doi:10.1017/S0036930606002997 (About doi)
Published online by Cambridge University Press 02 Oct 2009

A Link to the Abstract/Details of This Article  How to Cite This Article

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doi:10.1017/S0036930606002997

Book Review


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Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism provides a compelling perspective for healing the age-old Jewish-Christian schism. While an 'apologia... for a particular form of Messianic Judaism' (p. 25), Mark Kinzer's bold and brilliant book is primarily about ecclesiology, a post-Supersessionist 'Bilateral Ecclesiology in Solidarity with Israel'. The book is well-written and tightly argued, though on occasion the author over-interprets the biblical text in order to wring out every ounce of evidence for his thesis.

Kinzer's bilateral ecclesiology affirms the continuing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, including 'Jewish practice' (circumcision, Sabbath and holiday observance and dietary customs) as the obligatory
response of covenant fidelity even for Messianic Jews (pp. 23 and 51). Kinzer envisages an ecclesiology that ‘consists of two distinct but united corporate bodies — a Jewish and a Gentile ekklesia’, ‘each with its own formal or informal government and communal structures’ (pp. 23 and 152). Jewish ‘Yeshua-believers’ live as Jews, engaging in Jewish practice as a part of the wider Jewish community without the evangelistic strategies directed towards Judaism by some Messianic Jews. In so doing, post-missionary Messianic Judaism becomes the missing link that connects the Gentile ekklesia with the Jewish people.

The first chapter prepares the ground for the exegetical conclusions in subsequent chapters by acknowledging that exegesis seldom renders definitive interpretations. The author shows how a variety of extra-textual historical factors ought to incline readers to accept his reading of the biblical text.

The next two chapters, ‘The New Testament and Jewish Practice’ and ‘The New Testament and the Jewish People’, present the core exegetical arguments for (1) the continuing validity of Jewish practice for all Jews including Yeshua-believers, and (2) the continuing validity of God’s covenant with Israel, ‘sanctifying its life and in the end accomplishing its redemption’ (p. 23). In fact, in Kinzer’s ecclesiology, ‘the ekklesia requires a living connection to the Jewish people’ (p. 232): ‘the Christian church becomes the multinational extension of the Jewish people and its messianically renewed covenantal relationship with God’ (pp. 15–16).

Indeed, the whole point of Christ’s mediation in relation to Gentiles seems to be to incorporate them into Israel’s covenant. Kinzer sees ‘this church [the Gentile church] as “joined to Israel through the Messiah”’ (p. 300). ‘In this way Israel is given primacy’ (p. 300). Thus, while Kinzer speaks of ‘distinct but united’ and equal (pp. 23 and 178), his ‘primacy’ language tends to subordinate the Gentile ekklesia to God’s covenant with Israel and renders Christology subservient to that covenant as well: ‘The church has life only because it retains a connection to Israel through Yeshua’ (p. 233, also see pp. 12, 15, 16, 152, 153, 173, 177, 232, 264, 300, 303 and 310).

Yet another way to construe all of this involves a more fully trinitarian approach than we find in Kinzer’s book. In a trinitarian perspective, Jesus Christ himself is the ultimate source, content, goal and active agent in God’s covenantal relations with Israel. Jesus Christ reveals the truth about Israel’s place in God’s oikonomia, serving the coming of Christ, a role that continues until the end of time, contra supersessionism. Israel is the root and the Church the branches, but Christ himself is the life that flows through the roots and branches, which each have their peculiar role to play in God’s oikonomia, leading to mutual enrichment rather than subordination of one to the other.
Chapter 4 argues that the vision outlined in chapters 2 and 3 can only be lived out in the ‘Bilateral Ecclesiology in Solidarity with Israel’, described at the beginning of this review. Such an ecclesiology is a frontal assault on ‘The Christian No to Israel: Christian Supersessionism and Jewish Practice’, the title of chapter 5. Here Kinzer traces the ascendency of the Gentile church and its prohibition of Jewish practice as mortal sin. This leads to Kinzer’s insightful thesis that the church’s prohibition of Jewish practice compelled Jews to say ‘no’ to Christ as a profound expression of their ‘yes’ to God’s covenant with Israel. Chapter 7 affirms the validity of Jewish tradition, arguing for the importance of the rabbinic Judaism in the post-Yeshua era.

The final two chapters deal with Messianic Judaism. Chapter 9 traces the history of Messianic Judaism, identifying principles that eventually led to the post-missionary Messianic Judaism Kinzer envisions. The final chapter, ‘Healing the Schism’, deals with how the Gentile ekklēsia can help restore the Jewish ekklēsia and together begin to heal the schism between the Jews and Christians.

This section remains one of the most underdeveloped aspects of the book since, while Kinzer calls for fraternity between the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church, he does not spell out what this means. Good will, prayer, encouragement, dialogue and urging Jewish Christians to join ‘healthy Messianic Jewish congregations’ are all important (pp. 308–9), but do they go very far towards concrete communal unity between the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church? Indeed Kinzer’s vision for communal distinction between the wings, ‘each with its own “polity and practice”’ (p. 178), tends to trivialise whatever expression of unity he proposes, especially when this distinction entails ‘eschatological permanence’ (pp. 173–4). Quoting Freedman and Donaldson, the only argument Kinzer musters for this disconnection in polity and practice is that without ‘two subcommunities . . . “identifiably Jewish portions of the community would inevitably become assimilated”’ to the Gentile ekklēsia and lose its Jewish practices (pp. 178–9). However, is this assimilation and loss of Jewish practice as inevitable as Kinzer asserts? Are there not alternatives to homogeneity or each with its polity and practice?

While I agree with Kinzer’s central thesis, I see it as leading to more radically communal conclusions than he concedes. Is not the whole point of Galatians 3:28, as well as Ephesians 2:11–22 and 4:1–16, about the power of the Gospel to create just such a unified, yet diverse, community in which the hostilities between Gentile and Jew are overcome in a genuine unity-in-difference that must come to expression communally in polity and practice? Furthermore, is not this kind of concrete unity-in-diversity precisely the telos
we should expect in a trinitarian ecclesiology with an ultimate source and end in the primordial Unity-in-Diversity of the Triune God?

A lot of work needs to be done here both theologically and in ecumenical dialogue. We owe Mark Kinzer a debt of gratitude for placing the issues in the centre of the table with such clarity, candour, grace and hope.

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