

Messianic Jews and Academic Work

Editorial

This issue of Mishkan focuses mainly on academic work about and by Messianic believers. The contributions give a glimpse of some of the academic work which has been done in recent years and, in some cases, is still being done.

It holds positive implications for the future that people both involved in Jewish evangelism and with a mind to engage in academic study invest resources on scholarly works related to Jewish evangelism and Messianic believers. It is true that there is often some honor attached to an academic dissertation but this has, as a rule, been preceded by a time of deprivation — particularly for one's family. This can often be witnessed in the prefaces of these dissertations. Allow me to quote from Irina Livinskaya's book, which is reviewed in this issue of Mishkan. Her acknowledgments conclude with these words:

"I am especially grateful to my mother and to my husband who showed much patience and accepted with understanding my physical absence from St. Petersburg for long periods, and then my spiritual absence despite my physical presence in St. Petersburg, while I was writing this book."

Sad to say, there are still people among Jesus-believing Jews and gentiles alike who not only regard academic work on faith matters with a considerable amount of scepticism but even consider it dangerous to one's faith. But even as it is true that it is not a sin to be a Jew, it is also not a sin to have been given a good brain — whether Jewish or gentile — and then use that brain in the service of the gospel.

In my imagination I can still see the young Israeli Messianic student in front of me. Early this year she informed the board of a foreign mission society, which was visiting Israel, about the evangelical student work in Israel. Unprompted she told us that in her Messianic congregation she did not receive much support and understanding of her wish to start an academic career. On the contrary, she felt that some members of her congregation thought that she was entering a dangerous road.

When I heard this, I recognized the attitude I confronted when I grew up many years ago in Denmark — an attitude which hinders the hopeful learner.

It is true that academic work with the Bible has sometimes resulted in the biblical message being mangled. But academic work has also increased our insight. And if we consider the situation in Europe in the last third of the previous century, names like Delitzsch, Strack, Dalman — all people who were involved in Jewish evangelism — indicate that we are not dealing with anti-intellectual persons. Consider names like J. Lichtenstein at the Institutum Judaicum in Leipzig, or A. Edersheim in England — to name a few.

It is quite a different matter that there are believers with an academic education in responsible positions which they hold precisely because of their academic training who during working hours use their brains but switch them off concerning matters of faith and fellowship.

It is difficult to find justification for this form of anti-intellectualism in the Bible.

In Shema Israel it is said: "And you shall love YHWH your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with your whole might" (Deut 6:5). In Mishna Ber 9:5 "... with your whole might" is explained to mean: "with your whole property." The Hebrew word for "property" is mammon. Therefore, you shall love God with all that you have. It is a command to place all one's property and resources at God's disposal.

I understand this to include the brain and its activity! And regardless of how the Greek text should be understood in relation to the Hebrew original, I am grateful for the conclusion reached by the scribe who came to Jesus and engaged him in a discussion about the first and the greatest of the commandments: "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:32-33).

Jesus said to this scribe: "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34).

In academic work we are all on the way. What is self-evident needs to be substantiated and critical questions must be asked. Academic work on Messianic believers or the Messianic movement of yesterday gives us a better understanding of today's situation. Perhaps it is even possible to learn from history so that we avoid repeating its mistakes.

In my own academic work I have been enriched by being in close contact with the Messianic movement. I have also been challenged existentially, which is how it should be. It goes without saying that in a study of the contemporary Messianic movement as well as in an examination of the "Jewish Christianity" of the past it is not acceptable in an academic dissertation for a gentile to sneer "Jewish!"

I am looking forward to Messianic believers grappling with church history and the first-century christological disputes, for example. What the result will be I cannot say, naturally. But it will likewise not be acceptable in an academic dissertation if a Jew dismisses a viewpoint by sneering "Gentile!" Argumentation is a *sine qua non*.

In academic work you are — as in life — always on the way. We do not desire a situation in which Jewish evangelism is reserved for academics. But a lack of appreciation for scholarship in exchange for perceived "godliness" is equally unwanted.

No one can do everything. We need each other. Ignorance and stupidity are not a prerequisite for faith!

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