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## A Response by Peter Hocken



Written by Peter Hocken

As a Catholic friend and close observer of the Messianic Jewish movement, I want to give a warm welcome to Mark Kinzer's new book *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*. My reasons for this welcome are as follows. First, for seeking to provide a distinctively Messianic Jewish ecclesiology.

His ecclesiology is summarised 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."<sup>1</sup>

Second, for the quality of its biblical scholarship. It is the first full-length study concerning the Messianic Jewish movement I have read that possesses a real potential to be taken seriously in the world of mainline Christian theologians and church leaders. Kinzer is familiar with the world of biblical scholarship, both conservative and critical. He is admirably thorough in his analysis and reinterpretation of all the biblical texts used in the past to support supersessionist positions.

Third, Kinzer's summary of the history of supersessionism in the early Christian centuries and of its repudiation in modern times is succinct and competent, introducing some dimensions not found in much Messianic literature, e.g., the contribution of Paul Levertoff and his influence on the Russian Orthodox priest Fr. Lev Gillet, and the rise of Hebrew Catholicism with the contribution of Fr. Elias Friedman.

Fourth, Kinzer is aware both of the huge potential of the Messianic movement and of its weaknesses, in particular of the ways in which Western individualism weakens and thwarts the Spirit's work of restoration of what is inherently corporate. His concern to remedy this individualism and its fissiparous consequences forms part of his emphasis on the need for a Messianic Jewish ecclesiology.

As one already convinced of the necessity for a corporate expression of faith in Yeshua that is authentically Jewish, I recognize the persuasiveness of his arguments for Messianic Judaism to identify with the Jewish community and its heritage. I know that Gentiles cannot tell Messianic Jews what it means to be Jewish, and that Messianic Jews have to discover from the Holy Spirit how to be Jews who believe in Yeshua and live as his disciples.

### HEALING THE SCHISM

Kinzer's global perspective leads to a bigger vision than simply the "resurrection" of the Jewish ekklesia, and the restoration of the "one new man" considered solely within an Evangelical framework. For Kinzer, "the division of Judaism and Christianity was a tragic schism within the one people of God that badly damaged both sides."<sup>2</sup> In this vision for "Healing the Schism" (the title of the final chapter), the Holy Spirit (not emphasised in the book) is now undoing the separation of the Judaism and Christianity that led to their mutual exclusivity and to defining themselves against each other. This means that the Lord's work of restoration involves the bridging of the chasm between Judaism and historic Christianity— Eastern, Western and Reformed—with the huge challenges this presents to all sides.

Kinzer recognizes that this wounding has not prevented the two religions from being bearers of the riches of divine revelation. He presents a balanced evaluation of the positives and the negatives of the historic church traditions, and he avoids dismissive negative judgments, that for him would be further instances of replacement judgmentalism. So in regard to the third principle, "If the church's actual no to the Jewish people and to Judaism does not vitiate the richness of Christian tradition, then the Jewish people's apparent no to Yeshua need not vitiate the richness of Jewish tradition."<sup>3</sup> This recognition needs to lead to a deeper analysis of how

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the richness of Jewish tradition. This recognition needs to lead to a deeper analysis of how both Judaism and Christianity have been wounded by their mutual alienation. Perhaps inevitably with the focus of this book, Kinzer indicates damage done to historic Christianity more than the damage done to Judaism. But the recognition that both traditions were damaged prompts the question: Were they damaged in the same way?

The “Healing the Schism” perspective suggests that just as the original separation worked itself out over several generations, so the coming together cannot be a rapid process, but will require sustained prayer, study, repentance, sifting, testing and correction. Here it seems to a Catholic observer, accustomed to long-term development, rather than all-embracing solutions, that Kinzer’s ardent advocacy may try to tie the ends up too quickly. But the clarity of his analysis could be an invaluable help to moving the healing process forward in a decisive way.

## **ECCLESIOLOGY**

While welcoming Kinzer’s important contribution, I do not find here a sketch of a complete Messianic Jewish theology of the church, but rather a clear exposition of key structural elements that must form part of such an ecclesiology. As one familiar with the twentieth century renewal of Catholic ecclesiology, I sense that Kinzer’s focus on the structures necessitated by a “bipolar ecclesiology” corresponds in some respects to the Catholic focus on church structures in the pre-Vatican II Church, and that a full-orbed ecclesiology needs to be more thoroughly christological and pneumatological as post-Vatican II Catholic ecclesiology has been seeking to become.

An important section in Kinzer’s book treats the total and permanent identification of Yeshua with his own people and of Yeshua as “one-man Israel.”<sup>4</sup> Kinzer makes this a key plank— I think rightly—in his advocacy of the theological and covenantal significance of rabbinic Judaism, but he does not use this to provide a christological foundation for his Messianic Jewish ecclesiology. If a biblically-based ecclesiology is based on the missions of the Son and the Spirit, a messianic and non-supersessionist understanding of the church will be based on the crucified and risen Messiah of Israel, whose glorified humanity, through which the Holy Spirit is poured out, always remains Israelite-Jewish and becomes the instrument by which the Gentile believers are grafted into the transformed commonwealth of Israel. A Messianic Jewish ecclesiology needs this heavenly dimension opened up by the risen and ascended Yeshua.

The issue of church is closely connected with that of tradition. The third principle requires a discussion of the relationship between the Oral Torah and the Written canonical Torah. Here Kinzer affirms clearly, “To the extent that we may equate oral Torah with rabbinic law, we may

also assert that rabbinic tradition decisively subordinates the Oral Torah to the Written Torah.”<sup>5</sup> Not only does this parallel Catholic debates about the relationship between Scripture and tradition, but Kinzer also upholds a “teaching office” to interpret the Torah in ways that echo Catholic understanding of the role of the magisterium.

## **ESCHATOLOGY**

Kinzer gives a relatively small place to an explicitly eschatological vision for Messianic Judaism. There is an eschatological dimension to his fifth principle, and he affirms clearly that the Jewish ekklesia forms the “eschatological firstfruits” of the wider Jewish community.<sup>6</sup> But the forward thrust toward the eschatological future inherent in the Messianic heritage of Judaism as a whole is not central to Kinzer’s ecclesiology. On the last page, Kinzer reveals why he soft-pedals eschatology. “Even for those reluctant to adopt such an eschatological perspective [interpreting twentieth-century developments in Israel as eschatological signs], the restoration of a bilateral ecclesiology in solidarity with Israel should still be compelling.”<sup>7</sup>

I understand why Kinzer did not want to become embroiled in controversy over details of eschatological fulfilment, being aware how some eschatological beliefs of Messianic Jews have been taken over from pre-millennial dispensationalists in the Evangelical world. It seems that Darby’s teaching on the rapture was necessitated by his fateful separation of the destinies of Israel and the church. But the problem in not highlighting eschatology is that an absolutely key and distinctive element in the Jewish heritage is weakened, namely the orientation of the Jewish people to the future messianic kingdom. Perhaps my disappointment is that Kinzer does not really develop his fifth principle by showing how the Jewish ekklesia is essential for the whole church to be prepared for the coming of Yeshua in glory.

## **EVANGELICALISM AND THE MESSIANIC JEWISH MOVEMENT**

While Kinzer’s book is challenging to all received Christian theologies, it will be especially challenging to those with an Evangelical theology and praxis. His unease with Evangelical Protestantism is evident throughout, from his acceptance of critical biblical scholarship, with his positive approach to tradition, and in his acute sense of the ways in which an individualistic ethos can never do justice to the Jewish heritage.

Kinzer’s criticisms of individualism clearly express concern at the extent of Evangelical influence on the Messianic movement.

Many of his statements here obviously resonate positively with a Catholic reviewer. So, for

example, his argument that “Judaism is not a religious artefact from biblical times but a dynamic way of life embodied in and transmitted by a living community,”<sup>8</sup> states in relation to Judaism what Catholics believe about historic Christianity.

I am concerned that Kinzer’s argumentation for a postmissionary Messianic Judaism may manifest an excessive reaction to Evangelical patterns. The theological argumentation for a postmissionary approach is rather brief for such a challenging concept, which has been highlighted by the use of this phrase in the title. He does not examine the New Testament evidence for Messianic Jewish proclamation of the gospel to fellow Jews in the careful way that he studies all the passages relevant to supersessionism. He advocates “the unveiling [to the Jewish people] of the messianic mystery underlying Jewish historical existence and religious tradition.”<sup>9</sup> It is a pity that he limits his comments on what this unveiling might mean: “The notion of bearing witness also does not necessarily imply a programmatic initiative, but could be expressed through a congregation’s way of life.”<sup>10</sup> I suspect that the Messianic movement would not be what it is today if this pattern had been followed.

Kinzer’s failure to do justice to the positive elements in Evangelical Protestantism is rooted in his emphasis on the continuity between the first and the new covenants, as he repudiates all

forms of supersessionism that introduce a false discontinuity between the Jewish and Christian communities. This approach plays down the discontinuity emphasised by Evangelicals that is represented in the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the conversion made possible by these events. Any renewal that repudiates individualism, while retaining (and purifying) the personal, must not lose sight of the profound truths expressed in the Evangelical understanding of the radical discontinuity in the Passover of Yeshua and in regeneration-conversion. How to hold together the personal regeneration of each believer (Evangelical emphasis) and the birth of the church as an organic instrumental body not constituted by the choice of its members (Catholic emphasis) is one of the big challenges that can only be resolved through a profound return to the Jewish roots in both Testaments. For me, this is one of the biggest questions facing the Messianic Jewish movement. Kinzer’s book raises these issues more fully than any other work that I have read.

It is perhaps more implicit than explicit in *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* that an authentically Jewish expression of faith in Yeshua will look neither Evangelical nor Catholic. When he writes, “To rediscover its own catholicity, the church must rediscover Israel and its relationship to Israel” (p. 310), he is seeing that the full, organic and visible unity of the church can only be restored by the different Christian traditions relating rightly to the Jewish ekklesia. In this re-alignment and transformation, all the authentic elements of each heritage will be preserved. This also includes the Evangelical.

#### Notes:

1. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 264.
2. Ibid., 263.
3. Ibid., 214.
4. Ibid., 217-23.
5. Ibid., 244.
6. Ibid., 264. 7 Ibid., 310.
7. Ibid., 215.
8. Ibid., 301.
9. Ibid.

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