

Book Review – Messianic Judaism, A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past

About 10 days ago I spotted a synagogue while running in Memphis, Tennessee. The architecture of religious buildings is interesting to me so I looked closer and was pleased to discover that it was a Messianic Jewish synagogue. Messianic Jews are Jews that accept Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah. Though I considered them joint heirs with Gentile Christians of the saving work of Christ, I did not know much about them. I was not alone.

David H Stern's *Messianic Judaism, A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past* is an attempt to educate Gentile Christians, non-believing Jews, and even other Messianic Jews about what the movement is all about. Published by Lederer Books, a division of Messianic Jewish Publishers, this text, now in its third edition, is a comprehensive look at Messianic Judaism in the past, present, and even future. David Stern received an MDiv from Fuller Theological Seminary, took a graduate course from the American Jewish University, and earned a PhD in economics from Princeton University. Born to a Jewish family in the US but now living in Jerusalem, he taught at the University of California at Los Angeles, and translated *The Complete Jewish Bible*.

Stern begins by describing the high calling that he and other Messianic Jews share. Christianity, the largest religion in the world, was established by Jesus Christ, and is a direct descendent of the ancient Hebrew faith. Judaism is an important world faith, was completed by Yeshua the Messiah, and is a direct descendent of the ancient Hebrew faith. What a tragedy it is, therefore, that relations between Christians and Jews have been so acrimonious for so long. The author believes that Messianic Jews are called to close the gap, thus being instrumental in accomplishing the work of God in the world.

Rather than holding to a common belief that one can be either a Christian or a Jew, but not both, Stern feels that Messianic Judaism is both necessary and useful to show the Messiah to non-believing Jews and to provide the whole counsel of God, including the Torah, to Gentile Christians. Messianic Judaism also helps sustain the Jewish culture of an oft-persecuted people.¹ According to Halakhah, Jewish religious law, a Jew is anyone who is born of a Jewish mother or has converted to Judaism. Biblical evidence, by contrast, traces Jewish lineage through the father.² Messianic Jews, as opposed to Hebrew Christians, continue to acknowledge their Jewishness. Stern makes the interesting but debatable point that Jewish believers in the New Testament are never called Christians; only the Gentiles are.

Stern's section on the history of Messianic Judaism covers a lot more philosophy and even opinion than history. It begins discussing happiness, work, and meaning. Then this section concludes that though their service to God, Messianic Jews are at the focal point of history. He examines Romans 11 to illustrate how Messianic Jews and the Gentile Christians are both rooted in God's work in Old Testament Israel. Stern then looks at history to illustrate that Jews and Christians have been far apart from the era of Constantine to the 20th century. Only with the restoration of Messianic Judaism as a movement in the 1960s are Christians and Jews beginning to move closer together.³

The author makes some excellent points in his section on theology. He notes that Gentile Christians tend to use the names of the members of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, interchangeably, thus suggesting a practical tritheism. Having examined some of my own prayers, I realize that I have been guilty of this. Stern talks about the covenants that God made with Israel, from Noah (Genesis 9) to the New Israel (Jeremiah 31). He also emphasizes the corporate nature of the gospel. The work of Christ is not only for individual men but for families and communities and nations. He is a Zionist, firmly stating that Palestine belongs to the Jews and that Messianic Judaism will eventually form the critical mass in Israel.

Stern's best point is that the weakest link in Gentile Christian theology is our understanding of the ancient Hebrew law. The law is the centerpiece of the Jewish religion but flyover territory for modern Christians. We can't name the sacrifices, don't know what they were for, and don't care. We don't know much about the rest of the Law, the non-sacrificial portion, except the Ten Commandments. While it is true that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ made all of the

¹ Messianic Judaism, A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past, 11-12

² Ibid, 16

³ Ibid, 50-51

sin sacrifices in the Law obsolete, there are many other points of the ancient Hebrew religion that can deepen our understanding of the work of God in the past and in the present.

Orthodox Jews consider the Written Torah to be the five books of Moses, as well as the Writings and the Prophets (Tanakh). The Oral Torah includes the Talmud and later religious writings of prominent rabbis and other teachers. Stern explains that Conservative, Reformed, and other Jews hold different writings with differing esteem, and then asks if Messianic Jews should continue to follow the Jewish Torah. His answer is interesting. The author first redefines the Torah in light of the New Testament and then states that both Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians are required to follow the Torah. Depending upon how one defines the Torah, he may be right.

The latter part of *Messianic Judaism, A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past* describes the author's view of what needs to happen in order for Messianic Judaism to fulfill its God-given mission of unity with the Gentile Church and salvation for non-believing Jews. The list is long, including national and international organizations, a Messianic Jewish seminary, schools at every level, and Messianic Jewish literature. Some of these things have been introduced since the book was first written. A most pressing need is rapprochement between Gentile Christian congregations and Messianic Jewish ones.

The modern state of Israel is a centerpiece of Stern's understanding of Messianic Judaism. Though currently a secular state in which practicing Jews are a minority and Messianic Jews a tiny sliver, he believes that Israel will eventually give itself to Yeshua the Messiah. Stern encourages prayer for Israel and missions work to Israel, especially for the Messianic community as it tries to influence its neighbors. Even more, he encourages Messianic Jews to emigrate from the United States and other diaspora nations to Israel.

Messianic Judaism, A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past is a worthwhile read for pastors, seminarians, and anyone trying to understand their Messianic Jewish brothers. Stern's tone is conversational, not academic, and his analysis seems scattered at times. Nonetheless, he makes some good points that Gentile Christians and non-believing Jews should certainly consider.

Questions

1. How can modern Gentile Christians learn from our Messianic Jewish brethren?
2. How can we help Jews throughout the world to honestly consider the person of Yeshua?
3. How can we be a force against anti-Semitism in the Church and in the world?