

*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!*

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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.

of Judaism that may justly bear the name. Some Orthodox Jews do not like the term "Orthodox Judaism" for this very reason — it implies that there is some other form of Judaism, a tenet which they find unacceptable. The fact that we embrace and identify with our compound name implies that our view of Judaism is broader and more inclusive; we may think our form of Judaism is the truest and best, yet our name implies recognition of alternatives. And, in fact, it would be difficult for us to do otherwise, unless we were ready to propose that Judaism ceased to exist with the extinction of the early Messianic Jewish communities, and only returned to the world with the emergence of the 1960s Jesus movement.

The type of adjective we chose is also important. Some modifiers used in compound religious designations convey a clear value message: we are the ones who have this religion right, and all others have veered from the true path. Thus, in the Christian world, the terms "Catholic Church" and "Orthodox Church" make claims which other Christians cannot allow — that this particular church is the universal church or the one that believes rightly. Similarly, in the Jewish world "Orthodox Judaism" is a term that implies that other forms of Judaism are unorthodox. They may be forms of Judaism, but they are distorted forms, twisted out of shape. Thus, Orthodox Rabbi Moshe Dovid Tendler refers to "the non-Orthodox (non-Jewish) branches of Judaism."<sup>6</sup> In contrast, other modifiers used in compound religious designations function primarily in a descriptive mode, though a positive connotation is always intended. Thus, in the Christian world the "Lutheran Church" is that church which is rooted in the teachings of Martin Luther, and the "Episcopal," "Presbyterian," and "Congregational" churches are those which place special emphasis on particular forms of church polity. Similarly, in the Jewish world "Conservative Judaism," "Reform Judaism," and "Reconstructionist Judaism" express the approaches of these movements to Jewish tradition and change in the modern world. They are all primarily descriptive in nature, rather than implicit claims to exclusive legitimacy.

We could have chosen a polemical, value-charged adjective for our compound name. We could have opted for "Fulfilled Judaism" (with its apparent implication that other forms of Judaism have potentiality but no actuality) or "Completed Judaism" (with its apparent implication that other forms of Judaism are homes under construction and not yet fit to live in). We could have called our movement "Biblical Judaism," implying that all other forms of Judaism are "unbiblical" and thus invalid. Of course, these terms can be used among us with-

6 M. D. Tendler, "Harsh Words," *Moment* 23:4 (August 1998), 36-37.

out intending such denigrating implications. Still, it is significant that the term we selected was one which is primarily descriptive in nature, while also containing a strong claim to a unique position within the world of Judaism. Ours is the Judaism that believes that the Messiah has come, and that his name is Yeshua of Nazareth. Ours is also a Judaism in which the proclamation of the coming Messianic era is central to the way Jewish teaching is construed. In this latter sense, ours is not the only expression of "Messianic Judaism" (Lubavitcher *Chasidim* and Israeli Religious Nationalists would also qualify). Understood in the former more restricted sense, however, we have no others in the Jewish world who would dispute our claim to the modifier. Dispute arises not over the modifier, but over the noun modified — our claim to be "Judaism."

Thus, while affirming clearly and distinctly who we are and what we believe, our name also speaks about our relationship to the wider Jewish world. We cannot deny the legitimacy of other forms of Judaism, for without them we would have no Judaism. The Jewish way of life we live derives from these other forms of Judaism, and we must be grateful to them for handing it on to us. At the same time, we believe that we have something crucial to pass on to them. We have a message about the Messiah whom many of them await and who has come to give them access to unexpected treasures.

More can be learned about the theological significance of our name by probing further one of the alternative species designations mentioned above — "Biblical Judaism." While not employed by any Messianic Jewish groups as a replacement for "Messianic Judaism," it is commonly used as a description of Messianic Judaism — "Messianic Judaism is Biblical Judaism."<sup>7</sup> Is this true? Or, perhaps more to the point, what does it mean, and is that meaning appropriate to our reality?

"Biblical Judaism" could refer descriptively to the Judaism of biblical times. Most biblical scholars would refrain from using the term "Judaism" to describe pre-exilic Judahite or Israelite religion, and would contend that "Judaism" begins in the post-exilic period and finds its great champion in Ezra.<sup>8</sup> If this rule of nomenclature is followed, then "Biblical Judaism," understood as a historical and descrip-

7 Our faith is the Judaism of the Bible (Biblical Judaism)," D. Chernoff, *Messianic Judaism* (Havertown: MMI, 1990), 2. To his credit, Chernoff seeks to employ this term in a way that does not totally undercut other forms of Judaism: "We respect all other forms of Judaism, but we believe that we have found the long-promised messiah of Israel and that our faith is Biblical Judaism" (*Jerusalem Report* 10:20 [January 31, 2000], 56).

8 G. F. Moore, *Judaism, Volume I* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997; original edition 1927), 1.

tive term, would have a rather narrow application — to the Judaism of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the post-exilic prophets. This is probably not what those Messianic Jews mean who claim to practice “Biblical Judaism.” Perhaps they understand the term “Biblical” to include the Apostolic Writings. If so, they would be speaking of the Judaism practiced by Yeshua and his emissaries. However, of what value is such a term? If “Bible” is defined in this way — as including the Apostolic Writings — then other Jews would have no problem in conceding the claim that “Messianic Judaism” is “Biblical.” However, those Jews would then argue that this is a Christian rather than a Jewish way of defining “Bible,” thereby gaining support for their contention that Messianic Judaism is no Judaism at all. Given these problems, it is unlikely that any thoughtful Messianic Jews would characterize their religious life as “Biblical Judaism” in this descriptive and historical sense.

“Biblical Judaism” could also refer descriptively to a form of Judaism that treated the Bible as its sole authority for teaching on matters of ultimate religious significance (the *sola scriptura* of the Protestant Reformers). Messianic Jews who used the term in this way would be contrasting their faith with that of Rabbinic Judaism, which ascribes to Rabbinic tradition (the “Oral Torah”) binding authority as the necessary complement to scripture. It is worth noting that, understood in this way, the name has already been taken — the *Karaites* (meaning “Scripture-ites”) adopted the term, and used it for just this purpose: to oppose the binding authority of Rabbinic tradition.<sup>9</sup> However, there is another problem with Messianic Jewish appropriation of the term. Once again, the meaning of the word “Bible” is ambiguous. Are these Messianic Jews claiming — like the *Karaites* — to hold only *Tanakh* as ultimately authoritative? Or are they instead, like the Protestant Reformers, including the Apostolic Writings as part of the “Bible”? The latter seems more likely. If so, these Messianic Jews are elevating the Apostolic Writings to a level analogous to that held in Rabbinic Judaism by the *Talmud*. The contrast then between Messianic Judaism (so conceived) and Rabbinic Judaism is not between those who hold the Bible to be the sole authority and those who do not, but between those who think the Apostolic tradition essential in interpreting *Tanakh* and those who see Rabbinic tradition as serving this function. The fact that followers of Yeshua use the same word — Biblical — to refer to *Tanakh* and the Apostolic Writings, whereas Rabbinic tradition distinguishes

9 On the *Karaites*, see H. H. Ben-Sasson, “The Middle Ages,” in a volume he edited, *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 441-2, 448-52.

carefully between *Mikrah* and *Mishnah*, can obscure this correspondence in function between the Apostolic Writings and *Mishnah*.<sup>10</sup> Once equivocation is removed and terms are defined in the same way, Messianic Judaism is no more “Biblical” (in this second descriptive sense of the term) than is Rabbinic Judaism.

Even if one looked past this equivocation and assumed Messianic Jewish inclusion of the Apostolic Writings within the Biblical Canon, there would still be a problem with this notion of Messianic Judaism as “Biblical Judaism.” It is the same problem that confronted the *Karaites*. Is it possible to construct a viable form of Judaism with only the Bible as an authoritative sourcebook? Does the Bible provide sufficient practical detail to enable us to keep *kosher*, hold a *seder*, observe *Shabbat*, fashion *tzitzit*, and lay *tefillin*? Is it possible to have a Judaism that is truly *Jewish* (i.e., in accord with the sensibilities of the Jewish people) without drawing upon the *Siddur*, the *Machzor*, or the *Haggadah*? Undoubtedly Messianic Judaism must ascribe unique authority to *Tanakh* and the Apostolic Writings, and subordinate all other authorities to their all-encompassing, overruling, and ultimate scrutiny. In this sense Messianic Judaism could perhaps be called “Biblical Judaism.” However, a strict construal of *sola scriptura* as denying Rabbinic tradition any role in determining Jewish teaching and practice cannot succeed in the long-run (a truth recognized eventually even by the *Karaites*).<sup>11</sup>

These two descriptive uses of the term “Biblical Judaism” — the one using “Biblical” in a historical sense, the other in reference to the source of religious authority — are probably not primary in the minds of those who embrace it as equivalent to “Messianic Judaism.” Like “Catholic Church” and “Orthodox Judaism,” “Biblical Judaism” appears to be employed by its advocates as a value-charged polemical claim rather than as an objective description usable outside the ranks of the already committed. It implies the assertion that Messianic Judaism is in accord with the Bible’s true message, that it is the one form of Judaism that expresses the divine intention for the Jewish people found in the Bible. It also implies that other forms of Judaism are unbiblical — they are merely human inventions, which have no foundation in the Word of God. Those familiar with the idiom of popular evangelical piety know that the adjectives “biblical” and “unbiblical” are often used as equivalent to “good” and “bad.” In fact, “unbiblical” is usually taken to mean “contrary to the Bible,” with the underlying assumption that all

10 H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), xiii.

11 Neusner, *Introduction*, 284.

propositions or behavior are either biblically sanctioned or biblically proscribed, with no middle ground. It is this world of popular evangelical piety that provides the background essential to understanding the term "Biblical Judaism" as it is often used in the Messianic Jewish movement.

On the all-important matter of Yeshua's identity as Messiah of Israel, Messianic Jews can and should claim to be more "biblical" than their non-Messianic Jewish compatriots. We believe and affirm the message of the Apostolic Writings, that the words of the *Torah* point to Yeshua (John 5:46), and that the Good News concerning Yeshua was "promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures" (Rom 1:2). Along with Philip, we can say "We have found Him of whom Moses in the *Torah* and also the prophets wrote, Yeshua of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). This does not mean that in every case the traditional proof-texting apologetics of the missionaries bests the exegetical efforts of the anti-missionaries. It does mean that we see *Tanakh* as a whole speaking of Messiah Yeshua. As Alfred Edersheim put it,

These remarks are not intended to deprecate the application of individual prophecies to Christ; only to correct a one-sided and mechanical literalism that exhausts itself in fruitless verbal controversies in which it is not infrequently worsted. . . We fully and gladly add that even in strict exegesis many special predictions can be only Messianically interpreted. But we believe still more that the Old Testament as a whole is Messianic, and full of Christ; and we wish this to be first properly apprehended, that so from this point of view the Messianic prophecies may be studied in detail. Then only shall we understand their real purport and meaning, and perceive, without word-cavilling, that they must refer to the Messiah.<sup>12</sup> (Edersheim, 112-13)

In this sense, we may boldly speak of our "Biblical Judaism," for we proclaim the One who is Himself the fullness of *Torah*.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that in many ways other forms of Judaism are more "biblical" than we are. Do we observe *Shabbat* as well as other branches of Judaism? Do we transmit Jewish identity as well as other branches of Judaism? Do we practice *tzedakah* as well as other branches of Judaism? Do we show as much reverence in our worship and in our treatment of holy things (e.g.,

12 A. Edersheim, *Prophecy and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980; original edition 1885), 112-3.

texts containing the Divine name)? Are we as committed to social justice? Are we as zealous in avoiding *Lashon HaRa*? Are our families as healthy, stable, and loving? All of this is part of being truly "biblical," in the value-charged sense of living in accordance with the Divine Word. Thus, as soon as one looks beyond the strictly Christological significance of the claim to represent the true "Biblical Judaism," this claim appears less and less compelling.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that "Messianic Judaism" is far superior to "Biblical Judaism" as the fundamental designation for our movement, and that the latter term suffers such great liabilities as to render it largely useless even as a secondary self-description.

The adjective in our term of self-designation — "Messianic" — is thus significant in part because of what it is not (i.e., it is not polemical or value-charged). However, it is even more significant because of what it affirms. The term indicates that the distinctive feature of our Judaism is Yeshua the Messiah. This does not mean that we merely add faith in Yeshua to a preexisting religious system, "Generic Judaism," in order to produce the sum, Messianic Judaism. There are Messianic Jews who do just this, but the result is not Messianic Judaism. It may be Messianic, and it may be Judaism, but the integrated whole implicit in the compound term, Messianic Judaism, is not in evidence. Instead, Messianic Judaism is Judaism, in all facets of its teaching, worship, and way of life, understood and practiced in the light of Messiah Yeshua. In Messianic Judaism the *Torah* is read with reverence, just as in all other form of Judaism, but it is heard by those who find in Yeshua the fullness of *Torah*. In Messianic Judaism one can pray the Amidah in its traditional form, unamended, with the traditional understanding that one is thereby sharing in the fulfillment of Israel's communal obligation of worship expressed in Temple times by the daily sacrificial offerings. However, he or she would also recognize that the supreme fulfillment of that worship is found in Yeshua's self-offering, and that Israel's gift of prayer is now acceptable to God in and through its high priestly Messiah. In Messianic Judaism the Sabbath and the Festivals are observed, much as in other forms of Judaism, but their preliminary eschatological fulfillment in Messiah Yeshua is proclaimed and celebrated, and their final eschatological fulfillment in Him is anticipated and sought. Traditional forms of Judaism provide the fundamental way of life and thought, but they are all given new depths of meaning through union with Messiah in the Spirit.

A parallel to this integrated re-interpretation of the entirety of

the tradition may be found in the annals of Jewish mysticism. The *Zohar* consists of a mystical commentary on the *Torah*. The *Torah* is of highest authority, and *Talmudic* personages and idioms are invoked, but all is seen in a new light — the light of the *Sefirot* (the divine energies which emanate from the hidden ground of Divinity, *Eyn Sof*).<sup>13</sup> Issac Luria and his contemporaries and heirs continued this process in 16th century Tzefat, developing the new theological system and re-interpreting traditional practices in light of it.<sup>14</sup> Now the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* is not merely an expression of Israel's covenant love and duty, but is also a means of bringing unity to the fragmented inner world of the divinity and healing (*tikkun*) to the cosmos. Judaism as a system of life and thought remains intact, but it is at the same time transformed by the new perspective from which it is considered.<sup>15</sup>

Something similar is required of Messianic Judaism if it is to live up to its name. What distinguishes Messianic Judaism from other forms of Judaism is not a particular doctrine or practice, but the way the entirety of the tradition is perceived and lived. This does not entail the destruction of traditional Judaism, any more than did Kabbalistic theology. Instead, Messianic Judaism must digest the tradition and make it part of itself, while at the same time transforming it into something new.

### Inspired Tradition?

While still immature as a movement, we have now existed long enough to have something of our own tradition to draw upon. The sources which theology probes consist not only of canonical texts but also of the traditions of the community in which the theologian lives, worships, and conducts his or her scholarly craft. Theology is always "earthed" in a particular communal context.<sup>16</sup> The theologian scrutinizes the traditions of his or her community both in order to test them to see whether they are faithful to the fundamental truths that the community affirms, and also in order to find in them new insights into those fundamental truths. Sometimes traditions are mere cus-

13 G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 87-128.

14 G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 244-86.

15 *Major Trends*, 28-32.

16 D. M. Hay, "Pauline Theology after Paul," in *Pauline Theology, Volume IV*, ed. by E. E. Johnson and D. M. Hay (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 183.

toms (*minhagim*) of thought and life, with only passing or local significance.<sup>17</sup> This is "tradition" with a small "t." But sometimes traditions emerge as earthly responses to heavenly impulses (as oral *Torah*), and shed new light on a familiar landscape. This is "Tradition" with a capital "T."

I would like to suggest that our movement's name constitutes its clearest and most valuable Tradition (with a capital "T"). It tells us more than we have yet allowed ourselves to hear, about who we are and about how we are related to the two rival communities whose heritage we share. More careful attention to the implications of what we have called ourselves — and, perhaps, of what we have been called by One far greater than we — will foster growth toward a secure and mature identity as Messianic Jews practicing an authentic and integrated Messianic Judaism.

17 Though in Rabbinic thought even *Minhagim* are treated reverently and accorded authority. See S. N. Hoenig, *The Essence of Talmudic Law and Thought* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1993), 21-2.



## Theological Justification of "Messianic Judaism"

### Introduction

To this point I have argued that our chosen term of self-designation — Messianic Judaism — implies a set of claims about the nature of our movement, the nature of the wider Jewish world, and the relationship between the two. Those claims are as follows: (1) Our genus of self-definition is Judaism, rather than Christianity, and our Messianic spirituality and hermeneutic is the specific difference distinguishing us from other forms of Judaism; (2) As a form of Judaism, we are oriented toward the Jewish people and are not a Torah-revival for Gentiles seeking the pristine, unadulterated faith; (3) We acknowledge the legitimacy of other forms of Judaism, as well as our dependence upon them; (4) We believe that we have something unique and of great importance to contribute to the wider Jewish world and to those other forms of Judaism.

While arguing that our name implies such claims, I have not yet attempted to justify the claims themselves or to set them in a broader theological context. How can we identify primarily as Jews and with Judaism and accept the legitimacy of Jewish tradition, when that tradition has emphatically denied the Messiahship of Yeshua and has insulated Jewish people from his influence? Does such identification not violate the unity of the Body of Messiah and place natural kinship ahead of spiritual kinship? In this second part of the booklet I will attempt to address these questions. In addition, we must ask ourselves what such an understanding of Messianic Judaism means for a local Messianic Jewish congregation, with its usual high proportion of non-Jewish participants.

We will begin by considering the nature of Judaism itself. Then we will attempt to theologially assess the heritage of post-Yeshua Judaism. Finally, we will take up the crucial question of ecclesiology and ask how

the view of Messianic Judaism propounded here can be reconciled with the nature of the *ekklesia* as presented in the Apostolic Writings.<sup>18</sup>

### What is Judaism?

The matter of determining who and what is a Jew has proved to be one of the most contentious issues in the Jewish world of the past quarter century. When we leave this question and turn instead to defining Judaism, we seem to be on safer ground. Jews may fight with one another over the role of religion in determining Jewish identity, but no one denies that Judaism itself is a religion. In fact, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are considered the three great monotheistic religions of the world.

However, further reflection shows that this sense of safety is unfounded. Though Judaism is a religion, it is a religion that is founded upon and oriented to a particular tribe — Israel, the Jewish people. Thus, Michael Fishbane defines Judaism as "the religious expression of the Jewish people from antiquity to the present day," and asserts that "Judaism is rooted in the people who have constituted it."<sup>19</sup> Michael Wyschogrod is even more insistent on this fact, placing the divine election of a natural family at the heart of his theology:

Jewish theology arises out of the *existence* of the Jewish people. The divine presence in the created order had to become embodied in a people of flesh and blood. . . The election of the people of Israel as the people of God constitutes the sanctification of a natural family.<sup>20</sup>

In the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, American Reform Rabbis sought to cut the cord binding Judaism to Jewish nationality, stating explicitly that "We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community."<sup>21</sup> However, a century later few Reform Rabbis would hold such a position. It is now clear even to the Reform establishment that Jewish religion cannot be viewed apart from the concrete reality of the Jewish people.

18 In what follows the Greek word "*ekklesia*" will be used when referring to the multinational community of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Yeshua. The word "church" will be employed to refer to the Christian communions that developed historically as predominantly or exclusively Gentile institutions. The latter term is not intended to have pejorative connotations.

19 M. Fishbane, *Judaism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), 18-19.

20 M. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1996), 10, xxxiii.

21 On the Pittsburgh Platform, see J. Neusner, *Introduction to Judaism*, 295-300.

Once we take account of this fact, it becomes apparent that all statements which group Judaism along with other religions are potentially misleading. Paul van Buren has perceived this with great acumen:

Israel is not a church, and "Judaism" is no exact parallel to "Christianity." It is not another "religion." The Jews, by their own self-understanding, are a *people*, a nation, not a church or a religion.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean, however, that Israel is only a nation. Instead, it is a unique entity: it is both a nation *and* it is a holy nation (*goy/am kadosh*). As Martin Buber writes,

The human multitude of Israel experiences something which happens to it as a believing multitude, as a multitude united by belief, not as so many believing individuals but rather as a believing community. As such it hears and responds. In this process of being addressed and answering, it is constituted in that very hour into what we call a people. It becomes something which endures henceforth in a closed circle of generations and births. This differentiates Israel for all time from nation-states and religions. We deal here with a unity of belief and people which is unique. To regard its uniqueness as incidental implies incredulity vis-à-vis history as it has occurred. Its origin is designated as a covenant between the divine and the human.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Israel is unique among nations, so is Judaism unique among religions. Israel is a holy nation. Judaism is its national holiness.

This way of national holiness is expressed in the Torah. Israel first receives the charge to be a holy nation at Sinai (Exodus 19:5-6) as part of the covenant established there following the exodus from Egypt. The instruction given to Israel in the subsequent chapters of the Torah provides concrete detail as to how this way of national holiness is to be lived. Throughout Jewish history, with all its disagreements and controversies, there has been agreement on one fact: without Torah, there is no Judaism. As Jacob Neusner has written, "Submission to the authority of the Torah of Moses at Sinai marks all Judaisms as Judaic and excludes all other religions as not-Judaic."<sup>24</sup>

22 P. M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality, Part 2: A Christian Theology of the People Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 31.

23 M. Buber, "Church, State, Nation, Jewry," originally published in 1933, now in F. A. Rothschild, ed., *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 137-8.

24 *Introduction*, 389.

To be part of a people means embracing its history and tradition as one's own. Israel does not consist only of all Jews alive today, but of all Jews who have ever lived. Thus, the second half of Fishbane's initial definition is also important: Judaism is "the religious expression of the Jewish people *from antiquity to the present day*." As a holy people, the most important aspect of Israel's national tradition is its dialogue with and about Torah, its way of national holiness. Throughout its historical journey Israel has carried the Torah, subjecting it to continuous interpretation and reinterpretation, and then subjecting the interpretation to its own interpretation and reinterpretation. This cross-generational conversation about the meaning of Torah is as fundamental to Judaism as the Torah itself. From the Rabbinic perspective, it is Torah.<sup>25</sup>

Judaism, as a way of national holiness for the people of Israel, is unabashedly particularistic. This does not mean that it has no relevance for non-Jews, or that within its scheme relationship with non-Jews has no value, or that it sees all non-Jews as outside the sphere of divine grace. Unlike Christianity, with its universal scope and missionary imperative, Judaism does not see itself as defining the boundaries of salvation. In the controversy between Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eliezer over the ultimate destiny of the Gentiles, the view of Rabbi Joshua became the normative Jewish position: the righteous among the nations will have a share in the World to Come (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13:2). Rather than drawing the lines between the saved and the damned, Judaism marks out the holy life of a particular nation chosen for priestly service in the world. As Alan Segal puts it, "for the rabbis, Jewish nationality is a special privilege, just as priesthood is a privilege. But the privilege is not the same as salvation."<sup>26</sup>

The unique nature of Judaism and of Israel, and their categorical difference from Christianity and the Church, are important for us as we consider who and what we are as Messianic Jews. We claim a place among this holy nation and a role in its priestly mission in the world. This is what we mean when we refer to our movement as a species of Judaism. We also acknowledge a bond with a set of people from other nations who have been joined to Israel's Messiah, and who thus have a special relationship to the people of Israel. More on this later.

### Theology and History

Before we offer theological justification of this claim to be a form

25 See B. W. Holtz, "On Reading Jewish Texts," in Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 11-29.

26 *Rebecca's Children*, 169.

of Judaism, we must discuss briefly the nature of the theological argument at hand. As those nurtured spiritually by the theological tradition of the Reformers, most Messianic Jews enter all theological discussion with *sola scriptura* as a methodological presupposition. This is often problematic, for it can blind us to the inevitable influence that interpretive tradition and theological system exercise in our exegetical judgments. In the present instance, however, there are more weighty reasons for questioning the viability of *sola scriptura*. The issues we are facing derive not simply from thorny aporias of biblical interpretation (though they also abound!), but also and perhaps primarily from the vagaries of history. We have two troubling texts before us, not one: the text of scripture, and the text of history. If we believe that God speaks through the former, then its message will lead us to conclude that He also speaks through the latter.

We are concerned here with a Messianic reading of the history of Judaism and its relationship to Christianity. It is noteworthy that the same considerations arise when traditional Jewish theologians grapple with the history of Christianity and its mission in the world. Maimonides, Yehuda HaLevi, and Franz Rosenzweig all sought to give some account for the rise of Christianity as a historical force and its impact in spreading essential Jewish teaching to the nations of the earth.<sup>27</sup> They were impelled by theological convictions well-stated by Fritz Rothschild:

Judaism is a religion that finds God's revelation and manifestations in history as it unfolds from creation to its messianic fulfillment. . . . To assume that the transformation of the Greco-Roman world into Christendom. . . . was a mere accident, and not part of God's redemptive plan, is difficult to believe for Jews who take history seriously as the arena in which God and man are engaged in the achievement of ultimate redemption.<sup>28</sup>

This willingness to "take history seriously" derives from our willingness to take scripture seriously. Though the canon has been closed, the God who spoke and acted in ancient times has not retired, but is still in the business of speaking and acting in and through history. Traditional Jewish thinkers have recognized this fact and have based their views of Christianity on it. A Messianic Jewish (or Christian) appraisal of Judaism must do the same.

While Paul and his fellow apostles knew many things that we do

27 See D. Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

28 Rothschild, 6-7.

not know, we also know much that they could never have anticipated. We know that the world did not end in the first century, but has continued through two millennia and (despite the contrary view among some in our movement) shows few signs of ending soon. We know that the church became a Gentile community, hostile to Jews and Judaism, on its way to becoming the most powerful religious institution in the world. We know that Judaism did not wither and die, but renewed its energies after the destruction of the temple and two wars with Rome, producing classic religious texts and a thriving spiritual and intellectual culture. These are only a few of the relevant things that we see from our vantage point in the early twenty-first century which could not have been known to our first century antecedents.

We certainly need to read the text of history in light of the text of the Bible. As we seek to understand these events and what God would say to us through them, we must bring to the task minds steeped in biblical wisdom. However, the interpretive interaction between these two texts is not unidirectional. What we learn from history must then be brought to bear on our reading of Scripture. This is of special importance in the matter at hand, for (despite our facile efforts at harmonization) we face here, as Richard Hays notes, "a case where different [New Testament] texts stand fundamentally in tension with one another. . . ."<sup>29</sup> We find such tensions even within the writings of one biblical author (Paul) and even within a single letter that he composed (Romans).<sup>30</sup> Our reading of the text of history will help us decide which biblical texts should be privileged over others, and how to interpret the biblical message as a whole.<sup>31</sup>

We would be wise to keep the words of Paul van Buren in mind as we engage in this task. He speaks as a Gentile Christian seeking to understand the significance of Judaism and the Jewish people in the divine purpose.

If we dare to trust that God's hand is to be detected in Jesus Christ and so in the beginnings of our being in the Way, then we must dare also to trust that He has had much to do with the history which has come since. Certainly other hands, sometimes all too

29 R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 408.

30 See C. H. Cosgrove, *Elusive Israel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

31 Hays argues, with good reason, for assigning Romans 9-11 such pride of place, 430-1; at the same time, it must be noted that such tensions exist internal to Romans 9-11, as Cosgrove points out.

painfully evident, have also been at work in that history, but that is the price that God was willing to pay for calling actual people into cooperating with Him in completing His creation. It is a risky business to see history as the location of God's work, and both the Jewish people and the church have been hurt by false readings of its signs. Yet to reject this risk is to close ourselves to any living relationship to the God of this world. If God is a living God, then we must accept the risk of living with Him and under Him, *hic et nunc*.<sup>32</sup>

As part of the Jewish people, "the beginnings of our being in the Way" were not in "Jesus Christ" but in Abraham. All the more so, have we reason to trust that the God who called our father Abraham, established us as a people, and showed His faithfulness to us through centuries marked by our unfaithfulness, has not ceased to work His will among us in our long years of exile?

#### The Primacy of our Jewish Identity in the Face of the Historic Jewish "No"

Already in the earliest writings of the Yeshua movement, the letters of Paul, we see signs of the disappointment and even trauma experienced by the movement's first members at the response of the wider Jewish world to their message. That response was mixed at best — at times enthusiastic, at times indifferent, at times violently hostile (as in Paul's own case, before his Damascus Road reversal). To understand the depth of their disappointment, however, we must take into account not only the response itself but also their own exalted wonder at encountering the risen and exalted Messiah. In the light of this overwhelming experience and conviction they could only react with shocked incomprehension when their brethren could not see what was so obvious and marvelous to them. The pain increased as the years passed and official opposition hardened, and their place in the wider Jewish world became more and more tenuous. The polemics that resulted are a pervasive feature of the Apostolic Writings, composed in the heat of intense intra-communal strife.<sup>33</sup>

This provides an initial context for understanding the problem sensed by many Christians (and some Messianic Jews) in the notion that Mes-

32 P. M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality, Part 1: Discerning the Way* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 65.

33 See the helpful articles in C. A. Evans and D. A. Hagner, eds., *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), and in W. R. Farmer, ed., *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999).

sianic Jews should find their primary locus of identity in Judaism. Judaism said "No" to the Messiah; how can followers of the Messiah root their lives in such inhospitable soil?

As Messianic Jews, we affirm two truths as central to our faith and identity: (1) God's irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people, embodied in and guarded by the Torah, and (2) God's reconciling and revealing work for Israel and the nations in Messiah Yeshua. The former truth is at the center of the Hebrew scriptures. The latter truth can also be found there, but not in as straightforward a manner. In Rabbinic tradition the truth of Yeshua's Messiahship is entirely absent. Nevertheless, the emergence of Messianic Judaism in the last quarter of the twentieth century shows that it is possible to be planted in Jewish tradition and affirm the latter as well as the former. The latter truth is the primary message in the Apostolic Writings. The former can be found there, but not in as prominent or self-evident a manner. In Christian tradition, the truth of Israel's election is entirely absent. Nevertheless, in light of the historical events of our century, more and more believing readers of the Apostolic Writings — especially in the scholarly world and higher echelons of ecclesiastical authority — are acknowledging the first truth as well as the second. Without the affirmation of both, Messianic Judaism is meaningless.

Post-apostolic Christianity said "No" to the first truth, and post-Mishnaic Judaism said "No" to the second. While Hebrew Christianity generally accepts at least part of the first truth (election — but not Torah), it also claims that the second truth is more important than the first and that its rejection has far graver consequences. In this way Christian culpability for its "No" is mitigated, Jewish responsibility for its "No" is accentuated, and the primacy of Christian identity for the Jewish believer in Messiah is secured.

There are several problems with the Hebrew Christian way of resolving the tension between these two "No's." First, as R. Kendall Soulen and others have argued, the enduring validity of the covenant with Israel should occupy a central position in the structure of Christian theology.<sup>34</sup> It is the God of Israel who has acted in Yeshua the Messiah on behalf of Israel and all the nations of the earth. The church's failure to affirm this truth or build its theology upon it has radically disfigured the message of the Good News entrusted to the church. Thus, the Hebrew Christian stance minimizes the theological consequences of Christianity's "No."

Second, the practical consequences of this "No" have been even more catastrophic. It has produced a tragic legacy of anti-Semitic preju-

34 R. K. Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). Paul van Buren holds a similar position.

dice and hatred and the most horrific crimes in the church's history. In fact, as we will soon see, Christianity's "No" to the first truth has contributed substantially to Judaism's "No" to the second. Thus, the Hebrew Christian view likewise minimizes the practical consequences of the Christian "No."

Finally, if there are mitigating factors to be considered, they are mainly on the Jewish side. Three such factors stand out. First, Judaism's "No" to Yeshua in its formative period was neither as universal nor as foundational to its identity as was Christianity's "No" to Israel. Before the conversion of Constantine and the rise of the church as a major force in the political life of the Roman Empire, responding to Christianity was not a driving concern in the Jewish world.<sup>35</sup> Hebrew Christian attacks on Rabbinic Judaism sometimes assert or imply that the Rabbinic system was shaped as a deliberate alternative to Christianity, that the denial of Yeshua stands at the heart of Rabbinic thought. This is far from the truth. Rabbinic Judaism was founded on Pharisaic, priestly, and scribal traditions of the Second Temple period which antedated the Yeshua movement.<sup>36</sup> The decisions made at Yavneh and afterwards responded primarily to the crisis in the Jewish world produced by the destruction of the holy city and its temple, but also to some extent to the various competing Jewish systems — only one of which was that advocated by the followers of Yeshua.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, early Christianity could not ignore Israel and Judaism. The identity of the Gentile Church hinged on its claim to be the replacement for faithless Israel. The *Adversus Iudaeos* tradition begins early in the church's history, and plays a prominent role in its development. Thus, Christianity's "No" to the first truth is a foundational building block in its theological structure and corporate identity, whereas Judaism's "No" to the second truth exercises only a minor influence

35 J. Neusner, *A Short History of Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 79-84.

36 Neusner, *Introduction*, 157-63.

37 "...the original rabbinic texts...contain less antagonism expressed specifically against Christians than does the New Testament against Jews. Probably this difference reflects the fact that for Christianity the continued existence of Judaism was a constant theological problem, whereas for rabbinic Judaism, Christianity represented only one more variety of sectarian heresy" (Segal, 147-8). Segal's reference here to the New Testament's antagonism "against Jews" is unfortunate, and in fact inconsistent with his own earlier statement that "the New Testament's many uncomplimentary references to Jews have been misinterpreted by both Jews and Christians. The argument between Judaism and Christianity was at the beginning largely a family affair" (142). However, even this passage indicates the problems that arise from the use of such anachronistic terms and categories as "Judaism" and "Christianity" in discussing the Apostolic period.

in its formative process.

A second mitigating factor is of even greater significance. Once the movement associated with Yeshua had become widely known to the Jewish world, and a clear "No" to its claims was the assumed Jewish response, the church was already largely a Gentile institution which denied Israel's election and discouraged or prohibited Jewish practice. At this point the Jewish "No" is more of an affirmation of the first truth than it is a denial of the second. Paul van Buren recognizes this fact, and his comments are worth quoting at length:

What evidence we have from the Apostolic Writings suggests that of the tiny fraction of all the Jews in the Roman empire who may even have heard of Jesus, much less having actually heard or seen him, a large number responded positively. Indeed it seems probable that for some fifty years after Easter, the Synagogue tolerated Jews in its membership who, ever faithful to Torah, believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah whom God had exalted. The split would appear to have developed not because of Jesus, nor even because of Easter; the issue turned on Jewish fidelity to Torah: when Gentile Christians began telling Jews who believed in Jesus that Torah was no more to be followed by them, then all faithful Jews had to say No. The fundamental meaning of the Jewish No, which the church should understand therefore, is that it was from the beginning and continues to be an act of fidelity to Torah and Torah's God. The Gospel met Gentiles as a demand to abandon their pagan ways and the service of gods that are not God. The Gospel met the Jews, as the church after Paul's time preached it, as the demand to abandon the express commands and covenant of the very God whom the church proclaimed! Here is a profound incoherence that has arisen because of the lack of a proper Christian theology of Israel. The theological reality which such a theology must address, then, is that Israel said No to Jesus Christ out of faithfulness to his Father, the God of Israel.<sup>38</sup>

What the Jewish people were taught by their Rabbis to deny was a church which taught that Israel's covenant with God had been superseded. The church was asking Israel to agree that its faithfulness to Torah had no longer any meaning, because God's faithfulness to his people had come to an end. For Israel to have accepted such a church would have been a betrayal of the covenant and a denial of the faithfulness of God!

38 van Buren, Part 2, 34.

The choice with which such a church confronted the Jews was quite different from that confronting those Jews who entered the early Jesus-movement. The latter came to belief in Jesus as the one appointed by God to come soon as *Israel's* Messiah. They joined a Jewish movement as Jews and, so far as we can tell, they remained in it as Jews. Fidelity to Torah was never in question for them. It was a quite different matter, two generations later, for those Jews confronted by the church in the last quarter of the first century. By then, the movement had become perhaps already predominantly Gentile in membership, and Jews who joined it had to turn their backs on the rest of their people.<sup>39</sup>

Christianity's "No" involved an act of usurpation, Israel's "No" an act of loyalty to the covenant. It is hard to imagine a stronger mitigating factor on the Jewish side.

Yet, the third may even exceed the second. The apostle Paul already acknowledged Israel's "No," and while he grieved over it he also saw a divine purpose behind it.

...through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles. . . Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! . . . I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a [divine] hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved. (Rom 11:11-12, 25)

The Jewish "No" to Yeshua is thus an essential prerequisite to the Gentile "Yes" to him.<sup>40</sup> As such, it is part of the divine plan. Richard Hays has even suggested that Paul saw in the Jewish "No" to Yeshua a mysterious identification with Yeshua:

"God did not spare [*ouk ephesato*] the natural branches" (Rom.

<sup>39</sup> van Buren, Part 2, 276-7.

<sup>40</sup> Why this is so is not immediately obvious. The most satisfactory explanation seems to be that of T. L. Donaldson, who argues that Paul accepted the widespread Jewish view of the time that the end of the age was contingent upon Israel's repentance, and then understood this repentance as involving acceptance of Yeshua as the Messiah. "If Israel's acceptance of Christ will accompany — indeed, precipitate — the parousia, and if the parousia represents the termination of the Gentiles' opportunity for salvation, then Israel's immediate acceptance of the gospel would have meant the closing of the door to the Gentiles" (*Paul and the Gentiles* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997], 222-6).

11:21) in just the same way that God "did not spare [*ouk ephesato*] his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Rom 8:32, RSV). Thus, in Paul's mind there is a definite — if mysterious — analogy between the "hardening" of Israel and the death of Jesus: God has ordained both of these terrible events for the salvation of the world. Thus, the fate of Israel is interpreted christomorphically, including the hope of the Jews' ultimate "life from the dead" (11:15).<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Israel's "No" to our second truth is not only issued in defense of our first, it is also issued in the service of that very truth which is denied, and brings Israel into a hidden relationship with the One denied.

Given all this, the Hebrew Christian solution to the problem posed by the two "No's" has little cogency. Given the first truth — God's irrevocable covenant with the Jewish people — and given the various extenuating circumstances inherent in Judaism's denial of the second truth — God's reconciling and revealing work in Yeshua — it is fitting that Messianic Jews, like other Jews, consider identification with the Jewish people throughout its history and commitment to its welfare as the bedrock of their social identity. Though this could make Yeshua peripheral to the Messianic Jew, it need not do so. If we are truly *Messianic* Jews, then our love for our people, our reading of its history, our interpretation of its sacred texts, and our participation in its sacred rites will all be conducted in, with, and through that Messianic seed of Abraham and David, who summed up in his person all that Israel can and should be. Our identification with the Jewish people does not compete with our identification with Yeshua. It can, however, compete with our identification with the Gentile church. This brings us to the heart of our task: the development of a sound Messianic Jewish ecclesiology.

### Messianic Judaism, Israel, and the Multinational Ecclesia

The Gentile Church recognized as early as the second century that its identity was closely tied to that of Israel. Adopting an adversarial posture, it presented itself as the New Israel, replacing the faithless Jews who had denied their Messiah and nullified their election. This supercessionist doctrine shaped the ecclesiological thinking of all the churches until the nineteenth century, and most of the churches until the middle of the twentieth. It has encountered severe challenges in

<sup>41</sup> Hays, p. 433. See also his *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 61-2.

our day from Dispensationalism (on the right) and post-Holocaust ecumenical theology (on the left), and is no longer taken for granted. However, these challenges have not yet produced a compelling and coherent revision of ecclesiology capable of generating a broad consensus.

While no overarching vision of the relationship between the *ekklesia* and Israel has emerged, two paradoxical truths have won increasing acceptance. The first acknowledges what was of value in the traditional teaching: the *ekklesia* does serve as a kind of eschatological enlargement or multinational extension of Israel, and fulfills at least part of the mission entrusted to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. Non-Jews who join the *ekklesia* become in some significant sense heirs of the promises made to the patriarchs and participants in their covenant with God.<sup>42</sup> However, in this context the covenant and promises are understood in eschatological and soteriological terms as defining the community of salvation (in contrast to the normative Rabbinic understanding of Israel's covenant as vocational and priestly in nature). The second truth constitutes what was missing in the traditional teaching: the election of ethnic, genealogical Israel remains valid. It has not been and cannot be revoked. Therefore, in some significant sense the covenant and the promises still belong to the Jewish people as the biological heirs of the patriarchs.<sup>43</sup> (This allows for a vocational and priestly understanding of Israel's distinctive covenant status similar to the normative Rabbinic view.)

The general recognition of these two truths stands as a noteworthy achievement. However, there is little agreement about how to expound each truth in detail or how to understand the relationship between them. These are the ecclesiological concerns that are of ultimate importance for us as Messianic Jews. They also may be questions that require our contribution in order to receive an adequate answer.

For our purposes here the fundamental question is this: how is it that the *ekklesia* possesses its connection to the life and identity of Israel? On the deepest level, it enters into the life and identity of Israel through its relationship with Yeshua, who serves as a sort of one-man Israel, recapitulating in himself the role of Jacob and the entire course

42 Even Dispensationalist theologians now often affirm this. See the articles in C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

43 Even traditional Reformed theologians now often affirm this in some form. See, for example, D. E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

of Israel's history, past and future.<sup>44</sup> Just as Israel was seen in Jewish thought of the time as a new Adam, a restored humanity, so Yeshua fulfills this role in an unexpected eschatological manner, overcoming death, assuming the glorious bodily form destined for all the righteous in the world to come, and imparting the Spirit of the future age to those who believe in him.<sup>45</sup> For the early non-Jewish believers, however, this relationship with Israel through Yeshua was also mediated by the Jewish followers of Yeshua who carried his message to them and made their incorporation into eschatological Israel a human reality. In the period before 70 C.E. these non-Jewish believers also possessed a geographical center, the mother-community in Jerusalem, which tied them to the people of Israel with its history and destiny. Thus, for the first generation of Gentile believers the sense of partaking of the heritage of Israel was not an abstract reality divorced from concrete human experience.

According to Jacob Jervell, the essential role of the Jewish wing of the Yeshua movement in connecting the Gentile wing to the heritage of Israel is a prominent theme in the writings of Luke. Jervell asserts that Luke never equates the *ekklesia* and Israel. Israel is the Jewish people, and the Jewish wing of the *ekklesia* is the renewed portion of Israel that mediates the promises of God to its Gentile wing:

The portion of Jews who believe in the Messiah and are willing to repent appears as the purified, restored, and true Israel. "Israel" does not refer to a church that is made up of Jews and Gentiles, but to the repentant portion of "empirical" Israel; they are Jews who have accepted the gospel, to whom and for whom the promises have been fulfilled. For Luke this relationship is the presupposition for the Gentiles sharing in the promises.<sup>46</sup>

In these Jewish Christians the unity and continuity of salvation history were evident. Gentiles received a share in the promises of this Israel.<sup>47</sup>

The Gentiles, however, are not Israel, but have been associated with Israel.<sup>48</sup>

44 This notion of Yeshua as a one-man Israel was well-stated by the Jewish theologian Will Herberg. See "Judaism and Christianity: Their Unity and Difference" and "A Jew Looks at Jesus" in Rothschild, 244, 259.

45 N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 18-40.

46 J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 43.

47 *Luke*, 68-9.

48 *Luke*, 67.

Luke conceives of the Jewish Christian element in the church as the center and kernel of the church.<sup>49</sup>

Jervell sees the centrality of "the Jewish Christian element in the church" reflected in the way Luke presents the role of Jerusalem and its Messianic congregation:

The third part of the picture is the church in Jerusalem. At the end of the book this congregation is decisive for the church as a whole. It is noteworthy in the composition of Acts that Jerusalem is mentioned in the last part of Acts. If Jerusalem, and the church there, were a thing from the past, Luke could have ended the Jerusalem section in Chapter 7. But we have also Chapter 15, and in Chapter 21 the history of Paul is connected with and "enclosed" by Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup>

According to Luke, Jerusalem has authority over all the Christian churches. There is no church disconnected from Jerusalem and so from Israel.<sup>51</sup>

In Acts a distinctly Jewish corporate expression of faith in Yeshua binds the Jerusalem congregation both to the wider Jewish community and to the wider *ekklesia*. Jerusalem members of the Yeshua movement maintain a strong connection to the wider Jewish world, worshiping in the temple, attending synagogues, and taking concern for Jewish public affairs. They faithfully observe Torah and the traditions of their people.<sup>52</sup>

49 J. Jervell, *The Unknown Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 42-3.

50 *Unknown Paul*, 18. This view is presented even more forcefully by R. L. Brawley: "Although Acts begins in Jerusalem and ends in Rome, it is inaccurate to conclude that Jerusalem falls out in favor of Rome. The narrative in Acts actually reciprocates between Jerusalem and the extended mission. . . Acts does not delineate a movement away from Jerusalem, but a constant return to Jerusalem. In the geography of Acts emphasis repeatedly falls on Jerusalem from beginning to end" (*Luke-Acts and the Jews* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987] 35-6).

51 *Unknown Paul*, 18-19.

52 According to Jervell, this Lukan depiction of the Jewish *ekklesia* is historically accurate. "And now I come to the only attempt to give a definition of Jewish Christianity, which is a multifarious phenomenon: Jewish Christians refuse to separate Christianity from the religious, political, and cultural fate of Israel — and there is but one Israel. I am inclined to call this the common denominator which keeps Jewish Christian groups and churches and parties together. There is but one people of God, namely, Israel. The significant mark of this people of God is the circumcision of the Mosaic torah. So they stick to circumcision. The Mosaic torah is a seal and characteristic for the people of the covenant and the salvation. Therefore the law is permanently valid" (*Unknown Paul*, 33-4).

At the same time, the Jerusalem congregation maintains a corporate relationship to the wider *ekklesia*, supporting the mission to the nations and recognizing Gentile believers in Yeshua as siblings and sharers in Israel's covenant blessings. For Luke this devout congregation represents the entire Jewish wing of the *ekklesia*, and its authority serves to link the Gentile wing of the *ekklesia* to Israel and its promises.

The importance and authority of the Jerusalem community in the first seven chapters of Acts derives in part from the presence of Peter and the Twelve. However, in the Jerusalem scenes of the later chapters the Twelve are peripheral or entirely absent, and it is Jacob (James), the brother of Yeshua, known from other early sources as a paragon of traditional Jewish piety, who occupies center-stage.<sup>53</sup> It becomes clear in these chapters what is most important to Luke about the Jerusalem community: not the connection to the first followers of Yeshua, but the connection to Judaism.<sup>54</sup>

Richard Bauckham finds a similar message in the canonical arrangement of the so-called "catholic epistles":

If we read the catholic epistles in the order which at an early date came to be the accepted canonical order, with James in first place and 1 Peter immediately following, then we read first a letter addressed only to Jewish Christians as the twelve tribes in the Diaspora and then a letter apparently addressed only to Gentile Christians as "exiles of the diaspora", to whom defining descriptions of Israel as God's people are applied. One effect is to portray the inclusion of Gentiles in the eschatological people of God, which retains through its Jewish Christian members its continuity with Israel and yet is also open to the inclusion of those who had not hitherto been God's people (1 Pet. 2:10). . . The sequence and relationship of James and 1 Peter portrays the priority of Israel. . . , Gentile Christians' indebtedness to Jewish believers. . . , and also the full inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God.<sup>55</sup>

Bauckham also finds this message expressed in the ancient order of the canon, found in most of the earliest biblical codices, and still used

53 For more on Jacob, see R. Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," in Bauckham, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Volume 4* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 415-80, and J. Painter, *Just James* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

54 Therefore, the standard paradigm for understanding Luke's view of the relation between Christianity and Judaism should pivot 180 degrees. That is, rather than setting gentile Christianity free, Luke ties it to Judaism" (Brawley, 159).

55 R. Bauckham, *James* (London: Routledge, 1999), 156-7.



in the Eastern Churches, which places the "catholic epistles" before the Pauline epistles.

The order which places the catholic letters (with James at their head) before the Pauline corpus maintains the priority of the centre over the movement out from the centre.<sup>56</sup>

John Miller goes further, viewing the arrangement of the entire New Testament canon (in its Eastern form) as a response to Marcionism that affirms the truth that "the church's destiny and mission and Israel's destiny and mission are . . . inextricably linked."<sup>57</sup> The canon thus refutes the "Marcionite severance of Christianity from Judaism."<sup>58</sup>

Writing with attention both to the biblical text and to the modern reemergence of Messianic Judaism, the German theologian Peter von der Osten-Sacken has boldly underlined the ecclesiological importance of the Jewish wing of the *ekklesia*:

. . . the living stones that go to make up the structure of the church of Jesus in the initial period, both in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora, are *Jews* who believe in Jesus. In common parlance they are Jewish Christians — messianic Jews, according to the term that is increasingly winning acceptance. They are the ecclesiological bridge joining Israel and the Gentiles, the lack of which is unimaginable. And they have the specific task of witnessing to and emphasizing, in the light of the gospel especially, the indissoluble bond between the two.<sup>59</sup>

For the apostle, therefore, a purely gentile church, existing for itself and out of itself, without a Jewish Christian section, would quite simply be not conceivable, let alone theologically tenable. Rather, according to his gospel and to the Bible in general, with its clear "Israel and the Gentiles," it would be an utterly heretical body. If, in spite of his warning, Paul had ever heard talk about the end of Jewish Christianity, or about the end of the "remnant of Israel" or of "all Israel," he would undoubtedly have spoken about the end of the church. . .<sup>60</sup>

56 James, 116.

57 J. W. Miller, *Reading Israel's Story* (Kitchener: Blenheim, 1999), 56.

58 Miller, 55.

59 P. von der Osten-Sacken, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 105.

60 Osten-Sacken, 108.

The matter could not be stated better: Messianic Judaism is the "ecclesiological bridge joining Israel and the Gentiles." The loss of a clear Jewish presence in the *ekklesia* obscured its relationship to genealogical Israel, and opened the door for supercessionist theology. We may therefore draw an important conclusion: the nature of the *ekklesia* not only allows for Messianic Judaism — it requires it.

A book that is often interpreted to say the opposite — the Letter to the Ephesians — actually confirms this conclusion. Ephesians speaks eloquently of the way Gentiles, formerly estranged from God and His people, have been brought near in Messiah and made fellow-citizens with the heirs of the promises given to the patriarchs. However, this new relationship is made real by the presence of flesh and blood descendants of those patriarchs, whom these Gentiles know and with whom they are on equal standing before God.

No apostolic text emphasizes the unity of the *ekklesia* more than Ephesians. Yet, often unnoticed is the way the letter also emphasizes the continuing significance of the Jewish people, especially within the *ekklesia*. After introducing the great mystery of the divine will — the summing up of all things under one head, Messiah Yeshua (1:9-10) — the writer distinguishes between the two categories of people who have become part of this new unity:

As resolved by him who carries out all things after his will and decision, we [Jews] were first designated and appropriated in the Messiah. We, the first to set our hope upon the Messiah, were to become a praise of God's glory. You [Gentiles] too are [included] in him. For you have heard the true word, the message that saves you. And after you came to faith you, too, have been sealed with his seal, the promised Holy Spirit.<sup>61</sup> (1:11-13; brackets in original)

Thus, the sign of the peace and reconciliation that Messiah brings to the entire creation is the new partnership he forges between Jews and Gentiles. The letter resumes this theme in chapter 2, and develops it at length.

He is in person the peace between us.  
He has made both [Gentiles and Jews] into one.  
For he has broken down the dividing wall,  
in his flesh [he has wiped out all] enmity. . .

61 Quotes from Ephesians are taken from Markus Barth's translation in his Anchor Bible commentary, *Ephesians*, Vol. I (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974), xxvii-xxxiv.

[This was] to make peace by creating in his person a single new man out of the two, and to reconcile both to God through the cross in one single body. In his own person he has killed the enmity. (2:14-16)

Many read these verses as mandating the removal of all distinction between Jew and Gentile in the new Messianic community. The RSV and NRSV incorporate such an interpretation into their translation, rendering verse 15 "that he might create in himself one new man *in place of the two*" (italics mine). Such a reading seems unlikely given the letter's *we/you* (i.e., Jew/Gentile) references (1:11-13; 2:1-3), and the message that the Gentiles are entering into a heritage that the Jews already possessed, at least in anticipation (2:11-12, 19; 3:6).

Markus Barth has understood these verses better than any other commentator:

According to 2:13 the opposite to the Gentiles' exclusion from Israel is their inclusion in the Messiah. The unification of Jews and Gentiles is not due to an absorption of the Gentiles in Israel or to a dispersion of and assimilation by the Jews among the Gentiles. Certainly both of these two movements were under way before and after the coming of the Messiah. . . . Either way might have led, without the interference of a third party, to some unification. Then one or the other of the two groups involved would have claimed the victory for itself even if peace rather than victory had become the key word. However, in Eph 2 Paul ascribes the merit for pacification neither to Israel nor to the Gentiles, but to the Messiah who cares equally for Jews and pagans. This way no one on either side of the former wall could "boast about himself" (2:9).<sup>62</sup>

The new man is "one . . . out of the two." . . . The matter out of which he creates the new man consists of Jews and Gentiles who had both been "dead in sins" and "hostile" to one another and to God. Thus the new creation is not an annihilation or replacement of the first creation but the glorification of God's work. . . . Among the NT books Ephesians alone calls God's covenant partner "one new man" and emphasizes that this man consists of two, that is, of Jews and Gentiles. . . . the incorporation of the Gentiles into Israel and the formation of one people consisting of Jews and Gentiles certainly does not mean that the Gentiles must become Jews, or

62 Barth, 292.

the Jews Gentiles! If the Jews become "like" the others, and the Gentiles "like" the Jews (Gal 4:12) — because both live from grace alone — then the Jews are yet not paganzed, and the Gentiles not "forced to judaize" (Gal 2:14) in order to be "one in Christ." Their historic distinction remains true and recognized even within their communion. . . . Eph 2:15 proclaims that the people of God is different from a syncretistic mixture of Jewish and Gentile elements. The members of the church are not so equalized, leveled down, or straitjacketed in a uniform as to form a *genius tertium* that would be different from both Jews and Gentiles. Rather the church consists of Jews and Gentiles reconciled to one another by the Messiah who has come and has died for both. The "one new man" is by origin and constitution a community of several persons. He is not an individual, or a conglomeration of identical individuals. He is an organic body consisting of distinct members, not an amalgamation; a social structure, not a shapeless mass; a continuous mutual encounter, exchange, bewildering or joyful surprise of free persons, not a boring equalitarian collective.<sup>63</sup>

For the Jewish member of the *ekklesia*, acknowledgement of Gentile brothers and sisters in Messiah represents a confession that the One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who has revealed Himself anew to Israel in Messiah Yeshua, has also acted decisively to reveal Himself to the *Goyim* and to make them equal sharers in the covenant. For the Gentile member of the *ekklesia*, acknowledgement of Jewish brothers and sisters in Messiah represents a confession that the God of Israel is the One God, and that all who are alienated from Israel are alienated from Israel's God and Israel's Messiah. Both confess that God has now done a new thing in Messiah; yet, as Barth notes, this new thing does not annihilate or replace what came before, but instead glorifies it.

Some missiologically informed Christian leaders, seeing the necessity of finding indigenous expressions in various cultures for the message and life of the Good News, support Messianic Judaism as just such an effort. Thus, they treat the Jewish people as one of many mission-targeted people-groups. Such Christians accept that the Jewish people are truly an *ethnos*, a people with a distinctive culture, and not just a "religious community" (as asserted in the Pittsburgh Platform). However, they fail to recognize that Israel is a unique people, a holy people. They may believe that Messianic Judaism is required — but only in the same way that any indigenous cultural expression of

63 Barth, 310.

the Good News is required. Other Christian leaders sympathetic to our movement endorse the establishment of Messianic Judaism as a distinct expression of the Good News, understanding that there is something special about what we have to contribute to the broader *ekklesia*. Still, they think of us as analogous to other denominations and theological traditions such as the Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, or Pentecostals. However, in our own view Messianic Judaism (humble as it now is) plays a more prominent role than this in the divine scheme.

According to both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Apostolic Writings, all people are divided into two categories: Jews and Gentiles. This is true for the world as a whole, and it is also true for the *ekklesia*. Even Paul, who argued against certain interpretations of this distinction, would nevertheless concur, as Terrence Donaldson contends:

Paul's "no distinction" statements are by no means global assertions. He does not believe that the traditional, Torah-based distinctions between Jew and Gentile are completely irrelevant or have been totally obliterated, Jews simply being absorbed into a larger undifferentiated humanity with no ongoing significance. The statements in question are as specific and limited in their applicability as are the statements about works and faith. In the contexts of both Rom 3:22 and 10:12 the issue is that of entrance requirements into the community of salvation, and the point being argued is that Torah observance is not to be imposed on Gentiles as a condition of membership. But when this is not the issue, Paul's language betrays at many turns the fact that *the Jew-Gentile distinction continues to play a fundamental role in his system of convictions.*<sup>64</sup> (italics mine)

As those ethnically and genealogically part of elect Israel, Messianic Jews have a unique position within the *ekklesia*, and Messianic Judaism — their way of life and faith in continuity with their ancestral tradition — also has a unique position within the *ekklesia*. Without Messianic Jews and Messianic Judaism, the *ekklesia* is not truly and fully itself.

Yet, without immersion in the wider world of Judaism, Messianic Judaism cannot be itself. If Messianic Jews are to represent national Israel within the multinational *ekklesia*, they must participate actively in Israel's national life. If they do not, they will eventually either assimilate to the Gentile majority in the *ekklesia*, as happened in the

64 Donaldson, 159.

Pauline churches, or become a fossilized and irrelevant sect, like the Nazarenes or Ebionites. Israel is a holy nation, and Judaism is its national holiness.<sup>65</sup> Unless Messianic Jews take their place within the life of that nation, their identification as Jews will be meaningless and their claim to practice Judaism will be fraudulent.

So, we find that to be itself the multinational *ekklesia* requires Messianic Jews with their Messianic Judaism, and to be themselves Messianic Jews with their Messianic Judaism require full involvement in Israel's national life and way of holiness. Thus, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that it is in the best interests of the *ekklesia* as a whole to expect its Jewish members to root their lives deeply in Jewish soil. They must be Jews first; only then can they offer to the *ekklesia* what it requires of them. In this way the *ekklesia* acknowledges the logical and temporal priority of national Israel: without Israel there is no *ekklesia*, there is no Messiah.

How can this theological conviction be translated into social reality? How can Messianic Jews combine their commitments to national Israel and to the multinational *ekklesia*?

Ecclesiological models for handling Jew-Gentile relationships have usually derived from an interpretation of Pauline theory and praxis. According to the common view, Paul considered a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles to be the ideal expression of the *ekklesia* in any given location, and sought to found such communities.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, his missionary efforts within the Jewish world were unsuccessful, and the Pauline congregations were overwhelmingly Gentile in composition. Nevertheless, his vision of a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles remains normative for later generations. In this vision, Jewish members are permitted to maintain Jewish practice, but only insofar as such practice does not conflict with unrestricted community relationships with their Gentile brothers and sisters.<sup>67</sup> Thus, Paul emphasized the life together of Jews and Gentiles in the new

65 On the Ebionites and Nazarenes, see S. Goranson, "Ebionites," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2:260-1; B. Bagatti, *The Church from the Circumcision* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1971); R. A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).

66 If Paul's call for unity is taken seriously, he did not merely want to be the apostle to the gentiles. He wanted to be an apostle of all the church, for his vision was for a new community formed of all gentiles and Jews. . . Paul's attempt to organize that community, parallel to his attempt to gain acceptance as an apostle, also ironically publicized his ritual position as apostasy and worse" (A. F. Segal, *Paul the Convert* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], 265).

67 See, for example, E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 177-8.

eschatological community rather than the distinctive identity and vocation of the Jewish believer in Messiah. As demonstrated by the Antioch incident narrated in Galatians 2, Paul contended that any conflict in a mixed community that pitted Jewish particularity against Gentile inclusion must be resolved in favor of the latter.

Terrence Donaldson accepts that this was Paul's ecclesiological vision, but he balks at seeing it as normative for later generations. In fact, he believes that such an approach lacks long-term viability.

I have identified [Paul's] basic convictions concerning *membership requirements* (membership is granted through faith in Christ, and therefore not through Torah observance), *status* (Jew and Gentile are on equal terms in Christ; there is no distinction), and *identity* (all those in Christ are members of Abraham's family). How can we add to these the additional conviction [also held by Paul] that an ethnically identified Israel, differentiated from the Gentiles in traditional Torah-determined ways, continues to have significance within the new sphere of reality determined by Christ?

With the benefit of hindsight, we can easily discern a certain instability in such a set of convictions. They could not be held together in any consistent way for very long. If the community is defined solely on the basis of faith in Christ; if Torah observance is not to be imposed on Gentile converts; if indeed the Torah-observant need to give way when such observance interferes with community life; if this community, precisely on the basis of its Christ-identity, is the real family of Abraham; if there is no distinction in terms of entrance requirements and membership privileges between Jew and Gentile; then inevitably as time goes on and one generation succeeds another, any distinction between Jew and Gentile would inevitably fall away, identifiably Jewish portions of the community would inevitably become assimilated, and "Israel" would inevitably become (as it did by the time of Justin Martyr) a purely allegorical or nonliteral designation for a decidedly non-Jewish entity.<sup>68</sup> (brackets mine)

Thus, Paul tried to combine two principles of community formation that were ultimately incompatible. How could he have made such a mistake? Donaldson offers the following answer:

How is it that he can remain so committed to an Israel defined in traditional, Torah-based terms, while at the same time insisting on

68 Donaldson, 185-6.

a redefinition of Abraham's family (Israel) based instead on Christ — a redefinition which, if followed through consistently, would sooner or later surely mean the disappearance of an ethnically identifiable Israel?

As argued earlier, an answer suggests itself in the phrase "sooner or later." For Paul, there was no "later"! . . . The brevity of the interim period allows us to understand how Paul can hold both to a definition of Abraham's family in which faith in Christ is the only membership requirement for Jew and Gentile alike, and to the continuing significance, both within and apart from the church, of the Jew/Gentile distinction and of ethnic Israel. Needless to say, it is a formulation that could not be carried intact into a church in which the parousia is indefinitely delayed; the very attempt to do so distorts it considerably.<sup>69</sup>

The Pauline model makes sense in light of his expectation that this age was drawing to a close. He was not planning for a multi-generational community. He did not consider the possibility that nineteen hundred and fifty years might pass and the present order of the world remain intact. If Donaldson is correct, we can still embrace Paul's fundamental convictions about the multinational *ekklesia* and the Jewish people, but we dare not imitate his pastoral strategy if we want to build a Messianic Judaism that will survive beyond a single generation.

However, there is another way of understanding Pauline ecclesiology. This alternative view stresses Paul's specific vocation: he was called to be an Apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16; 2:2, 7-9; Rom 1:5, 13-15; 15:15-21; Eph 3:1-9). While he never ceased to pray for his fellow Jews and to attempt to win them to Messiah whenever possible, his basic task in life lay elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> That the communities he formed were overwhelmingly Gentile was not a mark of his failure but of his success. That Jews within those communities were required to

69 Donaldson, 246.

70 The importance of recognizing Paul's specific vocation as directed to Gentiles has been noted and emphasized by J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959); K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), and *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Paul van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality, Part 2*, 277-82; L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987); P. J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); S. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); M. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); and J. G. Gager, "Paul's Contradictions: Can They Be Resolved?" *Bible Review* 14:6, December 1998, 32-9.

make compromises in their daily Jewish practice for the sake of their Gentile brothers and sisters was not a universal law of the *ekklesia* but a consequence of the particular character of these congregations: they were Gentile communities founded by the Apostle to the Gentiles.

This perspective on Paul's practical ecclesiology finds support in his description of the agreement reached in Jerusalem concerning his mission to the Gentiles:

Seeing that I had been entrusted with the Good News of the uncircumcision, just as Peter had been entrusted with the Good News of the circumcision (for He who worked through Peter making him an emissary of the circumcision also worked through me in regard to the Gentiles), and recognizing the divine gift that had been given to me, Jacob and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, extended to Barnabas and me the right hand of partnership, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcision. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do. (Gal 2:7-10; translation mine)

The full implications of the wording of this agreement often go unnoticed. The agreement demarcates two distinct corporate spheres of responsibility: the circumcision (the Jewish people) and the uncircumcision (the non-Jewish nations). It implies not only two distinct missions, but also two distinct sets of communities resulting from those missions, and two distinct leadership structures overseeing those missions and communities. The agreement also buttresses the case made by some scholars that Jacob and the Twelve saw themselves as primarily concerned for Israel and its redemption.<sup>71</sup> Other emissaries (such as Paul and Barnabas) were entrusted with the work of announcing Messiah's reign among the nations of the earth and forming communities from their ranks. Thus, the agreement reached in Jerusalem between Paul and the founding pillars of the *ekklesia* bears out Markus Barth's understanding of "the one new man out of two" (Eph 2:15) as meaning "one new man consisting of two."

Such a reading of Galatians 2 was known in the first centuries of the church.<sup>72</sup> Archaeologist Fr. Bellarmino Bagatti begins his volume, *The Church from the Circumcision*, with the following words:

In the mosaic of the Church of St. Sabina in Rome, made under Pope Celestine (422-432), at the sides of the great historical inscrip-

71 Munck, 212-3; Jervell, *Luke*, 75-112.

72 See Jervell, *Paul*, 41-2 and 163, footnote 35.

tion there are two female figures, the "Ecclesia ex circumcissione" on the left and the "Ecclesia ex gentibus" on the right. Each has a book in her hand. Over the former is St. Peter, in the act of receiving the law from God's hand; over the latter is St. Paul. Evidently as a basis of the composition is the saying of St. Paul to the Galatians (2,7): "to me was committed the gospel for the uncircumcised, as to Peter that for the circumcised." In the mosaic of the Roman church dedicated to Pudentiana, anterior to that of St. Sabina, there is represented in the centre, at the foot of Calvary, Our Lord, at the sides the Apostles, and on either side two women who hold a crown. From these and other like compositions we can conclude that, in the mind of the mosaicists, the two churches, represented under the female forms, were equal both in teaching and in future recompense.<sup>73</sup>

These mosaics make clear that Galatians 2 was understood as implying more than just the establishment of two missions. The agreement speaks of "the Good News of the circumcision" and "the Good News of the uncircumcision," but it implies the existence of "the *ekklesia* of the circumcision" and "the *ekklesia* of the uncircumcision." The one *ekklesia* of Messiah Yeshua is not made up of individual Jews and Gentiles, mixed together in an undifferentiated stew, but of two distinct corporate entities joined in an indissoluble bond of love and mutual commitment.

This vision of binitarian ecclesiology is also reflected in Luke's description of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The Council is summoned in order to address the insistence of some Pharisaic members of the Jerusalem community that all Gentile believers in Messiah must be circumcised and charged to keep the Mosaic Torah (15:5). The discussion begins with heated debate (15:7). Then Peter rises and recounts his experience with Cornelius, as an argument against compelling the Gentiles to become Jews. Next Barnabas and Paul tell about the extraordinary results of their work among the Gentiles. Finally, Jacob pronounces an authoritative decree, based on exegesis of a text from Amos 9:

After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has

73 Bagatti, 1.

fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.’ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.” (Acts 15:13-21, NRSV)

These verses have been interpreted brilliantly by Jacob Jervell, who deserves to be quoted here at length:

For James the event shows “how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name” (v. 14). This episode is justified and confirmed on the basis of scriptural interpretation, namely, by prophetic utterances (vv. 16-18). It is, however, not only this episode or even the Gentile mission that is established by the scriptural reference. *With the admission of Gentiles to the people of God, there are now two groups within this people.* No doubt 14b is meant to correspond with 17: “to take out of them (=Gentiles) a people for his name” and “all the Gentiles who are called by my name.” “A people of the Gentiles” is related to “the rebuilding of the dwelling of David which has fallen,” the restoration of Israel (v. 16). *James asserts that two groups exist within the church.* The conversion of the Gentiles is the result of the conversion of Israel, as is demonstrated by the numerous references to Jewish mass conversions.

*This division of the church into two groups is the presupposition for the apostolic decree, or better yet, James’ decree. The entire argument is carried by the difference between the two groups.* It is presupposed that Jewish Christians keep the law; this point of view harmonizes with the account in Acts as a whole. On the other hand, Gentile Christians need not keep the law in its entirety. James supports this by appealing to Moses as a witness for his decision (v. 21). The apostolic decree is nothing but Mosaic law, which is applied to Gentiles living together with Israel. Actually, Luke at this point has two authorities for the decree: Moses and James.<sup>74</sup> (Italics mine)

74 Luke, 190. On Jacob’s speech in Acts and its use of scripture, see also Baukham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” 452-62.

In another place Jervell puts the matter in this way: “The idea is that of a people and an associate people.”<sup>75</sup> It is striking that both key texts from the Apostolic Writings dealing with the authoritative resolution of the issue of Gentile incorporation into the *ekklesia* (Galatians 2 and Acts 15) reflect a common binitarian ecclesiology — the *ekklesia* is one people and two peoples at the same time.

A final text that assumes the same type of ecclesiology is found at the beginning of the letter of Jacob (James). The letter is addressed “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). Several recent commentators agree that this designation can refer only to Jewish people.<sup>76</sup> Most likely, it refers to groups of Jewish believers in Messiah Yeshua who are located outside the land of Israel. This is significant, for elsewhere in the Apostolic Writings such groups are found only in the land. The author identifies himself as Jacob, the same figure who speaks authoritatively in Acts 15 and who was the most respected leader of “the *ekklesia* of the circumcision.” Thus, the leader of the Jewish wing of the *ekklesia* here addresses an encyclical to the congregations of this wing located outside the land of Israel. This implies a consciousness of distinct corporate identity within the wider context of the one Messianic *ekklesia*.

One can conclude from these texts that the Pauline communities were never intended to be universal models for the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the *ekklesia*. Instead, they were expressions of “the *ekklesia* of the uncircumcision.” The fundamental biblical paradigm for “the *ekklesia* of the circumcision” is the Jerusalem community as depicted by Luke, and the network of satellite groups implicit in Galatians 2 and James 1. This Jewish *ekklesia* existed as part of a wider Jewish world, which provided its primary frame of reference. The fundamental biblical model for relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the *ekklesia* is the corporate bond connecting the Jerusalem community (and its Jewish satellites) to the Pauline communities of the diaspora. This bond established an essential link between the Gentile congregations and the people of Israel as a whole.

The corporate paradigm for the identity of “the *ekklesia* of the circumcision” was not completely forgotten after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. The Nazarenes, Ebionites, and other splinter groups of Jewish believers in Yeshua in the early centuries of the common era succeeded in preserving for a time a multi-generational Jewish movement founded on loyalty to Messiah. However, their success was short-

75 Luke, 143.

76 Baukham, *James*, 21, 105, 112; Painter, 243-5; R. P. Martin, *James* (Waco: Word, 1988), 8-10.

lived, for they were unable to sustain a cooperative relationship with either the Gentile wing of the *ekklesia* or the wider Jewish community. This led to social isolation, material impoverishment, and missiological irrelevance. In particular, the rupture with emergent Rabbinic Judaism spelled the doom of any form of Messianic Judaism, for no Jewish group can survive for long as an ostracized sect, cut off from the life of the Jewish people as a whole. Even if these Yeshua-adhering Jewish congregations had preserved a mutually supportive relationship with the Gentile *ekklesia*, it would not have been enough to compensate for the break with the larger Jewish world.

Messianic Judaism has a new opportunity in our day as a result of both the pluralism of Jewish life at the turn of the millenium and the new affinity for Judaism and the Jewish people in the post-Holocaust Christian world. The development of the Messianic Jewish congregational movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century points to a recapturing of a vision for "the *ekklesia* of the circumcision." Unfortunately, we have not yet grasped all that this ecclesiological model entails. Most of our congregations include a large number of Gentile members. Consequently, many of us view our congregations as witnesses to the unity of Jew and Gentile in Messiah — just as many scholars view the Pauline communities as models of such reconciliation. In the Pauline communities Jewish members were required to make certain compromises in their Judaism. In our congregations non-Jews generally adopt Jewish customs and identify with the Jewish people. In neither case is there a true witness to the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. Such a witness only occurs when the integrity and identity of each party is respected and supported. This can only occur in an *ekklesia* composed of two *ekklesiai*.

Our congregations should be Jewish entities, and not examples of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Messiah. That broader unity should be expressed on a corporate level, just as various church bodies relate ecumenically to one another and even work towards mutual recognition (as the Roman Catholics and the Greek Orthodox are doing). Such a corporate mode of embodying the unity of Jew and Gentile is not only practically necessary for the survival of Messianic Judaism; it is also fitting to the nature of Israel as a nation, since Jews are never Jews as individuals but only as part of a community, and to the nature of the *ekklesia*, which requires a vivid corporate Jewish expression in its midst to confirm its living connection to the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

At the same time, unlike the Jerusalem community, most Messi-

anic congregations do not reside in Jewish enclaves, nor are we, like the Nazarenes and Ebionites, cut off from the Gentile churches. Many Gentiles are attracted to our movement, and many Jewish participants are married to non-Jews. We will never be entirely home-grown. Still, Gentiles who are joining us are joining *Jewish* congregations and entering *Jewish* space. They are thereby identifying with the Jewish people as a whole and its way of life in a manner that the Gentile churches cannot and should not do.

### Conclusions

In the first section of this booklet I argued that our name, Messianic Judaism, implies that we see ourselves first and foremost as a type of Judaism. In the second section I have attempted to demonstrate that such a self-perception can be defended on theological grounds. The theological argument can be summarized as follows:

(1) Despite appearances, Judaism and Messianic Faith, Israel and the *ekklesia*, are not really analogous entities, members of common sets or categories (i.e., the category of "religion" and the category of "religious-community"). Israel is a holy nation, and Judaism is its way of national holiness as prescribed in the Torah. It sees itself as a priestly people chosen and called for a special purpose, but not as an exclusive community of salvation. On the other hand, the *ekklesia* is a multinational community, with no ethnic or genealogical membership restrictions. It is also a missionary body, viewing itself as a community of eschatological salvation. Given these differences in kind and not just in quality, there is nothing inherently contradictory about Messianic Judaism operating both as a particular expression of the Jewish way of national holiness and as one of the two fundamental expressions of Messianic Faith within the *ekklesia*.

(2) The fact that Jewish tradition has rejected the claim of Yeshua's Messiahship does not preclude Messianic Jewish identification with that tradition, even to the point where the Jewish people and Judaism (always interpreted through a Messianic lens) serve as the primary locus of social identity. This is so because the church has also rejected a fundamental truth (i.e., the election of Israel) with profound consequences, and because the factors mitigating Jewish culpability are weightier than those mitigating Christian culpability.

(3) The Apostolic Writings provide a picture of the *ekklesia* as a mul-

tinational body consisting of a Jewish and Gentile component, with the Jewish presence as a crucial point of continuity between national Israel and the *ekklesia* as a kind of enlarged eschatological Israel. Without such a vital Jewish presence, the *ekklesia* loses something integral to its existence. Such a presence can only be secured through Messianic Jewish congregations that are distinct and distinctly Jewish, planted deeply in the life of the wider Jewish community. Therefore, the primacy of Jewish life for Messianic Jews is not only consistent with the nature of the *ekklesia*, but demanded by it.

The support for each of these positions consists of a combination of exegetical, historical, and sociological observations and inferences. Our theological method involves both an examination of historical and sociological data in the light of scripture, and similarly an examination of scripture in the light of historical and sociological realities.

The argument of this booklet concerns how Messianic Jews conceive of their Judaism in relationship to both the wider Jewish and Christian worlds. To a certain extent Messianic Jews can and must determine this for themselves. However, for the type of Messianic Jewish identity presented here to become a lived corporate reality that can be transmitted effectively from one generation to the next, it must also be accepted or at least tolerated by those wider worlds to which we are connected. This is not yet the case. Our hope and our prayer is that it will one day be the case. Regardless, we must begin by grasping for ourselves all that Messianic Judaism entails, and rooting our lives therein. Only in this way will the wider Jewish and Christian worlds ever confront the message we bring, and have the historic opportunity to say "Yes" in response.