. (Bavli Berachot 24a and Ketubot 72a) In response to (a) 60% of the interviewees accepted the statement, whereas 36% felt that women should have the choice of having a job, irrespective of financial reasons and providing this did not detract significantly from their primary role in the home. In response to (b) 52% agreed with the statement, while 48% felt that it was unavoidable for men and women to speak to each other but that this should always be done modestly. This latter group felt that men could be sexually powerful as well and seduce women thereby contradicting the Talmudic suggestion that only women dominate men through their sexuality. All of the interviewees agreed that women’s covering their head in public was a matter of individual choice.
Other roles of women were also discussed with the interviewees. One of the female interviewees, who rejected the traditional role of women, pointed out that Jewish texts which portray women in leadership roles are often ignored. Another female interviewee who adheres to a more traditional role acknowledged the accounts of women in prominent roles outside the home but interpreted these roles as still under the authority of men. Six of the male interviewees saw no problem with women having prominent/leadership roles in a secular context but this could not be allowed in the religious sphere.

Carol Calise cites a number of examples where biblical women were in leadership roles such as prophet, judge and military leader. In Micah 6:4, Aaron and Miriam were sent with Moses to lead the Israelites; in Judges 4 and 5 Deborah was a judge, another form of leadership in Israel; and in 2 Kings 22:14 the ministry and spiritual leadership of Huldah the prophet is recorded. (Calise 3-4) The case of Deborah is discussed by a Messianic Jewish Rabbi, Yaacov Farber. He argues that Deborah was indeed a leader but not by the will of God; rather it transpired because, "during the time of the Judges the Israelites were doing their own thing...they were in an apostate condition...there was a lack of men who were of leadership material." (Farber 1) Farber believes that women who use the example of Deborah to argue for female leadership do so as a result of "...the natural progression of deception....women desiring to gain authority over men is part of the curse of original sin....It is in fact the result of the fall of man." (Farber 2) Farber portrays Deborah and other women of this period as deceptive, opportunistic and manipulative. Ellen Kavanaugh, a member of the organisation The Light of Mashiach, states that the accounts of these women merely show that women had a valued place in God's plan but they cannot be leaders because women are commanded by God not to dominate men or establish fellowships. She argues that the roles of Miriam, Deborah and Huldah were under the authority of male figures (father, brother, husband or elder). (Kavanaugh 3) Moreover, Kavanaugh points out that a woman's role does not stop with motherhood but can extend to teaching, particularly to her children and the community. Yet this must always be carried out under the supervision of a male elder or leader. (Kavanaugh 3-4)

The majority of the interviewees (90%) expressed opinions which reflected Kavanaugh's key point about the teaching role of women. All those interviewed agreed that women must be allowed to teach and express prophesies given to them by God. 95% of the sample said it should be allowed under the supervision of men. The acceptance of women as teachers or prophets in the spiritual life of the community is certainly a move away from Orthodox Judaism where women are not allowed to participate in any aspect of the worship and are certainly not allowed to be rabbis. It could be...
argued that for these interviewees, originally from Orthodox Jewish backgrounds, women’s teaching and prophesying reflect the content and spirit of Acts 18:26, where the role of Priscilla is described as being a helpmate to her husband Aquilla. Still, the overarching interpretive framework of Messianic Judaism is rooted in 1 Corinthians 11:3: “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God,” which for some Christians and Messianic Jews confirms the opinion that a woman is under the authority of a man. However, it could be argued that these interviewees were expressing aspects of Jewish teaching that had been overlooked because of a dominant patriarchal context. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is portrayed as male, named frequently father or husband. On the other hand, his people, ‘Israel’, are often portrayed as God’s “adulterous, promiscuous, immature wife” (Brenner 163). Despite the failings of this ‘wife’ she is an essential helper to God. According to Atalya Brenner, it is also possible to assert that the Song of Songs “supplies god, finally, with a worthy loving partner.” This idea is carried forward into Jewish mystical texts through the feminine principles of Shekinah and Shabbat, being paired with the male principle of the divine king (Brenner 169-170).

**Jesus and the Role of Women**

The Jewish view of women at the time of Jesus was defined, established and redefined over many centuries, through a range of experiences and encounters in diverse cultural contexts. The predominantly accepted view as discussed above is that the central role of women is of being a wife and a mother. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasise how important it is for women to be good wives and mothers, demonstrating faithfulness and love to their husbands. It also recognises the important contribution of women who played a public role such as Deborah the judge, Miriam the prophet and Yael and Judith who were military combatants.

It is against this socio-cultural and religious background that Jesus viewed and encountered women. But to what extent did he uphold and promote the traditional view of his time? Messianic Jews teach that Jesus saw women as having an important role in his ministry and that he "...endorses their cause, pleads their case and enlists their energies for He Himself was engaged in." (Hegg 11) All interviewees agreed with this viewpoint and some cited examples from the Gospels which in their opinion presented a picture of Jesus that challenged the norms of Judaism vis-à-vis the role and status of women. The interviewees brought up examples, such as Mary’s work which was praised by Jesus (Mark 14:9); Jesus’s conversation with a Samaritan woman (John 4: 7-26); women were amongst those who travelled with Jesus (Luke 8: 1-3); women...
urged by the Angel to tell of Jesus’ resurrection (Mathew 28: 1-10); and the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection was a woman. (John 20: 10-18) These examples are employed by some Messianic Jews, including 75% of the interviewees, to claim that Jesus wanted to restore equality between men and women and demonstrated the important role women played in his ministry. (Hegg; Hord; Ensign) However, other Messianic Jews, including 80% of those interviewed, argued that the teaching and actions of Jesus, "...elevated women and restored dignity and respect.” (Juster 2) Furthermore, Juster expresses an opinion which is prevalent in Messianic Jewish communities:

> Although women were part of the band of His followers and even were the first witnesses to the resurrection, not one was chosen to be among the twelve....Yes, Yeshua did challenge the society with regard to respect for women but not in regard to governmental leadership roles for women. (Juster 2)

The argument presented by Juster is also supported by Kavanaugh. She distinguishes between Jesus who valued the place of women yet at the same time did not advocate that they should be leaders. She maintains that Jesus would not have contradicted God's social order in which men come second to God and women come third. This in turn means that if women became leaders, assuming authority and dominance over men, God's social order would be undermined (Kavanaugh 2). Rabbi Farber reinforces this view when he writes,

> Women allow your husbands to lead and be content to follow him, which is the way HaShem intended it to be and that is the way it will go well for your life, your home and your family. (Farber 3)

On the basis of the examples from the New Testament, it could be construed that Jesus did in fact challenge major attitudes of rabbinic Judaism towards women. According to Sherry Hord, he defended their rights and identified the hypocrisy of rabbinic interpretation of certain laws which favoured men over women (e.g. divorce, adultery). The code for social interaction between men and women was definitely not adhered to by Jesus; He talked with them, touched them to heal them and allowed them to minister to him. His overall approach is said to have "...re-established the Yisraelite woman's place of equality in the congregation of Yisrael, and as a result assigns...her right of spiritual freedom to function in ministry with the brothers." (Hord 10). These views were presented to interviewees and all of them believed that Jesus certainly did these things. However, the majority of those
interviewed said that this did not mean that Jesus was advocating leadership roles for women.

**Paul and the Role of Women**

Messianic Judaism uses certain verses from the writings attributed to Paul to argue against women in leadership. Several passages are said to support a wife's submission to her husband. According to Juster, Ephesians 5:22 teaches the authority of the husband over his wife and family; in 1 Corinthians 11:3-6 it is stated that, "...the head of the woman is man", and women are instructed to cover their heads when praying or prophesying to show submission to their husbands and elders; and in 1 Timothy 2:15 it is stated that women must not have authority over men. (Juster 3) The teaching regarding head covering for women is understood by Kavanaugh as less about modesty and more about the visible sign of a woman's marital status, thus demonstrating her submission to her husband's headship over her. (Kavanaugh 4) Messianic Jews who believe that the husband and wife relationship is ordained by God also believe that if this model is violated "...in false co-equality...", then it "...violates God's intended distinctions which are meant to reflect ultimate realities." (Juster 3-4) Therefore, spiritual leadership is based on the husband-father role which is alleged to be evident in Paul's letter to Titus and his first letter to Timothy. Juster states that these passages confirm "that the ability to rule the family is explained as foundational for eldership....These passages are clearly male orientated. There is no hint of women qualifying for these roles." (Juster 4)

There is evidence that these interpretations of Paul's teachings are being questioned and challenged by some Messianic Jews. The questions raised could be resolved by employing three approaches: linguistic, cultural and parallelism. Hegg utilises all three in his counter-argument regarding the man being the head of the woman as presented in Ephesians and Colossians. Using the linguistic approach he points out that the Greek term used by Paul is *kephle*. This term was used in classical Greek from 300BCE -600CE to mean 'source, sustainer, supplier', whereas the Greek word for a ruler or leader having authority is *archon*. Since Paul never used the latter term when describing the relationship of a husband to his wife then Hegg argues that Paul speaks of the man's role as one who protects and sustains his wife but does not rule over her. (Hegg 14-15) Parallelism is used by Hegg to show that in Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:16, Paul uses the very same term *kephle* "...in the context of supplying the body with all that it requires, thus emphasising the meaning source, sustainer." (Hegg 15) He claims that in each of the passages where the husband is described as *kephle* in relation to the woman, "there is the idea
of source or sustainer in the nearby or immediate contexts." (Hegg 15)

The cultural approach is presented by Calise to consider the passage in 1 Timothy 2, which explicitly states that women should not teach men. Calise contextualises the passage in relation to specific cultural and social issues in Ephesus: there were uneducated women who abused authority by teaching. Paul dealt with a specific situation which Calise argues does not indicate, "...that Paul means to prohibit all women for all time from teaching or exercising authority. If Paul meant this, he would not have recommended his female co-workers to the various congregations." (Calise 7) Mark Ensign reinforces Calise's conclusions when he points out that Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:5 indicates that he accepted women prophesying in public. Therefore the passage in Ephesians could not have meant that women should never teach. (Ensign 20) In another study by Craig Keener, the cultural approach is utilised to explain Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 11 that women should cover their heads when praying in public. Keener says that Paul described how believers dressed when they met for communal worship. (Keener, 1992: 21) It is also feasible that the underlying cause for Paul's instruction to women to cover their heads is due to the continuing influence of Jewish law. For some Messianic Jews the central message regarding the wife-husband relationship as described in the first letter to the Corinthians and in the letter to the Ephesians is one of mutual submission and authority. (Hegg 13-19; Calise 7) Submission should not be equated with the concept of a less worthy position or inferior role just as "the Messiah, in submitting to the Father, is in no way inferior to the Father." (Hegg 20) Timothy Radcliffe, a Christian writer, comments on the headship of man and argues that the text has nothing to do with man having authority over women, rather it is a reminder that man is the source of a woman: "in the beginning woman was made from man’s rib... Paul points us back to the story of Creation to establish what it means to have a male or female nature" (Radcliffe 66).

While some aspects of Paul’s teachings could be viewed as preaching against prominent roles for women in religious public life, other Pauline texts are more difficult to understand this way. The examples of women who worked in the early Messianic congregations appear to provide evidence of the fact that women were prominent in the leadership of early communities. Paul speaks of Priscilla and Aquilla in Romans 16: 3&4 as co-workers. Euodia and Syntyche are women who are also acknowledge by Paul as deacons. (Philippians 4: 1-3) Phoebe is referred to as a deacon and Paul asks the community in Rome to, "...receive her in the Lord in a
way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need..." (Romans 16: 1-2) In the last chapter of his letter to the Roman assembly, Paul identifies by name not only a number of men but also a number of women who he refers to as fellow workers, apostle or saints: Junia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis and Julia. Calise argues that because Paul uses the same phrases and terms when identifying the role of both men and women working to spread the message of Jesus then this means that he "...considered them to be ministers of the Gospel and leaders in the body of the Messiah. (Calise 5) David Stern articulates this same argument in relation to the term which Paul uses to describe Phoebe's role, Diakonos. Stern writes that not only did Phoebe hold "...a prominent office in the Cenchrean congregation," but that the term diakonos is a masculine term and was used by Paul in relation to both men and women, implying that Phoebe was a leader. (Stern 439) The argument that there were no women apostles also appears erroneous when positioned against Paul's reference to Junia (Rom. 16: 7), described as outstanding amongst the apostles. Catherine Kroeger notes that many scholars maintain that up until the 13th century CE this passage in Romans read Junia (feminine name) and not Junias (masculine name). The letter 's' was added by translators during the Middle Ages in order to change the meaning to a male apostle. (Kroeger 77-82) It has been maintained from that time on in all translations in spite of the fact that "the masculine form is unknown in antiquity, and there is absolutely no literary, epigraphical or papyrological evidence for it." (Mullican 12) Messianic Jews who support women in leadership roles believe that there is sufficient evidence in the New Testament (and also from archaeological evidence) that women in first century messianic communities served in various roles of leadership. They assert that barring women from such roles is rooted in human prejudice and that the teachings of Paul need to be understood within their own cultural and historical context.

The Oxymoronic Role: Submission and Intelligence
The predominant view of women held in Messianic Jewish communities combines elements of Orthodox Judaism, (a woman's principal role as wife and mother) and Evangelical Christianity, (a woman is under the headship of her husband). These two viewpoints were expressed by the majority (95%) of the interviewees. By adopting both perspectives, Messianic Judaism reinforces the relational role of women to men. But, as the majority of the interviewees noted, it is a role which allows for a certain level of women's visibility in the spiritual work of the community, e.g. evangelism, teaching, and contributing to bible study, not often seen in traditional Judaism and Christianity. One of the female interviewees who had been brought up in an Orthodox Jewish home, attending an Orthodox synagogue, stated that currently as a member
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of Jews for Jesus she had been allowed to take part in evangelising campaigns in East London. She found this work liberating and spiritually uplifting, giving her a sense of value that she had not experienced in an Orthodox setting. However, as three other female interviewees admitted, they realised that any teaching or evangelising they undertook was always under the authority of male members of their community. Thus, they accepted the view that the ideal role for a Messianic women is "...to be supportive of the leadership and also be willing to take the bull by the horns in areas that men may feel uncomfortable with, that a woman could be very effective with, e.g., unwed mothers, teenage runaways." (Feher 123)

This ideal role for women appears to combine submission with some assertiveness. Nonetheless, Messianic women do not equate submission with tyranny. Submission to the husband only occurs when an insoluble disagreement arises and needs to be followed by prayer and discussion; if the disagreement persists the woman should accept her husband's judgement. (Harris-Shapiro 68)

According to Shoshanah Feher's study, many Messianic women have created a paradoxical view of gender differences and roles: "...secretly they perceive themselves more powerful than men...," but they regard submission as power under control and "...choose to submit, not because we need to," but because it is God's will. (Feher 122)

Though Messianic Jewish women are allowed to evangelise and teach, often only amongst other women, there are also some significant differences regarding the participation of women in worship compared to traditional Judaism. In some traditional Jewish synagogues women do not participate in any aspect of the worship: they sit separate from men (usually in an upstairs gallery); they cannot sing in a choir; many of them are unable to read the liturgy because they have not been given the opportunity to learn Hebrew and they do not take part in Torah study sessions. In Messianic Jewish worship women can sing in a choir, participate in congregational dance, sit alongside men, and actively participate in Bible study sessions.

In a small number of congregations such as Adat Ruach in Southern California, women are allowed to preach from the pulpit, but they are under the authority of a male elder or pastor. Women in Adat Ruach cannot hold the office of pastor or elder but they can be deacons. (Feher 122) To some extent, Messianic Judaism moved away from some of the restrictions on women's participation in traditional Jewish worship. However, they are generally encouraged "...to be more private, effecting change and exercising abilities in women's networks or under the guidance of men." (Harris-Shapiro...
65) This does not mean that Messianic Jewish women are expected to be silent on issues of faith and politics. All male interviewees said it was acceptable for women to contribute to discussion and all women interviewees said it was important for women to contribute to community life because it allowed the experiences and perspectives of women to be articulated, thereby fulfilling God's plan for both males and females. Even though women are encouraged to participate in intellectual pursuits, in most congregations boundaries are set to limit the progress of women. If a woman expresses views which are considered too assertive, challenging or overshadowing male authority, she can be chastised in public by her husband:

In a Bible study, one leader publicly silenced his wife, who had suggested a way to look up Bible verses, with a sarcastic comment: 'This is a helpmeet suitable for me?' (Harris-Shapiro 67)

Despite such occurrences many Messianic women continue to demonstrate assertiveness in congregational life. Their persistence began to bear fruit in quite significant ways in a small number of congregations. More radical changes took place during the late 1990s when two Messianic Jewish congregations elected to have women pastors. (Harris-Shapiro 71) Less radical developments occurred at other congregations, such as B'Nai Masiach, where women are allowed to be part of the prayer circles. These changes indicate that "...the role of women in Messianic congregations is in flux." (Cohn-Sherbok 83) Nevertheless, a lengthy process is projected because both men and women have to accept and "...fully integrate the challenges of women's leadership with the evangelical arrangement of responsibilities and authority between the genders." (Harris-Shapiro 71) The pressure for change provoked the production of an Official Paper in 2002 from the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) which examined leadership roles for men and women. It opens with the following statement: "The question of role differentiation as prescribed in the Bible is a source of great division and controversy in the body of the Messiah," and ends with the conclusion that a woman can use all of the gifts of the Spirit to minister to both men and women, "as long as she is under the authority of the elder and her husband if she is married." (Juster 1 & 12) This official statement attempts to appease the lobby for change by stating that the gifts of the Spirit are granted regardless of gender. However, the traditional position remains intact. A woman in a leadership role must be subordinated to the elders and her husband if she is married.
Messianic women are generally encouraged to attend classes on cooking and other family issues whilst men are instructed about leadership and spiritual development. This was the experience of all female interviewees. Some congregations, such as Adat Ruach in the United States have Women's Ministry run by women to teach and nurture women on issues, such as marriage, family responsibilities and their role in relation to their husbands and elders. More typically are the activities for women which are described in the Newsletter of the Emmanuel Messianic Jewish Congregation in Clarksville, Maryland. Women have established their own sisterhood, EMET, within the congregation and they run the Hospitality Committee, the Lifecycle Committee which helps families plan and arrange special occasions, such as Bar or Bat Mitvahs, weddings, funerals, Quilt Projects and Babysitting Co-ops. (Anon.999:2)

Conclusion
It is apparent that there are signs of change within Messianic Judaism regarding the role of women. Both proponents and opposers use scriptures to argue their particular perspective. This situation clearly shows how biblical exegesis can produce conclusions to fit one’s subjective view. Those who argue in favour of women in leadership are said to allow cultural pressures in terms of humanistic egalitarian arguments to cloud their understanding of what the particular scriptures teach. (Juster 11) Messianic Jews who believe that the Bible does not teach equal leadership are accused of allowing another set of cultural perspectives, such as patriarchy, to influence their interpretation of the scriptures. (Calise 9) Those who interpret scriptures through a patriarchal lens appear to totally disregard the historical and cultural context of the Bible and, as Wegner points out, ignore the way in which early Jewish writers viewed women “as person and sometimes as chattel; in some cases they treated her as both at once; and in context – the public domain- they treated her as neither, that is, they simply excluded her, thus obviating the need to consider her at all” (Wegner 176). Both sides accuse each other of imposing human agenda on God’s social order and of interfering with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Compared to Orthodox Judaism, the range and diversity of roles which women can play in the Messianic community are much greater. Yet, women are unable to undertake full leadership responsibilities in decision making and governance. Hence, the nature and practice of leadership exercised by Messianic men does not always reflect the model presented by Jesus or Paul.

As this article demonstrates, both men and women demand change to the present role of women in Messianic Judaism. Their demands might not appear as secular as would first be presumed because...
they seek a balance between the religious and cultural norms of the Hebrew Scriptures, rabbinic writings, and Jesus and Paul's teachings. Judith Hauptman makes an important point when talking about Judaism in general, "today, armed with the knowledge that Jewish law is open to change, women are likely to seek to become full-fledged members of the Jewish community" (Hauptman 249). Therefore, it seems that the central issue for the Messianic Jewish community is to be constantly alert to what they perceive as the work of the Holy Spirit and recognise that within their sacred texts there is sufficient evidence to argue for leadership roles for women.

Works Cited


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