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Messianic Jews — Who Are They and Why Do We Need Them?

This article explores the role of Messianic Jews in the worldwide body of believers in Jesus and their significance in understanding the relationship between the Church and Israel. Christianity began as a Jewish movement, but the Church distanced itself from its Jewish roots early on, especially after the Council of Nicaea. Supersessionist theology, which sees the Church as replacing Israel, has shaped Christian thought and contributed to anti-Jewish attitudes for centuries.

Messianic Jews — Jewish believers in Jesus who maintain their Jewish identity — challenge this tradition. They build their identity on the promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, they rely on Paul's teachings, especially in Romans 9–11, emphasizing Israel's enduring election and the unique role of the Jewish people in God's plan. Messianic Jewish theology blends Christian and Jewish perspectives, aiming to build bridges between the Church and the synagogue.

This article argues that the Messianic movement is an eschatological sign, calling the Church to reevaluate its stance toward Israel. The visible presence of Jewish believers within the Church is essential to its identity and future. Their calling is to be a blessing to both the Church and the nations, preparing the way for the return of the Messiah.

Key words: Messianic Jews, Supersessionism, Israel, Church, Election, Eschatology, Identity, Torah, Jewish-Christian relations, Ecclesia ex circumcisione

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Мессианские евреи: кто они и зачем они нам нужны?

В этой статье исследуется роль мессианских евреев в мировом сообществе верующих в Иисуса и их значение для понимания отношений между Церковью и Израилем. Христианство зародилось как иудейское движение, но Церковь очень рано отдалилась от своих еврейских корней, особенно после Никейского собора. Теология замещения, согласно которой Церковь заменяет Израиль, на протяжении веков формировала христианское мышление и способствовала антиеврейским настроениям.

Мессианские евреи — то есть евреи, верующие в Иисуса, — сохраняют свою этническую идентичность и бросают вызов этой традиции. Они строят свою идентичность на Божьих обетованиях, данных в Ветхом Завете. В Новом Завете они опираются на учение Павла, особенно в Послании к Римлянам 9–11, подчеркивая непреходящее избрание Израиля и уникальную роль еврейского народа в плане Бога. Мессианская еврейская теология сочетает христианские и еврейские точки зрения, стремясь построить мосты между Церковью и синагогой.

В этой статье утверждается, что мессианское движение является эсхатологическим знамением, призывающим Церковь пересмотреть свою позицию по отношению к Израилю. Видимое присутствие еврейских верующих в Церкви имеет важное значение для ее идентичности и будущего. Их призвание — быть благословением как для Церкви, так и для народов, готовя путь для возвращения Мессии.

Ключевые слова: мессианские евреи, супрематизм, Израиль, Церковь, избрание, эсхатология, идентичность, Тора, еврейско-христианские отношения, Ecclesia ex circumcisione

From a Jewish Movement to a Gentile Church

Since the early centuries, Christianity has had difficulty understanding its relationship with God's chosen people, Israel. For centuries, this relationship has been defined by a supersessionist[1] model of biblical interpretation, which seeks to explain away Israel's election and replace them with Christians. It has been thought that the Jewish people's special position in God's plan ended with Jesus and was replaced by the church, the «New Israel»[2] . In this text, the terms «Jews», «Israel», and «chosen people» refer to the ethnic-religious group whose history is described in the Bible and which is still recognizable today. «Messianic Jew» refers to a follower of Jesus who is Jewish by birth and who wishes to preserve his Jewish identity and identify with the people of Israel. «Church» refers to the worldwide Christian community, which is mainly made up of non-Jewish believers.

Emphasizing Jewish identity or Judaism has been a topic in the Church that has been met with indifference at best and considered a mortal sin at worst. This seems strange in light of the Old Testament, in which God describes his faithfulness to the people of Israel as being as eternal as the heavenly bodies or the laws of nature (Jeremiah 31:35–37). Nothing Israel does, can shake that election. Furthermore, Christianity originated as a movement within Judaism. Israel was the rightful recipient of God's promises and gifts. The inclusion of other nations in God's chosen people was the subject of heated debate at the Council of Jerusalem, as recounted in Acts 15.

[1] From Latin «supersedere»: to sit above or be superior to. «In general parlance to supersede means to take the place of someone or something, while to be superseded means to be set aside as useless or obsolete in favor of someone or something that is regarded as superior. In recent decades the term "supersessionism" has gained currency among theologians and biblical scholars to refer to the traditional Christian belief that since Christ's coming the Church has taken the place of the Jewish people as God's chosen community, and that God's covenant with the Jews is now over and done». This is how R. Kendall Soulen defines the concept on page https://www.post-supersessionism.com/. See also: Soulen R. K. The God of Israel and Christian Theology. Minneapolis 1996. P. 1–2.

[2] The term «New Israel» is not used in the Bible, but it is a concept that has emerged in Christian theology to describe the Church as the spiritual successor to ancient Israel. The first ones to develop this concept were church fathers Justin Martyr, Origen, and Augustine. See also Vlach M. Rejection Then Hope: The Church's Doctrine of Israel in the Patristic Era // TMSJ. 2008. 19/1. P. 57–60.

Protestant churches have traditionally interpreted the New Testament largely on the basis of Paul's letters. This makes it easy to overlook the fact that the Acts of the Apostles reveals a great deal about Paul's Jewishness[3] . In the final chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, he publicly states that he has not violated Jewish law or traditional rules (25:8 and 28:17). Many scholars argue that the context of the Epistle to the Galatians has often been misunderstood. Paul did not oppose Judaism, but rather the requirement that Gentile Christians convert to Judaism, which had crept into the church[4].

As the Gospel spread rapidly, Jewish believers soon became a minority in the church. After the first few centuries, they practically disappeared for long periods of time. The church widely accepted the idea that Israel as a nation had not accepted Jesus the Messiah and therefore deserved to be rejected by God and scattered throughout the world. This conclusion also influenced the attitude toward the Old Testament[5].

For example, in the 2nd century, theologian named Marcion was influential in Rome. For him, the God of the Old Testament was a vengeful despot, while Jesus taught the goodness and love of God. Although the Roman Church in principle made a clear break with Marcion, many of the ideas he represented continued to influence Christianity for a long time[6]. For centuries, Jewish interpretation of the Bible had little value in the eyes of Christians. Often the Old Testament was not even thought to refer to Israel in its deepest sense, but all the promises given to it were interpreted metaphorically as belonging to Christians. The Israel of the Bible meant the Church

[3] Paul's Jewishness is reflected in the following Bible passages, among others: Acts 16:3 Paul circumcised Timothy; 17:2 He regularly attended the synagogue; 18:18 made a vow (Nazirite vow?); 20:16 hurried to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Shavuot (Pentecost); 21:23–26 paid on behalf of other Jews who had made vows; 23:6 said he was a Pharisee at that time; 25:8 and 28:17 said he had not broken the law or done anything against the customs of Jewish ancestors.

[4] See, for example: Juster D. Jewish Roots. Understanding Your Jewish Faith. Shippensburg, 2013. P. 123–127, 154–156; Stern D. H. Messianic Judaism. A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past. Clarksville, 2007. P. 129–133.

[5] See, for example: Soulen R. K. The God of Israel... P. 1–21.

[6] See for example: Ruth M. Marcionism // URL: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/marcionism (1.07.2025).

and formed only the necessary stage on which the universal events of salvation history were presented[7].

We usually remember the First Council of Nicaea in 325 for drawing a line between Arianism and the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity and the creed. What has received less attention or has been almost forgotten is what happened at the council in relation to Judaism and the Jewish followers of Jesus. Emperor Constantine convened the council and also played a significant role in finalizing its decisions. He wanted the unity of the Roman Empire to be supported by a unified church. Messianic theologian Mark S. Kinzer states: «Thus began the long history of the church-state entanglement that has had such dire consequences for the Jewish people»[8]. Kinzer sees another problem in the fact that the council did not even include representatives from the circumcised communities, the «ecclesia ex circumcisione». We do not know the exact reason for this. At that time, the group of Jesus believers who identified as Jews was already small and marginalized, but they still existed. From the perspective of today's Messianic Jews, the council was not ecumenical but a council of gentile Christian churches[9].

However, the council's biggest problem in relation to the Jewish followers of Jesus was its decision on the timing of Passover: it could not be dependent in any way on the Jewish festival calendar. The emperor commented on the council's decisions as follows:

It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom [the calculation] of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. ... We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews ... and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews, for it is truly shameful for us to hear them boast that without their direction we could not keep the feast[10].

[7] See: Soulen R. K. The God of Israel... P. 1–56.

[8] Kinzer M. S. Stones the Builders Rejected: The Jewish Jesus, His Jewish Disciples, and the Culmination of History. Eugene, 2024. P. 21.

[9] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 21–22.

[10] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 22. Kinzer cites: Schaff P., Wace H. Seven Ecumenical Councils: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series. Vol. 14. Grand Rapids, 1983. P. 54.

The First Council of Nicaea as a whole symbolizes the Church's conscious turning away from the Jews and detachment from its Jewish roots. The Nicene Creed also reflects this — not so much in what it says, but in what it leaves unsaid. It outlines God's plan of salvation without in any way highlighting Israel's central role or significance in the implementation of that plan. Today, Messianic Jews generally accept the content of the creed and thus join the Christian tradition, but they criticize the Hellenistic way of expressing things and the structural supersessionism reflected in the creed[11].

Over the centuries, the small seeds of negative attitudes within the Church grew into violent anti-Semitism in Europe. Examples of this include forced conversions to Catholicism and the Spanish Inquisition in the 1400s, pogroms in Russia in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and the Holocaust in Germany during World War II.

Although the actual persecution of Jews is over, at least for now, we Christians often unconsciously carry ancient attitudes and patterns with us. The significance of Israel is not necessarily understood. The fact that someone has been chosen but we ourselves do not belong to that group usually causes an instinctive negative reaction in us: irritation, perhaps even jealousy. We think that emphasizing Jewish background breaks the unity of the congregation. We wonder why Jewish believers do not simply assimilate or blend in with other Christians. This has been the case for centuries, but Messianic Jews ask whether this has been biblical. Following are some observations on the interpretation of the New Testament from a Messianic Jewish perspective[12].

Election of Israel, blessing for the world

Christian theology has sometimes concluded that Jews and Gentiles together form a third race of believers in Jesus, in which Jews are no longer Jews but merge with Gentile Christians[13]. Today's

[11] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 15–39. For a definition of the term structural supersessionism, see: Soulen R. K. The God of Israel... P. 29–31.

[12] See, for example: Juster D. Jewish Roots...; Rudolph R. J. «To the Jew First» Paul's Vision for the Priority of Israel in the Life of the Church // Kesher: A Journal of messianic Judaism. 2020. Iss. 37. URL: https://www.kesherjournal.com/article/to-the-jew-first-pauls-vision-for-the-priority-of-israel-in-the-life-of-the-church/ (23.6.2025); Stern D. H. Messianic Judaism...

[13] About the concept of third race, see for example: Sechrest L. L. A Former

Messianic Jews challenge this idea, and strictly speaking, apostle Paul does not support it when he says:

> Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. (1 Corinthians 7:18–20)

David J. Rudolph reminds us that in Paul's worldview, people are divided into two categories: Israel and other nations. He himself was Jewish and remained Jewish until the end of his life. According to the apostle, the gospel belongs first to the Jews, because the covenant God made with them gives them priority. The principle of «to the Jew first» permeates the entire Bible. God's chosen people, Israel, have a special position, but also a special responsibility. This is clearly evident in chapters 1 and 2 of the Epistle to the Romans: the good news of salvation and, at the same time, the judgment for rejecting God's will reaches first the Jews and then the Greeks. Paul acted according to his faith and usually went first to the synagogue in new places; there he found not only his fellow countrymen but also so-called God-fearing Gentiles who were interested in the faith of Israel and receptive to the message of Jesus. David J. Rudolph estimates the number of Jews in the early church: at least ten thousand Jews responded positively to the call to follow Jesus—not exactly a small group[14]!

What is the position of Jews in the church today? For the past two millennia, the Christian view has mostly been that the election of the Jews ended sometime in the first century and that the church replaced the Jews as God's people. Something like this must have been circulating at the time the Epistle to the Romans was written, because in chapter 11 the apostle urges us to reevaluate this idea. He says directly to the Gentile Christians in Rome: «I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!» (Romans 11:1). Paul lists

Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race. New York, 2009; Bruns S. D. The Third Race: How the Early Church Engaged with Culture // URL: https://seedbed.com/early-church-third-race/ (23.06.2025). For the Messianic Jewish perspective, see for example: Rudolph R. J. One New Man, Hebrew Roots, Replacement Theology. How to restore the Jewish roots of the Christian faith without getting weird // TKCo. THe king's collective. 2021. P. 35. URL: https://collective.tku.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/One-New-Man-Hebrew-Roots-Replacement-Theology.pdf (23.6.2025).

[14] Rudolph D. J. «To the Jew First»...

the privileges that God has given to Israel. Note that Paul speaks in the present tense, referring to things that are still true in the era of the New Covenant:

> 1 What advantages, then, does the Jew have? What is the value of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. First of all, God entrusted His words to them. (Rom. 3:1,2)

They are the people of Israel, whom God has adopted as his children and to whom he has given his glory. He has made covenants with them, given them the law, worship, and promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them came Christ in the flesh, he who is above all, the eternally praised God, amen! (Rom. 9:4–5)

The entire message of the Old Testament was the basis of Paul's thinking[15] .

Christ came to serve the Jews. He came to confirm the promises made to the fathers, to show that God keeps his word. 9 He also came so that other nations might praise God for his mercy (Rom. 15:8, 9).

After this verse, Paul quotes from the Old Testament to show that Israel's special position in God's plan leads to blessings for the nations. Paul's dream was a kingdom of God in which Israel and the nations would worship the God of Israel together[16].

The election of the Jews does not imply a divine system of favoritism. The fact that God called Israel is a sign of his great love for all peoples. All people have equal value, and in relation to Jesus, they are equal. However, in Paul's thinking, equality does not mean sameness: just as men and women are irrevocably different, so too are the callings of Jewish and Gentile Christians different (Galatians 3:27–28).

Paul uses two different metaphors to illustrate to the Gentiles their position in relation to Israel: a building and an olive tree. In his letter to the Ephesians (chapter 2), he reminds them that they have been incorporated as stones into the building in which Israel already exists, but to which other nations do not naturally belong. The wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down through the work of Jesus. Some Bible interpreters have explained verses 14 and 15 as meaning that the wall of hostility is the Torah, God's law with its commandments, which is now meaningless in the

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

New Covenant. However, this is not a particularly credible interpretation when we remember how highly Paul speaks of God's law elsewhere. Instead, archaeological excavations of the Jerusalem temple area have found concrete equivalents to the wall, such as a warning carved in stone that kept gentiles away from the temple courtyard even at the risk of death[17].

On the other hand, Paul may also have been referring to a figurative wall or fence built by rabbinic traditions, writes Tim Hegg. According to the oral Torah, mere contact with a non-Jew can make a Jew unclean. This naturally created a strong barrier between Jews and non-Jews, even if that was not the original intention of the regulation. In every case, through Jesus, all hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been removed, the dividing wall has been torn down, and these groups can be connected to each other in the body of Christ[18].

Paul saw the church as a unity between Jews and Gentiles. They were called into a relationship characterized by mutual dependence, complementarity, and blessing one another — as R. Kendall Soulen, among others, writes. Nowadays as well everyone is invited to join God's family. When nations join the community of Israel, they receive blessings and are in turn called to bless Israel. God has revealed himself through Israel and the Holy Scriptures given to it. The greatest blessing to theworld was the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. The «One New Man» of the Epistle to the Ephesians is already a reality because of the work of Jesus, but as with many of God's works, we live in a reality that can be described as follows: they are already true, but we do not yet see their full fulfillment. After the early church, relations between Christians and Jews broke down, and they continue to suffer from this. However, there is no blessing separate from Israel, because the God of the Bible is the God of Israel, and he has intended us all to be interdependent[19].

Another image used by Paul is that of the noble olive tree of Israel, into which members of other nations have been grafted (Romans

[17] See for example: Jerusalem Temple Warning Inscription (from Istanbul Archaeology Museums).

[18] Hegg T. The «Dividing Wall» in Ephesians 2:14: What is it? Who made it? How was it broken down? // URL: https://www.protorah.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/The_Dividing_Wall_in_Ephesians_2_14.pdf (23.06.2025).

[19] See: Soulen R. K. The God of Israel... P. 109–140.

11:17–24). The apostle urges Gentile Christians not to boast, because they are completely dependent on the root from which nourishment flows to the branches. Ultimately, in God's plan, we all must humble ourselves. The Jews will have to die to the exclusivity of their faith: those who came later now share in God's spiritual treasures and salvation. Thus, God brings everyone to their knees!

Rebirth of the Ecclesia ex circumcisione

Richard Harvey has characterized Messianic Judaism as a kind of hybrid: it is a Jewish form of Christianity and, at the same time, a Christian version of Judaism. Members of the movement believe in Jesus and combine their faith with the Jewish way of life[20]. Often, especially in Israel, Jews who believe in Jesus gather in Messianic congregations and do not refer to themselves as Christians. In many other countries, there are also many Jewish believers among the members of Christian churches, and on the other hand, there are many non-Jews in Messianic congregations. It is impossible to give exact numbers. It is estimated that there are about 350,000 Messianic Jews in the world. Most of them live in the United States (175,000–250, 000) and Israel (10,000–20,000)[21].

Christianity originated as a Jewish movement. Christianity and Judaism began to diverge more clearly in the 4th century, and the church and synagogue no longer accepted Jews who followed Jesus among their ranks. It was not until the Protestant missionary movement of the 19th century that Christians became interested in Judaism, and groups of Hebrew Christians began to form in Europe[22].

In Central and Eastern Europe, Jews also came into contact with missionary work, and a small but significant number of them found faith in Jesus as the Messiah, writes Iemima Ploscariu. These Mes-

[20] Harvey R. In Search of Messianic Jewish Theology // Mishkan. A forum on the Gospel and the Jewish people. 2008. Iss. 56. P. 7.

[21] The figures presented vary considerably. The figures presented here are from the article Posner S. Israel's Best Friends or Jews' Mortal Enemies? // URL: https://momentmag.com/sarah-posner-israels-best-friends-or-jews-mortal-enemies/ (26.08.2025).

The Caspari Center Survey in 2021 estimated the number of Messianic Jews in Israel to be 15,000. See: Serner D., Goldberg A. Jesus-believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships. Jerusalem, 2021.

[22] Harvey R. In Search of Messianic Jewish Theology. P. 7–8.

sianic Jews accepted the central tenets of Christianity but believed that this did not mean abandoning their Jewish identity. They emphasized Jewish tradition and observance of the Torah. The most famous of them was Joseph Rabinowitz, born in Bessarabia (now Moldova), who founded the first Messianic congregation in Kishinev. He was a true pioneer and faced much opposition from both Christians and Jews at the time[23].

The next major revival took place in the 1960s and 70s, when the current Messianic movement can be said to have begun. After the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel, young American Jews who had come to faith wanted to express their faith in a Jewish way. The revivals of the 1970s gave rise to Messianic congregations and the Jews for Jesus missionary organization[24]. Around the same time, Alexander Men, an Orthodox priest of Jewish descent, was also active in Russia. The State of Israel was founded when he was 13 years old. This event had a profound impact on him and awakened his calling to the priesthood. As a result of Men's work, numerous Jews joined the Orthodox Church and, paradoxically, strengthened in their Jewish identity at the same time[25].

The theology of the Messianic movement

Richard Harvey's study (2009) provides a comprehensive analysis of the theology of the Messianic movement[26]. The Messianic movement is by no means a uniform phenomenon. However, most Messianics observe the Sabbath in some way, circumcise their sons, and celebrate Jewish holidays. Jesus and the early church in the Acts of the Apostles serve as their role models. Chapters 9–11 of the Epistle to the Romans, and in particular Paul's idea of the faithful remnant, are central to their self-understanding. In their interpretation of the

[23] Ploscariu I. Interpreting Conversion: Nineteenth Century Messianic Jewish Leaders in the Struggle for Legitimacy // Kesher: A Journal of messianic Judaism. 2015. Iss. 29. URL: https://www.kesherjournal.com/article/interpreting-conversion-nineteenth-century-messianic-jewish-leaders-in-the-struggle-for-legitimacy/ (6.08.2025).

[24] Harvey R. In Search of Messianic Jewish Theology. P. 8.

[25] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 60.

[26] Harvey R. Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach. Milton Keynes; Colorado Springs, 2009. In this text, I have used Mishkan's articles, which Harvey wrote based on his research, as a source.

Bible, they reject anti-Semitism and traditional Christian supersessionism, in which the church replaces the Jews as the «New Israel»[27] .

The Messianic movement is influenced by Protestant evangelicalism and a desire to address issues related to Judaism. The messianic nature of Jesus and the election of Israel are the cornerstones on which their theology is built. The majority of Messianics adhere to the classical creeds concerning the divinity and humanity of Christ, the Trinity, and the authority of the Bible, but the doctrines are expressed using Hebraic rather than Hellenistic concepts. Their theology combines Christian and Jewish discourse and seeks to build bridges between the church and the synagogue by challenging the thinking of both[28].

Many Messianic Jews have been influenced by charismatic Christianity, although there is a growing interest in a more formal worship life that draws on Jewish liturgical traditions. Most Messianic Jews believe in a millennial kingdom (premillennialism), but are not usually dispensationalists. Events in the Middle East and Israel, as well as the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, are at least to some extent related to their eschatology[29].

Richard Harvey outlines a continuum of the Messianic movement, with very Christian theology at one end and a very Jewish view at the other in relation to key themes such as the nature of God, the Messiah, the Torah in theory and practice, and the future of Israel. On the Christian side, theology is close to evangelicalism, in the midst of which the messianic movement was born, and at the other extreme are those whose identity is anchored in the Jewish social field and religious norms. According to Harvey, these categories cannot be considered actual schools of thought, but rather evolving currents within the Messianic movement[30].

Belief in the election of Israel, which is still valid, is a central part of the identity of Messianic Jews. In 2021, the Caspari Center in Jerusalem published a study on Messianic congregations in Israel[31]. Alec

[27] Harvey R. In Search of Messianic Jewish Theology. P. 7–9.

[28] Harvey R. In Search of Messianic Jewish Theology. P. 8–9.

[29] Harvey R. In Search of Messianic Jewish Theology. P. 8–9.

[30] Harvey R. A Typology of Messianic Jewish Theology // Mishkan. A forum on the Gospel and the Jewish people. 2016. Iss. 57. P. 11–23. (23.6.2025)

[31] Serner D., Goldberg A. Jesus-believing Israelis.

Goldberg and David Serner interviewed all the leaders of the congregations whose contact details they were able to obtain. In total, over 200 interviews were conducted. Goldberg and Serner describe the Messianic movement in Israel with the concept of eschatological restorationism, which is the belief in the restoration taking place in the end times. Although today's State of Israel is not flawless, it is nevertheless interpreted as the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.[32]

After the book was published, Goldberg and Serner also shared their general impressions of the interviews. An essential part of the self-understanding of many Israeli congregations seems to be the idea that the Messianic movement is part of God's plan to rebuild the Jewish community of the Acts of the Apostles.

Messianic Jews' attitudes toward the Law of Moses vary. One reason for the diversity of views is the fact that there is no precise knowledge about how the Jews of the early church combined their faith in Jesus with Jewish tradition. Today's Messianic Jews must seek answers from both Rabbinic Judaism and the writings of Paul, many of which are difficult to interpret. In addition, many Messianic Jews have come to faith through Christians and have, at least to some extent, internalized the anti-Jewish attitudes and negative views on law observance of the Christian church. Some have joined the followers of Jesus from an Orthodox Jewish background and find it liberating that they no longer have to follow the meticulous interpretations of the law in Rabbinic Judaism.

The attitude of Messianic Jews toward the Torah can be roughly divided into three groups, as summarized in the 2004 publication of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE). The first group, the «Torah-negative» group, represents the traditional Christian view that following the Law of Moses nullifies God's grace and justification by faith[33].

In the middle is the position that the cultural application of the Mosaic Law is acceptable because it is an important part of Jewish

[32] Erelä S. The Caspari Center Survey Released: The Israeli Messianic Movement Has More Than Tripled in the Last 20 Years // URL: https://www.caspari.com/2022/02/07/the-caspari-center-survey-released-the-israeli-messianic-movement-has-more-than-tripled-in-the-last-20-years/ (23.06.2025).

[33] Harvey R., Kjær-Hansen K., et all. Jewish Evangelism: A Call to the Church // URL: https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/jewish-evangelism-a-call-to-the-church-lop-60#h-what-about-the-law (6.08.2025).

national identity. Most Messianic Jews, especially in Israel, fall into this category. They observe the Sabbath and Jewish holidays and circumcise their sons. However, each individual is essentially free to choose their own attitude toward tradition[34].

The third position is the «Torah-positive» position, which recognizes the continuing value of Jewish tradition as an interpretive framework for the biblical writings. Jesus and his disciples defined the «halacha», or code of conduct, for the New Covenant community. However, the rabbinic tradition is still valued, and Messianic Jewish identity is built more in relation to the synagogue than to the church[35].

All Messianic Jews agree that no one can be saved by following the law. Striving to do God's will is man's response to God's faithfulness and the covenant He has made with man. Messianic Jews sometimes criticize the teaching they hear in Christian circles that before Jesus, people believed in salvation through good deeds[36] . On the other hand, Christianity is a religion of grace and something completely different from the faith of Israel in the pages of the Old Testament. From that follows that God Himself is also different. However, many Bible scholars say that earning salvation was in fact a foreign concept even to the Old Testament faith[37] , although legalistic, outward-focused, and merit-seeking religious practice is a danger that always lurks in people. It may be that Torah-positive Messianic Judaism faces greater challenges than other views in how to combine faithfulness to Jewish law with the freedom brought by the gospel.

Israel and the Messianic Jews Challenging the Church

The revival of the Messianic movement after centuries of silence challenges the church in many ways. According to Mark S. Kinzer, the challenge is not limited to a few specific issues but touches on

[34] Harvey R., Kjær-Hansen K., et all. Jewish Evangelism.

[35] Harvey R., Kjær-Hansen K., et all. Jewish Evangelism

[36] See for example: Juster D. Jewish Roots... P. 66, Stern D. H. Messianic Judaism... P. 125–132.

[37] See for example: Stern D. H. Messianic Judaism... P. 125–132; Juster D. Jewish Roots... P. 66, 117–127. E. P. Sanders founded a theological school of thought called «New Perspective on Paul» in the 1970s. Many theologians have followed him in researching the New Testament and contributed to the view that Jesus and Paul were part of a renewal movement within Judaism.

all areas of theology. Messianic Jews raise questions about themes that have been the subject of centuries of hermeneutical consensus within the church[38].

Kinzer would particularly like to ask the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church whether they can genuinely claim that their church is «catholic» (universal) and speak of apostolic succession if the Jewish branch of Christ's church is missing[39] . At least the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church has already taken note of this question, and there have been many constructive discussions about the significance of the Messianic movement. An important figure in initiating and maintaining this process has been Cardinal Lustiger (1926–2007), who was of Jewish descent, together with Mark S. Kinzer[40].

Many Christians today are very interested in discovering the Jewish roots of their faith. This is not primarily a matter of historical interest, but rather a conviction that by delving into Jewish roots, something of the original Jewish character of the church can be attained. However, according to Kinzer, the true Jewish character of the church requires «the visible corporate presence of Jewish disciples of Jesus within the ekklesia». This, in turn, requires Christians to honestly evaluate their own attitudes, beliefs, and practices so that it is possible to follow the Jewish way of life in the midst of the church. For centuries, Christian and Jewish identities have been built on opposition to each other, and breaking down these barriers requires conscious effort[41].

It is easy to dismiss Jewish believers as a marginal group due to their relatively small numbers, even though the schism between Jewish and non-Jewish members of the church was the worst schism in church history, from which all other divisions originated – according to Mark S. Kinzer and a few other researchers[42]. The «parting of

[38] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 62–66. / Such questions include, for example, the authority of Paul's texts in relation to other New Testament writings and their relationship to Jewish law.

[39] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 69, 84.

[40] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 83–86.

[41] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 73.

[42] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 86–87 / Kinzer cites Balthasar H. U. von. Martin Buber & Christianity. A dialogue between Israel and the Church. New York, 1961. P. 99–100. Kinzer also cites Karl Barth according to Buren P. M. van. A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality. Part 2. P. 251–252. See also Stern D. H. Messianic Judaism... P. 47–59.

the ways» between Judaism and Christianity that took place during the first centuries has been studied to some extent. There were three parties involved: the wider Jewish community, the emerging gentile Christian church, and the Jewish members of the church. Mark S. Kinzer quotes scholars James Dunn and Anders Runesson in arguing that the split originally occurred between Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus, not primarily between the church and the synagogue. This naturally leads to the question of whether the process was inevitable—or, even more boldly, whether it could have been reversed. It may be too difficult to answer these questions because so much time has passed, but in any case, they will be revisited as the Messianic movement challenges the church with its existence[43].

Kinzer argues that true «catholicism» should creatively combine Christian and Jewish traditions and thus contribute to healing the centuries-old schism. This can only be achieved by seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and it takes different forms among Messianic Jews and Jewish Christians:

> The emergence in our day of a community of Jewish disciples of Jesus is a new work of the Spirit who has granted to this developing body the authority to fashion an appropriate way of life that can contribute to the healing of the twofold tradition. To fulfill this calling, Jewish disciples of Jesus must bring together what has been separated and, by the guidance of the Spirit, draw from both traditions what each can supply for this purpose. However, the mode of engaging with each of the two traditions will differ for Jewish Christians and Messianic Jews[44].

God chose Israel as his instrument and witness to the world. Although Israel has failed in many ways in its role as a witness, its survival and the history of its people continue to inspire many – and also provoke strong opposition. Kinzer reminds us that Israel's existence is very significant for the church: it anchors the church's

[43] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 78–80; Dunn James D. G. The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity. Philadelphia, 1991. P. 239; Runesson A. Who Parted from Whom? The Myth of the So-Called Parting of the Ways between Judaism and Christianity. // Chosen to Follow: Jewish Believers through History and Today / Ed. by K. H. Hoyland, J. W. Nielsen. Jerusalem, 2012. P. 70.

[44] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 127–128.

faith and God's promises in history and physical reality. Without a vision of God's plan, which he has carried out and continues to carry out through Israel, the Church's faith is in danger of withering into abstract ideas and Gnostic philosophy that are alien to reality[45].

Messianic Rabbi Stuart Dauermann wants to include God's promises to Israel in the gospel. According to him, Jesus is not only the savior of individuals or the church, but the son of David, through whom God's eschatological plan will be fulfilled. This also includes the return of the Jews to the land of Israel and the spiritual renewal of the people:

> It is a necessary corrective to the kind of truncated and supersessionistic gospel that separates Yeshua and his work from his central role in the consummation of God's promises to Israel. Yeshua is not simply the Savior of individual souls, nor simply the Lord of the Church. He is the Son of David, through whom Israel's return to the Land, spiritual repentance-renewal, and restoration to covenant faithfulness is guaranteed and accomplished. We ought not to think of Yeshua apart from this eschatological agenda. This is the agenda which we are called to serve, and which constitutes a major component of the armature of Messianic Jewish discipleship[46].

The Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, which consists of a group of ordained Messianic Jewish rabbis and associated leaders, states that the Messianic movement is an eschatological sign. It anticipates the return of the Messiah and the final establishment of his kingdom:

> Just as the return of Jews to the land of Israel over the past century signals a new phase in the eschatological frame of history, so the re-emergence of the Jewish Yeshua community conveys the same message[47].

Jews who believe in Jesus are the remnant referred to by Paul, which heralds the salvation of the entire nation of Israel at the end of time (Romans 11:26). Their faith does not invalidate the election of Israel as a whole, but they are the first fruits of the great harvest to

[45] See, for example: Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 88–92.

[46] Dauermann S. Seeds, Weeds, and Walking the High Wire: The Role of the Remnant — Embodying Israel's Destiny // Postmissionary Messianic Jewish Inreach. URL: https://www.ruachisrael.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/What-Exactly-is-MJ-paper.pdf. (8.08.2025).

[47] The Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council. The MJRC Vision of Messianic Judaism [Электронный ресурс] // URL: https://ourrabbis.org/main/resources/the-mjrc-vision-of-messianic-judaism (8.08.2025).

come[48]. Paul describes the current state of the people of Israel as a partial hardening, which is not final or hopeless (Romans 11:25). God's covenant with Israel is eternal (Romans 9:4; 11:28–29). When «the full number of the Gentiles has come in», there will be a great awakening among the Jews, and the messiahship of Jesus will be revealed to them (Romans 11:25–26). How these exciting events exactly will unfold remain a mystery to us, but Paul's words confirm the promises of the Old Testament and testify that God still has a plan for the Jews.

The calling of the Jews in the body of Christ

God's special revelation to the world was given in His Word, which was conveyed to us by the chosen people. God gave that people a royal and priestly calling, the contours of which can already be seen in Abraham's actions, for example, when he prayed for Sodom (Genesis 18:16–32). Later, God calls the people of Israel, whom He has delivered from Egypt, to this task: «Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. The whole world is mine, but you shall be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation» (Exodus 19:5–6).

Dutch theologian Edjan Westerman interprets this calling of the entire people to mean that within it, God chooses certain groups and individuals for special tasks. The entire tribe of Levi receives a priestly calling, but from among them, the family of Aaron is set apart to perform the actual priestly duties in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Just as the family of Aaron represents the people before God, so the people of Israel have a priestly role as mediators of blessing on behalf of the other peoples of the world[49]. Obviously, this calling cannot be fully realized until the Jewish people accept Jesus as their Messiah.

The pattern of nested callings is repeated and expanded in the New Testament, Westerman writes. Jesus is the sinless high priest who, through his atoning death, unites all nations into the royal priesthood of Israel (1. Peter 2:9–10; Rev. 1:5–6).[50] However,

[48] See for example Juster D. Jewish Roots... P. 131; Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 100–104.

[49] Westerman E. Learning Messiah. Israel and the Nations: Learning to Read God's Way Anew. Eugene, 2018. P. 25, 39, 56, 57, 71.

[50] Westerman E. Learning... P. 251–253, 263. See also Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 100–104.

the new community still has Israel's DNA. Israel retains its original calling among the nations, and it can be said that even in the royal priesthood of New Covenant believers, Messianic Jews have their own unique role to play.

Kinzer sees three different ways in which the apostles followed Jesus as Jews and applies this to Messianic Jews today. Paul's calling was to reach the Gentiles with the gospel, and he emphasized the freedom of the Gentiles from the Jewish law. This has led to an interpretation in which Jewish tradition has been widely condemned by the church, even though Paul himself maintained a connection to the Jewish way of life. Another model of following Jesus, which has remained more foreign to the Christian community, was represented by James and the congregation he led in Jerusalem. They lived in close contact with other Jews and attended the temple. They probably did not have much contact with members of other nations, but they witnessed about the Messiah to Israel. Not much is known about the apostle Peter, but he seems to have taken middle ground in his calling. In his letter to the Galatians (2:7–9), Paul mentions that Peter's task was to work among the Jews. On the other hand, the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 10) describes how Peter played a central role in opening the doors to mission among other nations[51].

How could the Jewish calling be fulfilled in the church?

Messianic Jews are in the midst of a huge construction project: what should the identity and lifestyle of a Jew who believes in Jesus living in the 2020s be like? No outsider can define it for them; we non-Jews can only support our Jewish brothers and sisters and give them space to find answers. Identity is always a very personal and sensitive issue, and no pressure of any kind is acceptable in this area. However, in recent decades, many Jewish believers in Jesus have become convinced that Jewishness is their God-given calling, and they want to live it out.

Kinzer outlines the special characteristics of the calling of Jewish believers living in different situations. According to him, Messianic Jews should follow the example of the apostles in how they creatively interpreted biblical and Jewish tradition in light of Jesus' teachings,

[51] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 100–111.

crucifixion, and resurrection. The result would be a recognizably Jewish way of life that accepts the authority of Jewish tradition but is nevertheless anchored in the teachings of the New Testament[52].

According to Kinzer, Jews who have found a spiritual home within the church face a slightly different challenge. Their starting point is a commitment to the tradition of their own church, but even that can be evaluated and applied within certain limits. They can gain insight into this by familiarizing themselves with classical rabbinic texts and the living tradition of Jewish communities. They need to learn about the Jewish roots of their faith and make use of the knowledge that has already been generated through interaction between the church and Jewish scholars[53].

According to Kinzer, it is not possible for Messianic Jews and Jewish Christians to create a common «halacha», a way of following Jesus, for all Jewish believers, because the relationship to Christian and Jewish tradition is emphasized differently in their lives and congregations. However, it is important for them to support each other «in their common commitment to the healing of the twofold people of God and its twofold tradition». In this way, they can be a blessing to the Church, to Jews, and to the whole world[54]. The Church has a mission toward Israel, but Israel also has a mission in relation to the Church:

> Israel is nowadays used and will, to a greater extent still, be used in the service of the Revelation. The people of the Law and the Prophets is perpetually sent (missus, missio) by God to the Christian Church in order to witness to certain truths and powers[55].

How can church leaders support Jewish members when the majority of the congregation is non-Jewish? David J. Rudolph writes that it is important to encourage baptized Jews to remain Jewish or, if they have become estranged from their roots, to reconnect with them. They can be encouraged to maintain contact with a Jewish community in addition to their own church. Families can be encouraged to observe the Sabbath and Jewish holidays and to follow kosher dietary

[52] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 127–129.

[53] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 129–130.

[54] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 130.

[55] Kinzer M. S. Stones... P. 136. Kinzer cites: Gillet L. Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship between Judaism and Christianity. 1942. Reprint Eugene, 2014. P. 191.

laws. A rabbi may be found who is willing to perform circumcision for the child and help with other Jewish lifecycle events. The pastor can make room for Jews in his congregation and teach the Bible in a way that does not invalidate Israel's election. Otherwise, there is a danger that Jewish believers will become completely assimilated — as has largely happened throughout church history.[56]

In conclusion

Over the centuries, Christianity has attempted to distance itself from Judaism and separate Israel's destiny from its own. The rift between Gentile Christians and Jewish believers was the first and greatest schism in Christianity. The Jewish way of following Jesus was suppressed in the Church after the first few centuries.

The emergence of the Messianic movement in the 20th century revived questions about the relationship between the Church and Israel. According to the Messianic Jewish interpretation of the Bible, Israel's election is eternal, and the Christian Church has not replaced it. The movement thus has biblical and historical justification for its existence. Its theology is constantly evolving and gives the church food for thought. For the sake of its own identity, it is important for the church to interact with Jewish believers.

The Church has common roots with the Jews — the Church and Israel are bound by a common destiny. From the Bible, we can understand that the blessing given to Israel has always become a blessing for other nations. Our future is also shared: according to Paul, Israel's salvation is linked to how other nations hear the gospel, and together they form the prerequisite for Jesus' return. All Christians, but especially Messianic Jews, are called to act as bridge builders between the Church and the synagogue. By spreading the gospel and building relationships, every believer in his own place prepares for the return of the Messiah.

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