

# MESSIANIC JUDAISM

## A Response to Mark Kinzer

by  
**Michael Rudolph**  
**Ralph Finley**

Many books and articles have been written about, against, and in defense of Messianic Judaism, but Mark Kinzer's book entitled "The Nature of Messianic Judaism" is the first which has motivated us to respond. The reason is that until now, there appeared to be unity in the U.M.J.C. regarding the identity of Messianic Judaism as being fully part of, and in service to, the larger body of believers. Mark's address to the Union, however, and the subsequent publication of his book, appears to have signaled a movement away from the U.M.J.C.'s current published position – a movement which distances us from the Christian Church and would appear to deny equality to Gentiles within our congregations.

### **Genus of Self-Definition**

The parts of Mark's book which most clearly highlight our concerns are three of the claims contained in his introduction to the chapter entitled "Theological Justification of Messianic Judaism:" The first claim reads:

(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." (Kinzer, p. 14)

By declaring a "genus of self-definition", Mark constrains us to identify with either Judaism or Christianity as mutually exclusive entities. This is a similar assertion to one we have all heard from the Rabbinical Jewish community -- that one is either a Jew or a Christian, and cannot be both. In their case, of course, they define "Christian" as anyone who believes in Yeshua. If we accept Mark's thesis that we belong to the genus of Judaism, he would then say that our lifestyle must reflect aspects of the greater Jewish Community's faith and practice:

"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." (Kinzer, p. 5)

Unfortunately, one aspect of the Jewish Community's practice which Mark advocates is its inward-directed orientation:

"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." (Kinzer, p. 5).

Scripture does not focus on "Messianic Judaism," but on a believing Jewish remnant (Romans 11:5). Contrary to this remnant being "among Jews and for Jews," it is the very basis upon which Gentiles of faith join with Israel as grafted branches (Romans 11:16-18). Indeed, Mark's

concept of "among Jews and for Jews" is inconsistent with God having made Israel a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:5-6) and a father and host nation to the Gentiles (Genesis 17:4-7; Zechariah 8:22-23, 14:16-19). Because of this priesthood, our orientation can neither be exclusively nor even primarily toward the Jewish people; rather it must be toward all of mankind, Jew and non-Jew alike, who need to hear the Gospel proclaimed from a Jewish-rooted perspective.<sup>1</sup>

### **Torah and Lifestyle**

The second item in Mark's definitional claims is also contrary to our priestly commission:

(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." (Kinzer, p. 14).

Messianic Judaism (in fact all Judaism) is called to be a witness to godly faith, and to a God-given way of life for both Jews and non-Jews.<sup>2</sup> After all, who was it that was given responsibility for preserving the oracles of God (Romans 3:1-2)? And what other lifestyle has God ever endorsed than the one He gave to Israel through the Mosaic Law? For this reason, we expect that in time, local churches will come to look more and more like Messianic Jewish congregations – especially as they rediscover the Law, begin to keep the Sabbath, and participate in God's annual feasts. This is not something to fear, for Messianic Judaism's identity comes not from what it does, but from what it is – God's Jewish remnant joined by Gentiles called to a movement, whose joint purpose it is to maintain the "Romans" olive tree so that all who come to faith in Messiah may be grafted in. Therefore, rather than being reluctant, we should be eager hosts to Gentiles seeking "Torah-revival" and "the pristine, unadulterated faith."

### **Jewish Traditions in the Church**

To one extent or another, all Messianic Jewish congregations employ Rabbinical practices and traditions for exactly the reason Mark advocates – to serve as a bridge between us and the wider Jewish community. That notwithstanding, it is important that we always distinguish between traditions which are extra biblical, and those which are taught in *Torah* and generally applicable to both Jews and non-Jews. So, for example, the authors of this article would not teach Gentiles in the "Church" that God wants them to light candles on *erev Shabbat*, but we would teach that God wants them to keep the *Shabbat* (Isaiah 56:3-8). We would not teach Gentiles in the "Church" that they must put *mezuzot* on their doorposts, but we would teach that the words of the *Shema* must be remembered and obeyed in their daily walk (Matthew 22:36-38). On the other hand, we would not preclude Gentiles in the Church from displaying *m'zuzot*; Mark apparently would, though, for he states:

"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." (Kinzer, p. 43).

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge and honor the principle expressed in Romans 1:16: "for the Jew first and also for the Greek."

<sup>2</sup> There may be some differences in the lifestyle of the Jew and the non-Jew; the requirement to be circumcised is one such difference.

## **Equality of Jews and Gentiles**

Let us now turn to a related premise in Mark's book – that Gentiles in a Messianic Jewish congregation are not equal in function to its Jews:

“... and those non-Jews within it [meaning the Messianic Jewish congregation] have a supportive role.” (Kinzer, p. 5).

In one sense he is correct, since only Jews carry and perpetuate the Abrahamic Covenant, and only Messianic Jewish believers are the remnant into whom Gentile believers may be grafted. On the other hand, Scripture teaches that Yeshua's sacrifice has brought Jewish and Gentile believers into full spiritual equality (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28-29; Ephesians 2:13-15; Colossians 3:10-11), and there is therefore no reason that Messianic Jews and Gentiles called to Messianic Judaism cannot or should not function equally in a Messianic Jewish congregation.

Mark's solution for unity and equality in the body of Messiah broadly appears to be that Messianic Jews should stay in their synagogues, Gentile believers should stay in their churches,<sup>3</sup> and that each of them should support the other at a distance. In comparing Pauline communities with modern Messianic Jewish congregations, Mark states:

“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 *ekklisiai*. 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).” (Kinzer, p.42).

Few of us have trouble achieving peace and unity with those with whom we do not have to live. The miracle of Jewish and Gentile reconciliation in Messiah is that we not only are able to cooperate, but can live in harmony and unity – yes, even share leadership – within the same congregation. And just as some Gentiles are called to participate in Messianic Jewish congregations to nurture the remnant, some Jews are sure to be called to participate within Christian churches in order to raise their consciousness for Jewish witness, and to assist them in restoring their Jewish roots.

### **‘No’ to Yeshua – ‘No’ to Israel**

Another area of our concern is Mark's representation of "the historic Jewish 'No'." Mark put forth the thesis that the Jewish ‘No’ to Yeshua was "an act of loyalty to the covenant," implying that it is therefore understandable or even excusable:

“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.” (Kinzer, p. 24).

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<sup>3</sup> Kinzer is not saying that there should be no Gentiles in Messianic Jewish Congregations.

Mark's statement paints an erroneous view of history – that the Jewish community's 'No' to Yeshua was formed based on its reaction to a Gentile-dominated Church which said 'No' to Israel. Although it is true that the second generation Church was already moving away from its *Torah*-centered roots, one does not have to look far in the apostolic writings to see that Judaism's rejection of Yeshua was present much earlier. It is seen consistently throughout the Gospel books and, in the Book of Acts, we read of more than one instance where the High Priest and others try to stop people from proclaiming Yeshua as Messiah. Gentiles were not even an issue when Peter was arrested and beaten, and Stephen was put to death. They were attacked, not for disloyalty to the Covenant, but for proclaiming Yeshua as Messiah. Even Paul, before becoming a believer, received an official letter authorizing him to hunt down believers in Yeshua and bring them to trial. No, the Jewish 'No' to Yeshua existed long before Gentile rejection of Israel was an issue.

### **Legitimacy of Judaism**

Mark's incorrect understanding of history leads him to his third claim in which he declares that non-Messianic forms of Judaism are legitimate, and that we depend upon them:

(3) "We acknowledge the legitimacy of other forms of Judaism, as well as our dependence upon them." (Kinzer, p. 14).

Mark is wrong! While it is true that all Jewish people are "legitimate" (they carry the Abrahamic Covenant), the forms of Judaism that reject Yeshua, are not. We may learn from their history, borrow some of their practices, and discover godly truths preserved by their institutions but, to the extent that we declare dependence upon them, we give up our birthright and weaken ourselves spiritually. We and not they are the New Covenant remnant of Israel, and to the extent that they are legitimate, we are not.

### **Conclusion**

We must understand that our divine purpose is not rooted in the fluidity of the changing definitions of "Jewishness", but in the purposes of God as revealed in the *Tanakh* and the Apostolic Writings. We must also understand that at the core of our purpose is the truth that Yeshua is not only a way of salvation; His is the only name given to men by which they must be saved (Acts 4:12).

In our relationship with the Church, we have a responsibility to proclaim the oracles of God because Israel was chosen to be entrusted with the promises, covenants, service, glory, and the law. These things were not given to us to hide under a bushel, but rather to set upon a hill and perform in such a way that the Father is glorified. Messianic Judaism should not be afraid to claim its rightful position as the legitimate remnant of Israel that has not bowed its knee to Baal (figuratively), but which has continued in the revelation of God, faithful to the heavenly calling. With that understanding, Messianic Judaism should, without apology, exhort the wider body of Messiah to return to its Jewish roots and accept its position as being grafted in among the remnant. What is more, it should encourage the grafted Gentiles to take seriously the promise of the New Covenant, that through their grafting, God's Torah is written on their hearts and put in their minds.

As for our relationship with the wider Jewish community, the answer is simple. We are to remember that those of physical Israel are the elect of God, carriers of God's covenant with Abraham, the intended recipients of the New Covenant, and beloved because of the fathers. With that knowledge, we need to always stand up for them in righteousness, and to protect them. At the same time, we must not play down the fact that the Rabbinical institution currently rejects the Gospel (Romans 11:28) and needs to repent. We must therefore seek to win them with the same zeal and love that the Apostles had, being sure not to return evil for evil, but to bear the reproach of Messiah until the eyes of all of Israel are open, and they are grafted back into their own olive tree.

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The authors of this response are elders and pastors of Ahavat Yeshua, the Messianic Jewish congregation located in our Nation's Capital. One of us, Michael Rudolph, is Jewish, and was raised in the environment of Jewish Orthodoxy, while the other of us, Ralph Finley, is Gentile. Both of us call ourselves Messianic believers (Michael a Messianic Jew and Ralph a Messianic Gentile), equal participants in Messianic Judaism, and co-leaders with another elder, Marcellus Powell, of our Messianic Jewish congregation. The Messianic Judaism we are part of is a New Covenant movement of both Jews and non-Jews whose lives are rooted in the Judaism of antiquity as practiced by the early followers of Yeshua. Because the term "Messianic Judaism" literally includes Jews who believe in "Messiahs" other than Yeshua of Nazareth, we sometimes also use the term "New Covenant Judaism." While we distinguish ourselves from modern Christianity, we are also quick to explain our similarities so as not to mislead those who would associate the terms "Jew" and "Judaism" as necessarily belonging to those who have rejected Yeshua as Messiah. What is even more important than the terms we use, however, is that we genuinely accept our membership in the larger body of believers, which includes all disciples of Yeshua who count themselves as either part of Messianic Judaism or Christianity. We believe that our views of Messianic Judaism are more in accord with the official position of the U.M.J.C. than are Mark Kinzers, and we have chosen to respond at this time because we are concerned that the published exposure Mark has received from the U.M.J.C. will influence some of his readers away from Biblical truth.

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