

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Messianic Judaism: Evangelical and Post-Evangelical Trajectories**  
**A paper delivered at the 2014 Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature**

**Mark S. Kinzer**  
© Mark S. Kinzer

In October 2012 the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement approved (without a dissenting vote) a *responsum* on the halakhic status of Messianic Jews. In its opening description of the Messianic Jewish movement, the *responsum* treats the missionary organization “Jews for Jesus” as the prototypical expression of Messianic Judaism, and views the founder of that organization – Martin (Moishe) Rosen – as the seminal figure in the emergence of the new movement.

This idea [i.e., Messianic Judaism] was originally promulgated by Martin Rosen in 1973. Rosen was born a Jew but converted to Christianity and became a Baptist minister. He led a mission to convert other Jews, but when he found that they were not responsive, he came up with the idea that the impediment to Jews accepting Jesus was their reluctance to give up their identity as Jews and become "Christians." Jews for Jesus was his new tactic for converting Jews...

The *responsum* acknowledges that “there are differences in *approach* among the various groups of 'Messianic Jews,’” but the word “approach” implies that these differences are at the level of strategy and tactics, and reflect no diversity in the substantive goals which are pursued or the basic beliefs and values which give rise to those goals.

This portrayal of the “essence” of Messianic Judaism and its origins has become an unquestioned assumption in most discussions of the movement in the wider Jewish world. Many Christians likewise employ the term “Jews for Jesus” as a synonym for “Messianic Jews” and suppose that Messianic Judaism is primarily or exclusively a missionary strategy for making Jews into Christians. This deeply rooted viewpoint shapes discourse not only on the popular level but also in academia. In their short description of Messianic Judaism, the scholarly members of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement are merely adhering to a conventional narrative that they and other scholars of religion *know* to be true in advance of any encounter with the reality so described.

One of the great virtues of the recent volume edited by David Rudolph and Joel Willitts is the way it challenges what all had “*known* to be true” – not by exposing and explicitly countering such assumptions, but instead by introducing its readers to a multi-dimensional reality that fails to conform to their expectations. The book contains thirteen articles about modern Messianic Judaism, all of them written by recognized leaders of the movement. In the process of describing this movement, these authors dispel the illusion that it constitutes a homogeneous and static subset of the evangelical world which takes paradigmatic form in the mission agency founded by Moishe Rosen.

David Rudolph’s opening chapter recounting the history of the Messianic Jewish movement complicates the picture from the outset. He begins by distinguishing between 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant missionary societies devoted to the evangelism of Jews and Messianic Judaism:

...Jewish mission agencies did not promote Messianic Judaism. They facilitated Jewish evangelism and encouraged “converted Jews” to join Protestant churches, which assimilated these Jews into Gentile Christianity. Hebrew Christians who were employed by Jewish missionary societies did not typically live within the orbit of Judaism or identify as Torah-faithful Jews. Most were fully at home in the symbolic universe of Gentile Christianity. (27)

Rudolph then shows how the term “Messianic Judaism” emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a rejection of the Hebrew Christian model adopted by these mission agencies.

In December 1910 the first volume of *The Messianic Jew* was published by Philip Cohen’s organization, the Jewish Messianic Movement. The journal promoted the importance of Yeshua-believing Jews living within the orbit of Judaism and embracing a Torah-observant life. (27)

Seven years later the official journal of the leading institution of the Hebrew Christian movement denounced Messianic Judaism as a heresy (29). Thus, already in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century we see a stark contrast between two opposed visions for how Jewish disciples of Jesus should relate to the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition. It is not merely a difference of strategic “approach” or practical *methodology*, but a fundamental disagreement about the significance of Jewish identity and of the *ends* Hebrew Christians – or Messianic Jews – should pursue.

Rudolph then shows how the resurgence of the Messianic Jewish vision in the 1970’s obscured for outsiders the underlying tensions and disagreements that remained between these two opposing perspectives. The Hebrew Christian institution which in 1917 had denounced Messianic Judaism as heresy reversed course in 1975 and changed its name from “The Hebrew Christian Alliance” to “The Messianic Jewish Alliance.” The mission agencies, including Jews for Jesus, saw the practical benefits of the new terminology, and eventually followed suit. The identity-marker championed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Jesus-believing Jews who promoted loyalty to the Jewish people and Jewish tradition as *ends* rather than *means* had triumphed. However, the dominance of the new *terminology* did not reflect a consensus in the movement on vision and values. Instead, those associated with the evangelical mission agencies and their theological convictions continued to have deep-seated reservations about the Messianic Jewish congregational movement, and those identified with the congregational movement returned the favor.

Stuart Dauermann’s article on “Messianic Jewish Outreach” focuses attention on the difference between the Hebrew Christian orientation to mission and that embodied (ideally) in the Messianic Jewish congregational movement. He summarizes the “message” and “milieu” of Hebrew Christianity as follows: “The message was the gospel of individual salvation through faith in the work of Jesus Christ, the true faith (as opposed to Judaism), and the milieu where that faith was to be lived out was the church rather than the synagogue” (90). In contrast, “the Messianic Jewish ethos affirms the importance of ongoing covenantal participation with the Jewish people past, present, and future,” inspiring Messianic Jews to seek involvement with the

Jewish community as their milieu and to embrace a vision of the “communal consummation of the Jewish people” as their goal and message (92).

Mitch Glaser’s chapter provides a fascinating companion piece to the article by Dauermann. Glaser is the Executive Director of one of the oldest and largest mission agencies. Like Dauermann, he was one of the founding members of Jews for Jesus, but unlike his friend and sometime theological sparring-partner, he remains a major figure in the world of evangelical missions to the Jewish people. In his chapter Glaser describes the most prominent national institutions which identify with the Messianic Jewish movement, differentiating between those he calls “Messianic Jewish National Organizations” and “Jewish Mission Agencies.” In what insiders would recognize as a tactful understatement, he acknowledges the “tension” that has existed between the two sets of organizations:

Many who are part of the Messianic Jewish national organizations and the modern Messianic Jewish movement can trace their spiritual roots back to one or more of the Jewish mission agencies. However, there has also developed a certain tension between the modern Messianic Jewish movement...and the Jewish mission agencies. (121)

Glaser then states that the “lines between the Messianic Jewish national organizations and the Jewish mission agencies are blurring” (122), and thus that the tensions are abating. Why is this the case? He nowhere suggests that Messianic Jewish national organizations are modifying their views in the direction of the evangelical missions. He does, however, assert that changes are occurring in the mission agencies that bring them closer to the views of the Messianic Jewish national organizations: “Admittedly, a significant number of Jewish mission agencies were not previously supportive of Jewish believers in Yeshua being Torah-observant. Yet this seems to be changing” (123). Glaser emphasizes the commitment of the Jewish missions to the welfare of the Jewish people and to the preservation of Jewish identity. His article as a whole reflects an attempt by one of the world’s most prominent Jewish missionary leaders to think about the ethos of those missions in terms prescribed by their Messianic Jewish interlocutors.

My own article in this volume demonstrates that this reduction in tension did not result from a gradual change in sensibility, but instead followed a decade of intense turmoil and debate. Moreover, the debate was not merely between those associated with the Messianic Jewish congregational movement and their missionary colleagues, but divided the congregational movement itself.

My article, entitled “Messianic Jews and the Jewish World,” focuses on controversies within the Messianic Jewish movement in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These controversies stemmed from the thinking of a circle of Messianic Jewish leaders associated with an annual theological conference known as “the Hashivenu Forum.” The conference took as its starting point a set of core values which included the following:

- The Jewish people are “us,” not “them.”
- The richness of the rabbinic tradition is a valuable part of our heritage as Jewish people.
- Messianic Judaism is a Judaism and not a cosmetically altered "Jewish style" version of what is extant in the wider Christian community.

These core values were formulated as a challenge to the Messianic Jewish movement to *become* what it claimed to *be* – namely, an authentic expression of Judaism. Implicit in the challenge was a critical assessment of the Jewish integrity of the movement as it entered a new millennium.

Those who identified with the Hashivenu core values contended that the Messianic Jewish congregational movement, while forsaking particular tenets of evangelical theology related to the Torah and the status of the Jewish people, was as wedded to an evangelical Protestant *worldview* as the mission agencies whose vision it ostensibly opposed. This worldview became evident in the movement’s commitment to biblical and soteriological exclusivism. The former entailed a rejection of the authority of tradition in the interpretation of the bible, while the latter denied entrance to the world to come to all who had not confessed faith in Jesus in this life. These twin convictions alienated Messianic Jews from their fellow Jews, making it difficult to enter into meaningful conversation or relationship. These convictions also confirmed the bond Messianic Jews felt with their evangelical Protestant friends and mentors, who shared their distrust of tradition and who, like them, were among “the saved.”

The emergence of Hashivenu at the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ignited a firestorm in the Messianic Jewish world that encompassed the congregational movement as much as the mission agencies. As the Mitch Glaser article indicates, the flames of that conflict have largely subsided. As the rest of the Rudolph and Willitts volume shows, what remains is a diverse and changing movement in which post-evangelical trajectories have established their legitimacy beside evangelical rivals. The range of legitimate options in the Messianic Jewish movement has increased, and the center has shifted.

This broadening of the Messianic Jewish movement is also reflected in the new readiness of many Messianic Jews to form relationships and engage in dialogue with those outside the evangelical orbit. In his article on “Messianic Jews and the Gentile Christian World,” Daniel Juster – one of the founders of the Messianic Jewish congregational movement – tells of initiatives that have brought Messianic Jewish leaders into close contact with Roman Catholics. An informal dialogue between Catholics and Messianic Jews, launched by Cardinal Georges Cottier, Theologian of the Papal Household under John Paul II, has existed since the year 2000. Jennifer Rosner writes of the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of the Messiah, which brings together Messianic Jewish leaders and Jews from the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. She likewise describes public lectures in a Messianic Jewish setting which featured respected mainstream Jewish scholars. If the accounts of Juster and Rosner are given any credence, Messianic Jews participate in these projects with a willingness to learn and change, and not only with the intent of influencing their partners in conversation. This provides further evidence that segments of the Messianic Jewish world have burst the evangelical bubble which had encompassed the movement in virtually all of its 20<sup>th</sup> century manifestations.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in this volume to the missionary paradigm of Hebrew Christianity and the exclusivist assumptions of 20<sup>th</sup> century Messianic Judaism is found in an article on Messianic Jewish ethics by Russell Resnik, longtime Executive Director of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations. As is the case for most of the essays in this volume, the challenge is implicit rather than explicit. Resnik depicts Jewish ethics as the imperative of “reflecting God and his nature, fulfilling the assignment to bear the divine image” (84). He then

suggests that Messianic Jewish ethics are based on the premise that the divine image finds its perfect human expression in the life of Jesus. Resnik next draws two corollaries from this approach to ethics. First, he argues that Jesus showed radical loyalty and love for the Jewish people, and also for the Jewish tradition. Thus, Messianic Jews of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should do the same. Second, he shows how Jesus persevered in this loyalty and love despite the hostility of those who held power among his people. As Resnik puts it, Jesus “accepted his undeserved marginalization and transformed it into a position of service and prophetic testimony” (86). Again, contemporary Messianic Jews should do the same.

Resnik then tells of an incident involving a Messianic Jewish leader which illustrates both corollaries. This leader was attending a Shavuot service in a traditional synagogue. As it turned out, he was the room’s only *kohen* – a descendant of the priestly family of Aaron. Accordingly, he was invited to ascend the *bema* to recite the blessing for the first portion read from the Torah. (This is a privilege reserved for *kohanim*.) As he was coming forward, the Rabbi saw him, recognized him, and waived his finger and cried out, “no!” That gesture and that single word spoke volumes. *No Messianic Jew would be allowed to approach the Torah in this Rabbi’s synagogue!*

However, according to halakhah, a non-priest cannot receive this Torah honor if a priest is present. This created an halakhic dilemma in the midst of a festival liturgy. The Messianic Jewish leader in question could have reacted to his public humiliation by marching out of the synagogue in protest. This would resolve the legal dilemma for the Rabbi, but would also symbolically highlight the Rabbi’s act of shaming a fellow Jew – a serious violation of Jewish ethics. Or, this man could have returned to his pew and watched with a cynical smile as the Rabbi struggled to resolve the dilemma according to Jewish law. But the Messianic Jew rejected both of these options. Instead, he voluntarily exited the room so a non-priest could assume the Torah honor, and afterward returned to his seat for the remainder of the holiday service.

Resnik then makes explicit the point of his story: “My friend was displaying ethics on the margins, which is the distinctive quality of Yeshua’s ethics – even though Yeshua is rejected by some of his people, he never rejects his people in turn” (87). Resnik continues by citing Stuart Dauermann: “Even in contexts where other Jews might seek to exclude us and discount us for our Yeshua faith, we must never be confused about our solidarity with them. We must continue to contribute to Jewish institutions, support Jewish causes, and labor for the wellbeing of all Jews everywhere” (87). For Resnik, Dauermann, and our anonymous Messianic Jewish *kohen*, loyalty to the Jewish people and tradition is not an instrument for attaining an independent end (i.e., evangelism) but is instead an intrinsic value to be embraced for its own sake and for the sake of Heaven.

The Messianic Judaism encountered in these articles assembled by David Rudolph and Joel Willitts stubbornly resists the pre-existing categories of its potential Jewish and Christian readers – categories which are well illustrated by the *responsum* of the Conservative Movement with which I began this paper. The articles do demonstrate the continued vigor of the evangelical missionary paradigm in circles that identify themselves as Messianic Jewish, but even more they reveal the way many in this movement have turned away from that paradigm in their quest to live as faithful Jews. The articles also suggest that overall *trends* in the movement favor the post-

evangelical trajectory. To equate 21<sup>st</sup> century Messianic Judaism with Jews for Jesus, or to hold up Moishe Rosen as the seminal figure in its origin, is to ignore the concrete reality of this diverse and dynamic religious movement.

Those who reject the validity of Messianic Judaism may well retain their negative assessment after reading *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*. Those with religious authority in the wider Jewish world – such as the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement – might well render the same halakhic judgment concerning the status of Messianic Jews as is found in their 2012 *responsum*. However, the judgment they render will be more worthy of the ethical values they espouse, for it will constitute a response to an existing reality rather than to an artificial construct generated by the polemics of previous generations. In opening to outsiders this window to a much maligned and misunderstood movement, Rudolph and Willitts have rendered a service deserving of our gratitude.