



Shaping the Aims and Aspirations of Jewish Believers

By Richard Harvey

Postmissionary Messianic Judaism is a groundbreaking and significant book. While it will be condemned as heretical in some circles, others will welcome it as an important and programmatic statement for the future direction of the Messianic movement.¹ As a Messianic Jewish theologian, Mark Kinzer now joins the ranks of David Stern, Daniel Juster, and earlier Hebrew Christians such as Jacob Jocz, Joseph Rabinowitz, and Paul Levertoff.² Each in their time helped to shape the aims and aspirations of Jewish believers in Jesus, articulating their views in the context of Church and Synagogue. Like them, he will be seen as both seminal and controversial. It will only be in the light of further discussion, reflection, and practical implementation that his contribution will be fully assessed.

Kinzer's work focuses on three areas. It brings a new reading of passages in the New Testament that deal with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles on Jewish practice and how Jewish believers should see themselves as continuing to be part of Israel. It challenges the Church to recast its relationship to the Jewish people in a non-supersessionist and non-evangelistic (or at least non-evangelical) mode. And it calls on Messianic Jews to engage with the Jewish people in a "postmissionary" form of Messianic Judaism.

Kinzer has not written the book primarily as a systematic theology of Messianic Judaism, but as an overview and reinterpretation of New Testament teaching that leads to a fresh understanding of the relationship between the Church and Israel. This results in a call to Messianic Jews to live out a new postmissionary response of primary identification with Judaism rather than with Christianity. But the book amounts to a significant contribution to Messianic Jewish theology, and should be assessed accordingly. By building his argument around the nature of ecclesiology and his repeated call for a "bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel," Kinzer makes implicit but important theological statements on

1 The Hashivenu Forum (www.hashivenu.org) recently devoted its annual conference to discussion of the book, and a forthcoming edition of *Kesher*, the Journal of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, is given to reviews and responses to the book.

2 See David Rudolph, "Messianic Jews and Christian Theology: Restoring an Historical Voice to the Contemporary Discussion" in *Pro Ecclesia* (Winter 2005) Volume XIV, Number 1, pp. 58–84 for a recent review of the contributions of Messianic Jews to theology.

several other questions – such as the nature of election and salvation, the uniqueness and significance of Jesus, and the meaning of Torah in the light of the coming of the Messiah. The book does not develop discussion on all these issues, and we will have to wait for Kinzer's next volume(s) to see what position he takes on them. The assumptions behind Kinzer's argument will need to be fleshed out to gain an overall picture of how he understands the wider theological implications of his position.

There are many questions that can be raised about the book: Kinzer's brand of biblical scholarship will not appeal to those of a more conservative evangelical tradition, coming as he does with a more ecumenical, post-liberal and post-critical perspective than is commonly found in evangelical or LCJE circles.³ His reading of Jewishness, Jewish identity and what it means to be Jewish in the light of belief in Jesus will strike chords with diaspora Jews from a Conservative synagogal background, but not with Israeli believers who define themselves without such religious categories, or others from different religious traditions and non-religious backgrounds; his reliance or favoring of some New Testament scholars (such as Douglas Harink and Mark Nanos) over others will be seen as special pleading; he may be reading too much into the views of Jewish thinkers such as Michael Wyschogrod⁴ and David Novak in seeking a welcome

³ There are considerable philosophical and theological differences between the two approaches. See "What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry/Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered" in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), ch. 15, 338–360. Hunsinger suggests that the disagreements between Evangelicals and post-liberals on the nature and authority of scripture should not prevent them from learning from each other's criticisms, and affirming the many points they hold in common. A useful guide to post-liberal reading is Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Brazos/Baker, 2003), to which much of Kinzer's discussion refers. For an evangelical critique of post-liberalism, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (IVP, 1996), chapter 3.

⁴ Kinzer cites Michael Wyschogrod as sympathetic to Torah-observant Messianic Jews, as if approving of their belief in Jesus. But an alternative reading of Wyschogrod would still see Messianic Jews as practicing false worship (*Avodah Zarah*) if they continue to believe in Jesus. See "Letter to a Friend," and "Response to Respondents," in "Symposium on 'Jewish-Christians and the Torah,'" *Modern Theology*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (April, 1995) and David Berger and Michael Wyschogrod, *Jews and 'Jewish Christianity'* (New York: Ktav, 1978). A recent interview with Wyschogrod suggests this latter view:

In his article "Can a Jew be a Christian?" (May 3), Jason Byassee characterizes me as an "orthodox Jewish theologian ... who has written with surprising sympathy about Messianic Judaism."

I have written elsewhere that "from the Jewish point of view accepting trinitarian Christianity is not a good thing to do. In fact, it is so bad that a Christian Jew loses all sorts of privileges in the community of Israel." What she does not lose, however, is her standing as a Jew. Once one is born of a Jewish mother or properly converted, one remains a Jew no matter how many of the Torah's commandments are obeyed or violated.

Therefore it is not correct to assert that I am "willing to accept Messianic Jews' claim that they are still Jews as long as they act like Jews by obeying the Torah, keeping kosher, observing the holidays, circumcising their sons, and so on." If born to a Jewish mother or properly converted, I am willing to accept all Jews as Jews – though perhaps not as good Jews – whether or not they do any of the things enumerated.

for his position within the Jewish community; he may be interpreting the emphasis of formative thinkers of Hebrew Christianity such as Levertoff and Lev Gillet too much in the light of his own concerns. The raising of such questions is not surprising, as the book raises many important issues about the assumptions, method, sources, and content of a theology of Messianic Judaism, and to take it seriously the reader must engage with the book at several levels, and with a finely sharpened pencil.

There is much of value in the book, and it should be required reading for all who have an interest in Jewish evangelism and Jewish believers in Jesus. While welcoming the book as an important contribution to the development of Messianic Judaism and the formation of an intelligent and coherent theological tradition of which Messianic Jews are greatly in need, I have three main concerns. These are the nature of ecclesiology according to Kinzer (the *ekklesia* is the very thing that the book is about); the programmatic statement on how Jewish Christianity/Messianic Judaism is to be understood in New Testament times and the present; and the sounding of the “death-knell” for Jewish evangelism and mission as we know it today.

Kinzer’s ecclesiology focuses on three related questions: within the one *ekklesia*, how do its two constituent parts relate to each other? How “torah-observant” should the Jewish part be? And how should this “bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel” affirm Israel’s covenant, Torah, and religious tradition? These are all immensely complex questions. Kinzer deals with these questions through a review of New Testament scholarship, an overview of Jewish-Christian relations throughout history, and with theological reflections on the Church and Israel. But the book’s structure is somewhat unwieldy, and its central concept, “bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel,” needs further examination. What exactly does

this mean, as a theological statement?⁵ Other aspects of ecclesiology are largely ignored, as the focus is on the relationship between Israel and the Church. It seems to me that ecclesiology alone, as a branch of systematic theology, can not bear the

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weight of such discussion, especially in light of the further issues raised concerning the nature of Jesus as God incarnate, the place of the Law, the meaning of salvation, and the nature of the gospel for both Israel and the nations. Kinzer’s bilateral ecclesiology runs the risk of producing a “bilateral Christology” and a “bilateral soteriology” in its wake.

⁵ See the discussion in Stephen R. Haynes, *Prospects for Post-Holocaust Theology* (Scholars Press/OUP, 1991), chapter 1, for a number of models available for describing the nature of the relationship between the Church and Israel. The phrase “in solidarity with” can be variously interpreted to allow for the inclusion of Israel within the Church, the inclusion of the Church within Israel, and parallel co-existences of the two in partnership, complementarity, or even antagonism.

Kinzer's reading of Barth and his interpreters articulates for the first time in a Messianic Jewish context the fruits of a non-supersessionist, post-Holocaust theology, which argues for a new soteriology. The unacknowledged and unrecognized Christ is hidden within the Jewish people, incarnate with and within them already, and the Jewish *no* to Jesus is in fact, in the light of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, in accord with divine will. Direct proclamation of the messianic claims of Yeshua, unless by a Torah observant Messianic community which is not a "threat from outside" but a "voice from within," is unhelpful and counterproductive, continuing the trend of assimilation that results in the loss of Jewish grandchildren.

If I have summarized Kinzer's argument correctly, there are a number of problems. Barth's ecclesiology is both compelling, suggestive, and influential here, and Kinzer's reading of Barth is carefully nuanced by positive and negative assessments of the theologian by Sonderegge,⁶ Busch,⁷ Haynes, and Soulen.⁸ Barth wrote in the light of "the Jewish question" in pre- and post-war Europe, and his work has paved the way for the Christian reclamation of Judaism and the Jewish reclamation of Jesus. While he had contacts with Hans Joachim Schoeps, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig, his views on Israel and the Jewish people can be read both positively and negatively, and will be questioned by many. His ecclesiology (according to Sonderegge, but not according to Busch) maintains the double-predestination of Israel as both rejecter and rejected, the "hearer" of God's revelation but not the "believer," and this leads to a continuing role for Israel as part of the "community of God" despite their unbelief. Israel is still negatively assessed as the characteristic representative of unredeemed humanity. Barth's bilateralism is not of two confessing *ecclesiae* but of one community composed of the believing Church (including Jewish Christians) and unbelieving Israel. For Barth it is not so much the Jewish Christians who are "the bridge" between the Church and Israel, so much as Christ himself, including within his being both those who accept and those who reject him. Barth's christological election (with its suggestive overtones of universalism) leaves room for the inclusion of unbelieving Israel "in solidarity with the Church" though they deny what the Church affirms. If this

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⁶ Katherine Sonderegge, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth's "Doctrine of Israel"* (Penn State University Press, 1992) sees continuing elements of supersessionism and anti-Judaism.

⁷ Eberhard Busch, "The Covenant of Grace Fulfilled in Christ as the Foundation of the Indissoluble Solidarity of the Church with Israel: Barth's Position on the Jews During the Hitler Era," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1999), 476– 503. Busch has a more sympathetic view of Barth's position.

⁸ R. Kendal Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), chapter 4; "Karl Barth and the Future of the God of Israel," *Pro Ecclesia* 6:4 (Fall 1997): 413-428.

is a correct reading of Barth, Kinzer appears to have adopted the same logic, and a “bilateral Christology and soteriology” emerges, following Rosenzweig and Palikowski.

Kinzer’s understanding of Torah and the role of Jewish tradition follows from this reading, and is consistent with his own personal orientation and practice as a Messianic Jew. Kinzer is reluctant to indulge what he sees as the Christian (primarily Protestant) theological approach to the meaning of the Torah, which focuses on its purpose and principles but leads to an unsympathetic criticism and rejection of what is a positive and God-given heritage of the Jewish people. Kinzer opts rather for a Jewish “operational” understanding of what Torah involves in practice, emphasizing the observance of Sabbath, kashrut, and circumcision as the identity markers of the Jewish community. This approach to Torah reflects Kinzer’s desire to promote Torah-observant Messianic Judaism, but the presuppositions and assumptions behind such an approach are open to question. In the light of Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Torah (as explored by a brand of scholarship Kinzer generally rejects) and the post-biblical developments of Torah within Jewish history and tradition (which Kinzer is reluctant to critique), this interpretation of Torah and its place in Messianic Judaism will not be universally accepted and will need more careful justification.

The final concern I have is with Kinzer’s desire for a “postmissionary” form of Messianic Judaism. It is clear but unfortunate that Kinzer uses the term “postmissionary” for rhetorical effect, speaking over the heads of his immediate readers (concerned Christians) to an unconvincing and wary Jewish community who react instinctively against the term “mission.” Kinzer denies any positive sense for the term “mission” in the light of this misperception, which is filtered through the experiences of Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, and the Jewish community’s opposition.

Perhaps it is because of the North American context in which Kinzer and his “opponents” operate that he feels the need for “clear blue water” between himself and mission agencies of the type that promote “direct evangelism,” whether on the streets, in the media, by person-to-person visitation, or in the planting of Messianic

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congregations as part of an evangelistic strategy. Kinzer strongly reacts against the “religious and cultural ‘Christianization’ of other Jews.” But his choice of title indicates a “missionary purpose” of his own, to reclaim the Messianic movement as a movement with its primary focus of identity within Jewish “social space” rather than in the world of culturally non-Jewish Christianity.

Just as, in my view, the distinction between “Hebrew Christianity” and “Messianic Judaism” was a regrettable oversimplification and false dichotomy which plagued the early Messianic Movement of the 1970s and

1980s, and led to an immature and unnecessary hostility, so the distinction between "missionary" and "postmissionary" forms of Messianic Judaism also plays into the hands of those who would not affirm any form of Messianic Judaism which advocates in an

overt way the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah. Kinzer's use of the term "missionary" is to be understood in light of the "anti-missionary" response of the Jewish community. But this should not be allowed to obscure the original meaning of "mission" in Scripture and theology, which the modern missionary movement, at its best, seeks to fulfill as the divine commission to both the Church and Israel. True mission comes from the heart of God himself, expressed in his love for his creation through the sending of his Son. This *missio dei*⁹ is expressed in both the calling of Israel to be a light to the nations, and in the coming of Jesus as incarnate Son of God to gather his *ekklesia* from Israel and the nations into a renewed and extended people of God. If the Messianic movement is truly to be a part of that divine mission, it should not renounce its missionary nature, whatever the problems with terminology.

While Kinzer understands his work as "postmissionary" in its orientation, I would argue that his position represents an important development of an existing missiological approach to the Jewish people, that of contextualization and the construction of an "ethnotheology." Ironically, this may result in both increased missionary effectiveness and in greater opposition, accompanied by the usual accusations of deceptive and underhanded tactics that Kinzer is at pains to deny. As long as Kinzer continues to affirm the uniqueness of Christ, the nature of the Triune God, and the saving effect of the death and resurrection of the Messiah, then despite the promotion of Torah-observance, the reframing of the biblical narrative to include the election of Israel, and the rereading of the New Testament in the light of a repudiation of supersessionism, Kinzer's work will stand within, not outside, the tradition of mission theory and practice. Within the continuum of contemporary approaches in mission and Messianic Judaism, Kinzer argues for a position on one end of the spectrum, which others more conservative and evangelical will be quick to oppose. But he has done the Messianic and missionary movements, and those concerned with Jesus and his people, a service, by identifying key questions and showing one way in which they might be addressed.

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⁹ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991) for this important understanding of missions as a form of participation in the mission of God.