

# Introduction

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One of the earliest publications of the modern Messianic Jewish community, *The Messianic Jew*, rolled off the printing press more than a hundred years ago in December 1910. Reading this journal, one is struck by the grand vision for Messianic Judaism that its authors articulated soon after the turn of the century. A straight line can be drawn between the dreams of these Jewish pioneers and the emergence of the twenty-first-century Messianic Jewish community.

*Introduction to Messianic Judaism* is a portal into this movement. It provides a description of what the Messianic Jewish community looks like today at its center and on its margins. The first section of the book traces the ecclesial contours of the community, providing a sociohistorical and theological snapshot of where the community is presently and where it is heading. Alongside these chapters, part 2 includes a number of essays on biblical and theological issues central to the identity and legitimacy of Messianic Judaism.

There are now over five hundred Messianic synagogues around the world.<sup>1</sup> In North America, the majority of Messianic synagogues are affiliated with the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) and the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS). The UMJC defines Messianic Judaism as “a movement of Jewish congregations and congregation-like groupings committed to Yeshua [Jesus] the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant.”<sup>2</sup>

I grew up in one of these UMJC synagogues from the age of eight. How I became a Messianic Jew is in many ways paradigmatic of how God is moving in the lives of thousands of Jews today. The realization that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel, the one foretold by the prophets of Israel, is often followed by a second life-transforming realization: that the God of Israel calls Jews who follow the Jewish Messiah to remain Jews and become better Jews in keeping with his eternal purposes.

This is my story. In 1975, our house was robbed. My father called 911 and the officer who received the dispatch raced to our house. While on the way, the policeman

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1. David H. Stern, *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past* (Clarksville, Md.: Lederer, 2007), 271–72.

2. Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, “Defining Messianic Judaism,” 2005. Cited 27 February 2012. Online: <http://www.umjc.org/home-mainmenu-1/global-vision-mainmenu-42/13-vision/225-defining-messianic-judaism>.

heard Jesus say to him, “Tell the person you meet about me.” When the policeman arrived at our home, he said, “Mr. Rudolph, I think you should sit down. I have something to tell you.” The policeman proceeded to tell my father about Jesus — who he was and why God sent him into this world.

My father, who was a criminal lawyer at the time, felt sorry for the policeman, thinking that he had lost his mind. But as the policeman shared the message of the gospel, my father experienced being surrounded by the presence of God. It was tactile and like a force field. While this was happening, the policeman left without taking a report, having done what Jesus told him to do. After about an hour, the presence of God departed, my father fell to the floor, and he prayed, “God, I am so sorry that I have not believed in you all these years. Now I know that you are real. But why did you send a Christian? Is Jesus who the Christians say he is?” My father did not know the answer to this question, but he knew he was going to find out.

Over the next couple of months, my father read large portions of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel foretold by the prophets. He began attending a local church. When the pastor of the church learned that my father was Jewish, he encouraged our family to visit a nearby Messianic synagogue, where we would be able to live out faith in Jesus in a Jewish communal context.

My father took the pastor’s advice and visited the Messianic synagogue, but he did not like it because most of the service was in Hebrew. So my father returned to the church. When the pastor saw my father again, he asked what happened and my father shared his experience. Amazingly, rather than the pastor welcoming my father into his church, the pastor said, “Mr. Rudolph, I think you should give the Messianic synagogue another chance since it will be difficult to maintain your Jewish identity at our church. We do not celebrate Jewish festivals, have bar mitzvahs, teach Hebrew, etc. This is a very important decision.” So my father went back to the Messianic synagogue, and this time he felt it was where God wanted our family to be. Today my father is the rabbi of a UMJC Messianic synagogue.

Because this pastor encouraged my father in the direction of Messianic Judaism, I was raised as a Messianic Jew. I now have three daughters, all of whom have been raised in Messianic synagogues and identify as Messianic Jews. My oldest daughter is a student at Johns Hopkins University, and she tells me that she will raise her future children as Messianic Jews. The Messianic synagogue option enabled my parents (both of whom are halakhically Jewish) to pass on Jewish identity to their children and grandchildren. But things could have turned out differently had the pastor not intervened. If the pastor had welcomed my father into his church, without welcoming his Jewish calling, the likelihood is that I (like the vast majority of Jesus-believing Jews in churches) would have assimilated and left behind my Jewish identity.

The Messianic Jewish community is made up of thousands of Jews like my father who, since the late 1960s, have described the Messiah of Israel entering their lives and calling them to become better Jews. Along with these Jews who became followers of Yeshua as adults, there is also a second (even a third and fourth) generation of Messianic Jews like myself who have grown up in the Messianic Jewish community. We

stand on the shoulders of those who pioneered the modern Messianic Jewish movement, and we have a unique contribution to make as those who have always thought and lived as Messianic Jews.

This book is written primarily for rabbis and pastors, informed laity, undergraduate students, and seminarians in the Messianic Jewish, mainstream Jewish, and Gentile Christian world. It is understandable why Jews would be interested in Messianic Judaism. But why would Gentile Christians want to learn about the Messianic Jewish community? Joel Willitts answers this question in the concluding chapter of this volume. For now, I would like to offer several reasons why Messianic Judaism is relevant to Gentile Christians. The first reason is *epistemological* — Messianic Judaism helps Gentile Christians to understand their own faith better. In his book *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, John Howard Yoder describes early Christianity as a form of “Messianic Judaism” and the early church as a body composed of “Messianic Jews” and “Messianic Gentiles.”<sup>3</sup>

Many today view Judaism and Christianity as separate and distinct religions by God’s design. However, Yoder argues that this was not God’s intention. A more objective understanding of the Jewish-Christian schism requires setting aside the “had to” and allowing for the possibility that “it did not have to be.” Historical development does not always reflect the will of God. A critical reading of history will allow for the “defectibility of the church of the past” and bear in mind that “divine providence” readings of church history are sustained in part because they validate Christian self-definition:<sup>4</sup>

There was never a single event by that name [the Jewish-Christian schism]. After it had conclusively taken place, it seemed to everyone to be utterly natural that it should have come to pass. Yet there was a space of at least fifty years — twice that in most respects — during which it had not happened, was not inevitable or clearly probable, and was not chosen by everyone, not even by everyone who finally was going to have to accept it. We do violence to the depth and density of the story if, knowing with the wisdom of later centuries that it came out as it did, we box the actors of the first century into our wisdom about their children’s fate in the second. We thereby refuse to honour the dignity and drama of their struggle, and the open-endedness of their questioning and the variety of paths available to them until one answer, not necessarily the best one, not necessarily one anyone wanted, was imposed on them. . . . If God’s purpose might have been to offer a different future from the one which actually came to be, then we do not do total justice to God’s intent in the story by reading it as if the outcome he did not want but which did happen, had to happen.<sup>5</sup>

As historians have increasingly recognized, the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity occurred between the second and fourth centuries, and this parting did not necessarily reflect apostolic example or teaching:

3. John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 32 – 33.

4. Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 137.

5. Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 43 – 44, 47.

We have learned that instead of thinking of “Christianity” and “Judaism” as systems, existing primordially in a “normative” form, and instead of thinking of “Christians” and “Jews” in the early centuries as separate bodies existing over against each other, we must think of two initially largely overlapping circles. The circle “Church” and the circle “Jewry” overlapped for generations, in the persons whom we may call either messianic Jews or Jewish Christians, who for over a century at least stood in fellowship with both wider circles. They were not split apart from one another by Jesus’ being honoured as Messiah, not by anyone’s keeping nor not keeping the law. The split which was ultimately to push the circles apart began, we saw, not in the first century but in the second. It began not as a cleft between the two larger circles but as a schism within each of the communities. People like the “apologetic father” Justin began splitting the Church over the issue of respect for Jewish culture, and some rabbis began pushing out the *nozrim* who wanted to stay in their synagogues. “Justin’s wedge” is dated about 150; the “rabbis’ wedge” returned the insult at least a generation later.<sup>6</sup>

Messianic Judaism is the bridge between the Jewish people and the church, and as such it helps the church to understand better its origin and identity.

A second reason why the Gentile Christian world should concern itself with Messianic Judaism is *ecclesiological* — God designed the church to be a Jew-Gentile body. Markus Barth wrote in 1969, “The church is the bride of Christ only when it is the church of Jews and Gentiles. . . . [T]he existence, building, and growth of the church are identified with the common existence, structure, and growth of Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>7</sup> Why is this? *It is because the church is a prolepsis of Israel and the nations in the eschaton.* Interdependence and mutual blessing between Jew and Gentile reflect the *raison d’être* of the church and anticipate the consummation when Israel and the nations, in unity and diversity, will worship Adonai alone. As George Howard asserted in 1979, a Jew-Gentile church testifies to the oneness of God and the ultimate plan of God:

The gospel as Paul preached it demanded a continued ethnic distinctiveness between Jews and Gentiles in order that . . . [Adonai], the God of the Hebrews, could be conceptualized by both Jews and Gentiles as the God of all nations. . . . This is certainly his point of view in Rom. 3:29 – 30 where he says: “Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since God is one.” His thought is: if God is one he must be the God of both Jews and Gentiles. . . . We may even go further and say that any attempt on either side to erase the ethnic and cultural nature of the other would be to destroy Paul’s particular concept of unity between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>8</sup>

Countering Paul van Buren’s argument that “Only one Jew is essential to the Church and that is the Jew Jesus,”<sup>9</sup> Isaac Rottenberg points out that “Jewish-Gentile

6. Yoder, *Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, 69.

7. Markus Barth, *Israel and the Church: Contributions for a Dialogue Vital for Peace* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1969), 90 – 91.

8. George Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia: A Study in Early Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 66, 79 – 81.

9. Paul M. Van Buren, *Discerning the Way* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 155.

unity belongs to the *esse* [being], not just the *bene esse* [well-being] of the Church.”<sup>10</sup> R. Kendall Soulen has made a formidable case for Jew-Gentile ecclesiological variegation in his book *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*:

Traditionally, the church has understood itself as a spiritual fellowship in which the carnal distinction between Jew and Gentile no longer applies. The church has declared itself a third and final “race” that transcends and replaces the difference between Israel and the nations. . . . The proper therapy for this misunderstanding is a recovery of the church’s basic character as a table fellowship of those who are — and remain — different. The distinction between Jew and Gentile, being intrinsic to God’s work as the Consummator of creation, is not erased but realized in a new way in the sphere of the church. The church concerns the Jew as a Jew and the Gentile as a Gentile, not only initially or for the period of a few generations but essentially and at all times.<sup>11</sup>

Peter Hocken describes this fellowship between Jesus-believing Jews and Gentiles in the church as inherently “dialogical”:

The vision of the church as “the two made one” profoundly challenges all our inherited views of the church, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. First, it challenges what we may call all “monopolar” models of the church. The New Testament model is “bipolar,” a union of contrasts or of opposites: of the Jews (oriented by their original calling toward the nations) and of the Gentiles (oriented by the gospel calling toward Israel and their Messiah). The bipolar model excludes a self-serving church, a church that sees its role as subordinating all else to itself — even in the name of Christ. There is something dialogical built into the constitution of the church as there is in the eternal “constitution” of the Trinity. There is the dialogue of the Bridegroom with the Bride (Eph. 5:22 – 23) and there is the dialogue of the “two made one,” of Jew and Gentile, already on earth.<sup>12</sup>

One of the main purposes of this book is to give Gentile Christians vision for the dialogical relationship they share with Messianic Jews so that they will *come alongside* the Messianic Jewish community and assist it. Coming alongside can take many forms, including (a) praying for the Messianic Jewish community, (b) sharing the good news of Yeshua in a way that affirms the calling of Jews who follow Yeshua to remain Jews and to become better Jews, (c) encouraging Jews in churches to be involved in the Messianic Jewish community, (d) supporting Messianic Jewish education, (e) contributing to the welfare of Messianic Jews in Israel, (f) helping local Messianic synagogues, (g) collaborating with Messianic Jewish ecclesial leaders and scholars, (h) preaching and teaching the Scriptures in a way that affirms God’s covenant faithfulness to the Jewish people and the bilateral (Jew-Gentile) nature of the church, and (i) including Messianic Jews in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

10. Isaac C. Rottenberg, *Jewish Christians in an Age of Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (1995), 99. A collection of essays published “by the family and friends of the author in honor of his 70th birthday for distribution among circles engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue.”

11. R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 169 – 70.

12. Peter Hocken, “The Messianic Jewish Movement: New Current and Old Reality,” in *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements: The Tensions of the Spirit* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), 106.

A third reason why the Gentile Christian world should take an interest in Messianic Judaism is *Christological* — Jesus is a Jew. Therefore, he has a particular relationship to the Messianic Jewish community.<sup>13</sup> In the last six verses of the New Testament, the resurrected Messiah says, “I am [present tense] the Root and the Offspring of David” (Rev 22:16). He remains today a Jew, the resurrected Jew, the son of David (i.e., the Jewish Messiah = Christ), the king of Israel. As Bruce Marshall notes, the resurrected Jew upholds the continuing validity of a Jew/Gentile distinction: “in the person of the Logos God makes his own the flesh of the particular, Jesus of Nazareth. God’s ownership of this Jewish flesh is permanent. . . . So in willing his own incarnation, it seems that God wills the permanence, indeed the eschatological permanence, of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>14</sup>

To love Jesus is to love him in the fullness of his divinity and humanity, and being a Jew is fundamental to his humanity. As Paul said, “Remember Yeshua the Messiah, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel” (2 Tim 2:8 NIV NCPE).

There is a tendency in today’s church for Gentile Christians to think of the Son of God as having left behind his humanity. Typically, Gentile Christians do not have difficulty worshiping Jesus, but many experience difficulty thinking of Jesus as fully human, having a national/ethnic identity and returning in bodily form to establish his kingdom on earth. The Jesus worshiped today is often a Christ of the Spirit who has transcended earthly existence. N. T. Wright notes:

The idea of the human Jesus now being in heaven, in his thoroughly embodied risen state, comes as a shock to many people, including many Christians. Sometimes this is because many people think that Jesus, having been divine, stopped being divine and became human, and then, having been human for a while, stopped being human and went back to being divine (at least that’s what many people think Christians are supposed to believe).<sup>15</sup>

13. For Messianic Jews, Yeshua is “the incarnation of the Divine WORD through Whom the world was made, and of the Divine GLORY through Whom GOD revealed Himself to Israel and acted in their midst. He is the living Torah, expressing perfectly in His example and teaching the Divine purpose for human life. Yeshua is completely human and completely divine. As the risen Messiah and the heavenly *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest), Yeshua continues to mediate God’s relationship to His people Israel, to those of the nations who have joined the greater commonwealth of Israel in Him, and to all creation. God’s plan of salvation and blessing for Israel, the nations, and the entire cosmos is fulfilled only in and through Yeshua, by virtue of His atoning death and bodily resurrection, and God’s gift of life to both Jews and Gentiles, in this world and in the world to come, is bestowed and appropriated only in and through Him” (Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, “Statement on the Identity of Yeshua,” November 12, 2003; online: <http://www.umjc.org/home-mainmenu-1/faqs-mainmenu-58/14-umjc-faq/17-who-is-yeshua>). This was followed by the UMJC’s 2004 “Statement on the Work of Yeshua” — “Yeshua is the Messiah promised to Israel in the Torah and prophets. Through His death, burial, and resurrection, He provided the atoning sacrifice that gives assurance of eternal life to those who genuinely trust in Him. Jewish people, along with all people, need the spiritual redemption that is available only in Messiah Yeshua, and need to put their trust in Him and His sacrificial work. Our role as a union of congregations is to embody the message of life and redemption through Messiah in the context of the larger Jewish community” (<http://www.umjc.org/home-mainmenu-1/faqs-mainmenu-58/14-umjc-faq/19-what-are-the-standards-of-the-umjc>).

14. Bruce D. Marshall, “Christ and the Cultures: The Jewish People and Christian Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (ed. Colin E. Gunton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178.

15. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 111.

When Gentile Christians see Jesus as the resurrected son of David, the king of Israel, post-human conceptions of him fade away. This is because Jesus' past, present, and future as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1), the particularity of his humanity, becomes vividly clear. This in turn leads many Jesus-believing Gentiles to become interested in the Messianic Jewish community.

The beginnings of this book go back to England. Joel Willitts and I met as PhD students in New Testament at Cambridge University, where we studied under the same supervisor, Professor Markus Bockmuehl. We had readers' desks at Tyndale House, a biblical studies research center, and regularly discussed issues related to post-supersessionist interpretation of the New Testament and Messianic Judaism.

Joel and I became good friends and found that much mutual blessing took place whenever we had conversations about the Bible and theology. I valued Joel's perspective as a Gentile Christian and Joel valued my perspective as a Messianic Jew. There was a synergy in our exchange that often led to fresh insights and unforeseen avenues of theological inquiry. My experience at Tyndale House with Joel and other Gentile Christian friends taught me that there is indeed a God-designed interdependence between the Messianic Jewish and Gentile Christian ecclesial perspectives, and that one without the other is woefully inadequate.

Those were magical days in Cambridge. Joel and I talked about what we wanted to accomplish after we completed our doctoral programs and agreed to write a book together. We felt that the time was ripe for a Messianic Jew and a Gentile Christian to collaborate on a writing project, and we hoped to set a precedent for this in the field of biblical and theological studies. It is exciting to see our dream realized with the publication of *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, authored by twenty-six Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians.

Of the twelve authors in part 1, all are recognized leaders in the Messianic Jewish community. They work with various organizations, including the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC), the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA), the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS), the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC), Tikkun International, Chosen People Ministries (CPM), Messianic Jewish Theological Institute (MJTI), Israel College of the Bible (ICB), and the New School for Jewish Studies. A third of the Messianic Jewish contributors are leaders in their thirties and forties, and two of the essays ("Messianic Jewish Synagogues" and "Messianic Jewish Worship and Prayer") are authored by Elliot Klayman and Seth Klayman — father and son — to underscore the cross-generational impact of Messianic Judaism.

Fourteen scholars from a wide spectrum of Christian backgrounds have written essays for the second part of the book. Their participation signals a growing academic and ecclesial interest in Messianic Judaism. Since the 1970s, a sea change has taken place in New Testament studies that has far-reaching implications for how the church evaluates Messianic Judaism. A broad reassessment of the New Testament writers' view of Judaism has occurred since the publication of E. P. Sanders's seminal work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), and this reevaluation continues unabated. The contributors to the second part of *Introduction to Messianic Judaism* draw from this

recent scholarship and demonstrate how post-supersessionist interpretation of the New Testament results in readings of the biblical text that are consistent with Messianic Judaism. The final section of the book is written by Joel Willitts, who provides a summary and synthesis of the essays, explaining how they shed light on the ecclesial context and biblical foundations of Messianic Judaism.

It is our hope that this book will become a standard reference for introductory information on Messianic Judaism. May it help Messianic Jews and mainstream Jews to understand better the history and contours of the Messianic Jewish community, and may it inspire Gentile Christians to enter into closer relationship with Messianic Jews. May the collaboration that Joel and I experienced in working on this book lead to a wider collaboration between Jew and Gentile in the body of Messiah.

הנה מה־טוב ומה־נעים שבת אחים גם־יחד

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

— PSALM 133:1