

# Jewish fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ) in post-supersessionist water: Messianic Judaism within a post-supersessionistic paradigm



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This article defines, explains and argues for the necessity of a post-supersessionistic hermeneutical posture towards the New Testament. The post-supersessionistic reading of the New Testament takes the Jewish nature of the apostolic documents seriously, and has as its goal the correction of the sin of supersessionism. While supersessionism theologically is repudiated in most corners of the contemporary church through official church documents, the practise of reading the New Testament continues to exhibit supersessionistic tendencies and outcomes. The consequence of this predominant reading of the New Testament is the continued exclusion of Jewish ethnic identity in the church. In light of the growing recognition of multiculturalism and contextualisation on the one hand, and the recent presence of a movement within the body of Messiah of Jewish believers in Jesus on the other, the church's established approach to reading Scripture that leads to the elimination of ethnic identity must be repudiated alongside its post-supersessionist doctrinal statements. This article defines terms, explains consequences and argues for a *renewed* perspective on the New Testament as an ethnic document; such a perspective will promote the church's cultivation of real embodied ethnic particularity rather than either a pseudo-interculturalism or the eraser full ethnicity.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Didn't Saint Paul say that Christians have 'died to the Law' (Gal 2:20) and that Jesus believers were 'free from the law' (1 5:1)?

Didn't he also say that 'no one is justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus' (Gl 2:16)? And didn't he say further that the 'law is not faith' (Gl 3:12)? Why would anyone then think that it was appropriate for a believer of Jesus to continue to practice the law?

And isn't Jesus purported to have said his kingdom was 'not of this world' (n 19). Didn't he tell a parable once in which the punchline was that God was replacing unfaithful Israel with the New Testament church (Mt 21)? For that matter, why would anyone want to keep the ritual commandments of the Torah anyway? That seems so foolish, backward and impossible anyway.

In light of the perspective highlighted in this sampling of quotes representative of the average Christian's thinking, it is hard to see how anyone would have thought it a good idea to be both a Jew and a Christian. Jerome, the 4th-century church father, once wrote of Christians who attempted to pattern their life by Jewish practices: 'while they desire to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither the one nor the other' (Aug. *Ep.* 75.4.13).

So, it is perhaps not a surprise that the emergence of Messianic Judaism in the late-20th century corresponded with the reevaluation of the New Testament (NT) and its Jewish roots, a reassessment done some 1600 years after Augustine.<sup>2</sup> The ground breaking work of scholars such as E.P. Sanders with his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) forced a 'New Perspective' on the field of NT studies. This, coupled with the emergence of the so-called Third Quest for the historical Jesus, of which several of the key contributors are Jewish scholars (e.g. Geza Vermes, David Flusser and Paula Fredriksen), created a scholarly and ecclesial environment which now fosters the reconsideration of the nature of the texts of the NT.

1.A version of this article was presented at an invited lecture on Messianic Judaism for the Center for Jewish Civilisation, Georgetown University, USA on 16 April 2015.

2.For an introduction to the Messianic Judaism see the recent volume by Rudolph and Willitts 2013 and the earlier important work of Kinzer 2005.

Most denominations in the last half century have thoroughly denounced the supersessionism that has shaped the interpretation of every aspect of the NT since as early as the 2nd century, except for the occasionally rare sectarian movement.

It must still be admitted that this reappraisal of the NT's relationship to Judaism has yet neither been fully worked out within NT scholarship nor has it made much of a dent in the preaching and teaching ministry and in the liturgy of the local parish. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear in an academic paper on the NT or in Sunday sermon that the Judaism, of which Jesus or Paul knew, was characterised by the impossible demand of an external, formulaic, non-rationally derived set of dead commandments. Christianity, as we are told, is the opposite of this: a relationally based, vital, internally oriented faith. The replacement theology of common Christian thinking and worship is unconscious and pervasive.

In most cases today, both scholars and Christians alike choose one of two perspectives on the Mosaic Law. With the arrival of the Messiah, either (1) the Mosaic Torah has been superseded and annulled, or (2) it has been superseded but has become an indifferent issue of preference. The latter position refers to the continuing practice of Jewish law as a matter of *adiaphora*, meaning 'things indifferent'. So for interpreters of the NT, the ritual requirements of the Torah have been *either* annulled *or* rendered irrelevant and ultimately unnecessary. So to do them is *either* to put one's eternal destiny at risk or, if not spiritually disastrous, undesirable nevertheless, since such external things are no longer required for salvation. The latter position does look suspiciously and somewhat condescendingly on those who wish to practise such Jewish works because they believe the practice of Jewish law, while not inherently evil, can dangerously lead one to put trust in human effort instead of the finished work of Messiah. This is a quite common Protestant way of looking at things since historically there has been an impenetrable theological wedge between faith and obedience.

Post-supersessionism, however, presents a *third way*. Building on the earlier work of scholars who established a new perspective on early Judaism and early Christianity, a post-supersessionist approach to the NT *constructs* social space for Jewish ethnic identity within the *ekklēsia* of the Messiah Yeshua. In this brief essay, I wish to describe post-supersessionism and argue that such a reading approach, whatever it be named, is the necessary presumption for Jewish ethnic identity to flourish within the church as it was always intended to do. Messianic Judaism's legitimacy is founded on a *renewed* perspective reading of the NT as I propose here; such a reading represents a recapturing of the historic *ekklēsial* vision of the apostolic documents of the NT.

## Approach not method

Post-supersessionism is an *approach*, not a method. This is an important initial insight. It is something more along the lines

of a theological (or philosophical if you would prefer) and historical posture towards the texts of the NT. Those who read the NT from a post-supersessionist perspective will range widely in their views of the authority of the canon of the NT particularly. Furthermore, they will employ the same exegetical tools used by others of a different ilk, although they may also, in many cases, be the very ones within the field of NT studies who are employing new methodologies in addressing old questions thereby coming out with significantly different conclusions than the traditional ones.

Post-supersessionism is a unified 'sensitivity', an 'intuition' if you like, about the *kind of conclusions* that are satisfactorily valid *historically, exegetically and theologically* in the light of the *historical circumstances and intentions* of the NT canonical documents. This is important. At bottom, I really do not think the debate these days about the meaning of a text is primarily about the minutiae of exegesis, lexical, grammatical or otherwise. Two hundred plus years of higher critical exegesis has delivered little-to-no consensus on much of any of the most important matters in the study of the NT. Perhaps this observation is about the only real conclusion for which there can be consensus.

There are, of course, key questions of history that matter – for example, the rapidly developing results of Jewish Studies which move very fast today redefining our understanding of the nature of late Second Temple Judaism, the historical, cultural and theological context of Early Christianity. The developments in this separate discipline, because it is treated as separate, is in many cases simply not sufficiently followed by NT scholars with some exceptions.

It is also the case that NT scholarship is largely *platonic* in its prioritising the spiritual over the material in the interpretation of the Bible. Specifically, there is a *formidable* tendency to deny, to 'reimagine' as some like to say, the *concrete* perspective and comportment, that is, the 'way-of-being-in-the-world', of the *ekklēsia* of Yeshua. I think this is due, to a great extent, to the continuing Cartesian foundation of thought which works with a dualism that reads evidence with a primarily cognitivist-rationalistic and idealistic model.

A post-supersessionist approach is an invitation to look differently at the material of the apostolic writings in light of their *effects*. It is unapologetic in its *named*, that is consciously stated, *intentionality*.<sup>3</sup> We think with a *specific* intention and that is whether we are conscious of it or not. A post-supersessionist approach reads the NT *intentionally* seeking to correct a *deep seated sin* within the Christian tradition: The sin of the *exclusion* of a fundamental element of its basic definition.

## The Jewish New Testament

Post-supersessionism begins with the assumption of the Jewish character of the NT. The NT is an anthology of *Jewish*

<sup>3</sup>The French phenomenologists, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty, noted back in the early 20th century, that human animals relate to the world 'intentionally'; we always have *intentionality* when we think and perceive the world; we think *about* something. See Merleau-Ponty 1964, 2014).

texts *intentionally* constructed to promote the central thesis that Jesus of Nazareth is the Davidic Messiah of Israel. This intentionality is evinced on the first and last page of the canonical document with the two complementary references to Jesus of Nazareth as the Davidic Messiah:

- An account of the genealogy of Jesus *the Messiah, the son of David*. (Mt 1:1)
- It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. *I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star* (Rv 22:16).

A more Jewish argument will scarcely be found. What's more, the Davidic interests of the NT situate it thematically and historically not far from a text like *Psalms of Solomon*, a pseudepigraphon of the very late 1st century BCE. The NT is a Jewish text and should be read as a source for pre- and post-destruction Judaism of the middle-late 1st century like Qumran, *Pss. Sol.*, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Philo and Josephus.

In addition to this, Davidic claims that there is evidence that suggests an awareness among early church Fathers of the ethnically bilateral nature of the early *ekklēsia*. Athanasius's canonical list provided in his 39th Festal Letter of 367 represents our earliest witness to an organisation of the NT texts. It reads:

Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.<sup>4</sup> (Athanasius's 39th Festal Letter of 367)

Athanasius' canonical list has a potential implication important for thinking about the Jewish character of the NT – its grouping of the books into five units: (1) Gospels, (2) Acts (3) Epistles, (4) Paul's Epistles and (5) Revelation. Particularly important is the way the list connects Acts with the so-called Catholic Epistles which are authored by the Jewish Jerusalem leaders: James, Peter, John and Jude (cf. Acts 15, 21; Gl 1–2).

In Athanasius' list, the Catholic Epistles follow immediately after Acts and come before Paul's epistles. There appears to be a subtle connection in Athanasius's thinking between the narrative trajectory of Acts and the two groupings of texts that follow. Stated another way, the book of Acts' content can be divided in half between the story of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Paul's mission among the Gentiles in the wider Greco-Roman world. In this regard, Athanasius' subsequent grouping of texts may imply that he viewed the Catholic Epistles as letters to Jewish churches and Paul's epistles as letters to Gentile churches, a suggestion made

4.NPNF 2.4.

cautiously here. At the very least, the Athanasian ordering prioritises the non-Pauline letters and challenges the relative neglect of these letters compared with Paul's letters in the history of the Protestant church.

## Post-supersessionism

Let me give a rough and ready definition of the 'supersessionism' of which I speak when using the concept *post-supersessionism*.<sup>5</sup> The term is much abused today, and we can be thankful for the recent work of Matthew Tapie who has provided historical clarification on the use of the term (2014). In line with Tapie (2014), I think my own definition captures the meaning well. The label:

Supersessionism refers to *any* interpretation of the NT that, *intentionally or unintentionally*, would lead to the eventual *disappearance* of the Jewish *ethnos* from within the church of Jesus the Messiah. (Author's own citation)

Two points are important to develop briefly. The first is contained in the words 'intentionally or unintentionally'. The fact of the matter is today no one would wish the label 'supersessionist' on their worst enemy. To be labelled as such is probably equivalent today in the United States to being named a supporter of the Bush doctrine. Scot McKnight, a notable Evangelical NT scholar and theologian, recently called the label a 'bully club'; he has demurred its use against exegetical foes; calling for a retirement of the term in discourse (McKnight 2014). McKnight's characterisation has merit and Tapie commented similarly: 'The word often seems to function as a term of abuse' (Tapie 2014:356).

Yet, in our contemporary context, the issue is not the overt supersessionism of former generations. This is due to the development within NT studies I mentioned earlier related to a reassessment of Judaism. But still prevalent today, and perhaps more insidious because of its unconsciousness, is the *unintentional* interpretation of the NT that over time *fosters* the erasure *again* of Jewish ethnic presence within the church. These readings, while able to dodge accusations of overt supersessionism with great bluster (I have in mind N.T. Wright's recent work on Paul), effect the exact same outcome as their more overt sibling.<sup>6</sup> The fascinating debate between Jerome and Augustine between the late 4th and early 5th century over the interpretation of Galatians 2:11–14, known from a series of letters they sent back and forth to each other, may serve as something of a paradigm, with Jerome serving as the intentional supersessionist in his reading of the text and Augustine the unintentional, although both were clearly supersessionists in their time.<sup>7</sup>

5.Soulen (2005) defines post-supersessionism as, 'not a single viewpoint but a loose and partly conflicting family of theological perspectives that seeks to interpret the central affirmations of Christian faith in ways that do not state or imply the abrogation or obsolescence of God's covenant with the Jewish people, that is, in way that are not supersessionist'.

6.N.T. Wright (Wright 2013:805–811, 1445) deals squarely with the issue of supersessionism in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, particularly addressing criticism he has received. For a critical review of Wright's book that shares a similar perspective see Fredriksen 2015.

7.See the Aug. Ep. 38, 73, 75 and 82.

The other key aspect of the above definition is the question of the meaning of 'ethnicity'. Today, scholars, let alone average Christians, have a popular understanding of this term that is insufficient at best and erroneous at worst, for understanding the ancient world of early Christianity. It seems that for scholars in the last 200 years at least, since the modern concepts of race developed, ethnicity has been reduced to genealogical descent with no irreducible connection to social and cultural bodily practices. One is considered Dutch simply if one has descended from peoples from Denmark. The ethnic designation in modern terms does not in any way imply cultural elements. Closer to our point, one can be Jewish ethnically today without patterning one's life in any way that would be associated with practices of any distinct group. So for most Christian-interpreters right up until today, the church of the 'circumcised' and 'uncircumcised' does not necessitate real embodied practices unique to those distinct identities. One was Jewish only by genealogical descent. So all the talk in the NT about Jew and/or Gentile harmony in the *ekklēsia* of the Messiah is realised for interpreters if there a non-embodied, ethnic Jewish presence. What this means in practical terms is that for the circumcised side of the *ekklēsia*, Jewish presence is represented only as the *assimilated Jew*.

The problem with this perspective is that in view of the ancients, ethnicity was not defined in pure genealogical terms. What marked out ethnicities in the 1st century was primarily the pattern of life lived by particular groups. What's more, in modern times there is a blurring of the categories of 'race' and 'ethnicity', the former being only a relatively new concept, and so the two are not the same thing. Race is a modern term that identifies superficial external elements such as skin colour, facial structure and hair type as markers of a more internal and fundamental distinction. Genetics have largely shown that race has no basis in biology. There is no such thing as race genetically. Race isn't biological, but it is real. Given its modernity, then, race isn't a relevant concept for discussing early Christianity and the NT.

Ethnicity (*ethnos*) was both genealogical and *social-cultural* in the ancient world. For people in the 1st century Greco-Roman world, ethnicity was defined by descent and practice. But here is an additional important point: descent itself was and is a social construct. Hutchinson and Smith (1996:7) call it 'a myth of *common ancestry*'. They describe it as 'a myth rather than a fact' which includes 'the idea of a common origin in time and place and that gives an *ethne* a sense of fictive kinship'. Genealogies were not scientific documents. The genealogies of the ancient world constructed the reality of descent as much as reflected it. We need not go any further than the NT's genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke to confirm this. In the cases of both descent and practice, it is the social group that is determinative. What someone's ethnicity was in the ancient world depended largely on who recognised them as such.

What's more, there were rituals by which one could enter into an ethnic group, be absorbed and *transformed* ethnically.

Jewish proselytisation provides such a case. When an uncircumcised male (a Gentile) passed through the ritual process of proselytisation and came out on the other side patterning their conduct by Jewish norms based on the interpretation of the Torah, they were no longer considered 'uncircumcised', so, no longer a Gentile. They were recognised as a member of the ethnicity of the Jews.<sup>8</sup>

So when we are discussing Jewish identity in the *ekklēsia*, we must include practices associated with culture. The answer to the difficult question, 'Who was a Jew in the ancient world?' must be that it is: those who were recognised as such by the wider group recognised as Jews who comprised the Jewish people of the 1st century.<sup>9</sup> Several scholars recently have made this point, not least the always interesting Daniel Boyarin, who has recently argued in a lecture entitled 'Imaging No Judaism' that 'Judaism' did not exist in the 1st century (2014). With this provocative title, he attempts to argue that "'Judaism" is not a native concept for Jews'.

What is the point of this discussion you may be asking? The point is that the early church was clear on the fact that the *ekklēsia* was to be comprised of both the circumcised and uncircumcised (Gal 2; Acts 15). These categories cannot be defined by modern non-bodily conceptions. What is in view in the NT is a community of ethnic Jews and non-Jews, with the former defined not only by their genealogical descent *but also* by their practices. If the church ever ruled that it was inappropriate to practise ethnically distinct Jewish identity, then the church would cease to be fulfilling its divine mandate. The history of the church for 1800 years has done this very thing.

The relationship between a post-supersessionist framework and Messianic Judaism then is perhaps obvious, and it was demonstrated in the recent book *Introduction to Messianic Judaism* edited by David Rudolph and me. Over half the book presents post-supersessionist readings of the NT. In the conclusion, I characterised these readings by four key assumptions:

1. God's covenant relationship with the Jewish people (Israel) is present and future.
2. Israel has a distinctive role and priority in God's redemptive activity through Messiah Jesus.
3. By God's design and calling, there is a continuing distinction between Jew and Gentile in the church today.
4. For Jews, distinction takes shape fundamentally through Torah observance as an expression of covenant faithfulness to the God of Israel and the Messiah Jesus (Rudolph & Willitts 2013).

8. Recently this point has been criticised by Matthew Thiessen (2011) who argues that there were at least some Second Temple Jews whose understanding of ethnicity was genealogical and, consequently, rejected the idea of conversion by circumcision. Thiessen attempts to interpret Paul's logic against the circumcision of Gentile converts (e.g. Gal) within this strand of thinking (2015). That there were Jews who thought the way Thiessen suggests is plausible, but his interpretation of the evidence has been criticised (see Cohen 2013); what's more, Thiessen does affirm that the 'dominant view' in the Second Temple period was that Gentiles could become Jews (2011:11).

9. See discussion in Skarsaune 2006:esp. 11–13.

## The *ekklēsia* of the circumcised and uncircumcised

On any legitimate reading of the NT, one must conclude that the *ekklēsia* of *Yeshua*, the Messiah, is a *community of difference*. And that difference captured in the earliest literature of the NT centred on the ethnicity. This emphasis, on the one hand, is *contextually situated* to be sure; it was *the* issue that emerged as the greatest challenge for the earliest *circumcised* and *uncircumcised* community of believers, but it was and is, nevertheless, a *constitutive one*. Neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor James, nor Peter, nor any of the writers of the apostolic documents envisaged a community that was anything less than this. It was this basic distinction, which was the key outcome of the Gospel, that Paul named the ‘truth of the Gospel’ in Galatians 2. I draw attention to the situation that necessitated Paul’s reference to the ‘truth of the Gospel’. In both the cases of Titus being compelled to be circumcised (2:5) and in the so-called Antioch Incident where Peter’s withdrawal acted as a force for ethnic transformation (2:14), the ‘truth of the Gospel’ was tied to the abiding presence of *both* circumcised and uncircumcised in the *ekklēsia*.

So here is the key question: *How do we read the New Testament, so that the ekklēsia of Yeshua, the Messiah, remains a community of the circumcised and uncircumcised?* A post-supersessionist framework is *necessary* if we are to recapture and sustain the ‘truth of the Gospel’. It is also the basis of any talk of a multi-cultural *ekklēsia*.

A circumcised or uncircumcised *ekklēsia* is the basis of a universal ecclesiology that celebrates diversity, fights cultural hegemony and supports diverse ethnic expressions of faith in Jesus, whether they be Jewish or Gentile (one of the over 16 000 ethnic people groups among the nations according to one report).<sup>10</sup>

This is of particular concern for Jewish believers in Jesus because Jewish ethnicity is wrapped up with God-given markers of identity like circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance and land – practices that the Gentile Christian church, from the patristic period, stigmatised because of the belief that these practices had been set aside with the coming of Christ and replaced with a new Christian identity. By making normative this perspective in church teaching and practice, Gentile Christian leaders ensured that there would no longer be an ethnic representation of Jews in the body of Messiah, a most egregious irony since the Messiah lived as a Torah-observant Jew. The primarily Gentile Christian church cannot champion a message of ethnic diversity while at the same time maintaining a theological perspective that strips God-given, socially constructed, ethnic boundary markers of identity from Jewish people who follow Jesus.

One of the contributions of a post-supersessionist interpretation is a hermeneutical approach to the NT that goes *beyond* the faulty modern intellectualist dualism of body and

10. Cited 20 December 2014. Online [http://www.joshuaproject.net/global\\_statistics](http://www.joshuaproject.net/global_statistics)

mind (and the related pairs of antinomies of physical versus spiritual or objective versus subjective) that have exercised hegemony over the interpretation of the NT in the last two centuries. Furthermore, it transcends the 1600-year approach to reading the NT that, while not always excluding Jewish ethnicity outright, eliminated it from the church in practice.

A post-supersessionist reading of the NT is rightly called a *Re-newed Perspective* because it reclaims the essential diversity of the *ekklēsia* at its earliest period of social praxis subsequent to, and consequent of, the advent of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of Israel. This constituent ethnic diversity as an essential definition of the community of Messiah’s way-of-being-in-the-world was to *be* from start to finish. If a distinct Jewish presence in the *ekklēsia* is to be vitally sustained, the circumcised side of the ethnic pairing within the *ekklēsia* requires an ethnically shaped social praxis.

Only a reading of the NT like that of a post-supersessionist reading – whatever it may be named – will cultivate Jewish ethnic identity by offering historically grounded, embodied (as opposed to purely cognitivist) readings of the NT. Such readings create the space in our contemporary moment for the cultivation of an embodied *habitus* consistent with the foundation story of the *ekklēsia* of circumcised and uncircumcised.

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