

Discussion

Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People

by Mark S. Kinzer
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ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S statement, "Christians need badly to listen to Jews,"¹ remains as true today as it was when he wrote it nearly twenty years ago. The first thing that needs to be said about Mark Kinzer's *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People*, is that it ought to be read broadly and carefully. Written by a son of Abraham according to the flesh, a believer in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah of Israel, and an adherent of the Apostles Creed, this book is the fruit of long and deep study of Scripture and contemporary theology, as well as broad ecumenical and pastoral experience, by a weighty and thoughtful scholar. Kinzer writes lucidly and engagingly and takes great care to lay out his argument clearly, repeatedly retracing the steps he has taken, and pointing out the next section of the trail he intends to follow.

Kinzer argues that the relationship between Christianity and Judaism belongs properly, not to missiology, but to ecclesiology. "We are dealing

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press/London: Duckworth, 1988), 11.

with one people and one religion, but it is a people and a religion that is inherently twofold in nature. Sadly, what should have been an enriching differentiation became a bitter schism” (21–22). Kinzer advocates a “bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel.”

Our ecclesiology can be summarized in five basic principles: 1) the perpetual validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people; 2) the perpetual validity of the Jewish way of life rooted in the Torah, as the enduring sign and instrument of that covenant; 3) the validity of Jewish religious tradition as the historical embodiment of the Jewish way of life rooted in the Torah; 4) the bilateral constitution of the *ekklesia*, consisting of distinct but united Jewish and Gentile expressions of Yeshua-faith; 5) the ecumenical imperative of the *ekklesia*, which entails bringing the redeemed nations of the world into solidarity with the people of Israel in anticipation of Israel’s—and the world’s—final redemption. In short, we have argued for a *bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel that affirms Israel’s covenant, Torah, and religious tradition*. (264, original emphasis)

Kinzer’s ecclesiology is built on an argument resting on three foundational, interrelated claims: (1) the New Testament—read canonically and theologically in the light of history—teaches that Israel’s covenant, way of life, and religious tradition have enduring validity and importance, even when Israel proves unwilling or unable to explicitly recognize its Messiah; (2) the failure of the Gentile *ekklesia* to receive and confirm this truth contributed decisively to the rupture between the *ekklesia* and the Jewish people—“a rupture that constitutes a debilitating schism in the heart of the people of God”; and (3) this schism was manifested first in the rejection of the validity and importance of the Jewish *ekklesia* and of its integration within the wider Jewish world, and the healing of this schism requires the restoration of such an *ekklesia* (303). His case is complex and linear, consisting of a series of linked arguments about the status and function of the Jewish people in the divine plan, drawn from Scripture and history. The various components merit consideration in detail. Here I can offer only a lengthy sketch, but at least that much is required in order to make clear the scale and interest of the project and to offer some initial thoughts in response.

Following a disarmingly sincere and earnest introduction that recounts the author’s fascinating personal journey, the first three of nine chapters deal with the New Testament. The first chapter suggests that certain non-exegetical historical factors ought to incline the reader favorably toward the novel exegesis of the Scripture that the book will propose. The first

of these factors is the dramatic difference in the social location of the biblical authors and of their contemporary readers, the latter "boxed into" thinking in terms of mutually exclusive Jewish and Christian categories and social worlds. Second, one ought to consider carefully the ethical implications of one's interpretive scheme; in particular the reading of Matthew 27:25 as the enduring self-curse of the "deicidal Jews" has been the root, so Kinzer argues, of untold suffering inflicted upon them and its facile dismissal. Finally, if one accepts that the God revealed in the Bible is the Lord of history, one ought to take seriously the post-biblical history of both the Gentile Church and the Jewish people and be prepared, as Robert Louis Wilken says, to "see dimensions of the Holy Scriptures that were not apparent to earlier generations" (42). Kinzer cites six historical developments that he believes should be pondered as a propaedeutic exercise to the exegesis of the at times "irreducibly ambiguous" texts of the New Testament (41)—texts that he reads as canonical and authoritative. The six factors are: the loss of a visible Jewish presence in the *ekklesia* (the term Kinzer normally uses in preference to "church," which he sees carrying with it a freight of institutional history); the astonishing survival of the Jewish people and Judaism; the emergence of virulent and violent anti-Judaism in the Christian tradition; the holocaust, which Kinzer sees as "the ultimate outcome of Christian supersessionism" (44), the belief that the covenant of Sinai has been replaced by the covenant with the Church; the return of the Jewish people to Israel (which Kinzer carefully describes only as confirmation of "the significance of the Jewish people in the divine purpose," fully recognizing that "these realities have not always cast a favorable light on the Jewish people" (45); the emergence of the Messianic Jewish movement in the last fifty years or so.

All these factors justify, for Kinzer, a serious rethinking of the relationship between Israel and the Gentile *ekklesia*. He is not alone; throughout the book he cites authors ranging from the Roman Catholic Wilken, to the Lutherans Wolfhart Pannenberg and Robert Jenson, to the former Lutheran and now Roman Catholic Bruce Marshall, to the Anabaptist John Howard Yoder, to the non-messianic Jew Michael Wyschogrod. And, of course, Kinzer duly regards the towering figure of Karl Barth. In addition, he notes that the Catholic Magisterium has lately taken care to give clarity and nuance to the way in which the Church ought to see the people of Israel and its relationship to them.

The second and third chapters deal with the New Testament and Jewish practice and the New Testament and the Jewish people, respectively. The second chapter argues that, according to the New Testament,

keeping the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law that peculiarly identify the Jews as a people with a distinct way of life—circumcision, the dietary laws, keeping the festal calendar, and the Sabbath—is not only permissible for Jews, but obligatory. Kinzer’s chapter offers a clear and compact overview of the more recent, weighty literature on the subject (for example, that of E. P. Sanders, Jacob Neusner, Peter Tomson, Gabriele Boccacini, Mark Nanos, and Douglas Harink). The findings of such studies, piling up over the last two decades, ought to sideline a good deal of what has been taken for granted about the relation between Jesus, his first disciples, and the Torah.

The third chapter concludes that “God’s covenant with Israel remains intact” (23). “The New Testament regards the Jewish people as recipients of a particular calling and as servants with a distinctive role and mission in the divine purpose . . . [which] is not transmitted to or absorbed by the multinational *ekklesia* as a whole” (97). In other words, the Jewish people, whose national identity is constituted in large part by the practices prescribed by the Law, have an important and distinctive role in the divine purpose that is fulfilled precisely by remaining a distinct, visible people. The positive role in the divine redemptive purpose belongs not only to those Jews who believe in Yeshua as Messiah, but also to “Jews who have not believed in Yeshua, but who have loyally sustained a continual Jewish communal presence in the world through hours of deepest darkness [and] are heirs of God’s covenant with Israel” (98).

While Kinzer gives attention to Matthew, Mark, Luke–Acts, and John, at the heart of this chapter is, as one would expect, a treatment of Romans 9–11. Kinzer adopts a rather surprising view of this Pauline tract, expounded in the book’s longest piece of sustained exegesis of a single text. He lays out his view of the role of Israel as “partially hardened,” namely blind to the identity of Yeshua as Messiah. (This translation, an alternative to the hardening of “a part of Israel,” is crucial to his exegesis.)

Whereas a traditional reading of Romans 9–11 has seen the hardening of nonremnant Israel as exclusively punitive in nature, the texts we have been exploring point in another direction. They depict Israel’s suffering as a form of suffering imposed by God so that God’s redemptive purpose for the world might be realized. (129)

Kinzer, following Elizabeth Johnson, Richard Hays, Douglas Harink, and Mark Nanos, argues that Romans 9–11 must be seen in connection to the letter as a whole, especially Romans 8. He asks whether, perhaps, “Paul is hinting through these striking parallels between Romans 8 and

Romans 9–11 that Israel's temporary unbelief in Yeshua is itself, paradoxically, a participation in Yeshua's vicarious, redemptive suffering?" (133). Kinzer, again relying on Hays, sees behind this allusion to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

The fourth chapter initiates Kinzer's positive ecclesiological proposal:

. . . an *ekklesia* that consists of two distinct but united corporate bodies—a Jewish and a Gentile *ekklesia*. the Jewish *ekklesia* would live as part of the wider Jewish community and the Gentile community would express its solidarity with the Jewish people through the loving bond with the Jewish *ekklesia*. (23)

He builds his case again through an examination of the New Testament, giving particular attention to the Book of Acts as presenting "the Jerusalem community under the leadership of James as the mother congregation for the worldwide *ekklesia*" (177). He backs this up with an appeal to Galatians 2 and Ephesians 2. The chapter closes with a reflection on the parallels and differences between the author's proposal and the theology of Israel propounded in Karl Barth's theology of election.

In the fifth chapter, Kinzer surveys the history of the "Christian No to Israel." This "No" consisted first of all in the prohibition of Jewish practice for Jewish believers. "Thus a schism ruptured the messianic *ekklesia* and helped to produce the wider rupture between *ekklesia* and the Jewish people as a whole," without invalidating the Church's vocation or tradition (24). Kinzer traces the roots of this "No" to a very early stage in the Church's history, finding the first such proponent in Ignatius of Antioch. He surveys a number of patristic witnesses, some of whom are more positive than others, as well as Aquinas, and traces among them a pattern of supersessionism. He then asks what denouncing supersessionism might mean, finding hope for such an enterprise in the fact that "[t]he church faithfully preserved and carried within it the truths that would allow it eventually to reexamine its history and recognize supersessionism as an error demanding correction" (211).

In the next two chapters, Kinzer subjects his own ecclesiological proposal to cross-examination, first by a "Christological test," then a "biblical test." The first of these chapters turns an "apparent" Jewish "No" to Yeshua on its head, finding that:

Once the church had prohibited Jewish practice—as it did at a very early stage—the Jewish no to Yeshua actually expressed its yes to God and God's covenant. In this way the Jewish no to Yeshua paradoxically shared in Yeshua's own yes to God. I conclude that the risen Yeshua

dwells in hidden fashion among his own flesh and blood brothers and sisters and that the schism with the church, while damaging to the Jewish people, does not invalidate its vocation or tradition. (24)

Kinzer argues that Rabbinic Judaism—which emerged in the early centuries of the common era, with the *Mishnah*, Talmud, synagogue and prayer book, and Torah study as its pillars—manifests this ongoing presence. Having argued, especially on the basis of his reading of Romans 9–11 for the ongoing role of the Jewish people in the divine plan, he draws an inference from the historical role of rabbinic Judaism: “This particular expression of Judaism—and only this particular expression of Judaism—succeeded in preserving both the Jewish people and its covenantal way of life. Its crucial role in what is evidently a divinely appointed task points to its inherent value” (215). Kinzer argues, with the support of N. T. Wright, that Yeshua is the representative and individual embodiment of the entire people of Israel, but unlike Wright, he rejects supersessionism. Instead, he takes up the position of David Stern, that “Yeshua is in union, not only with the church, but also with the Jewish people” (223).² Most strikingly, Kinzer draws from Paul Van Buren an argument that the Jews were offered a church that (wrongly) taught that God’s covenant with Israel had been superseded, and takes it a step further:

If the obedience of Yeshua that led him to death on the cross is rightly interpreted as the perfect embodiment and realization of Israel’s covenant fidelity, then Jewish rejection of the church’s message in the second century and afterward can rightly be seen as a hidden participation in the obedience of Israel’s Messiah. (225)

Thus, rabbinic Judaism passes the “Christological test.”

The “biblical test” of the following chapter argues

that the Pentateuch confirms the need for both an oral tradition of legal interpretation and an institutional framework in which that tradition can be developed and practically applied . . . [and] that later rabbinic tradition is compatible with—though not identical to—the teaching of the New Testament. (24)

The first part of that argument takes off from the story in Exodus 18 of the institution of judicial elders under Moses, recommended to him by his father-in-law, Jethro. It is an insightful argument, of relevance as well to the relation between Scripture and tradition in the Church. The second part of

² David Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Resources International, 1988), 108.

the argument notes the commonalities between Yeshua's teaching and that of Pharisaic Judaism. Kinzer cites a 1985 document from the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, which, like Kinzer, argues that the strong adversarial portrayal of Jesus' relation to the Pharisees, especially in Matthew's Gospel, arises from a "polemical affinity" that indicates the proximity of the teachings of Jesus and the Pharisees.

In the eighth chapter, "From Missionary to Postmissionary Messianic Judaism," Kinzer recounts the birth of Hebrew Christianity in the nineteenth century and Hebrew Catholicism and Messianic Judaism in the twentieth century and compares each in turn to his five basic principles. For most readers, the whole history will be new; and those who know of messianic Judaism at all will likely be familiar only with one of the movements, Jews for Jesus. Kinzer's account demonstrates the variety of forms and rationales that Jewish messianic faith has assumed in the last two centuries and sheds light on a story seldom told in histories of Christianity or Judaism.

On Kinzer's account, each of these movements was essentially missionary in its orientation toward the Jewish people as a whole. By contrast, in the final chapter he offers three aspects of the *postmissionary* orientation of the Jewish *ekklesia* to the wider Jewish world: (1) it will realize that it must first receive the testimony borne by the wider Jewish community to the God of Israel before it is fit to bear its own witness; (2) the Jewish *ekklesia* bears witness to the one already present in Israel's midst; it only points other Jews to his intimate proximity; (3) it bears witness discreetly, sensitively, and with restraint, as always aware of the painful wounds of the past. Nonetheless, faith in Yeshua is not simply envisioned as an appendage to a more fundamental Jewish faith. In the Jewish *ekklesia*, "Yeshua-faith and Judaism are not two separate realities, but one integrated whole. Its Yeshua faith will affect every dimension of its life, including its participation in the wider Jewish world" (304).

Besides this thoroughgoing identification with and witness to the Jewish people, the Jewish *ekklesia* will also "stretch out its hands to the Gentile *ekklesia* and bring it into a structured ecclesial relationship to the Jewish people" (305). Kinzer sees the restoration of a Jewish *ekklesia*, which he refers to several times as a "bridge," as bringing with it a power to contribute to the healing of other divisions, to combat the temptation to a dualism of body and spirit, and to better hear, understand, and respond to the Word of God in the Scriptures. Kinzer avers that the

schism between the Jewish people and the *ekklesia* can be healed without coming to full agreement over Yeshua's messianic identity, though full

healing of the schism will come only “when the wider Jewish community accepts the Jewish *ekklesia* as a legitimate participant in Jewish communal life. (307)

As for the Christian churches, they can act so as to promote such healing, Kinzer says, in at least three ways. First, Kinzer encourages the churches to redouble efforts to foster respect for the Jewish people and Judaism; and, going far beyond this, Kinzer urges that they need to “see Judaism and the Jewish people in the Christological perspective” that Kinzer argued for in his chapter on “The Christological Test” (308). Second, the churches must not only allow, but urge Jews in their midst to live as observant Jews. Finally, Kinzer calls for initiating dialogue at all levels with the Messianic Jewish movement as it now exists.

Kinzer’s book is broad and audacious. Each of its subarguments could engender an entire symposium. Here I will attempt to offer some initial response to his proposals, recognizing that they constitute, not so much a rejoinder, as an invitation to offer clarification and fuller elaboration.

First, for those who hold that the apostolic mark of the Church confessed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed consists in part in the succession of episcopal office-holders going back to the apostles, Kinzer’s proposal raises a special challenge: How would the “bi-lateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel” manifest itself concretely in a way that accords with an actual succession of apostolic office holders? This obstacle to agreement is a high one indeed, even if not insurmountable. In an era in which the pontiff can call for proposals from Orthodox and Protestant Christians on how the Bishop of Rome might advance the unity of all believers, one can certainly imagine a similar call for proposals on how the Church might manifest its constitution as an apostolic communion in continuity with a visible people of the covenant at Sinai, a people whose ongoing covenantal status seems to be affirmed both in recent magisterial statements and in the writings of a wide variety of contemporary theologians. In addition to that, Kinzer points to developments in the movement he calls “Hebrew Catholicism” that indicate some possible ways toward integrating a distinctive Jewish life and liturgy within the Catholic communion.

More crucially, Kinzer’s adumbration of the relation between the Jewish people and Christ raises some concerns. Chief among these is the positive portrayal of the hardening in Romans 11. Even if we accept the translation that takes the hardening to be a partial hardening of perception, rather than a hardening of some portion of the whole people, the biblical usage of this image is never positive. Whether we think, for example, of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart by God, or the hardening of their

own hearts by the people of Israel at Massah (Ps 95:8ff), or the hardening that Isaiah denounces (Is 63:17), or the hardness of Gentile hearts (Eph 4:8), the image seems to be thoroughly negative; and it would be a surprising reversal to use it as positively as Kinzer sees Paul using it. It is true that the phrase in Romans does not explicitly refer to the "heart" as these other passages do, but it is easier to imagine Paul's use of "hardening" aligning with these other passages than departing from them, especially since he explicitly connects it with disobedience.

One of the most difficult aspects of Kinzer's book to get some purchase on is his use of the notion of participation in Christ's sufferings, or "co-suffering." Participation is a popular but imprecise term in contemporary theology, the use of which calls for much more careful delineation. I find in particular the use of participation in connection with the "vicarious suffering" of Christ a cause for some unease. The unease is rooted in a concern that the uniqueness of Christ's redemptive suffering not be compromised. That concern applies not only to the application of that notion to the Jews, but to all the martyrs—witnesses—of all times, and to the assertion (unsupported by reference to any other exegetes or to internal evidence) that in Romans 8:18–25 "it is likely that [Paul] sees this co-suffering [of the sons of God] as an essential component in the eschatological redemption of creation" (130). It may be necessary to suffer in this life while we await the full redemption of our bodies, but it is not at all clear that the suffering is redemptive of creation, as Kinzer seems to suggest.

This is not a blunt charge of deficiency in Kinzer's work; the strongest language about "vicarious suffering" comes not from the author, but from some of those he cites. Surprisingly, the most unsettling quotation comes from a pupil of Karl Barth, Thomas Torrance, who speaks of the Jewish slaughter at the hands of the Nazis as "a burnt offering laden with the guilt of humanity" that "brings a new appreciation for the vicarious role of Israel in the mediation of God's reconciling purpose in the dark underground of conflicting forces within the human race" (227). One can put an acceptable sense upon such statements, but such general and highly charged rhetoric—particularly because it is used in speaking about such a tragic, horrific, and moving event—carries with it a danger: that the redemptive role that belongs uniquely to Christ as the One Mediator, who uniquely redeems and represents the whole of the sin-laden human race before God, might be shared among other vicarious mediators.

Of course, there is a role of mediation in which human beings can participate in the accomplishment of the divine plan, and that role can involve suffering. We also know that Christ himself can call the suffering of his persecuted brethren his own (Acts 8:4–5). All those who suffer for

the sake of Christ make their lives an offering to God along with him, and in so doing may themselves be conformed more perfectly to his image (Rom 8:29). But the term “vicarious suffering,” with its connotations of the one who “bore our sins in his body on the tree,” is probably best discarded, whether it is used of Jew or Gentile, believer or apparent unbeliever. In particular when the suffering of the Jews as a result of their “hardening” is joined to Isaiah 53, it gives one pause.

At times Kinzer uses a mode of speaking about a mediating role for the Jews that seems to me to be entirely unobjectionable, and nonetheless of genuine importance: that of witness, including martyrdom. The Jews may participate in Christ’s suffering in that their existence, which as Kinzer argues is inextricably bound to observance of the prescriptions of the Torah, witnesses to the reality and the all-surpassing worth of the God of Israel who has come to redeem us in the Person of Jesus Christ. This thesis is still not beyond debate, but it is less problematic than the talk of vicarious, redemptive suffering. In any case, perhaps one should take care to trim back the lush growth of language about “vicarious suffering” in connection with the redemptive plan of God, lest the unique work of the incarnate Son of God merge into a general theory of redemptive suffering.

A troubling absence from the book is mention of the gift of the Holy Spirit as constitutive of the body of Christ, and what this might mean for our understanding of the status of the people of Israel. Kinzer mounts a “Christological test” for the validity of rabbinic Judaism, and concludes that the tradition of the Talmud and Mishnah pass that test. I would not suggest that there is such a thing as a “pneumatological test,” since normally the presence of the Holy Spirit is tested by reference to Christ rather than vice versa; but is not the presence of Christ possible in different modes, and is the confession of Yeshua as Messiah not intrinsically connected to his vivifying, illuminating, empowering presence through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Certainly the New Testament indicates that in some way Christ was present and active already in the history of Israel prior to the incarnation, but not in the mode in which he is present to those who receive the gift of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection. Is it only recognition of the intimate presence of the one *already* present in their midst that is at issue in the acceptance of Yeshua as Messiah?

It seems at times that Kinzer’s strong affirmation of the participation of the Jewish people in Yeshua, the Jewish people as a kind of *corpus mysticum Christi*,³ even in the absence of their knowledge or acknowledgment of

³ A phrase taken from Lev Gillet, building on Jacques Maritain. Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah* (1942; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 157.

his presence, makes explicit Christian faith for a Jew primarily cognitive. Do all the radical New Testament declarations of regeneration, renewal, and salvation relate only to the Gentiles? Ephesians 2:4–6, for example, speaks in the first person plural, which suggests that the need for resurrection of “we who were dead in our trespasses and sins” would apply to Jew and Gentile, on Kinzer’s reading. If these apply to the Jews as well, is there not more at stake in the Jewish reception of Yeshua as Messiah than simply an acknowledgment of the already intimate presence of him “who lives within Israel and directs its way, who constitutes the hidden center of its tradition and way of life” (304–5)? While the ongoing, irrevocable election of the people of Israel is not in doubt, isn’t there more to say about what is new in the New Covenant than that the nations are now joined to Israel? And is not the newness of the New Covenant bound both to faith in Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

No doubt Kinzer would say that he is writing for the Gentile *ekklesia*, and would say something different to his Jewish brethren. His emphasis on continuity and commonality between Israel and the *ekklesia* is entirely understandable in a book that attempts to counter the prevailing view of Jewish legal observance as at best superfluous and at worst sinful. Nevertheless, because the presence and action of the Holy Spirit is so central to the claims that the New Testament makes about the New Covenant, in its impact on both Jews and Gentiles, Kinzer needs to clarify what difference the outpouring of “the gift of the Father” makes, how that outpouring is new in the New Covenant, and how it relates to explicit faith in Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world.

In line with the foregoing observation, to say that the “schism between the Jewish people and the *ekklesia* can be healed without coming to full agreement over Yeshua’s messianic identity” (307) is also rather troubling. It seems to me that some kind of fundamental division objectively exists when there is disagreement as to whether this particular son of Abraham is also the Son of God come in the flesh. If “schism” is taken to mean active enmity, then, no, healing schism does not require such agreement. But if “schism” means a disruption in communion, such as would be appropriately expressed in the Christian tradition by gathering at the Eucharistic table, then healing that schism must involve recognition of the identity of the One with Whom we commune.

Despite these reservations about Kinzer’s proposal, this is a book well worth pondering as an important starting point for a vital theological topic. It offers a fresh, ambitious attempt to assess the status of the life, tradition, and witness of the millions of observant Jews who worship the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of all, and the maker of the

covenant at Sinai, and who do so in obedience to that covenant's demands. Moreover, its case is made with a full and unreserved reverence for the New Testament as the written Word of God. His three proposals for how the Church might act to promote healing of divisions between Jew and Christian Gentile deserve a serious response and, at least for the most part, approbation. Amidst the clamor for dialogue among religions, how can we neglect dialogue between Jewish and Gentile brethren in Christ? This book makes an honest, earnest, and valuable contribution to that vital discussion. **N-V**