

*With boldness of thought and clarity of expression, Dr. Kinzer takes the discussion of the nature of Messianic Judaism to an entirely new level. And he does so with great love and respect for both historic communities which gave birth to this radical form of Jewishness. This treatment is destined to become essential reading for Messianic Jewish clergy and lay people who yearn for clear answers to the all-important question, "Who exactly am I as a Messianic Jew?" Read and enjoy!*

Dr. Richard C. Nichol  
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*Simply masterful! Kinzer has the gift of combining profundity with simplicity, erudition with pragmatism. He plumbs to the depths of Messianic Jewish identity with the care and concern it deserves. The Nature of Messianic Judaism is not the last word in Messianic Jewish ecclesiology, rather it is a bold next step in the development of a distinct Messianic Jewish identity.*

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MARK KINZER

# *the* Nature of Messianic Judaism

*Judaism as Genus, Messianic as Species*



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## Defining Messianic Judaism: A Theological Task

After a quarter century of existence, one might have hoped that Messianic Judaism would have progressed beyond matters of fundamental self-definition. Unfortunately, such is not the case. Our movement still struggles with basic identity questions. However, this struggle demonstrates more than just our collective immaturity. It reflects the complex, challenging, and disturbing questions raised by our very existence for two communities who, through almost two millennia, have defined themselves in opposition to one another. The precise nature of our relationship to these two communities and their histories and traditions defies simple formulas.

The task of defining Messianic Judaism could be construed in varied ways. One could study the question descriptively, either from a historical perspective (e.g., looking at the communal identity of Jewish believers in Yeshua of the first century and after) or from a sociological perspective (e.g., examining the communal identity of Messianic Jews at the beginning of the third millennium).<sup>1</sup> While of value, such studies cannot answer our real question, which is prescriptive rather than descriptive. When we ask, "What is Messianic Judaism?" we mean "What should Messianic Judaism be?" We are asking a theological question — what is our divine purpose and what is the purpose of our relationship to the churches and to the wider Jewish community?

The question is theological in another sense as well. "Is Yeshua the Messiah?" constitutes a theological question, but it is one that — for a Messianic Jew who accepts the authority of the Apostolic Writings — can be answered with little intellectual exertion. Elementary

1 Historical studies which treat this question include B. Chilton and J. Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament* (London: Routledge, 1995), J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991), and A. F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). Sociological studies include S. Feher, *Passing over Easter* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1998) and C. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism* (Boston: Beacon, 1999).

exegesis suffices. However, the question we are now asking is of a different order. It requires sophisticated biblical exegesis, and much more. How do we understand certain biblical texts, whose meanings are at times ambiguous, and which reflect a social reality drastically different from our own, and then apply them to our world? How do we relate to Jewish history after the destruction of the temple, and to the form of Judaism that crystallized around the *Mishnah* and the *Talmuds*? How do we think about the churches and their checkered history, especially in their dealings with Judaism and the Jewish people? These questions, and many others like them, are implicit in the deceptively simple question, "What is Messianic Judaism?" To answer them, we must do far more than cite biblical proof-texts. We must engage in the disciplined intellectual activity that we call theology.

## "Messianic Judaism": Theological Implications of our Self-Designation

### Original Intention

Whenever we employ new terms to describe realities pointed to in scripture, whenever we go beyond merely repeating what the Bible says in its own words, we are doing theology. New terms which gain near universal acceptance within a community of faith — terms such as Christianity and Judaism, Trinity, Sacrament, and Biblical Canon, *Tikkun Olam*, *Shekhinah*, and *Torah She-be-al Peh* — represent major developments in theology and spirituality, and themselves open up fresh possibilities for interpreting the data of Revelation.<sup>2</sup> The renaming of our movement in the 1970s was itself such a major theological development, the implications of which we have not yet thoroughly probed. What is the significance of the fact that our movement calls itself "Messianic Judaism"? I am not merely asking what we originally intended when we coined the term. I am also asking what the term itself implies.

Nevertheless, it would be wise to begin with the original intention. The self-designation for our movement's antecedent, reflected in the name of its most important organization, was "Hebrew Christianity."<sup>3</sup> The new name was given for at least three reasons. First, it reflected the fact that the word "Hebrew," used commonly among (Reform) Jews of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a religious and cultural self-designation, had fallen out of currency and had been replaced by the word "Jewish." Second, by inverting the order of the two elements of the compound term, from "Hebrew / Jew-

2 See M. Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Blaisdell, 1965), 1-58.

3 I am referring here to the Hebrew Christian Alliance, founded in Britain in 1866 and in the United States in 1915. In 1975 the American branch changed its name, becoming The Messianic Jewish Alliance. Eventually the international Alliance and its other national expressions followed suit.

ish Christianity" to "Messianic Judaism," relationship to the Jewish people and Jewish religious tradition was given new emphasis. "Judaism" became the genus and "Messianic" the species, rather than the reverse. Third, the change from "Christianity" to "Messianic" served to avoid misunderstandings, especially among Jewish people, for whom "Christian" often was equivalent to "Goy." It also expressed our desire to find new cultural and linguistic forms, comprehensible and familiar to Jewish people, in which to express our faith in Messiah.

These original intentions, embodied in the bold new self-designation, provided us with foundational principles that continue to shape our movement in constructive ways. Any directions that conflict with those principles are certain to lead us astray from our original purpose. At the same time, I would suggest that the significance of the new name takes us beyond these original intentions, into what (at least for some of us) may be uncharted terrain.

#### "Judaism" as Genus

What does the name "Messianic Judaism" imply about the movement to which it refers? The decision to use the term "Judaism" speaks volumes. As already noted, its role as the fundamental category or genus in our self-definition gives new emphasis to our connection to the Jewish people and the Jewish religious tradition. The term expressed our fresh consciousness that the earliest followers of Yeshua were all Jews and continued to live as Jews. Thus, the Judaism of the Second Temple period stood foremost in our thoughts. However, a vital, culturally-engaged religious movement cannot employ a term common in everyday language in a way that is substantially different from that in common use. Historians and archaeologists may hear the word "Judaism" and immediately think of the world of antiquity, but the non-specialist considers Judaism to be the religious tradition of the Jewish people, in all its diversity, throughout its history. Thus, we are claiming a meaningful relationship to the entirety of the Jewish tradition, not just to a Jewish world which passed away with the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and which is now accessible only through the speculative reconstruction of scholars.

Later in this booklet I will explore the question, "What is Judaism?" At this point, some attention must be given to the term itself. The word "Judaism," though coined in antiquity, has only become ascendant in the Jewish world in modern times.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the term "Chris-

4 L. Jacobs, "Judaism," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10:383-86. (Reprinted in J. Neusner,

tianity," it does not point directly to the faith-content of the Jewish religion. Unlike the term "*Torah*," which it supplanted, it also does not point directly to the way of life of those who live and believe it.<sup>5</sup> Instead, "Judaism" turns attention first to the Jewish people, and designates the religious faith and way of life of those people by invoking their name. Therefore, when we call our movement a type of Judaism, we are affirming our relationship to the Jewish people as a whole, as well as our connection to the religious faith and way of life which that people have lived throughout its historical journey.

At the same time, "Judaism" does refer to Jewish religious tradition. We could have called ourselves "Messianic Jews" without calling our movement "Messianic Judaism." The name "Messianic Jew" implies that the bearer sees his or her Jewish identity as fundamental. However, many Jewish people consider their Jewish identity important without finding anything of great value in Judaism. Just as the term "Jew" is meaningful apart from the word "Judaism" (though the converse is not true), so the term "Messianic Jew" is meaningful apart from "Messianic Judaism" (though, once again, the converse is not true). Though perhaps unrecognized at the time, the decision to employ the term "Messianic Judaism" and not just the term "Messianic Jew" was of great moment. It implied identification with the Jewish religious tradition as well as with the Jewish people.

Finally, the name "Messianic Judaism" implies that our movement is fundamentally among Jews and for Jews. It may include non-Jews, but it is oriented toward the Jewish people, and those non-Jews within it have a supportive role. This contrasts with the view that our movement has as a basic objective the *teshuvah* of "paganized" Gentile Christians under the yoke of *Torah*. In this context, it may be significant that many today prefer the term "Messianic movement" to "Messianic Judaism." The former term can easily denote a *Torah*-revival among Gentile Christians. The latter term cannot. A Messianic Judaism without Jews is no Judaism at all.

#### "Messianic" as Species

The "Judaism" in "Messianic Judaism" is thus of tremendous significance. The fact that we added an adjective — "Messianic" — is also significant. It implies that we see ourselves as a particular species of Judaism, and that we acknowledge the existence of other forms

*An Introduction to Judaism: A Textbook and Reader* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991], 405-6.)

5 Neusner, *Introduction*, 307. See also Jacobs.

