

Defining Messianic Judaism

UMJC Theology Committee, Summer 2002, Commentary by Russ Resnik

Recently I was leafing through the catalog of a major Christian book supplier and came across a section they had termed “Messianic Judaism.” There were a few books in this section, but most of its space was given to a nice selection of tallitot and kippot, challah covers and candle holders, along with an offering of tambourines and shofars. This supplier may be sympathetic to Messianic Judaism, but it treats the movement like a song-and-dance show. Likewise, we can all think of a bearded friend dressed mostly in black, who was not raised in a Jewish home, has no Jewish ancestry and minimal Yiddishkeit, but still calls himself a “Messianic Jew.” However we decide to define Messianic Judaism, both our friends and our detractors are already forming definitions of their own, which we may not want to live with.

Even apart from this threat, however, it remains our responsibility to define ourselves. We must say who we are before others can properly hear us, respond to us, and perhaps join us. When I have the opportunity to speak to a new audience, I find that I must tell some of my own story before I gain their hearing. In telling my story, however briefly, I establish who I am, and how I claim any right to speak to them. Likewise, in Messianic Judaism we must tell our own story before we will gain an audience with anyone beyond ourselves. Furthermore, we must tell a shared story, if we are to develop a common identity and evolve from religious movement into true community. After three decades as a movement, we are still in search of a shared story, in need of a viable identity that we can pass on to the next generation. The time has come for us to define ourselves as Messianic Jews.

This common, self-defined identity is the subject of the Theology Committee statement endorsed by the UMJC delegates at our 2002 annual meeting. The basic statement says:

Messianic Judaism is a movement of Jewish congregations and congregation-like groupings committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant.

I will comment briefly on the expanded statement, paragraph by paragraph, and provide two addenda, the first offering a working definition of Jewishness in general, and the second proposing a model for Gentile involvement in Messianic Judaism.

Jewish life is life in a concrete, historical community. Thus, Messianic Jewish groupings must be fully part of the Jewish people, sharing its history and its covenantal responsibility as a people chosen by G-d. At the same time, faith in Yeshua also has a crucial communal dimension. This faith unites Messianic Judaism and the Gentile Christian Church, which is the assembly of the faithful from the nations who are joined to Israel through the Messiah. Together Messianic Judaism and the Gentile Church constitute the one Body of Messiah, a community of Jews and Gentiles who in their ongoing distinction and mutual blessing anticipate the shalom of the world to come.

Our story is not told in isolation, but within the context of a larger story. To be “fully part of the Jewish people” means that in Messianic Judaism we tell our story within the larger Jewish story, as we *must* do to be true to our calling as a Jewish movement for Messiah. We are Jewish not only in a biblical sense, but also in living interaction with the whole of our community and tradition, the “concrete, historical community” of which this paragraph speaks. We are making the revolutionary claim that we are at home in the Jewish community as we identify with Messiah. We do not leave our people, join what this paragraph terms “the Gentile Christian Church”, and then return to testify of Messiah, but we bear that testimony as part of the living, breathing Jewish people of today.

Our identity as human beings begins with our creation in the image of God, and it reaches fulfillment in Messiah, as Dan Juster pointed out in last year’s Theology Forum. Such identity, however, does not

obliterate the categories of Jew and Gentile. In Scripture, as Rich Nichol puts it, “the irreducible dyad of human existence is Israel and the nations.” This dyad remains in effect within the body of Messiah. The “Gentile Christian Church,” like the Jewish people, is a “concrete, historical community.” It is not a theological abstraction, but “the assembly of the faithful from the nations who are joined to Israel through the Messiah.” These two groups – the Messianic Jewish community and the Gentile Christian Church – represent within the Body of Messiah Israel and the nations, the two components of humankind portrayed throughout Scripture.

In his groundbreaking study *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, R. Kendall Soulen speaks of “God’s economy of consummation,” that is, God’s work of perfecting the goodness and holiness of his entire creation, including humankind. This work, writes Soulen, “is essentially constituted as an *economy of mutual blessing* between those who are and who remain different” (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, p. 111). It is to God’s glory that both components of the human race meet in mutual blessing within the Body of Messiah, and yet remain distinct. God is glorified when Jews practice their unique calling and traditions even as they honor Gentile believers as brothers and sisters in Messiah. God is glorified when Gentile believers serve him as representatives of all the nations alongside a remnant of the priestly nation Israel.

For a Messianic Jewish grouping (1) to fulfill the covenantal responsibility incumbent upon all Jews, (2) to bear witness to Yeshua within the people of Israel, and (3) to serve as an authentic and effective representative of the Jewish people within the body of Messiah, it must place a priority on integration with the wider Jewish world. Such integration must then be followed by a vital corporate relationship with the Gentile Christian Church.

The “priority on integration with the wider Jewish world” for which this statement rightly calls could imply a separation from the rest of the Body of Messiah. But to make such an inference would be to accept as axiomatic the rift between Israel and Messiah, and to assume that we must choose one or the other. Instead, we affirm a both/and approach, in which our Jewishness does not counter our “Messianicness”, but is rather the God-given vehicle of expressing it. As Mark Kinzer demonstrated in an earlier Theology Forum, Israel and Body of Messiah are qualitatively different categories, so that they are in no way mutually exclusive or contradictory. This needs to become a new axiom in our thinking.

Only if we ignore the biblical context of Messiah’s coming within Israel would we be moved to deny our full participation in Israel’s story, or the priority of “integration with the wider Jewish world”. Yeshua, after all, is indeed the *Jewish* Messiah. His coming and promised return fulfill the messianic hope founded in the Hebrew Scriptures and maintained by our people for millennia. Indeed, Messiah does not enter history in isolation but in the context of the Jewish story. As Soulen writes, “Faith in the gospel presupposes the God of Israel’s antecedent purpose for creation, a purpose threatened by destructive powers but vindicated by God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus” (p. 156). Scripture begins, not with Messiah, but with creation, then sin and exile, then the promise of restoration, the calling of Israel, the expansion of the promise, and finally the appearing of Messiah, “whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:21).

When Messiah does appear, as Stuart Dauermann points out in a recent article in *Kesher* (*Do You See What I See?* Issue 14, Winter 2002, p. 78), “He is first the Messiah of Israel, who unambiguously self-identified as a Jew, and was recognized as a Jew by all who met him. You cannot have a Lord of the Church who is not first, last and always the King of the Jews. He is not simply the cosmic Christ, the Son-of-Man-Without-a-Country, the generic Savior, but bone of Jewish bone, flesh of Jewish flesh, the Holy One of Israel, and Seed of David in whom alone all the promises to Israel and the nations are ‘Yes’ and ‘Amen.’”

Messiah models identification with Israel, yet we have often allowed our differences with rabbinic authority or with Jewish customs to alienate us from Israel’s continuing story, as in the manner of Christian supersessionism. Messianic Judaism properly understood, however, is a decisive counter to supersessionism; it embodies the truth that God has revealed himself and his purposes within the story of the Jewish people and does not need to set them aside to bring humankind to its destination. Jews should remain Jews when they believe in Messiah, not in some technical or token sense, but in practice and outlook, in family life and community involvement.

Rav Shaul makes two statements that we must maintain as well, despite the undeniable tension between them. He says both, "I am a Jew, a Pharisee, a Hebrew of the Hebrews" (and this many times), and "I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Messiah Yeshua my Lord." We do not dichotomize our faith in Messiah and our Jewishness; rather we hold the incomparable legacy of Messiah within the setting of Jewish life and tradition. If we believe that God's calling and promises for Israel remain in effect, and if we seek to restore this truth to the Body of Messiah, then Israel remains *our* community, despite the failure of Jewish communal leadership to recognize Yeshua as Messiah.

The Messianic Jewish way of life involves an attempt to fulfill Israel's covenantal responsibility embodied in the Torah within a New Covenant context. Messianic Jewish halakhah is rooted in Scripture (Tanakh and the New Covenant writings), which is of unique sanctity and authority. However, it also draws upon Jewish tradition, especially those practices and concepts that have won near-universal acceptance by devout Jews through the centuries. Furthermore, like most other branches of Judaism, Messianic Judaism recognizes that halakhah must be dynamic as well as faithful, for it involves the application of the Torah to a wide variety of changing situations and circumstances.

Halakhah is a sign that we take covenantal responsibility seriously. The life of obedience will not just happen, but requires deliberate communal effort. This realization is a key factor defining Messianic Judaism as a form of Judaism rather than as a Jewish subgroup within the church. The communal discussion and application of Torah to the details of everyday life is a uniquely Jewish enterprise. Some would contrast the Christian emphasis on the guidance of the Spirit with the guidance of this communal norm. But a Messianic Jewish halakhic process will seek the Spirit's guidance even as it embraces the human responsibility to articulate the divine instruction for a specific community.

The most important word in this paragraph may be "attempt." We recognize the innovative nature of Messianic Judaism as we envision it. To speak of halakhah at this stage is prescriptive rather than descriptive. But we must take responsibility for halakhah, if we are to develop a genuine Judaism that can be passed on to the next generation. "R. Tarfon says: The day is short, the task is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great and the Master is insistent. You are not expected to complete the work and yet you are not free to evade it" (Pirke Avot 2:15-16).

Messianic Judaism embraces the fullness of New Covenant realities available through Yeshua, and seeks to express them in forms drawn from Jewish experience and accessible to Jewish people.

We recognize that all Judaisms are in a sense messianic. Michael Wyschogrod goes so far as to write, "Authentic Judaism must be messianic Judaism. Messianic Judaism is Judaism that takes seriously the belief that Jewish history, in spite of everything that has happened, is prelude to an extraordinary act of God by which history will come to its climax and the reconciliation between God and man, and man and man realized" (*The Body of Faith*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996, pp. 254-255).

In what way, then, are we unique among Judaisms? First, because our messianic hope is centered on Yeshua the Nazarene. And, second, because we are the Judaism of Messianic presence. We share in the unfinished story of Israel, but our Messiah has appeared already. He is the firstfruits of all that is to come, and he remains present among us through his Spirit. This is what distinguishes us within Judaism: the activity and life of the Spirit in our midst, a sense of the immediacy of the divine, and evident healings, words, visions, and power. Through the Spirit, the justice and peace of the age to come are already being established among us. Such conditions create a faith community that becomes a viable option for Jewish people.

We await the same messianic hope as all Israel. Hence, we participate fully in the yearly cycle and the prayers of the siddur, which are filled with Messianic expectancy. We cry out with our people for the restoration of Israel and the redemption to come. Our distinction is that we claim through Yeshua to experience a foretaste *in this age* in that redemption before it comes in fullness in the age to come.

To speak of Messianic Judaism as a branch or form of Judaism implies a pluralistic view of Judaism that some might find troubling. But to see ourselves as a Judaism does not deny a unique claim for Messianic Judaism, because of the presence of Messiah in our midst. It simply expresses respect for other forms, since we recognize God at work in them. We do not claim to supersede other Judaisms, even though we claim to have found the Messiah that they still await. Furthermore, defining ourselves within Judaism and the Jewish people is essential to true intercession, for the intercessor must identify with those for whom he intercedes. We can think of Moses, who refused to distance himself from Israel, even after the sin of the Golden Calf, of Jeremiah, who went with the disobedient remnant down to Egypt, or of Rav Shaul, who wrote, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Messiah for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3). We maintain a Jewish identity because we stand with our people, and this stand is in no way diminished because we are also in Messiah.

Abraham Joshua Heschel placed a challenge before us nearly a half century ago: "For us Jews there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship with the people Israel. Abandoning Israel, we desert God" (*God in Search of Man*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1976, p. 423). In Messiah Yeshua, of course, we have been freely granted fellowship with God. Nevertheless, if we stand within Israel for Messiah, we have both Israel and Messiah. If we stand outside Israel, even though we proclaim Messiah to Israel, we lose our share in Israel's calling, our intercessory position on behalf of Israel and the nations, and our hold on a significant aspect of God's eternal purpose.

When we imagine our primary community of reference to be the visible church, we must define ourselves within that church by our Jewishness, but when our community of reference is Israel – our Jewish people and their tradition – we define ourselves within that setting by our loyalty to Messiah. It is far more compelling to the Jewish people we are called to serve, and more biblically consistent, to place ourselves within Israel standing for Messiah, than within the visible church standing for Jewish roots.

Too long have we sought to distinguish ourselves within the Christian community by our Jewish emphasis. Instead, let us be recognizably Jewish, a movement within the Jewish community that distinguishes itself by our response to the spirit of Messiah in our midst.