

Interview with Rabbi Herb Opalek

Faith Roots Media with Thom Berkowitz

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(9 days before Herb's passing)

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<http://www.citysitesurbanmedia.net/audio/Thom%20Berkowitz/FRM%20Berkowitz-Opalek.mp3>

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A. Herb's testimony

Thom: This morning we're talking with Dr. Herb Opalek. Instead of me introducing this great scholar, I thought he'd do it himself through a question I'm going to ask and basically: How does an Orthodox Jewish rabbi who learned the scriptures and the Talmud from the best scholars and then ended up teaching the best and the brightest himself for decades come to a faith or belief in Yeshua as Messiah?

Well...obviously, as I've said to many a person, God has a sense of humor, I **did** study in the best rabbinic schools in America and in Israel; received my ordination at a very early age [18 years old]. And...in line with the rabbinic statement, that one gets to know one's enemy, did my doctoral work on the New Testament so I could learn how basically to debunk the Brit Hachadasha...and...translated for my doctorate the book of John from Greek back to the original Aramaic with a light commentary on it. When I was married...in my first marriage, my father-in-law was THE recognized Jewish expert on mid-evil Jewish Christian debate and I knew the literature from both sides and, of course, I was not a believer in any sense of the word.

But, one day while I was out speaking, as well as raising money for a graduate institute, that I founded with a few friends and ended up in a hotel room, with the airline having lost my luggage. I guess I should thank DELTA for that (By-the-way, DELTA stands for Does not Ever Leave the Air) and opened up a Gideon Bible that was there, and opened up to John Chapter 3 and I started being upset because who would want to read something that I'd done a dissertation on and I thought I knew. As I read and reached Nicodemus and being born again from heaven, I guess even though I had all that book knowledge and even though I had been scrupulous, in a sense, in obeying **all** of the laws, it was only at that point in my life some 10-11 years ago that the Holy Spirit actually **entered** in to me and I finally understood who Yeshua was. I spent the rest of the night going through in my mind all of the Hebrew scriptures and finally understanding how they related. So that's how I came.

Thom: The whole difference for you...the game changer...was the Holy Spirit.

As it is for anyone who comes to Yeshua.

B. Why study the Gospel of John, again and again?

Thom: Herb, 30 weeks out of the year, I lead a community bible study—a non denominational bible study. Because of my Jewish background I lead it from from a Hebraic perspective. This next year.....we're going to study the book of John. Some of the 'push back' I got from the people is, "We've studied that...we've read that...so many times, why would we want to study it again?" What would be your comment to that?

There's the obvious answer which is when it comes to faith, John is the scripture that most mentions the word 'believe' or 'faith' than any of the other gospels. It is also, believe it or not, the most historical **of** all the gospels. And despite the fact that people said that Matthew is the Jewish gospel, John is equally as much of a Jewish gospel, if not more so than Matthew.

C. Super-secessionism (Replacement Theology)

Thom:A lot of Gentile believers that have been trained in the church that when Jesus came He brought the end for the need of what we call the Old Testament scriptures or the Hebrew Scriptures. How do you respond to something like that? You're talking about *super-secessionism*, of course...let's be honest. Paul in his own time was misunderstood. What Paul's teaching—most of his teachings---Galatians, and other sources, Corinthians and the like, where ever Paul refers to the fact that God is One, Paul is basing his teaching on the Deuteronomic creed that is so important in Judaism of "Hear O Israel, Adonai is One, Adonai is our God, *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad*; and what Paul is basically teaching is that the oneness of God is such that a Gentile must remain a Gentile and not become a Jew because God is One for the Gentile, and God is One for the Jew, and **all of the new testament, **everything**, is based on the Torah, on the Tanakh; and you cannot understand that Yeshua is the fulfillment of God's Word unless you give **equal** credence to the Tanakh.**

The **big mistake** that we have made—and that’s because of Luther---that we call it Old and New Testament. It is First and Final or First and Second Testament. One does not supersede the other. The **mistakes** that western Protestantism made because of Luther are finally beginning to turn and people in the western church are beginning to understand that the Torah is a necessary tool in being the complete Word of God. And one without the other makes no sense. And that was the lesson of course of Yeshua on the Emmaus road where He said that it is all in Him. That was the lesson He taught the two disciples.

D. Has the law been done away with?

Thom: A lot of people will bring you back to the Sermon on the Mount, where in Matthew 5:17-18, that Yeshua fulfills the Law, so that the Law is now done and we have a new commandment moving forward. How do you view that?

He equally says He has not come to change a ‘jot and a tittle’ in the Law, which in Hebrew, of course, is a rabbinic source...so people would have understood that. And He has not. That and the Emmaus road incident show that He is the fulfillment of the Torah and you fulfill the Torah in Him. That is why Paul in Romans speaks about the weak and the strong and the obligation of the strong not to critic the weak. We come to the Lord through who we are. If we are Jews, we come to Him through understanding of who we are as Jews.

If we are Gentiles, we come to Him as grafted in. The only way we can be grafted in is through Tanakh. The argument is really very simple: when Paul spoke...when Peter wrote...when John wrote...the only scripture that they lived their whole lives on was what we call the Old Testament. Scripture in Acts says that John and Peter continued to go to the Temple. Scripture itself says that Judaism was not superseded and that Torah was not superseded.

E. What/who is the root that Gentiles are grafted into?

Thom: When you say they are grafted in, they are grafted in to the root, who do you view as the root?

Yeshua! There can be doubt that Yeshua is the root because He is in the words of Paul, “the seed of Abraham” and we are of the seed of Abraham.

Thom: As I was studying...I always thought they would be grafted into the covenants given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And Jesus came forth from that covenant. But you don’t see it that way.

No, I see it as a direct coming...without the intermediary because Yeshua becomes the living Torah Himself. That’s why He’s saying, “It is fulfilled in Me.” That’s my understanding of those words.

And, BTW, getting back to your other question, and this might be superfluous: Studying the Judaic roots and the Hebraic roots of the New Testament opens up huge vistas that you don’t normally get to see.

I just wrote a little note for an academic publication. You’re familiar with, according to Matthew, the unknown disciple (although Luke mentions it’s Peter) takes out his sword and cuts off the ear of the guard, and I had always been bothered by two things.

Number one: I don't see that Jesus would have gone around with a bunch of armed people; and secondly, a group of armed people coming up to Jerusalem on a major festival, would have been a 'no no', as far as the Roman were concerned. They would have been stopped at the gates and the swords taken away, which was the Roman practice. But, if you understand that Passover is the only holiday and you go back to the Torah in Exodus and Deuteronomy...it is the **only** holiday where heads of households themselves slaughtered the Pascal lamb.

And it is the only holiday in the second Temple where it was not just the Priests doing the slaughtering. And you understand that it was a knife that Peter was carrying and not a sword, so that they could slaughter the Pascal lamb. In Luke where Yeshua, where Christ says you only two—that's because you always had a second one so that there would be no impurity in the first one; it helps you understand what's going on there. By realizing it was the Pascal knife for the sacrifice that was being brought there. It fits well into the theme of the Last Supper, and Christ in the Passover and Jesus is the Lamb of God. So understanding the Jewish milieu and the Hebraic and biblical background helps you understand what actually happened there.

It was the only thing that the Romans could not outlaw...people coming to the Temple to slaughter. It has been estimated that on the eve of Passover, 18,000 lambs were slaughtered...on that fateful day when the crucifixion occurred. There would not have been enough priests around to slaughter 18,000 lambs, if not members of the household. It's not fanciful because the Jewish sage Hillel became the head of the Pharisaic party because he was the only one who knew the answer to the question of: 'Could one carry a knife to the Temple on Passover that fell on the Sabbath so they could slaughter?' So we know this actually happened...that they were carrying knives.

Thom: Let me ask you: on one side of the coin you have super-sessionism or replacement theology, and on the other side of the coin you have this other teaching that Gentiles have Jesus, but Jews have the Abrahamic covenant, therefore they don't need Jesus to have a relationship with God for salvation. What are your views on that? There is one covenant with 2 approaches to it. And both approaches cannot get away from the verse: that one can only to the Father through Jesus. A Jew is obligated: shabbat—the Sabbath, kashrut (keeping kosher); he is obligated to do certain commandments, but his faith is not a works faith. Works is a matter of human designation rather than Godly designation. If you read Micah 6 about all God requires us is to walk humbly with Him. And when you walk humbly with God, that means that in faith you know who he is and not through works. And you understand that even in Micah, the Jew was obligated to come to faith. And the Gentile also comes to faith; so they both come to faith as the seed of Abraham because the commission as we read in Genesis to go out and teach the Oneness of God was given to Abraham by God Himself. So to say that that commission—the Oneness of God—separates Jew and Gentile from coming to God is heretical in the sense that it denies the words of God in the Old Testament .

F. Virgin Birth: The definition of 'alma'

Thom asks a question about the Virgin Birth—that there are those who don't believe that Mary was really a virgin—from Isaiah 7.

Herb replied: the controversy of what '*alma virgin*' means is age old; almost from the 4th century, up. But, there are instances in rabbinic literature of God inspiring the births of children. It is not an unheard of thing in Judaism. So there is ample source for virgin birth, even the rabbinic literature itself.

Thom: but they define '*alma*' in such a way as it does not mean *virgin*, it mean 'young maiden'. Herb: Right. They define it as 'unmarried woman'. If one goes back to the Septuagint, and one goes back to the Aramaic/Palestinian Targum, there can be no question of what *alma* means here. Anyone who really wants to read about this, there's enough literature out there that disproves the point.

The problem today is that we have a tendency to **read** into the scriptures what we want to believe—Isogesis--rather than Exegesis; reading **out** from the scripture what it actually says. It's the same example of if one opens up the new translation from the JPS of the Torah, Gen 1:1 reads: "When God began to create...", which is an apologetic because they don't want to begin: "In the beginning God created.." because then they would have to contend with John 1:1. So they just change a reading to make their own point. It's the same thing with *alma*.

G. How do your former Jewish student view you?

Thom: Now that you've been walking with the Messiah for, what, 11 years now...after all of your years of study what do you former Jewish students who don't believe....How do they view you now?

Oh, I'm dead to them. I am totally dead to them. When I lived in NY, I was spat upon in the street; got threatening phone calls; I was accused of everything from heresy to being a necrophiliac. People in general, when they can explain what someone has done...either label that person as demented, crooked, or whatever. You know, belief systems...if people are not willing to test their belief systems then they get their backs up, and want nothing to do with you and need to do more than denigrate you. I'm always amazed that people don't understand that you cannot have faith unless you doubt.

Thom: Are you seeing any type of loosening up in the greater Jewish community for an openness to embrace Yeshua as Messiah...either from the secular Jewish society or from the more rabbinic or orthodox Jewish society.

Orthodox Judaism: No. Conservative Judaism: No. There has been an outreach to Christianity from reformed Judaism and somewhat from secular Judaism. But its **very** 'light'. Susannah Heschel, the daughter of the great philosopher and my teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish philosopher, has written two books on the 19th century perception of Jesus among the Jewish community. Those books are eye openers for anyone who wants to see what is going on...even today.

H. Galatians 3:28—Identity or equality?

Thom: The book of Galatians (I get this put back at me) ...there is no longer Jew or Gentile...man or woman...they are one in God...why do you make such a big deal of studying from the Hebraic perspective?

Because we don't understand that in Galatians 3:28 there, that Paul is not speaking about *identity*; he is speaking about *equality*. There is a huge difference between *equality* and *identity*. We are all equal when we come to faith in God. When we come to faith in God, and Yeshua and Christ through our own identities; that it is important for us to know the identity of not only Christ Himself, but of His disciples and of those who wrote His scriptures. And that is an *identity* question rather than an *equality* question. We've turned it in, because of the women's issue, into an *equality* question rather than understanding it as *identity*.

I. Examples of misunderstood scriptures because of the translation:

**Parable of the "Older" Son; Parable of Lost sheep: Is it mountain or field?
Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, and Ps 22**

Thom: How about at the end of Galatians when Paul mentions that he's talking about the synagogue of God. Christians are taking that today to mean the church and no longer has to do with your Hebraic roots.

Yeah, well that's a total misunderstanding of the point that Paul was making. And there are plenty of places in the New Testament where one can misunderstand. For example, in Revelation 2, where John speaks about the synagogue of vipers and etc, there he is not talking about Jews. He's talking about other Jewish believers and differences with Paul and the Jewish community. You have to see how that term was used during that particular period. You can not abstract for today.

I'm mean...the whole idea of the younger and the older son in the parable of the lost son coming back and of saying that the younger son and the older son represent the church in Israel and one has superseded the other. There a total mistake based on a superscription that a printer put that this is a parable of the lost son; when in truth it is really the parable of the older son. Of how the older son refuses to knuckle under to God's will and to grace. That's a parable of grace versus works, and not church superseding Judaism. You have to look at it in the context of who Yeshua was speaking to and what he was saying, and how it was understood by the people when Christ comes and teaches and people were awed by His teaching. They were awed because He taught in parable rather than in *halachah*...rather than the straight law. So you need understand the method of teaching...who heard the message...and there are no contradictions in scripture.

You find for example, in the parable of the lost sheep, in Matthew it says that they were on a mountain. Luke says it was in a field. You get all of these modern scholars saying, "See, they don't even know where it happened!" Well, when you go back to the original Aramaic where the word ought to be '*surah*' or '*turah*' which is the same Aramaic lettering: one means field and one means mountain. And that's how it was translated by a Greek translator that we have the misconception rather than there being two other places than just one. Translations sometimes are killers.

Thom: Right and everything is context with the Hebrew language.

Everything is indeed context. And that's why it is so important to know the Hebrew scriptures. You do not understand the context of the New Testament unless you first see what is going on.

I mean, we have not touched, for example, on the question of going **overboard**. For example, the general consensus is that on the cross where Christ calls out, "**Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?**", that we say here that He is quoting Psalm 22. I have grave doubts about that. Number One, I think that more than anyone else Christ knew the scriptures. If He was going to quote Ps 22, He would have said, "Eli, eli lama azavtani". If you're saying that He's giving it in the vernacular, the common language that everyone used, it would be "Elohun, elohun, kima sabachtani". The word *sabach* does not mean 'forsaken' there. You do recall the Genesis story of Abraham trying to sacrifice Isaac? (**Tom: Yes I do.**) And you get the ram...the lamb in the thicket? (**Yes**) The Hebrew term in Torah for 'thicket', its only found there: its *sabach*, the same root for *sabachthani*.

Thom: Ok, so what you're thinking is that He is doing a *remez* to that section of the scriptures.... What He is doing...Look, Yeshua knew all along what His fate was going to be....Christ knew He was going to be crucified. He would not have lost faith at the very last moment. That doesn't fit in. But, as a dutiful son to a father, and He asks, "Why has it come to this...that I have not succeeded on earth with this mission...that I am now the lamb in the thicket?" It makes much more sense than the other and it explains the misapplication of the language itself in scripture. You loose in the translation...that's my point.

Thom: Right. That's a good point because I always explain that, that it was Jesus getting them to read Ps 22 because toward the end of it, it talks about the fulfillment of what he was doing.

Understandable! But, from the language itself, they would not have understood that it was Ps 22. **Thom: Ok.** Because He certainly knew how to quote scripture. We see that all through the New Testament. And, the language He's using is not the language of any of the Aramaic translation.

J. Is the NT better than the Old? Did Paul have more revelation than Jesus?

Thom: I want to circle back to Galatians 4, where Paul's writing between two covenants, between Sarah and Hagar, and his explanation. People use that as a justification that the Hebrew scriptures are done with; that all that we call the OT is past and the only thing we need to focus on now—going forward—is the NT because he said the New is better than the Old essentially in the two covenants. How do you view that?

Not very well, to put it bluntly. Paul, himself, as far as I can see in the scriptures was a law-abiding Jew to the end, for himself. I think if you go back to Galatians 2, the question had nothing to do with Peter sitting and eating no kosher food as people say. Certainly the instance with Cornelius had nothing to do with eating unkosher food. It had to do with what

came from the mouth, meaning how one spoke and the like and there were identity questions galore.

Paul would never, from a practical view point. If Paul felt that Torah was done with; if Paul felt that Torah had been superseded, Paul would never have raised money to support the Jerusalem brethren because that would have inimical to what he believed in and he would have allowed that to die out. **Thom: That was a great point. I never even thought about that.** Ok...from the practical viewpoint. From the theological viewpoint the question of Sarah and Hagar would take much more time than we have right now. But, that practical viewpoint ...that he was willing, knowing that it would cause trouble to act visible to bring the sacrifice at the Temple...he would not have done that. You see that Paul throughout suffered humiliation, suffered punishment, suffered torture, to stand up for what he believed in. He never would have; his nature was such, his zeal was such, that hypocrisy was totally alien to him. So there is no way he would have supported the community, under that Jewish leadership that still was law-abiding, if he felt that wasn't binding.

Thom: That is an excellent point. So as some feel that Paul has a greater and more complete revelation, than what Jesus had in the Gospels, that you would say that that is totally erroneous.

I would also say that that is totally heretical.

Thom: Heretical..right. They are the same because Paul expanded so much that Jesus never touched any of these issues.

There are three reasons for that, Ok? Number One: Jesus, He Himself was the basis of Torah, so that He left room for people to go in and interpret that basis. That's Number One. Secondly, if you read the Gospels...and people seem to forget that even though the Pauline Epistles appear after the Gospels, the Gospels were written subsequent to the Epistles. So, first came the Epistles and then came the Gospels in order of composition. So Paul was 'out there' and if he had misinterpreted you would have seen the Gospel writers fashion the story to denigrate Paul and they didn't do that. And thirdly, from a purely sociological view point, Yeshua's message was to a rural people. He opened it up for Paul to go to an urban Hellenistic society. The message is the same, the mode of delivery is different.

Thom: Great answer. Herb, I tell you that it has been a blessing to talk with you. We'd like to do it again. In fact, there would be a time in the future when we'd love to bring you in to Minnesota so that we could put on a conference and really tap into your anointing and the acknowledge, and the years and years and years of study that you.... Let me know when. I go all over the country whenever anyone asks. After all, that is what the Great Commission is all about.

Thom: Well that's fantastic! Have a great Shabbat tonight. Shabbat Shalom!
Shabbat Shalom!