

The Messianic Fulfillment of the Jewish Faith

Mark Kinzer describes his own story of coming to faith in Yeshua, and thereby to a richer understanding of Judaism and a deeper commitment to Jewish life. Upon becoming a believer in Yeshua in 1971, Kinzer never questioned that his newfound faith would be lived out in the context of Judaism. This commitment came at a time when a path for Jewish expression of Yeshua-faith had yet to be fully forged, and this essay represents Kinzer's burgeoning vision to pioneer such a path. In many ways, the convictions that Kinzer held in the early years of his messianic faith would cast the trajectory for the rest of his life and his life's work. In the impassioned reflections of a young man, we see here the seed-form of Kinzer's mature theological commitments.¹

THE JEWISH CHRISTIAN² IS for many people an anomaly and enigma. His identity often seems incomprehensible to both his non-Messianic Jewish brethren and his Messianic Gentile brethren. The Jewish form of incomprehension was passed on faithfully to me in my younger years. I recall being unable to distinguish between the words *goy* (Gentile) and Christian; in my mind both words referred to all of those

1. Originally published in Torrance (editor), *The Witness of the Jews to God*, 115–25.

2. As Kinzer's theology developed and he became increasingly committed to living a life within the Jewish world, his terminology shifted as well. The term "Jewish Christian" indicates that one's primary identity lies in the Christian world while the term "Messianic Jew" clearly connotes emphasis on one's identity as a Jew. The former reflects Kinzer's situation in 1982, when this essay was written. As Kinzer has worked toward the goal of Messianic Judaism embodying an authentic branch of Judaism, his terminological choices have been very deliberate. See "Introduction to the Thought and Theology of Mark Kinzer," (ix, n. 1), as well as "Toward a Theology of Messianic Judaism" (14–26) for further explanation on the significance of terminology.

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who were not Jews. The Christian form of incomprehension is reflected in the questions many Gentile believers ask me: “So you are a convert from Judaism?” or “So you were formerly a Jew?” The man who insists that he is a Jewish Christian looks to all the world as one who is trying to walk along a fence with a leg on each side, or as one who answers yes and no to the same question.

There are obvious historical explanations for this inability to yoke together the words Jew and Christian. Nonetheless, one cannot dismiss Jewish Christianity on historical or logical grounds. Jesus was a Jew, the apostles were Jews, the New Testament is a patently Jewish book, and the early messianic congregation saw the unity of Jew and Gentile within its halls as the paramount sign of God’s having reconciled the world to himself (Ephesians 2:11–22). Even the non-Messianic Jew cannot fault the logic: If Jesus was indeed the Messiah, then a Jew is obligated to follow him, and can only experience the fullness of Judaism as a result. One can argue with the premise, but not with the inevitability of the conclusion.

The fulfillment of Judaism in Jesus the Messiah is to me both a theological and an experiential reality, a truth I believe and a truth I live. I am a Jew, seeking to follow Torah (the Jewish law) and living today a more Jewish life than ever before; I am also a Christian, believing that Jesus fulfills the promises made to my ancestors, and experiencing the fruits that come from a relationship with him.

BACKGROUND

My immediate family memory goes back only two generations. Just before World War I my grandparents made the long ocean voyage from the eastern European *shtetl* (Jewish village) to the great American metropolis. My mother’s father was a humble carpenter, a jovial and simple man. My paternal grandfather was a learned and pious talmudic scholar. The rabbis would sit at his side and seek his opinion on abstruse matters of Jewish law. Though both of these men lived far beyond their allotted time of three score and ten years, a gulf separated their universe from mine—a gulf of language, culture, age, and worldview. I lived in the same house with each of them for a time, but I never really knew them.

My father was a kind man with few spiritual inclinations but with a passionate attachment to the synagogue and to Zionism. Through most of my youth he would drive twice daily to the *shul* (synagogue) to attend the morning and evening services. As President or Vice President of the

congregation he would devote several full evenings each week to committee meetings and practical management of the building. He would also contribute generously to the Jewish National Fund and other Zionist causes. Though usually mild and reasonable, he could be inflamed to a fever pitch at the mere mention of the state of Israel.

My mother's temperament had a more intuitive bent. She believed deeply in God and in prayer, yet she had little knowledge of the Scripture or of Jewish tradition. She concentrated her prayer and her energy rather on raising the three unruly youths to whom she had given birth.

My two older brothers and I responded to my parents' faith with undisguised condescension. We were living in a new age and a new culture, and the old ways were clearly unsuitable. We would sit together in the synagogue on the High Holy Days and joke about the operatic falsettos of the cantor or the spiritual apathy of the congregation. We were unimpressed with Judaism as we knew it—a ritualistic faith based on a language that few understood and a set of spiritual realities that few experienced. After celebrating our bar mitzvah's in our thirteenth years, we all scrupulously avoided religion in any form.

Of course, I did have other obsessions. In my early years my life gained meaning from one main source—sports. My brothers and I ate, drank, and slept sports. We played them in the streets and fields, read about them in the newspapers, watched them on television, attended them at the stadiums and arenas, and talked about them everywhere. As I grew older I discovered another source of joy and purpose—music. Again I dove in with gusto—playing, singing, and listening until even in sleep my head vibrated with Chopin and Brahms and B. B. King. Finally, I stumbled upon what was to become my greater passion—philosophy. It all began when I pulled from the shelf of our local library a volume of Plato's *Dialogues*. I read it quickly, and was immediately conquered. Spinoza and Aristotle soon followed. Philosophy led to psychology, and I rapidly digested morsels from Freud, Jung, Fromm, and R. D. Lang. I had already read Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and now I appreciated them even more. My mind had come alive with hunger for knowledge and truth, and the passion was not less strong for being intellectual rather than physical.

At this time I had an ambivalent attitude toward Jesus—a mixture of fascination, attraction, fear and hostility that is common to many Jewish people. On the one hand, the very name of Jesus could cause

me to cringe with apprehension and animosity. There was something alien and threatening in that name; it was associated not so much with a person as with ideas, institutions, and an ancient enmity that I did not understand. My mother once told me how she came home crying after her first day in a Gentile primary school and asked her parents, "Who is Jesus? They said I killed Jesus!" Such incidents leave their mark. Even many Jews who have never personally experienced the hostility of Christians still react with irrational fear and anger at the mention of the name of Jesus.

On the other hand, the man Jesus fascinated me. Something about his teaching and life caught my imagination and impressed me deeply. One night I stayed up until 3:00 a.m. watching a movie on television based on the life of Christ. I was so affected that I asked a Gentile friend the next day if I could borrow her Bible. I wanted to read the firsthand accounts of the life of this remarkable man. Unfortunately the Bible was in King James English, and I began with the first chapter of Matthew—sixteen verses of "begats." My zeal quickly waned, and I returned the Bible to my friend in as unused a condition as it was when I received it.

REVERSAL

The most significant year of my life began as I left my parents' household and enrolled at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I had been eagerly awaiting this transition for many years. I looked forward to being independent of my parents and their authority. Even more, I looked forward to the academic environment of intellectual and social ferment that awaited me in Ann Arbor. I wanted to meet other seekers who could aid me in my quest for knowledge and truth. Hidden in me beneath many layers of youthful pretense and egoism lay an intense desire for that which was right and true. I was a product of the late sixties, and the idealism of those years left an imprint on my mind.

The disillusionment of my first year at school hit me harder because of my high expectations. There were several reasons for this disillusionment. First, I found the huge university bureaucracy oppressive and stifling. Like most freshmen, I lived in a residence hall that housed close to a thousand students. I developed personal relationships with few of my classmates and none of my instructors. Secondly, I soon discovered that at the university, knowledge was fragmented into a multitude of discrete yet warring compartments. My quest for an integrated worldview was

frustrated on every side. Each of my professors was eloquent, knowledgeable, and persuasive; unfortunately, they all disagreed with one another. Thirdly, I found few people who were actually concerned with life's meaning and purpose. For years the main philosophical question that troubled me was the question of death. I was not so much afraid of death as I was unwilling to ignore it. What was the meaning of my work, my morals, my body, my relationships of love and friendship if all were destined to end in dust? I quickly found that very few people were concerned about such things, even at the university. Finally, I began to grow more conscious of my own shortcomings. My ideals were high, but my ability to live up to these ideals was substantially lower. In particular, I began to see some of my closest relationships deteriorate, and I knew that I was largely to blame. Therefore, the university sent me home for the summer disheartened, disillusioned, and slightly confused.

For three years much of my life had revolved around three close friends. We were all agnostics, and we were proud of our unbelief. During these years we were never apart from one another. I now decided that it was time for me to make a break with my past stabilities—especially the camaraderie of my friends. I needed to make up my mind decisively about what I thought, what I believed, and where I was headed. As an initial step in this direction, I purchased a backpack and reserved a seat on a cheap chartered flight to Europe. This would allow me to be away from my friends and family, visit some places I always wanted to see, and make some fundamental decisions about the direction of my life.

The next seven weeks proved to be a turning point. Every book I picked up seemed to speak about the reality of God and of Jesus Christ. I visited the magnificent cathedrals of Europe and marveled at the centuries of energy, treasure, and genius that men devoted to the glory of their God. A man approached me as I was eating lunch behind a Viennese palace and started speaking in German; as I told him that I did not speak his language, he broke out into a broad Kansas smile and began to speak to me in my native tongue about Jesus the Messiah. I spent a weekend with a Christian couple in Worcester, England, who talked with me about the Lord at great length and refreshed me with loving hospitality. They gave me a book that spoke of God as a personal and powerful being who ruled the world yet wanted us to know him consciously and intimately. I had been seeking an ultimate source of meaning, a foundational principle that could organize and integrate the field of human knowledge, an

ethical system that was lofty yet livable; but I was totally unprepared for this type of God, who was less concerned that we pursue him and more concerned that we let ourselves be found.

The straw that broke the camel's back awaited me as I returned home. In the seven weeks that I had been gone all three of my friends had become Christians. Their experiences and lines of thought paralleled my own. With this fact, I was finished. I could not resist and still maintain my integrity. I now began to pray, read Scripture, and meet occasionally with other believers. Every day I found new confirmations of my still slightly half-hearted faith. Prayer was answered; Scripture blazed like a torch before my eyes and enlightened my mind with unexpected truths; my life and character started to undergo a radical change. This was an entirely new world, full of powers and principalities beyond my imagining.

I had sought the truth, and it had seized me. I had longed for a comprehensive intellectual system, and instead found myself face to face with a person who was more than a person. This new faith had intellectual solidity, but it soared far beyond the realms of philosophy. The quest had ended where it had begun—with the God of Israel. He had summoned me, and there was no possible response other than the response of my fathers: “Here am I.”

A MESSIANIC JUDAISM

How could I reconcile my new faith with my former aversion to Christianity, that cluster of ideas and institutions and historical events that I had once associated with the name of Jesus? My initial approach was simple: I was not becoming a Christian in *that* sense. I was not joining myself to some entity called Christendom, but was merely believing that Jesus was the Messiah and deciding to follow him. In many ways I still identified Christianity with the *goyim* (Gentiles), and I was determined not to subject myself to a process of gentilization. My attitude has mellowed over the years as I have learned to appreciate many aspects of the Gentile Christian heritage, but that early determination to live as a Jewish follower of Jesus—a Jewish Christian—has remained the same.

My first Christian teacher was a Jewish man who was raised in an Orthodox home. He had become a believer in Yeshua (Jesus) at the age of nineteen, and had been serving the Lord faithfully for over twenty years. His wife was also a Jewish believer in Yeshua. They lived their lives in a fully Jewish way—their children went to Hebrew school, and their son

was bar mitzvahed in my father's synagogue. This man taught me a basic principle that I have never forgotten: accept your Gentile brethren as your family in the Lord, but never abandon your Jewish life or identity.

The application of this principle had a striking impact on my parents. As can be imagined, at first they were appalled at my new religious convictions. My mother responded with vehement objections. My father, seeing that I would not change my mind, and wanting to calm my mother's agitated emotions, followed his usual course of trying to make the best of a bad situation: "Look at it this way, Marion—at least now he believes in God." However, after several weeks they began to notice some things that surprised them both. First of all, I had clearly not forfeited my Judaism. In fact, I was more concerned about Jewish things than I had ever been before. I accompanied my father to synagogue and peppered him with questions about Jewish life. I insisted that I was not departing from my heritage, but instead was returning to it. Secondly, they noticed changes in my way of relating to them. I was less rebellious, more respectful, more eager to help around the house. Something significant had obviously happened in my life.

The outcome of this summer at home was more dramatic than I had expected. Four months after I had professed faith in Yeshua, my mother received a vision of the Lord and heard him call her name. She responded, and also became a follower of the Messiah. She has remained steadfast in her faith to this day.

In my first few years as a Christian I would at times grow fearful of losing my Jewish identity. Would my Judaism erode before the powerful assimilating forces of the Gentile world and the Gentile church? I no longer have such fears. Experience has confirmed what I already knew to be true theologically—faith in the Messiah is the fulfillment of Judaism.

I have experienced this fulfillment in many ways. First and most importantly, I have entered into and experienced personal relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God whom Jesus reveals in unique fashion (Matthew 22:32). He is not Marduk, Moloch, or Baal, but the God of my fathers. When my brothers and I were children, my father wrote a prayer that he taught us and recited with us every night before going to sleep. We irreverently rattled it off as quickly as we could and never really understood its contents, but I still have it memorized today:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
 He is my rock, my fortress, my shield, my guide, my guardian,
 my deliverer, my protector, my redeemer, my savior.
 He is the great God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.
 He is the creator of all living things, in heaven and on earth.
 He is the maker of miracles and wonders.
 He is the God in whom I trust. Amen.

This is the same God whom I now confess, know, love, and serve. He is the source of the Jewish people, the covenant with Abraham, the promise of the land, the holy Torah, and the messianic deliverance. He is the God of my fathers.

Secondly, faith in the Messiah has led me to a great love and reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures, the Tanakh (a Hebrew acronym for the Law-*Torah*, the Prophets-*Nevi'im*, and the Writings-*Ketuvim*). The Scriptures are the true foundation of Jewish life. In *Bereshit* (Genesis) we read of God's irrevocable promise to Abraham and his children. In the subsequent books of Moses we read of the deliverance from Egypt, the covenant on Sinai, and the giving of the Torah. In the *Tehillim* (Psalms) we have the ancient prayers of Israel that have expressed for millennia the Jewish people's worship of God and longing for redemption. In the *Nevi'im* (Prophets) we read about the promised consolation of Israel, the hope that has sustained this people through times of darkest night. As a son of Abraham by faith and by circumcision, I have realized that the Scriptures are my most precious heritage and possession. They tie me to the God of my fathers, but they also tie me indissolubly to the fathers themselves, those of my people among whom this book emerged and who have lived and died for this book and the way of life enshrined in it. Faith in the Messiah has brought me to a love and understanding of the Jewish Scriptures that has confirmed me unalterably in my identity as a son of Israel.

Thirdly, my faith in the Messiah has planted in me a great zeal for Torah. This is certainly a point of controversy among both Messianic Jews and Gentiles, but I can only express here my own opinion and experience. I believe that Messianic Jews can and should (when possible) observe the Law of Moses, ceremonial as well as moral. My conviction is based largely on the evidence for early Messianic Jewish practice found in the New Testament writings. For example, in Acts 21:20–24 we have

the following description of James' address to Paul and his co-workers upon their arrival in Jerusalem:

You see, brothers, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law.

Paul followed James' suggestion in order to demonstrate that these rumors were false. Paul observed the ceremonial law, as did the pious messianic congregation of Jerusalem.

Of course, many complex questions now arise. How does one interpret the law? Should a Jewish Christian follow the traditional rabbinic interpretation and embellishment of the law? How much freedom does the Jewish Christian have in regard to Mosaic ceremonial injunctions? This is only the beginning of the questions. Such complex issues are very important, but my main point here is simple and elementary: I love Torah, believe that it has implications for the lives of all Jews, and strive to follow it according to the teaching and example of Yeshua and his disciples. Faith in the Messiah has not alienated me from the way of life given by God to my forefathers any more than it alienated the apostle Paul from Torah.

Fourthly, my new knowledge of God has unlocked for me the immense treasury of Jewish worship. The *Siddur Avodat Israel*, the Jewish prayer book, abounds in the praise of God as do few books I have ever read. The core of the *Siddur* goes back to the time of Yeshua and reflects something of the way he must have prayed. As I pray daily from the *Siddur*, I experience communion with Yeshua and am able to join my voice with Jewish saints, past and present, who have offered acceptable sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God. These prayers, which were once so meaningless to me, now embody and express what I have come to know in personal experience.

In addition to the daily pattern of worship found in the *Siddur*, I have also come to appreciate *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and the Festivals. I can recall my first experience of the feast of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) after coming to believe in the Messiah. As I worshipped in the synagogue and waved my *lulav* (palm branch) and sang the *Hallel* (Psalms 113–118) and the great *Hoshannah* (Hosanna), my mind was drawn to Yeshua's grand entry to Jerusalem at the beginning of the last week before his death. I also meditated on the promise of his coming again in royal splendor, and how it would fulfill both Palm Sunday and the prophetic significance of *Sukkot*. I have had other such experiences and insights as I have celebrated *Shabbat*, *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost), *Chanukkah* (Dedication), *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year), and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). Regular synagogue attendance and familiarity with Jewish prayer has also deepened my capacity to observe these days adequately.

Fifthly, my new appreciation for the Hebrew Scriptures and Hebrew worship has given birth to a great love for the Hebrew language. I am not a Hebrew scholar, but I can pray and read with understanding. The more I use the language, the more it seems to me that it was fashioned with the worship and service of God in view. It is vivid, concrete, musical, and flowing with oriental richness. Ancient Hebrew is not a language like Greek that easily lends itself to metaphysical speculation. But it is a language that easily flows with the praises of God, and the richness of Hebrew worship is incomparable.

Sixthly, faith in the Messiah has given me a new love for the Jewish people. I once viewed the Jewish people as merely another ethnic grouping with its own customs, language, and history. I was not ashamed to call myself a Jew, but I was just as at home in modern American culture as I was in Jewish culture. Now I realize that I belong to a people that has a special call and destiny, not because of its great intrinsic worth or unique genius, but because of its election by God. I am humbled and ashamed at my people's consistent failings, but I am also grateful for God's continued faithfulness and love "for the sake of their forefathers" (Romans 11:28). I identify with Israel as my people, and like Paul, "my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).

Seventhly and finally, faith in the Messiah has brought me to a new love and appreciation for my own family. I am grateful for my parents and their faith, and for my grandparents and their faith. I am especially

grateful for my grandfather and his life of devotion to God. I delight in hearing stories about him from my parents; he was a man full of wisdom, faith, zeal, and charity. My faith in the Messiah has made me eager to imitate him.

I have often heard an accusation made by non-Messianic Jewish leaders that is thoroughly contradicted in my own experience. According to these leaders, Jewish Christians only live a sham-Jewish way of life. They adopt Jewish customs, not out of genuine personal conviction, but only so that they may deceive unsuspecting Jews into accepting the messianic claims of Jesus. Perhaps some Jewish Christians have done this, but my experience has been entirely different. I am a Jew, and I want to live as a Jew, even if I am the only Jew in a city and have no hopes of persuading some of my brothers regarding the messiahship of Yeshua. The Scriptures, worship, language, and destiny of Israel, and above all the God and Messiah of Israel are all part of my inheritance as a son of Abraham, and I have laid claim to that inheritance, for the God of Israel has laid claim to me.

Yeshua the Nazarene is the fulfillment of Judaism. He is the Jew *par excellence*, the personal embodiment of the people of Israel. Like the patriarchs and kings, and yet in even greater fashion, the Messiah is Israel, he is the personal head and representative and source and ruler of this people. This is the key to interpreting the great Suffering Servant passage of Isaiah 53—the servant refers both to the people Israel (as the Jewish interpretation states) and to a personal Messiah (as the Christian interpretation states). If this is true, then how can one lose one's Judaism by following this Jew who embodies and personifies the entire Jewish people? In fact, how can one be fully a Jew without following him?

Indeed, faith in the Messiah has fulfilled my Judaism. To be more precise, it has brought me *back* to the God of Israel whom I abandoned in my youth. I was an assimilated Jew, independent, cynical, and unbelieving, yet hungry for knowledge and truth, and Yeshua revealed himself to me as the wisdom and the power of God. To be even more precise, faith in the Messiah has brought me *forward* to a new Judaism consummated in the death and resurrection of Yeshua and already bringing forth the first fruits of the life of the age to come.