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Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant
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Jewish & Christian Community

Franz Rosenzweig

In my book, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, I argued that the identity of the Christian Church is inseparable from that of the Jewish People.¹ I also argued that the identity of the Jewish People is inseparable from the person of its crucified and risen Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth. It follows that the Jewish people and the Christian Church are so intimately bound together that it is impossible to adequately understand one without also understanding the other. We distort our presentation of Jewish community and Christian community when we treat them as two separate topics that can be studied independently.²

In the history of Jewish and Christian thought, few have attempted to look systematically at the Jewish people and the Christian Church in this way. The greatest thinker to do so has been Franz Rosenzweig. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig employs the image of stellar fire to convey the indissoluble connection between these two communities and their complementary characters and roles. The Jewish people constitutes the burning core of the star, folded in on itself as a dynamic singularity; the Christian community, in all its multiplicity, comprises the rays of heat and light which radiate ever outwards.

According to Rosenzweig, both communities exist for the purpose of bearing witness (*das Zeugnis*). Ultimately, their joint testimony is to God and to God's self-revelation, which each community has received. Rosenzweig often depicts this witness against the backdrop of the

¹ Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

² For a recent volume that bring this insight to bear on the study of Jewish and Christian history, see Leo Dupree Sandgren, *Vines Intertwined: A History of Jews and Christians from the Babylonian Exile to the Advent of Islam* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010).

temporal nature of human existence; each community witnesses to eternity (*die Ewigkeit*) – eschatological time -- and its proleptic accessibility in the present age. As the eternal people (*das ewige Volk*) the Jewish community is the eternal life (*das ewige Leben*), whereas the Christian Church is the eternal way (*der ewige Weg*). Only together in God, as the wholeness of the Star of Redemption, do they make up the eternal truth (*die ewige Wahrheit*). Rosenzweig thus utilizes Yeshua’s self-designation from John 14:6 (the Way, the Truth, and the Life) to characterize these two interdependent communities of witness.

To convey the distinctive manner in which each community bears witness and the implications for its distinctive communal character, Rosenzweig exploits cognate forms of the German verb *zeugen*. The root verb can mean either “bear witness” or “generate, beget.” Derived forms remove the ambiguity: *bezeugen* means “bear witness,” while *erzeugen* means “generate, beget.” Let us see what Rosenzweig does with these words and concepts:

The bearing witness for eternity [*Das Zeugnis für die Ewigkeit*], which in the eternal people [i.e., the Jewish people] is furnished by the begetting [*die Erzeugung*] must be furnished as real bearing witness [*Zeugnis*] on the eternal way [i.e., by Christians] ... Instead of the fleshly flowing on of the one blood which testifies [*bezeugt*] to the ancestor in the begotten grandson [*im gezeugten Enkel*], here the pouring out of the Spirit in the uninterrupted stream of baptismal water from one to the other must establish the mutual participation of bearing witness [*die Gemeinschaft des Zeugnisses*]... The mutual participation [*Die Gemeinschaft*] becomes one through the testified faith [*den bezeugten Glauben*]... [The Christian] knows his own life is on the way that leads from the [first] coming to the coming again of Christ.³

The Jewish people bears witness to its own “eternity” by transmitting its biological life from one generation to the next. In contrast, the Christian Church must be reborn over and over again through the waters of baptism, which enable those who are born biologically with an existence

³ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (trans. Barbara E. Galli: Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 362-3. Original German from *Der Stern der Erlösung* (edit. Albert Raffelt: Freiburg im Breisgau: Universitätsbibliothek, 2002).

outside the Church to become spiritual participants in its community of witness (*Gemeinschaft des Zeugnisses*).

Rozenweig further explains the difference in the two forms of witness by examining the role faith (i.e., that which is confessed and believed) plays in each:

This knowledge [i.e., that his life takes place on the path that leads from the first to the second coming of Christ] is faith. It is faith as content of a bearing witness [*eines Zeugnisses*]. It is faith in something. It is exactly the opposite to the faith of the Jew. His [the Jew's] faith is not content of a bearing witness [*eines Zeugnisses*], but product of begetting [*Erzeugnis einer Zeugung*]. He who is begotten as Jew [*Der als Jude Gezeugte*] bears witness to his faith [*bezeugt seinen Glauben*] by continuing to beget [*fortzeugt*] the eternal people. He does not have faith in something, he is himself the having of faith; he is faithful in an immediacy that no Christian dogmatic can ever afford for itself. This having faith sets little value on its dogmatic fixing; it has existence – this is more than words. But the world is entitled to words. A faith that wants to win the world must be faith in something. ...And this is exactly the main point of the Christian faith. It is dogmatic in the highest sense, and must be so. It cannot renounce its words. On the contrary: it cannot have enough to do with words, it cannot invent enough words. It would really have to have a thousand tongues. It would have to speak all languages. ...So the Christian faith, with bearing witness [*der zeugnisablegende christliche Glaube*], is the first begetter [*erst der Erzeuger*] of the eternal way in the world, whereas the Jewish faith follows in the steps of the eternal life of the people as begotten product [*als Erzeugnis*].⁴

When Christians bear witness (*bezeugen*) to their faith in Christ by confessing it publicly and verbally in fulfillment of their missionary calling, they beget (*erzeugen*) the eternal way in the world by enabling those outside the Church to enter its eschatological community of witness. Christian faith must be verbal and conceptual, focused perpetually on a cognizable object (i.e., the person of Christ) external to the witnessing community. As such, *this faith gives birth to the community*. In contrast, Jews have no outwardly oriented missionary calling (beyond serving as the source of life and light for the Church in its missionary labor). Faithful Jews do not have faith in some cognizable object external to themselves; instead, *their faith derives from their lived existence as a community, and is equivalent to that existence*. In consequence, they bear witness (*bezeugen*) to their faith in the God of Israel by begetting (*erzeugen*) Jewish children.

⁴ Ibid., 363.

For Rosenzweig, the Jewish people are a particular biological community, a natural family, adopted by God to bear lived witness to eternal life in the midst of a temporal world. The Christian Church, on the other hand, is a universal spiritual community united by bonds of faith that is called by God to bear verbal witness to the eternal way in the midst of that same temporal world. Without the eternal way of the Christian Church, the eternal life of the Jewish people remains an isolated island in a sea of paganism. Without the eternal life of the Jewish people, the eternal way of the Christian Church degenerates into gnostic philosophy, a set of ideas abstracted from the concrete particularities of real earthly existence.

This manner of depicting the Jewish-Christian distinction has been controversial among Jews since Rosenzweig. Many prefer to see Judaism as a universal religion along the lines advocated by Maimonides.⁵ According to this view, conversion to Judaism is a sensible if not a necessary course of action for non-Jews. Judaism stands as a superior rival to Christianity, rather than its complement. Other Jewish thinkers accept the particularity of Jewish peoplehood and its inherently biological character, but reject any notion that the Jewish people are dependent on the Christian Church for the realization of Israel's universal mission. A few, adopting a radical fringe position, even question whether gentiles share equally with Jews in humanity, and merit the same basic protections (such as the right to life).⁶ In each of these views, Judaism and the Jewish people stand independent of Christianity and the Christian Church.

Nevertheless, there are influential Jewish voices who have adopted an approach similar to that of Rosenzweig. Among Jewish theologians, the most prominent is Michael Wyschogrod.⁷

⁵ The most forceful and learned presentation of this position in recent literature comes from Jacob Neusner. See his *Recovering Judaism: The Universal Dimension of Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

⁶ See the recent controversy in Israel over the book, *Torat Hamelekh*. Kamoun Ben-Shimon, "The Murder Midrash," *Jerusalem Report* XXI:12 (September 27, 2010), 14-17.

⁷ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith* (Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996) and *Abraham's Promise* (edit. R. Kendall Soulen: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Among Jewish historians, the most noteworthy is Daniel Boyarin.⁸ Both Wyschogrod and Boyarin emphasize the particular embodied character of the Jewish people, and resist attempts to treat Judaism as a universal religion along the lines of Christianity. Both also appreciate the positive and complementary role Christianity can play as a universal community bearing witness to the God of Israel. Beyond this, each finds it impossible to explore the meaning of Jewish communal identity apart from an exploration of Christian communal identity.

Israel: One, Holy

While some prominent Jewish and Christian thinkers have adopted a vision of the Jewish people and the Christian Church resembling that of Rosenzweig, this vision finds little or no expression in the corporate worship or popular consciousness of the two communities. Nevertheless, we discover in their most central liturgical and creedal affirmations of self-identity a parallel formulation whose implications have not been adequately considered or assimilated by either group.

The Nicene Creed refers to the Church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” These four attributes, linked together as one phrase, have become the classical way of describing the Christian Church. The Creed makes no explicit reference to the people of Israel, and this omission reflects the supersessionism that characterizes the dominant theology of the early Church. While a supersessionist interpretation of the Creed’s articulation of ecclesial self-identity undoubtedly captures the intent of most of those in the early Church and afterwards who recited it as part of their liturgical confession of faith, I will argue for an alternative interpretation that takes account of a parallel formulation from the Jewish liturgy.

⁸ Boyarin has written extensively from this perspective. See, for example, *Carnal Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); *A Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); *Dying for God* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); *Borderlines* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

At the heart of the Jewish liturgy, recited twice daily, stands the Shema. The opening line of the Shema consists of an acknowledgement of Hashem as One. In the blessing that precedes and prepares for the recitation of the Shema, the divine unity serves as the basis and goal for a corresponding unity among those who confess it – initially, in the heart of each Jew (“Unify our heart to love and fear Your Name”), and then in the community of dispersed Jews throughout the world whom Hashem will gather together as one (“Bring us in peace from the four corners of the earth, and lead us upright to our land”). As a result of Hashem’s action to establish Israel in spiritual and physical unity, Israel will be able to acknowledge in eschatological fullness the unity of the divine Name (“Draw us near to Your great Name in truth, to acknowledge You and Your unity in love”).

The linkage between Hashem’s oneness and Israel’s oneness becomes even more explicit in *Shomer Yisrael*, a short intercessory poem found in the penitential service recited on most days after the morning and afternoon Amidah. This poem pleads with God to preserve Israel, and does so with reference to the Shema:

Protector of Israel, protect the remnant of Israel;
Do not let perish Israel – those who say “Shema Israel.”
Protector of a nation that is one (*goy echad*), protect the remnant of a nation that is one;
Do not let perish a nation that is one – those who acknowledge the unity of Your Name
[by saying] “Hashem is our God, Hashem is One.”⁹

As in the blessing before the Shema, the oneness of Israel derives from the oneness of the God who has chosen Israel, and finds expression and confirmation in Israel’s acknowledgement of Hashem’s oneness in its daily recitation of the Shema.

What is meant here by *goy echad*? If the Shema itself is a guide, the phrase refers to Israel’s uniqueness in the eyes of Hashem. Just as Israel worships Hashem as its only God, so Hashem singles out Israel as Hashem’s own special possession. This is why reference to Israel’s identity

⁹ All translations from the Siddur are mine, unless otherwise noted.

as a *goy echad* provides the prayer with such compelling petitionary force: if we are truly Your unique people in all the earth, how can You possibly permit us to perish from the earth? At the same time, the phrase may also suggest the common national identity shared by all Jews. Though Israel be scattered to the four corners of the earth, yet it is one and the same people wherever it resides; and this oneness will be confirmed on the day Hashem gathers it together from the earth's ends to its own land. In the meantime, this common identity finds expression daily when Jews throughout the world say, "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai echad."

The same connection between Hashem's oneness and Israel's oneness is found in the blessing for Shabbat inserted in the Amida in the Shabbat Minchah service:

You are one, and Your Name is one,
And who is like Your people Israel (*mi ke'amcha Yisrael*),
a nation one (*goy echad*) in the earth.

The first clause employs the language of the Shema to honor Hashem as Israel's only sovereign and the world's only God. The second clause honors Israel as a people uniquely related to the world's only God, in language drawn directly from 1 Chronicles 17:21: "And who is like Your people Israel, a nation one in the earth?" Here we discover the biblical source for the phrase *goy echad* that plays such a central role in *Shomer Yisrael*.

The sages of the Talmud already discern a relationship between the Shema and 1 Chronicles 17:21. In a vivid flourish of anthropomorphic midrash, they suggest that God wears tefillin, just as God's people wear tefillin. The tefillin worn by Jews carry within them the text of the Shema, in which Hashem is acknowledged as Israel's only God. What text lies in Hashem's tefillin?

According to Rav Hiyya bar Avin, the heavenly tefillin contains 1 Chronicles 17:21 – Hashem's

reciprocal acknowledgement of Israel as a people uniquely special to Hashem.¹⁰ As Hashem is one God, so Israel is one people.

We now move on to our second basic designation for Israel. A liturgical unit associated with the Shema is the Kedushah – the threefold angelic confession of Hashem’s holiness. The Kedushah is found initially in the first blessing before the Shema. The liturgy introduces the Kedushah with the following words:

All [i.e., the angels] accept on themselves, one from another, the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, granting permission to one another to sanctify the One who formed them, in serene spirit, pure speech and sweet melody. All, as one [*ke’echad*], proclaim His holiness, saying in awe: Holy, Holy, Holy...¹¹

The phrase “accept the yoke of the kingdom of heaven” is a well-known rabbinic idiom referring to the act performed by Israel in the recitation of the Shema.¹² Thus, what Israel does on earth by reciting the Shema is enacted in heaven when the angels recite the Kedushah. In both cases Hashem is acknowledged as the only universal sovereign. And in both cases the unity of those rendering the acknowledgement is a condition and a consequence of its fulfillment.

The term “holy” designates Hashem as unique, set apart, distinct in character and power from all else that is. The first blessing before the Shema stresses also the holiness of those angels who confess Hashem’s holiness: “May You be blessed, our Rock, King and Redeemer, Creator of holy beings.”¹³ Applied to creatures, the term “holy” refers to a status of belonging to Hashem in a special way, of being set apart from other creatures for divine use, and of participating in a creaturely manner in Hashem’s unique character and power. The word thus has much in common with the word “one” as it is employed in the Shema and in liturgical and midrashic materials related to the Shema that speak of Israel as a *goy echad*.

¹⁰ b. Berachot 6a.

¹¹ The Koren Siddur (trans. Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks: Jerusalem: Koren, 2009), 92-94.

¹² See, for example, m. Berachot 2:2

¹³ Koren Siddur, 92.

Returning to *Shomer Yisrael*, we should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that the third stanza refers to the Kedushah, and deals with the holiness of God and the holiness of Israel.

Protector of a holy nation [*goy kadosh*],
protect the remnant of a holy people [*'am kadosh*];
Do not let perish a holy nation [*goy kadosh*],
those who repeat the threefold holiness to the Holy One.

The phrase *goy kadosh* derives from the divine words to Moses at the inauguration of the Sinai covenant, and is there associated with the phrase *mamlechet kohanim* (“kingdom of priests”).¹⁴

The synonymous phrase *'am kadosh* appears in a parallel passage in Deuteronomy 7:6, which speaks of Hashem’s loving choice of Israel. Like the angels in heaven, Hashem calls Israel to fulfill on earth a priestly role, living as a holy people set apart for the worship of God and for bearing witness to the holiness of the divine Name. Since Hashem has chosen Israel in love for such a crucial role, how can the Holy One let the holy nation perish?

God is one, and so Israel is one. God is holy, and so Israel is holy. These nearly identical statements, in nearly identical form, are likewise found in the Shabbat Amidah for Minchah when it is recited privately. We already saw the beginning of the fourth blessing:

You are one, and Your Name is one,
And who is like Your people Israel (*mi ke'amcha Yisrael*),
a nation one (*goy echad*) in the earth.

The words immediately preceding these in the private recitation of the Amidah are as follows:

You are holy, and Your Name is holy,
And holy ones praise You daily, Selah.
Blessed are You, Hashem, the holy God.

The opening words of the fourth blessing are formulated to echo the words of the blessing that precedes it. God is holy, and God’s Name is holy, and holy ones (the angels in heaven, Israel on earth) perform priestly service by acknowledging God’s holiness in praise. God is one, and

¹⁴ Exodus 19: 6.

God's Name is one, and a nation that is one celebrates its unique calling by delighting in the holy rest of Shabbat.

Because God is holy and unique, so the people God has chosen for priestly service in the world is also holy and unique. It is truly a *goy* (nation) and an *'am* (people) – a particular ethnic unit joined by kinship, culture, and political life, and demonstrating visible continuity through time. However, it is unique among all the nations and peoples of the earth, for it has been singled out for Hashem's special priestly service. As a nation and a people, it bears witness to the Holy One who has called it into being and who sustains it through its historical journey. In all its fleshly particularity, it endures as the eternal people (*das ewige Volk*).

The Community of Messiah: Catholic, Apostolic

Assuming a vision of Israel's oneness and holiness similar to that found in later Jewish liturgy, the Book of Ephesians proclaims that God has acted in Israel's Messiah to include those from the nations in an expanded eschatological commonwealth of Israel. Ephesians teaches a high view of Israel's status and calling, but it roots that unique dignity among the nations in God's eternal election and blessing in the Messiah.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah,
who has blessed us [Israel] in Messiah
with every blessing of the Spirit in the heavenly places,
even as he chose us [Israel] in him before the foundation of the world,
that we [Israel] should be holy and blameless before him...
In him [Messiah]...we [Israel] who first hoped in Messiah
have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.¹⁵
(Ephesians 1:3-4, 11-12)

Even before the incarnation, Messiah dwelt with Israel as the destined realization of God's eschatological promise and Israel's hope. As a consequence, those remote from Israel were remote from Messiah.

¹⁵ All biblical translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Therefore remember that at one time you from among the nations...
were separated from Messiah, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel,
and strangers to the covenants of promise,
having no hope and without God in the world.
(Ephesians 2:11-12)

Now, through the death and resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah and the gift of his Spirit, those
from the nations have been assigned a place with the holy ones of Israel:

So then you [from the nations] are no longer strangers and sojourners,
but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones [i.e., Israel]
and members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Messiah Yeshua himself being the cornerstone [or capstone],
in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.
(Ephesians 2:19-21)

Through Yeshua these former pagans have been joined to Israel without becoming Jews, and the
result is an expanded and reconfigured people of God that continues to express Israel's oneness
(Ephesians 4:4-6) and holiness, but in a new form suited to the dawning of the Messianic age.

The Book of Ephesians would concur with the Nicene Creed that the eschatological
multinational expansion of Israel is one and holy. Its oneness and holiness derive from the
oneness and holiness of the Jewish people, which is itself eternally rooted in the oneness and
holiness of God and God's Messiah. The reconciliation of those from the nations with the Jewish
people bears witness to the power of God's Messianic Shalom. However, their reconciled unity
does not annul their distinct identity as Jews and non-Jews, but instead requires such distinction
in perpetuity so that their joint witness to reconciliation will endure for all ages.

The Book of Ephesians would also concur with the Creed that the eschatological people of
God are catholic and apostolic. The word "catholic" means universal or general. In contrast to
the Jewish people, whose identity is essentially particular and circumscribed, the community of
the Messiah encompasses those from among all the nations of the world. But just as God's

infinity does not negate but instead embraces created finitude (as seen preeminently in the incarnation), so the catholicity of the expanded people of God does not abolish but instead sustains and elevates the particularity of Israel. The Jewish people remain at the center of this new catholic reality as a distinct national entity, a sanctified community of kinship and common ethnicity. But the circle of oneness and holiness has now been widened to include all those from the nations who are reconciled with the God of Israel and the Israel of God. Within this widened circle, all are holy – with distinctions in role but no distinctions in access or proximity to God differentiating Jew from Greek, male from female.

In the early centuries after the coming of Messiah the term “catholic” distinguished the faith and life of the authentic *ekklesia* from its fraudulent rivals by focusing on the sectarian and schismatic character of the latter. The true *ekklesia* could be discerned by determining which communities in Yeshua maintained relationships of mutual recognition with other communities throughout the known world. This was a legitimate criterion of ecclesial discernment. Sadly, by failing to grasp the way the catholic and apostolic community was rooted in Israel’s oneness and holiness, the multinational expression of the twofold *ekklesia* adopted a vision of catholicity which negated rather than elevated the particularity of the Jewish people. As such, it sank unknowingly into schism, and damaged its own vaunted catholicity.

The catholic character of the community of the Messiah derives from its apostolic foundation. As Ephesians 2 proclaims, those who formerly were “strangers and sojourners” are now fellow citizens with the Jewish people in an expanded eschatological Israel that is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” Ephesians presents Yeshua as the keystone rather than the foundation. Why the special emphasis on the apostles? Since Ephesians everywhere exalts the preeminence of Messiah Yeshua, we may not read this text as detracting from his unique

dignity. On the contrary, to stress the foundational character of the apostles is to point the way to Messiah Yeshua. They are the ones authorized by Yeshua to be his representatives, and Yeshua announces through them his message of shalom to the nations.¹⁶ The authentic Messianic *ekklesia* is both *catholic* and *apostolic*.

Just as the principle of catholicity points to the spatial continuity of the Messianic *ekklesia*, so the principle of apostolicity points to its temporal continuity. No less than the Jewish people who are its point of origin, the Messianic *ekklesia* is a structured human community that transmits its life continuously from one generation to the next. However, in the two cases the modes of transmission differ. As Rosenzweig perceived, the Jewish people – founded on the twelve sons of Jacob – transmits its life through the begetting (and rearing) of children. In contrast, the Messianic *ekklesia* – founded on the twelve apostles of Yeshua – transmits its life through the proclamation of its apostolic faith. But just as the catholicity of the Messianic *ekklesia* assumes and elevates the particularity of the Jewish people (rather than negating it), so the apostolic continuity of the *ekklesia* likewise confirms the genealogical continuity of the Jewish people and its enduring national witness to the God of Israel.

The apostolic character of the Messianic *ekklesia* points to its historical source: the person, work, and teaching of a crucified and risen Jew and his foundational commissioning of emissaries – all of them Jewish. The apostolic character of the Messianic *ekklesia* also points to its ongoing mission to receive and enrich the apostolic message transmitted across the generations, and to carry that message to all the peoples of the earth. In this way, the apostolic character of the *ekklesia* establishes its catholic character. It does so both by welcoming all nations into its house, and by binding those nations to the heritage of Israel – that community of kinship and ethnicity set apart to be *one* and *holy*.

¹⁶ Ephesians 2:17.

Our reinterpretation of the Nicene vision of the *ekklesia* – one, holy, catholic, and apostolic – reveals a twofold *ekklesia* bound forever to the Jewish people. But what does this say to us about the nature and role of the Messianic Jewish community, both in its original 1st century context, and – in revived form – in the ever-changing circumstances of the 21st century world?

Messianic Jewish Community

A Priestly Remnant

As a nation that is “one” and “holy,” the Jewish people corporately have a priestly vocation. Do the Jewish followers of Yeshua have a special priestly calling within that priestly people? The apostolic writings do not teach this explicitly, but they hint that such is the case.

Romans 11 opens with the question, “has God rejected his people?” Paul denies this notion, but in order to do so he must explain why the people of Israel as a whole have not embraced Messiah Yeshua. He begins by presenting himself, an Israelite and an apostle of the Messiah, as a sign of God’s continuing fidelity to Israel (11:1). He then points to his fellow Jewish Yeshua-followers, whom he calls “the remnant” and “the chosen,” as a similar sign (11:5-7). After offering reasons why God “hardened” the rest of the Jewish people, Paul argues that this hardening is temporary and that Israel’s future embrace of Yeshua will usher in the eschaton (11:15). As an assurance of Israel’s destined redemption, he states: “If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump” (Romans 11:16, RSV).

The logic of Paul’s argument in Romans 11 suggests that the term “first fruits” refers back to the Jewish Yeshua-followers of verses 5-7. In halakhic terms, the offering of first fruits does not sanctify the remaining dough but instead releases it for secular use. However, the offering of first fruits fits into a wider pattern within the Torah according to which a part is devoted to God as representative of the whole. The Aaronic Priesthood constitutes a prime example of this pattern

in which the holiness of the representative part actually secures and sustains the holiness of that which it represents – the entire people of Israel. Similarly, Jewish Yeshua-followers perform a priestly service on behalf of their fellow Jews by representing them before God. As a consequence, all Israel retains its sacred status, in hope of the day of redemption when in fullness it will acknowledge its returning Messiah.

This priestly understanding conditions Paul’s use of the term “remnant.” A strict notion of remnant involves the substitution of a part for the whole. As a result of a judgment which destroys or disqualifies an unfaithful majority, a faithful minority – the remnant – takes their place.¹⁷ Priestly election likewise singles out a minority, but it does so for the purpose of representing and sanctifying rather than replacing the whole. Paul does not portray Jewish Yeshua-followers in strict remnant terms, but instead as a priestly remnant which represents but does not replace the Jewish people.

A priestly reading of Romans 11:16 draws support from a curious Pauline idiom. In several texts, Paul refers to the Yeshua-community of Jerusalem as “the holy ones.”¹⁸ Elsewhere, Paul applies this term to Yeshua-followers in general.¹⁹ However, here the word appears to have a special association with the Jewish Yeshua-followers of the holy city – the true Messianic “first fruits.”²⁰ In light of Romans 11:16, we may understand this terminology as implying that the Jewish Yeshua-community, especially as it was embodied in Jerusalem, constituted a sanctifying first fruits not only for the Jewish people, but also for the *ekklēsia* from among the nations (see James 1:18). They performed a priestly function on behalf of the entire people of God.

¹⁷ See Lester V. Meyer, “Remnant,” *ABD Volume 5* (edit. David Noel Freedman: New York: Doubleday, 1992), 669-71.

¹⁸ Romans 15:25-26, 31; 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1, 12.

¹⁹ For example, Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2.

²⁰ See Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 80 (see especially footnote 112). John McRay argues that this use of “holy ones” to refer specifically to Jewish Yeshua-followers is common in Ephesians (*Paul: His Life and Teaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 346-48).

As an Apostle of Yeshua and a Jew, Paul himself fulfills this priestly role on behalf of the nations by bringing them the Good News:

...because of the grace given to me by God, to be a liturgical servant (*leiturgos*) of Messiah Yeshua in the priestly labor of the Good News of God, so that the offering of the those from the nations may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.
(Romans 15:15-16)

Here the non-Jewish followers of Yeshua are the offering that Paul is presenting to God.

However, in later verses dealing with the contribution he is bringing to the Jerusalem assembly on behalf of these non-Jews, Paul modifies the metaphor:

At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, in service to the holy ones (i.e., the Jerusalem Yeshua-community); for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources (*koinonia*) with the poor among the holy ones at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if those from the nations have come to share (*koinoneo*) in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of liturgical service (*leiturgeo*) to them in material things. (Romans 15:25-27)

The Jewish Yeshua-followers of Jerusalem have “shared” their spiritual treasure with those from the nations; in gratitude, those from the nations are now reciprocating by “sharing” their material treasure. As a parallel expression for this “sharing” of material resources, Paul says that those from the nations are performing “liturgical service” by sending material gifts to the Jerusalem community. The reciprocal nature of the “sharing” noted by Paul implies that the “liturgical service” was likewise reciprocal -- that the Jerusalem Yeshua-community had also performed priestly liturgical service for those from the nations by sharing with them their spiritual treasure, the Good News of God. In accordance with this inference, Paul’s priestly liturgical service for those from the nations (described in 15:15-16) manifests the priestly function of the Jerusalem community, and presumably of the Jewish Yeshua-followers as a whole.

In Romans 15 Paul emphasizes the apostolic dimension of the priestly vocation of the first Jewish Yeshua-followers. They had received and transmitted the message of the Good News.

However, more is involved here. When enumerating the chief privileges of the Jewish people in Romans 9:4-5, Paul brings his list to a climax with these words: “to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah.” The sanctified kinship bond with both the patriarchs and the Messiah does not in itself assure the eternal destiny of individual Jews, but it does distinguish the entire people of Israel as a nation set apart for special divine service. The “flesh” has its own necessary and proper role to play. We should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that those who are joined to Messiah Yeshua in *both* flesh and Spirit – the chosen ones from among the chosen ones – are also summoned to a distinctive priestly vocation. According to this calling, they serve as an effective sign of the enduring *oneness* and *holiness* of Israel in Messiah Yeshua, and of the *catholic* continuity in space and the *apostolic* continuity in time of the Messianic *ekklesia*.

While the significance of a fleshly connection to Yeshua occupies only a subordinate place in Paul’s letters, it appears to have been far more prominent in the thinking of other early Yeshua-followers. Richard Bauckham has underlined the central role played by the relatives of Yeshua in the first century Yeshua-movement, especially in its Jewish sphere.²¹ James, leader of the Jerusalem community, was Yeshua’s brother. According to Hegesippus, the successor to James was Simeon, cousin of Yeshua. Bauckham suggests that Simeon’s election reflected “a kind of dynastic feeling, to which it seemed right that the leadership of the church should remain in the hands of relatives of Jesus.”²² Such an emphasis on immediate kinship to Yeshua among Jewish Yeshua-followers makes sense if they likewise saw significance in the less immediate kinship to Yeshua shared by all Jews. If Hashem could employ physical descent as a condition for priestly service in the Jerusalem Temple, and as a condition for the royal service of the Messiah himself

²¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 86-94.

²² *Ibid.*, 88; 125-33.

(Romans 1:3), might he not also set apart for special service those united to Messiah by bonds of both faith and kinship?

In addition to treating James with reverence, early tradition in the Yeshua-movement stressed his priestly role. This is evident in an account from Hegessipus, preserved by Eusebius:

He was called the ‘Just’ by all men from the Lord’s time to ours, since many are called James, but he was holy from his mother’s womb. He drank no wine or strong drink, nor did he eat flesh; no razor went upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, and he did not go to the baths. He alone was allowed to enter into the sanctuary, for he did not wear wool but linen, and he used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel’s because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people.²³

Hegessipus combines nazirite and priestly elements in his description of James. The brother of Yeshua is even presented as resembling the high-priest on Yom Kippur, who prays in the sanctuary – where he alone is permitted to enter – for the forgiveness of the nation.²⁴ While its historical value regarding James is doubtful, this early tradition supports our contention that James and the Jerusalem community were viewed widely in priestly terms.

Our conclusion at this point is simple: any sustained reflection on the meaning of Messianic Jewish community must account for the priestly dimension of Messianic Jewish identity, and assign it a position of central importance.

Diverse Modes of Priestly Service

The apostolic texts examined above suggest that a priestly vocation extends to all Messianic Jewish communities. However, these texts also differentiate among such communities, demonstrating an awareness of the diverse manifestations of the one priestly calling.

²³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2:23, 4-6 (trans. Kirsopp Lake: Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 171.

²⁴ For insightful comment on this text, see John Painter, *Just James* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 125-27.

All of the Jewish followers of Yeshua portrayed in the Apostolic Writings lived as full members of the Jewish community. However, they did so in different ways, depending on their geographical location and their particular calling. Thus, James and the Jerusalem assembly of Yeshua-followers displayed an unambiguous attachment to Jewish communal life. They worshipped at the Temple alongside the rest of the Jewish community, presenting their prayers and offerings and learning Torah in the Temple courts. Most likely they had only limited contact with non-Jews, welcoming Yeshua-followers from the nations as guests but not expecting many to remain as residents in the Holy City. James and the Jerusalem assembly of Yeshua-followers represented the corporate witness of the Messianic *ekklesia* to Israel that its election and destiny were summed up in Messiah Yeshua. They also represented the corporate witness to all non-Jewish followers of Yeshua that the Messianic *ekklesia* existed only as an eschatological extension of Israel's national life.

In contrast, Paul and his Jewish colleagues (such as Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy) spent substantial amounts of time with non-Jews. Like James and his Jerusalem assembly, they related to Jewish communal institutions as their own, attending the synagogue and recognizing the legitimacy of its authorities.²⁵ However, their particular task consisted of carrying the message of Yeshua to the nations of the earth. They also announced the Good News to fellow Jews in the Diaspora, but this was not their immediate and primary vocation,²⁶ though the ultimate redemption of Israel appears to have been their long-term goal.²⁷ In their work with non-Jews they stressed the ongoing importance of the Jewish people, and fostered identification with the

²⁵ Otherwise, Paul would not have submitted to synagogue discipline, as he evidently did (2 Corinthians 11:22-24).

²⁶ Romans 1:5, 13-15; 15:15-16; Galatians 1:16; 2:9.

²⁷ Romans 11:13-14.

community of Yeshua-followers in Jerusalem. This was the purpose of the offering for the “holy ones” in Jerusalem, which occupied so much of Paul’s attention.²⁸

We know less about Peter, but he seems to occupy a middle-ground between James and Paul. In the initial period following the resurrection of Yeshua, Peter presides over the Jerusalem community of Yeshua-followers and focuses exclusively on bearing witness to Yeshua before the Jewish people. He is the main spokesmen for the community before the Temple governors. In Paul’s account of an important conference in Jerusalem, Peter takes the lead (along with James and John) as the Apostle bringing the Good News to “the circumcision.”²⁹

On the other hand, according to Acts 10 Peter is the one who opens the door for the proclamation of the Good News to non-Jews by traveling to Caesarea and immersing Cornelius. Paul reports that there are some among the Corinthian Yeshua-followers who claim special loyalty to Peter.³⁰ Paul also informs us that Peter traveled on apostolic journeys with a wife.³¹ These Pauline references to Peter do not state that Peter worked and lived among non-Jews in his travels, but it is likely that his audience included both Jews and non-Jews. Paul’s account of his dispute with Peter at Antioch reveals that Peter attempted to walk a middle path between the way of James and that of Paul.³² The first letter of Peter hints at a Roman provenance for its composition, and early tradition reports that Peter died there as a martyr.³³ This is consistent with a picture of him as traveling extensively, and laboring among both Jews and non-Jews.

The Apostolic Writings thus suggest that groups of Jewish Yeshua-followers in the first century adopted a variety of different modes of communal interaction, depending on their

²⁸ Romans 15:25-33; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 9:1-15; Galatians 2:10.

²⁹ Galatians 2:7-9.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:22.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 9:5.

³² Galatians 2:11-14.

³³ 1 Peter 5:13.

geographical location and the particular apostolic role they were called to play. They all lived as faithful Jews, but faithfulness demanded different behavior in diverse relationships and contexts. For James and the Jerusalem community, called to demonstrate the rootedness of the Messianic *ekklesia* in the people of Israel and to bear witness to Israel's future redemption in Yeshua, covenant faithfulness meant immersion in the heart of Jewish communal life and scrupulous adherence to widely accepted halakhic norms. For Paul and his apostolic team, called to champion the eschatological expansion of the commonwealth of Israel among the nations of the world in Messiah Yeshua, covenant faithfulness required the halakhic flexibility incumbent on every diaspora Jew whose life involved substantial contact with non-Jews. For Peter and his associates, called to a service of unity on behalf of the twofold Messianic *ekklesia*, covenant faithfulness meant keeping all relational channels open – with the wider Jewish community, with James and the Jerusalem assembly, and with Paul and the mission among the nations.

While tensions existed among those called to diverse modes of priestly service as Jewish Yeshua-followers, all acknowledged their interdependence. Paul implies that his own priestly service among those from the nations is an extension of the priestly service of the “holy ones” in Jerusalem, and he places a priority on raising funds for those “holy ones.” James affirms the Pauline mission, and sees it as a sign that God is truly rebuilding the fallen booth of David – i.e., that God is restoring Israel under the reign of the promised Son of David.³⁴ Most clearly of all, Peter's role as unifier depended on the success of both James and Paul. These three apostles may have exasperated one another, but they could not do without one another.

Having examined the inter-related nature of Jewish and Christian community and the first century precedents for Messianic Jewish community, we are now ready to consider our own situation as Messianic Jews in the 21st century.

³⁴ Acts 15:13-18.

Messianic Jewish Community in the 21st Century

Given the distinctive character of Messianic Jewish community, how shall we approach the challenges that face us today? I will offer five recommendations for the future direction of our movement that are based on the conclusions reached above.

1. The Ways of James, Peter, and Paul. In accordance with the apostolic diversity of Jewish modes of life and service seen above, we would be wrong to assume that there is one normative expression of Messianic Jewish community appropriate for all Messianic Jews. While all Messianic Jewish communities will be committed *both* to Jewish covenant fidelity and the welfare of the wider Jewish world, *and* to the twofold Messianic *ekklesia* and its universal mission among the nations, each community will have its own emphasis based on its location, capabilities, and calling.

At the same time, I would propose that the primary vocation of Messianic Jewish communities today falls within the James to Peter spectrum. Like James, we are summoned to live within the Jewish world as witnesses to God's enduring fidelity to Israel in Messiah Yeshua and as priestly representatives of those among whom we live. This is the most difficult but also the most crucial aspect of our calling. It means that most Messianic Jewish communities must be situated in areas of high Jewish population density, and that we must do all that is in our power to participate in the life of the wider Jewish community.

Like Peter, we are also summoned to live as agents of unity, binding together the *ekklesia* of the nations and the Jewish people. This requires meaningful relationship with the Christian Church. But the point of the relationship is not to reside in the Church's own sphere for the sake of shaping its internal life. Instead, the point is to unveil for the Church the mystery of its identity

as a participant in the eschatological blessings of an expanded Israel, and to actualize that truth in the Church's life through mutual love and communal interchange.

Some Messianic Jews may also be called to the Pauline task of being a "light to the nations" – in our context, of immersion in the life of the Christian Church in order to teach those from the nations about Yeshua from a Jewish perspective. However, as a way of life – rather than as an occasional task -- this path should be the exception rather than the rule. This is necessarily the case because the ways of James and Peter are a condition for the success of the way of Paul. Without thriving Messianic Jewish communities living faithfully within the wider Jewish world, and without a unifying link between these communities and the Church, a Messianic Jewish mission within the Christian Church will inevitably become only another expression of the inner life of the Church. Without such thriving communities, it will also be impossible for Messianic Jews who walk in the way of Paul to sustain a Jewish life for themselves or their families.

2. Priestly Identity. As we have seen, the fundamental vocation of the Jewish people is to be a holy nation, a priestly people. This entails existing as a community of sanctified kinship and culture. Similarly, the fundamental vocation of the Messianic Jewish community is to be the priestly first-fruits of Israel's eschatological destiny. Thus, an essential condition for fulfilling our vocation is existence as a community of sanctified Jewish kinship and culture.

3. Priestly Remnant. As we have seen, Paul only employs the term "remnant" in a qualified manner. The community of Jewish Yeshua-followers is a priestly remnant, representing rather than replacing the people as a whole. The priestly election of the remnant secures the holy and elect status of the rest, rather than their condemnation.

This implies that we cannot view our community as the only true and valid expression of the people of Israel, or of the Messianic *ekklesia*. We are neither Israel recovered from its

“backsliding,” nor the “restored first-century church” purified of its “paganism.” Instead, we are but eschatological first-fruits, who stand before God on behalf of Israel and the Church, and who stand before Israel as witness to the sanctifying presence of Yeshua in its midst and before the Church as witness to the sanctifying presence of Israel in its midst.

4. Priestly Service. Observance of the Torah does not constitute Jewish community, but it does provide the shape of the community’s priestly service. The most fundamental task of a priest is the worship of Hashem, and worship is at the heart of the Torah.

As an eschatological priestly remnant, we offer our worship to God through Yeshua in the Spirit. As an eschatological priestly remnant of the Jewish people, we offer worship to God in accordance with the Torah, both as written and as carried in the life of the Jewish people through history. As an eschatological priestly remnant of the Jewish people bound in love also to the *ekklesia* from the nations, we offer worship to God as representatives of the one and holy people of Israel, the fiery core that through Messiah becomes a flaming catholic and apostolic star.

Thus, our primary communal task is not teaching or preaching, announcing the Good News or advancing social justice. We are summoned to do all those things, but for us they must be subordinate to the explicit worship of God, and only as such do those things become for us a form of worship.

5. Priestly Sodality. Full participation in Messianic Jewish community demands special dedication and commitment. It may not be appropriate for all Jewish followers of Yeshua.

To explain this, we may draw upon Ralph Winter’s missiological distinction between a modality and a sodality.³⁵ A modality is a group comprised of a full range of human beings -- old and young, male and female, married and single. It has leaders and followers, strong and weak,

³⁵ Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” available for download at <http://www.movements.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/two-structures-gods-redemptive-mission-winter.pdf>

able and disabled. There are no membership restrictions other than a willingness to abide by the standards of the group, and the objective of the group is simply to live its life in a particular way. In contrast, a sodality is a group with a focused vocation, with membership restricted to those who will be able to contribute to the fulfillment of that vocation. Sodalities require a higher level of commitment than do modalities. Winter sees the first century communities of Yeshua-followers as modalities, while he views Paul's apostolic team as a sodality. He also argues that monasteries, religious orders, and missionary societies demonstrate the fruitfulness of the sodality model throughout Christian history.

Sodalities of this sort are not service organizations composed of employees or volunteers who commit a segment of their week for a limited period of their life to accomplish a narrowly defined task. Instead, they are communities of people who have joined together in family-like relationships of mutual commitment and responsibility to fulfill a calling that is particular but which embraces all of their life.

As a representative part of the people and not the whole, as a part with a particular priestly calling that involves formidable challenges and imposes multiple hardships, Messianic Jewish communities should be viewed as sodalities rather than modalities. They are not for everyone. A Messianic Jewish community must be a priestly remnant of Jews and Jewish families; how else can they hope to represent the people of Israel? They must be a priestly community of Jews and Jewish families who embrace or are being drawn to Messiah Yeshua; how else can they represent Israel in Yeshua before God, or Yeshua to Israel, or Israel to the Christian Church? They must be a priestly community of leaders rather than followers; how else will they be able to maintain their convictions in the midst of fierce opposition? They must be a priestly community of stable mature families and individuals; how else will they be able to make the sacrifices

required to fulfill their priestly commission? Finally, they must actually be *communities* – not fluid collections of individuals and families who meet occasionally to fulfill their own needs or perform a task, but people bound together in long-term family-like relationships. How else can they be priestly representatives of a sanctified extended family?

In the context of this conference and consultation, we should also consider establishing extra-local sodalities that bring together Jewish Yeshua-followers who are walking the different paths of James, Peter, and Paul.

Conclusion

We cannot ignore the vast discrepancy between the picture drawn in this paper of Messianic Jewish community and the reality which most of us live. Search though we might, we can find no map or GPS to guide us to our destination. Nevertheless, if this formulation accurately expresses our calling, then the One who calls us is also the One who will guide us and who will sustain us on the journey.

We ourselves may never reach the destination. That may be for our next generation, or for their children. But in order for them to complete the journey, we must take the next step. As Rabbi Tarfon tells us, “You are not obliged to finish the task, but neither are you free to neglect it” (Avot 2:21).

And so, with eyes open to our calling and our need, let us exercise our priestly gift in Messiah Yeshua.

May Hashem bless us and keep us. May Hashem shine upon us and be gracious to us. May Hashem turn to us and grant us shalom.