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FINDING MESSIAH

A Journey
into the
Jewishness
of the
Gospel



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Finding Messiah: A Journey into the Jewishness of the Gospel*
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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS



The parting of the ways was more between mainstream Christianity and Jewish Christianity than simply between Christianity as a single whole and rabbinic Judaism.

JAMES DUNN

We made it!” my sister-in-law Leila exclaimed as we pulled into the parking garage of my new apartment complex in Pasadena, marking the end of our week-long cross-country girls’ trip.

I shut off the car. “Yep, I guess this is my new home.” I tried to keep my voice light, but in truth I was feeling overwhelmed. Soon, my three constant companions of the past seven days (Leila and two close friends) would return to their familiar lives in Northern California, while I began the exciting but undeniably daunting process of starting over again in a new city.

Having finished my MDiv at Yale, I was now back in California to begin working on my PhD at Fuller Theological Seminary. My years at Yale had gifted me with a profound love for Christian

theology (especially that of Karl Barth), yet toward the end of my time there, a startling realization had begun to crystallize: my deep and abiding Christian faith had almost completely eclipsed the Judaism of my heritage and upbringing. I felt like I had lost an anchoring piece of my identity, and I didn't know what it looked like to get it back.

I was raised in a Jewish home in Northern California, where my parents had moved one week after getting married. They were both raised in Los Angeles, my mom in the Reform Jewish movement and my dad in the Conservative Jewish movement.¹ As I grew up, my mom worked hard to preserve Jewish traditions and practices in our home while my dad dedicated himself to instilling in my brother and me a solid and grounding faith in God.

The spirituality of my parents didn't always line up, as my dad was also influenced by the New Age movement and held a certain suspicion of organized religion. My mom was agnostic until well into their marriage, but the rhythms of Jewish life were an anchoring part of her identity. We never got plugged into the local Jewish community, which both of my parents found to be too liberal.

My sense of Jewish identity was sturdy, even if I wasn't always sure what that meant or implied. My undergraduate years at Cal Poly, a large public state university, became a time of deep searching, and it "just so happened" that most of my friends in college were Christians. I found myself increasingly considering the claims of Christianity while being in part unable to connect with the more secular Hillel (Jewish student group) on my college campus.

I had chosen Cal Poly largely because that's where my brother was studying, and I look back fondly at our weekly sibling dinner nights where we would share about our lives and friendships, our faith and fears. My last year in college, through a series of powerful events, the claims of Jesus became undeniable and I yielded my life

to following him. Remarkably, sparked by a short-lived dating relationship with my Christian roommate, my brother also came to faith in Jesus in college. At the time, I had no idea what belief in Jesus meant for my Jewishness, so I simply buried it.

I became deeply involved with a Vineyard church plant and seldom spoke of my Jewish upbringing and identity. My bachelor's degree is in political science, and I had planned to go to law school like many of the students in my department. However, upon stumbling into faith in Jesus, I was immediately awakened to a profound fascination with theology that led me to divinity school instead. During my years at Yale I had felt like a kid in a candy shop, reveling in church history, systematic theology, and biblical languages.

But now, I was faced with a new dilemma. As my long-ignored Jewish identity started clamoring for attention, I began to wonder how on earth I could be both Jewish and Christian. These tensions would rise to the fore during my doctoral program.

Upon arriving at Fuller, I once again commenced the tiresome process of trying to find a new church home. For a year, I schlepped all the way across Los Angeles to attend Bel Air Presbyterian Church. After that, I spent six months attending a little Evangelical Free church whose white building stood on a shady residential street that was walking distance from my apartment. And, just like in New Haven, I once again ended up at an Episcopal church.

This particular Episcopal church—St. James' in South Pasadena—had as its associate priest a Palestinian Christian named Sari. I spent two years attending St. James', and I will forever be grateful for the friendship that I developed with Sari and his family, which became the font of much deeply enriching conversation, co-teaching, and building our own small but strong bridge across the chasm that often divides Jews and Arabs.

I probably would have stayed at St. James' a lot longer had a quiet yet persistent subplot not begun developing in my life. My first year at Fuller, I nonchalantly revealed to my doctoral adviser, Howard Loewen, that I was Jewish. At Yale, my experience of theology was that it didn't much matter who was doing the theologizing, it just mattered that it was solid and innovative. But the particulars of my spiritual identity were about to take on new meaning.

"You're Jewish?" marveled Howard following my reveal, eyes slightly wide. "That *matters*. You must meet my friend Mark Kinzer." What I would discover throughout the remainder of my doctoral program was that Mark Kinzer is one of the leading voices in the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement (which is largely composed of followers of Jesus committed to preserving Jewish identity), and that who I am matters profoundly in the way that I approach Christian theology.

About a month later, I sat at a corner table in a local coffee shop across from Mark Kinzer, who was in town for a conference and who assured me that there were lots of other people "like us" out there. One such person was Stuart Dauermann, who at the time led a Messianic Jewish congregation (something I had never even heard of) in Beverly Hills.

A number of things happened over the next several years. I began attending Stuart's congregation and, even amid the awkwardness and unfamiliarity of another new faith community, something about the Jewish rhythms touched deep inside my soul. It became abundantly clear to me why no church or denomination had ever quite felt like "home" to me. Messianic Jewish congregations can be complex places, as any in-between existence is. But in a flash, I knew that this in-between life lived alongside other Jewish followers of Jesus was my spiritual home.

The second thing that happened was that my own inner struggle to find my way as a newly self-identified Messianic Jew spilled over into my academic work. I ended up writing my doctoral dissertation on the ways in which the mutually exclusive categories bequeathed to us by the parting of the ways are being called into question in certain circles in our own day.² And just like that, I was hooked. I knew it would be my life's passion to break open the common misperceptions about Judaism and Christianity and the gap between them.



While most people are aware that Jesus was Jewish (as were the apostles), the significance and implications of this identity marker are often left unexplored. These founders of Christianity worshiped in the Jerusalem temple, lived in booths during the holiday of Sukkot, and upheld the statutes of the Torah. They were wholly committed to the Jewish faith, and this context influenced how the apostles understood who Jesus was and what following him entailed. The eventual parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity was a complex process whereby each developing religious community sought to distance itself from the other, the result being two entirely separate religions. I don't think Jesus' first followers saw this coming.

The New Testament seeks to envision and build a community where both Jews and Gentiles follow Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, side by side. As we see in Acts 10, Peter is astonished that the Spirit comes on Gentiles just as the Spirit came upon Jews in Acts 2. "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right," Peter marvels in Acts 10:34-35. Apparently, even Jesus' inner circle did not realize the full impact of his coming up until this point.

The rest of the book of Acts describes the process of how this early Jesus-following community sought to forge the way forward. Do Gentile followers of Jesus need to take on Jewish practices? No, according to the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. Do Jews continue to uphold the rituals and traditions that had set their community apart for centuries? Yes, according to Acts 21.

What begins to take shape is a group of believers who are united in Spirit and faith, while living out that faith in divergent ways. Jews living as Jews, Gentiles living as Gentiles, and the dividing wall between the two being torn down in the body of Messiah (Ephesians 2:14).

After all, isn't this what the long prophesied messianic era was to be all about? Israel and the nations living in harmony with one another rather than warring against each other, as we see so often throughout the pages of the Old Testament? As theologian Kendall Soulen explains, Jesus finally brings about "an economy of mutual blessing" between Jews and non-Jews, creating in his body a lasting and profound peace.³

But this beautiful harmony is exactly what got erased in the parting of the ways. The increasingly Gentile church adopted a zero-tolerance policy for Jews maintaining their Jewish identity (à la Ignatius), which paradoxically became antithetical to following Jesus. Meanwhile, the Jewish community—now led by the rabbis in the absence of the temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70—worked to stomp out the possibility of Jesus-believers in their midst.

After the two Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire (the first in AD 66–73, during which the temple was destroyed, and the second in AD 132–136, which ended with the Romans exiling the Jews from the city of Jerusalem), it became a liability for Gentile Christians to identify with Judaism. In fact, the main desire was to

distance Christianity (which was becoming increasingly favorable to the Empire) from the Judaism that proved so problematic to the Romans. As is often the case with negative identity definition, those who claimed both traditions threw a wrench into the process. As time went on, neither community would tolerate them.

What we end up with is an entirely Gentile church on one hand and a Judaism that anathematizes belief in Jesus on the other. The group that becomes lost to history—for centuries—are those who confess Jesus as Jews, those who once bridged these now mutually exclusive communities.



Despite my growing love for the Jewish rituals and worship at Ahavat Zion Messianic Synagogue in Beverly Hills, I still felt drawn to the spiritual richness of the Episcopal church. I wasn't quite ready to say goodbye to incense and stoles and partaking weekly in the Eucharist. For another full year, I attended Ahavat Zion on Saturdays and St. James' on Sundays, feeling within my body the whiplash of the parting of the ways and the yawning chasm left in its wake.

As I drove down Pico Boulevard in the heart of Jewish Los Angeles on Saturday mornings, I marveled at the throngs of religious Jews walking to synagogue. Men with long beards, black suits, and dangling tzitzit, women with long flowing skirts and brightly colored scarves covering their hair, children moving together in small groups animated by laughter and chatter. For me, it felt like a different world with its own set of insider rhythms and rules. Many of the restaurants and bakeries in the Pico-Robertson area are kosher, which means, among other things that, they are closed on Shabbat, with their owners and workers likely among those walking to one of the many neighborhood synagogues.

Having never experienced this kind of Jewish community, I felt like I had been transported to a different place or possibly a different era. I reflected anew on my own longtime desire to walk to church, and I got the sense that these Jews—who all necessarily lived within walking distance from one another and their places of worship—experienced a kind of spiritual community that I knew nothing of.

Then, a mere twenty-four hours later, I would walk through the heavy wooden double doors of St. James' Episcopal Church. Passing the white stone baptismal font, I would slip into one of the ornate pews that adorned the large sanctuary. The late morning sun filtering in through the high stained-glass windows bathed the congregation in a soft and resplendent light, truly creating the sensation of sacred space. By now I had learned the cadence of the carefully ordered service, which reached its liturgical crescendo in the communal partaking of the Eucharist.

I felt as though I was leading a double life. Did these Christians know anything of the Jewish world that existed just on the other side of the city? Did they care? Would it ever have occurred to them that Jesus may have had more in common with the Jews in West Los Angeles than the Christians here in the pews? Were there places where these two worlds, both of which I now felt some ownership of, intersected and overlapped? And where oh where was my place, my home amid these wildly different communities?



Ignatius was merely one of a whole host of voices that paved the parting of the ways. A hundred years after his stark declaration of monstrosity, Constantine would become the first “Christian” emperor in Rome. As the legend goes, on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in AD 312, Constantine had a vision of Jesus in the

sky telling him, “In my name conquer.” He went on to win the battle and, in some sense, become a Christian. Soon after, the prominent theologian and church father Augustine would begin developing a Christian doctrine of just war as the beginning of a long legacy that would follow. Christianity was now coupled with power.

In AD 325, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea, whose primary purpose was to establish an official church ruling on a doctrinal controversy that was tearing the community apart. At stake was the proper understanding of Jesus’ identity—was he begotten by the Father with no beginning (as Athanasius claimed) or was he created out of nothing at some point in time (as Arius claimed)?

While many are familiar with the words of the Nicene Creed, which was drafted at this council and strongly affirms the first position, few are aware of the impact this event would have on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Constantine was certainly influenced by the prevailing trends of growing hostility between the mostly Gentile church and the Jewish community. In fact, he would essentially institutionalize these attitudes and eventually set them in stone.

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,

of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

One tangible and enduring mark of this separation was the wedge that the Council of Nicaea drove between Passover and Easter. “We ought not therefore to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way,” thundered Constantine. “It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all

festivals, to follow the calculation of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded.” And with that, this Christian emperor forever decoupled the Jews’ remembrance of their exodus from Egypt and the resurrection of Messiah. From then on, it is a mere calendrical accident if the two happen to coincide.

So, not only did the Council of Nicaea definitively rule in favor of Athanasian Christology, it also sealed Christianity off from Judaism, both liturgically and theologically. This inaugurated a long historical era whereby, if a Jew wanted to follow Jesus as Messiah, she was required to publicly renounce any and all connections with the Jewish world. Here’s an actual conversion liturgy from the seventh century:

I do here and now renounce every rite and observance of the Jewish religion, detesting all its most solemn ceremonies and tenets that in former days I kept and held. In future I will practice no rite or celebration connected with it, nor any custom of my past error, promising neither to seek it out nor to perform it. Further do I renounce all things forbidden or detested by Christian teaching; and (recitation of the Nicene Creed).

In the name of this Creed, which I truly believe and hold with all my heart, I promise that I will never return to the vomit of Jewish superstition. Never again will I fulfill any of the offices of Jewish ceremonies to which I was addicted, nor ever more hold them dear. I altogether deny and reject the errors of the Jewish religion, casting forth whatever conflicts with the Christian Faith, and affirming that my belief in the Holy Trinity is strong enough to make me live the truly Christian life, shun all intercourse with other Jews and have the circle of my friends only among honest Christians.⁴

Amazing, isn't it? No more Jewish holidays or kosher dietary practices (in fact, one's conversion was often accompanied by the public eating of pork as a sign of true devotion to Christ). No more associating with Jewish family or community. No more participating in the rituals that define the Jewish people and their corporate life and worship (and that were, by the way, commanded by God in the Old Testament). Isn't it astonishing how different this scenario is from the pages of the New Testament?

Perhaps what is most remarkable is that many Christians today give little thought to this process and the ways it has shaped Christianity. The gospel that is generally preached has very little to do with Judaism, or the Torah, or the people of Israel—except maybe in that it offers Christians a certain freedom from these things (and we wonder why so few Jews have chosen to follow Jesus!).

However, in reality, what are so often perceived as dusty Jewish concepts stood at the very heart of Jesus' gospel proclamation. For his early followers, Jesus' mission and message was absolutely incomprehensible outside the framework of God's covenant with the Jewish people and the promises that anchored that covenant. Jesus came to fulfill the promises that had been made to the people of Israel, not to replace God's chosen people with a new group. The gospel is, then, all about God's faithfulness to the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants, and that was fleshed out through the Torah given to Moses.

Is the gospel that the church preaches today anchored in God's enduring covenant with Israel? What might it look like to increasingly tie these two stories back together? If Jesus' Jewish context is indispensable for understanding his core message, then the proclamation of the "good news" needs to affirm God's covenant faithfulness to the people of Israel, upon which God's faithfulness to the Christian church is built. If our gospel subtly but surely writes

Israel out of the narrative, how then can it be built upon Israel's Scriptures? Historically, in one way or another, the church's gospel has not translated into good news for the people of Israel. Much of what is needed today is a rethinking of our core theological categories, perhaps most centrally our gospel message.

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