



Rudolph, David & Joel Willitts (General Editors).
Introduction to Messianic Judaism: It's Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).
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In the excellent, multi-authored work, *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: It's Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, editors David Rudolph and Joel Willitts bring the reader into the history and contemporary ecclesial milieu of Messianic Judaism. Since I am convinced upon finishing the book that this is a work worthy of a complete and reflective read, I will not summarize large portions of the book in an attempt to distill and convey all of the various arguments made in the twenty-eight related but autonomous essays. Furthermore, such a task is an unnecessary endeavor as

Joel Willitts has already provided an excellent summary of the main points of each chapter in his concluding chapter in the book. However, because I took some really formative and reflective notes on several particularly illuminating chapters, I will engage further with the book, in a separate series of blog posts carried out at truthstatic.com, in which I will talk about my response to select chapters and discuss some interesting parallels that I found between the ethos of Messianic Judaism and my own deep spiritual connection and roots in the worship and culture of the Great Tradition (such as that contained in the Eucharist Rite of the Book of Common Prayer) from my own perspective in the Gentile Christian Church. I would love to include these observations here, but their inclusion would mean that this would be a nearly 4000 word review, and thus, far too long to be of any help to anyone.

First, in offering my general assessment of the book I can say with certainty and enthusiasm that the book as a whole is a profoundly important, extraordinarily clear, extremely informative, and thoroughly entertaining work. I would imagine that for many who come to this work from outside of the Messianic Jewish movement, the expectation would be to read a book solely about the 'Jews for Jesus' denomination. After all, that is what folks mean by Messianic Judaism right? Not really (or only)! as, 'Jews for Jesus,' though significant, represent only one component of a much broader and diverse movement. Indeed, I was astonished at how little I knew about the Messianic Jewish stream of the Church, and I am really grateful to the authors for how much I learned about the movement through the book.

The book is divided into two main movements and then a third section which is a summary and conclusion. Part I - The Messianic Jewish Community, and Part II - The Church and Messianic Judaism comprise the bulk of the book. Part I is written from the perspective of those within the Messianic Jewish movement, from a variety of different organizations, and is the more eye-

opening of the two sections to read if you are coming from a perspective and faith tradition which is outside of Messianic Judaism. Each essay is clear and concise, and manages to be sufficiently brief to make the book casually readable in short intervals. The reader is drawn in, not only to information *about* the Messianic Jewish movement, such as congregational and synagogue life, women in Messianic Judaism, outreach, organizations, worship and Messianic Jewish relations with other streams of the Christian church, etc but also into the story of those involved in the movement itself. It has the feel of listening to people talk with you about something that is really important to them, really central to who they are, and then being able to hear *why* it is so important through personal stories about their own faith journeys. In other words, it is not just a manual on Messianic Jewish factoids, or a mere primer. It is instead a personal testimony and informative relational exercise in understanding those who are within the Messianic Jewish movement.

In Part I, the reader discovers a really approachable introduction to all of the major elements of Messianic Judaism. All of the Messianic Jewish organizations and networks share a common heritage in the stream of Judaism which finds Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. However, they differ in the way in which they perceive other various elements of the faith, including, for example, the covenant and the nature of the relationship of Messianic Judaism with evangelical Christianity, among other things. The movement is diverse, not unlike evangelicalism itself, and consists of many streams which can disagree on a variety of issues, but are pursuing a common cause rooted in a common cultural, ethnic, and liturgical/ecclesiological tradition.

There was a bit of a coherence and orientation issue that arose when I transitioned into Part II of the book, however, in that Part I seemed to have a more cohesive focus, namely, to discuss key issues in Messianic Judaism for readers who were in need of an introduction. In Part II, the Gentile Christian scholars contribute to a general vision which revolves around biblical texts and theological issues which deal with Israel, Judaism, and the Christian Church. Yet, because each essay was focuses on a different nuance or biblical text, the result feels to me to be more like conference proceedings from a biblical studies conference on Judaism and Christianity than a focused statement. That is to say, the essays have a certain degree of *general* coherence, but their specific approaches are unique enough that the section feels like a collection of articles on a similar topic, rather than a unified whole. This is not necessarily a critique, I suppose, but simply an observation based on my experience in reading the texts.

The basic take away for me was that Part I felt like an excellent introduction to which I could return for specific points, but about which I generally got the main point from one read through. Part II, felt like a collection of robust and concise articles from a truly impressive collection of Gentile Christian scholars which were unified in general theme, but quite different in style and particular topic. The third section, Part III is essentially a chapter-by-chapter summary of the book's content by Joel Willitts. Many readers will likely find this final section helpful for revisiting the many varied topics covered in the book. It definitely makes sense to include such a feature in a book of this breadth, even though I personally found it to be not entirely necessary

(The book's chapters are so short, if I needed a brush up, I'd just prefer to re-read the chapter in question).

Introduction to Messianic Judaism, would make an excellent devotional read. I myself had this sense of a devotional multi-ethnic 'Communion of the Saints' while reading a chapter or two each day, directly following my devotional time in prayer and scripture in Rite II of the Morning Prayer service of the Book of Common Prayer. It was really enjoyable to learn about this entire stream of the Church of which I had very little knowledge before and to consider it an act of worship and a pursuit of greater Christian unity. It felt like a holy time for me, and I would recommend approaching the book in the same way to others who have a daily disciplined time of prayer. It really helped me to get a feel for the movement and how to pray for them as I continue in my Christian walk.

The book would also be perfect as a primary text for any course, undergraduate or masters (or even a church program) on Judaism and Christianity, which seeks to investigate the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Particularly helpful to students will be the book's focus on the extremely negative effects of supersessionist tendencies in biblical studies and theology. Throughout the history of the Church, many interpreters worked from the assumption that the Christian Church is a *replacement* for Israel, rather than a branch ingrafted to Israel, and as a part of Israel in the eschatological sense. For nearly all of the authors from within the Messianic Jewish movement, this theological position, supersessionism, has an overarching power, the shocking and devastating effect of which is to erase Jewish ethnicity and culture. Correctives to this view are offered, not only by Messianic Jews in Section I, but also by basically all of the Gentile Christian writers in Section II, and particularly powerfully by R. Kendell Soulen in Chapter 27. This highlighting of the supersessionist position may well be one of the key powers of this book in the curbing of former theological trajectories which caused grievous errors and a breach in Jewish and Christian relationships.

In general, and in sum I find the content of *Introduction to Messianic Judaism* to be engaging and informative, the tone to be scholarly yet practical and personal, and the format of the entire book to be conducive to classroom learning and personal devotion.

Review by

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