

The Impact of *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* on the Messianic Jewish Movement

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I would like to thank Professor Garber and the National Association of Professors of Hebrew for the opportunity to present this paper. The publication of *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* by Dr. Mark Kinzer in 2005 marked a watershed in the Messianic Jewish movement.¹ In this paper, I would like to summarize the book, and then describe its reception and impact in the community of Jewish followers of Jesus.

Kinzer's book focuses on the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. In chapter 1 ("Ecclesiology and Biblical Interpretation"), Kinzer argues in support of a hermeneutical approach that (a) does not anachronistically assume a first-century parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity, (b) considers the ethical implications of one's theological conclusions; and (c) gives attention to theological reflection on Jewish history after the New Testament period, such as the loss of a visible Jewish presence in the Church, the survival of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, the legacy of Christian anti-Judaism, the Holocaust, the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, and the reemergence of the Messianic Jewish movement in the second half of the twentieth century.

In chapters 2 and 3 ("The New Testament and Jewish Practice" and "The New Testament and the Jewish People"), Kinzer reviews the major New Testament passages that weigh in on the question of the continuing validity of Jewish boundary markers of identity for Jewish followers of Jesus, as well as the larger question of the continuing validity of God's covenant with *kol Yisrael*, the Jewish people as a whole. Kinzer argues that the New Testament, when read canonically and theologically, upholds the calling of all Jews, including Jesus-believing Jews—to continue to live as Jews as a matter of covenant fidelity. As one example of a text that Kinzer sees as pointing in this direction, Paul writes in Romans 11:28-29 that "as far as election is concerned, they [the Jewish people] are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." Based on numerous passages like these, Kinzer builds a case that from a New Testament perspective God remains faithful to his covenant with Israel despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

¹ Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

In chapter 4 (“Bilateral Ecclesiology in Solidarity with Israel”), Kinzer argues that if Jesus-believing Jews are to continue to live as Jews as a matter of covenant responsibility, this requires an ekklesia that “consists of two distinct but united corporate bodies—a Jewish and a Gentile ekklesia. The Jewish ekklesia would live as part of the wider Jewish community, and the Gentile ekklesia would express its solidarity with the Jewish people through its loving bond with the Jewish ekklesia.”²

In chapter 5 (“The Christian No to Israel—Christian Supersessionism and Jewish Practice”), Kinzer surveys the historical development of the view that the Church has superseded the Jewish people as the people of God. He demonstrates how the Church’s prohibition of Jewish life for Jesus-believing Jews ultimately caused a schism within the Church, what Kinzer terms “the crumbling of the ecclesiological bridge.” And this in turn resulted in a wider split between the Church and the Jewish people.

In chapter 6 (“Jewish Tradition and the Christological Test”), Kinzer contends that “While the New Testament treats first-century Jewish leadership as culpable for its response to Yeshua, it also sees God’s providential intervention at work in this response. Once the church had prohibited Jewish practice—as it did at a very early stage—the Jewish no to Yeshua actually expressed its yes to God and God’s covenant.”³ Dr. Kinzer goes on to argue that Jesus remains among his people, hidden within Israel, and as the one-man representative of Israel he mediates Israel’s presence to the church. Kinzer holds that this Christological reality in turn validates the vocations and traditions of both ecclesial communities—Israel and the Church—which he regards as complementary.

In chapter 7 (“Jewish Tradition and the Biblical Test”), Kinzer maintains that rabbinic tradition is a valid expression of the biblical imperative to determine halakhah for the community of Israel and is therefore compatible with the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, Kinzer sees Rabbinic tradition as compatible with New Testament teaching.

In chapter 8 (“From Missionary to Postmissionary Messianic Judaism”), Kinzer traces the history of Messianic Judaism from Hebrew Christianity in the 19th century to Hebrew Catholicism and the burgeoning Messianic Jewish community in the 20th century. With each of these movements, Kinzer assesses their degree of consistency with the conclusions he arrives at in chapters 1-7. Together, the conclusions from these 7 chapters may be summarized as a case for a “bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel that affirms Israel’s covenant, Torah, and religious traditions.”⁴ In line with this historical analysis, Kinzer posits that the modern Messianic Jewish movement is headed in the direction of a postmissionary Messianic Judaism, which he defines in epistemological

² Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 23.

³ Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 24.

⁴ Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 264.

terms as a “form of Messianic Judaism that reveals the mystery of Israel in the heart of the ekklesia, and the mystery of Yeshua in the heart of Israel.”⁵

In chapter 9 (“Healing the Schism”), Kinzer concludes the book by putting forward three ways in which Christians can help heal the schism within the Church:

First, the churches should revitalize their efforts to foster respect for Judaism and the Jewish people among Christians... Second, the Christian churches should heed the words of Michael Wyschogrod and recognize that the rejection of supersessionism requires a dramatic change in the way they treat Jews who become Yeshua-believers within the context of the Gentile ekklesia. If the covenant with Israel remains in effect, if Jewish practice rooted in the Torah constitutes the proper means of expressing that covenant, and if Jewish religious tradition determines the overall shape of that Jewish practice, then the Gentile ekklesia should urge Jews in its midst to fulfill their covenantal responsibilities and live as observant Jews... Third, the churches should initiate dialogue on local, national, and international levels with the Messianic Jewish movement as it currently exists.⁶

What is the core argument that underpins the case that Kinzer makes in *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*? That argument, developed in chapter 2, is that the New Testament considers Jewish practice to be a matter of covenantal responsibility for all Jews, including Messianic Jews. To put it another way, basic Jewish practice for Jews is related to covenant fidelity from the apostolic perspective. It is on this point that the case for PMJ ultimately stands or falls.

How has *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* been received by Jewish followers of Jesus over the past ten years? Many Jews in the mainstream Messianic Jewish community (that is, those connected to national organizations like the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations) have resonated with the first five chapters of Kinzer’s book because the notion that all Jews have a covenantal responsibility to live as Jews, including Messianic Jews, is normative. Therefore, the concept of a bilateral ecclesiology makes theological sense. It stands to reason that Messianic Jews need communities where they can live out their covenant fidelity through Torah observance with Yeshua at the center.

By contrast, Jewish missions agencies like Jews for Jesus and Chosen People Ministries typically regard basic Jewish practice as optional for Jewish believers in Jesus. Most Jewish missions leaders are not persuaded by Kinzer’s arguments in chapter 2 and therefore see no imperative for bilateral ecclesiology. This said, leaders on both sides of

⁵ Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 264.

⁶ Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 308-309.

the fence grapple with the thorny question of whether Kinzer's bilateral ecclesiology has a place for Gentile members of Messianic Jewish congregations, a practical query that is not directly addressed in PMJ.

Without a doubt, the most controversial section of the book for mainstream Messianic Jews and Jews associated with Jewish missions organizations has been chapters 6-7 where Kinzer makes a Christological and biblical case for the legitimate authority of Jewish tradition. This section of the book bursts the bounds of what has been normative for decades in the Messianic Jewish community and therefore challenges many Jewish believers in Jesus.

A second area of heated debate surrounding PMJ has been the question of the soteriological and missiological implications of postmissionary Messianic Judaism. Here, it is not what Kinzer says but what he does not say that has elicited concern. In response to suspicion about his soteriology being dual covenant, Kinzer presented a paper entitled "Final Destinies" at the 2007 Borough Park Symposium where a broad spectrum of Messianic Jewish and Jewish missions leaders from around the world gathered to discuss soteriology in general and Kinzer's postmissionary view in particular. Kinzer further clarified his views on this subject in a lecture given the same year entitled "Yeshua, the Glory of God and the Glory of Israel: Motives for Postmissionary Messianic Jewish Outreach." The following year, 2008, Kinzer presented a lecture at Narkis Street Congregation in Jerusalem entitled "*Postmissionary Messianic Judaism, Three Years Later: Reflections on a Conversation Just Begun,*" where Kinzer summed up his position on soteriology and outreach as follows:

To be postmissionary is not to transcend the good news, but to understand its message as the realization rather than the nullification of the Jewish people's communal identity and destiny. *To be postmissionary is always to think of individual Jews and their future in relation to the Jewish people as a whole and its future.* Postmissionary witness to Yeshua involves a new orientation to Jewish corporate life, history, and religious tradition, but it remains witness to Yeshua. And, I would argue, a witness that is passionate, powerful, and persuasive."⁷

What has been the impact of *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* on the Messianic Jewish movement? I would like to briefly highlight three areas in closing:

1. PMJ has raised the level of theological discourse in the Messianic Jewish community. It has introduced to the average Messianic Jew new concepts and new vocabulary to describe the nature and purpose of the movement. And this has trickled down from Messianic Jewish rabbinical assemblies to the bimah to the Shabbat table.

⁷ Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God*, 189.

2. Related to this first point, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations in 2005 became the first national organization to adopt a working definition of Messianic Judaism that described in some detail how the Messianic Jewish community relates to the wider Jewish and Christian worlds, and this definition reflects a bilateral ecclesiological perspective. The publication of PMJ also in 2005 helped to solidify this newly introduced definition statement in the movement. It enabled leaders and members of Messianic Jewish congregations to be able to unpack the theological and practical implications of this working definition in their local communities. And finally...
3. PMJ has provided the Messianic Jewish community with something of scholarly and ecclesial significance to share with the wider Jewish and Christian worlds. As the first book about Messianic Judaism written by a Messianic Jewish scholar and published by a major academic publisher, Brazos Press, PMJ has been a starting point of discussion for numerous dialogues over the past 10 years. Many of these dialogues have been personal and private. Others have been more public. Included among the latter has been the Roman Catholic – Messianic Jewish dialogue, which Kinzer describes in his latest book *Searching Her Own Mystery*. Another dialogue catalyzed by PMJ is the Church and Messianic Judaism Working Group, which has brought together mainline Protestant and Messianic Jewish scholars for an annual dialogue at Southern Methodist University. PMJ also paved the way for the formation of the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Messiah, which has brought together Jewish scholars who believe in Jesus from various traditions within the Church, including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Messianic Jewish among others. And lest we forget, PMJ has also provided a reason for today's SBL session. In this sense, PMJ has made it possible for the Messianic Jewish movement to have a voice at *this table*, something for which many of us are deeply grateful.

Postmissionary Messianic Judaism is not an ordinary book. It is a book that has given vision and direction to the course of a movement, a movement made up of tens of thousands of Jews around the world today. There is no doubt in my mind that years from now the Messianic Jewish community will look back on 2005 as a year when it entered into a new stage in its self understanding and reflection, and in its ability to enter into a sustained dialogue with the wider Jewish and Christian worlds.