

# PHILIPPIANS

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

# FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC COMMENTARY SERIES

by **J.K. McKee**

*A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*

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J.K. MCKEE

**MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS**  
[messianicapologetics.net](http://messianicapologetics.net)

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## FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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*This volume is dedicated to the life and ministry of*

***Kenneth Kimball McKee (1951-1992)***

*a husband, a father, a servant of Jesus Christ*

**"For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better...For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Philippians 1:21-23; 3:20-21, NASB).**



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## ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	HALOT: <i>Hebrew &amp; Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	Heb: Hebrew
Ara: Aramaic	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
ASV: American Standard Version	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
b. Babylonian Talmud ( <i>Talmud Bavli</i> )	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old &amp; New Testament)</i>
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	KJV: King James Version
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament</i> by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Lidell & Scott)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	LXX: Septuagint
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	m. Mishnah
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	MT: Masoretic Text
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
Ger: German	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
GNT: Greek New Testament	
Grk: Greek	

NIGTC: *New International Greek Testament Commentary*  
NICNT: *New International Commentary on the New Testament*  
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*  
NIV: New International Version (1984)  
NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)  
NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)  
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)  
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)  
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)  
NT: New Testament  
orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world  
OT: Old Testament  
PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*  
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)  
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)  
t. Tosefta

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament  
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*  
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*  
TEV: Today's English Version (1976)  
TLV: Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (2011)  
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)  
TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*  
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*  
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition  
v(s). verse(s)  
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*  
Vul: Latin Vulgate  
WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*  
Yid: Yiddish  
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

# PROLOGUE

In 2006, I finished a lengthy project by writing a commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Hebrews is a unique text, as many verses can easily be taken out of context by someone who is unfamiliar with the historical circumstances surrounding its composition. Some well-meaning Messianics can assume that its author may be putting down God's Torah by saying, "since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never...make perfect those who draw near" (Hebrews 10:1, RSV). For Messianic Believers today, these kinds of misunderstandings can be easily solved by examining the text as a whole, and knowing that the statement being made is that the Torah itself cannot provide final redemption for a person. The Law of Moses is designed to show a person that he or she cannot be made perfect without Divine intervention, revealing our need for salvation in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ).

Hebrews has some statements that are admittedly difficult to understand without going to some lengths to reconstruct the background events its author probably addresses. It is a complicated text for today's Messianic community to understand. While I view Hebrews as a very important text of Scripture, as it affirms the Divinity and humanity of Yeshua, His superiority over the world, as well as His final sacrifice, there are other books in the Apostolic Scriptures that affirm these very same things using less complicated language. We can more easily reconstruct the historical setting behind them. As I was completing *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*, I began to pray and ask the Lord to direct me to "the next book" of the Bible that needed to be examined. The answer that I kept receiving was: **Philippians**.

Other than the obvious fact that Philippians is only 4 chapters compared to Hebrews' 13 chapters, and would not take as long to work through, Philippians, just like Hebrews, has statements in it that, which if not carefully understood in their original First Century context, can be interpreted as meaning something other than what they are saying—particularly as they relate to the validity of the Torah and the faith heritage that we have inherited from Judaism. The challenge that this presents is immense, because unlike Hebrews which is ultimately anonymous, we know that the author of Philippians is the Apostle Paul—something recognized by conservative and liberal commentators alike. If we cannot reconcile Paul's words in this letter to the words of Yeshua that uphold the Torah (Matthew 5:17-19), then what are we to do? I accept Paul's words as inspired of God, and think that we need to work through some of Philippians' "problem verses." I believe you will discover that we can do this without difficulty.

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is very easy to overlook when compared to some of his others. Some of Paul's major letters include: Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians, and all offer us some foundational teaching regarding the role of Yeshua in our lives, the spread of the gospel, and/or some negative circumstances that arose in the First

Century *ekklēsia*. Philippians is a short letter with few negative remarks, if any, made to its audience. It is generally a letter that people turn to when they need encouragement during difficult times, or are looking for a way to thank someone for being generous. It is not often a text we think of when it comes to “deep theology,” but it speaks profoundly to the condition of much of today’s emerging Messianic movement.

The Philippian assembly was largely made up of non-Jewish Believers with a handful of Jews in a Roman, Gentile pagan environment. They were a very small group of people on their own in the colony of Philippi. Paul addresses the Philippians with great affection, thanking them as his close, trusted friends. His exhortation to them is to be humble, contrite, and always be about the loving work of God. His only negative words are to beware of false teachers and for two women in the congregation to get along. On the whole, these are not difficult things for us to consider, and anything negative would largely represent the “garden variety” problems of any fellowship of Believers.

These are not the challenges that Philippians presents to today’s Messianic Believers. The ethnic composition of the Philippian assembly, its location, the miniscule number of Jews in the fellowship, and then the fact that Paul may have *better personal relations* with a largely non-Jewish fellowship compared to some of the largely Jewish fellowships elsewhere, makes more than a few Messianics scratch their heads. This is probably why few Messianic Bible studies have ever been conducted examining Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

The Philippian assembly is an example and model that has been preserved for us in Scripture of a type of fellowship that has existed throughout the centuries. It is a small group of people on their own in a largely hostile environment. As we rediscover and integrate the distinct Hebraic and Jewish character of Yeshua’s and Paul’s teachings into our faith, Messianics will often minimalize or disregard the importance of classical studies for understanding the history of the Scriptures, in particular the Apostolic Writings. But in understanding any of the Pauline Epistles and their unique audiences, this factor cannot be ignored. Ironically, knowing about the Greco-Roman history of Philippi is *the* element that has been largely missing in a proper Messianic handling of Philippians, and holds the key to many of the answers we need.

When we gauge the development of today’s Messianic community with Philippians, we see some distinct parallels. Since the mid-1990s, increasingly more numbers of non-Jewish Believers have been embracing their Hebraic Roots and have been drawn into Messianic congregations. In most of these congregations, the number of non-Jews far outweighs the number of Jews. While the first Messianic Jewish congregations were planted in regions with traditionally large Jewish populations, such as the East Coast or West Coast of the United States, or highly urban areas, the Messianic movement is now branching out to places that do not have large Jewish populations. It is branching out in rural communities and in states and provinces where the total number of Jews is only in the few thousands, if not the hundreds. These are the fellowships that are largely, if not entirely, non-Jewish. But our Heavenly Father, for some reason or another, has used sincere Believers who want to obey Him to form these Torah communities with His blessing.

Our call as Believers in Yeshua, whomever we may be, is to witness to the world around us by a testimony of good works. These good works are primarily demonstrated in how we

are to treat others with respect, compassion, and with the love of God. **These are all concepts commanded by and exemplified throughout the Torah.** Paul writes the Philippians, “it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Messiah” (1:9-10, ESV).

This would be the same prayer that I would have for any small Messianic fellowship that thinks that it is alone and irrelevant. Paul wrote the Philippians as beloved friends thanking them for their support of his ministry and for helping him. Today, regardless of how small (or even how large) we may be, we need to likewise grow in God’s grace *and* His discernment. If we can do this, then we can have the satisfaction of knowing that we are faithfully performing the work of His Kingdom. If we can live like the Philippians lived, then we can possibly avoid the more major sins that Paul has to address in his longer letters. But what warnings might Paul be issuing to us—were he living today—that are seen in Philippians?

*J.K. McKee*  
*Editor, Messianic Apologetics*



# INTRODUCTION

Paul's letter to the Philippians<sup>1</sup> (Grk. *Pros Philippēsiou*, ΠΡΟΣ ΦΙΛΙΠΠΗΣΙΟΥΣ) is not a text that is frequently examined by the Messianic community today. It causes many Messianic Believers to deal with a place and setting that they are generally uncomfortable with in the Apostolic Scriptures: the Roman world. In a Messianic movement that is dominated with a great deal of focus on the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language, and Jewish studies, our ability to deal with other groups of people in the First Century is admittedly in need of some serious help. We must use a text like Philippians to gauge where we are today as a faith community, so we can learn to truly serve the Lord in diverse circumstances. If we cannot understand the diverse cultures of the Bible—in *both* the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures<sup>2</sup>—how are we to understand the diverse cultures that we find today, *which are many more?*

Philippians marks the entry of the gospel message into the continent of Europe, and it forces anyone who wants to understand it for what it is linguistically, culturally, and theologically to engage with Greco-Roman classicism. As Ralph P. Martin explains it, “the main influx into the fellowship was from the heathen world.”<sup>3</sup> The mission for obedient followers of the God of Israel to go out into the pagan world is seen throughout the Tanach. Many of the Pharisees of the First Century B.C.E. interpreted Jeremiah's prophecy, “O LORD, my strength and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of distress, to You the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, ‘Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, futility and things of no profit’” (Jeremiah 16:19),<sup>4</sup> as meaning that they were to go out and make

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in spite of the common reference to Philippians as “the Book of Philippians,” I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Philippians or Paul's letter to the Philippians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant *to its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

<sup>2</sup> It has been my observation that while the current Messianic handling of the First Century cultures is largely in need of serious improvement, particularly when it comes to adopting a proper attitude toward the Greeks and Romans, many of the same who are indignant toward these cultures have no idea how culturally diverse the Tanach actually is. Whereas the Apostolic Scriptures span a broad period of approximately 120 years, the literature of the Tanach spans anywhere from 2,200 to 4,000 years with many, many more cultures to consider than just the Greeks or Romans.

For a further discussion of this issue, consult the author's article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

<sup>3</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, Vol 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> For a further discussion of this, consult the author's article “You Want to Be a Pharisee” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).