

## **Historic Debate Addresses the Future of the Jewish People N.T. Wright and Mark Kinzer Meet at Samford University**

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The concept of a Jewish-Christian debate usually conjures up somber thoughts in the imagination of the Jewish community. The disputations of the medieval period were antagonistic, motivated by a conversion agenda, and often led to Talmud burnings and attacks on Jews. More than 500 years later, a recent cordial debate between eminent Christian theologian N.T. (Nicholas Thomas) Wright and prominent Messianic Jewish theologian Mark Kinzer proves things have drastically changed since those discordant years, and yet in some theological ways they have also stayed the same.

The tone was warm and respectful between Wright and Kinzer on the debate stage at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, on the eve of September 11. The debate was featured in Samford's Distinguished Lecture Series hosted by the school's provost, J. Michael Hardin. After a brief moment of silence for the 9/11 victims, the participants were invited to present their perspective on the meaning of Israel in the New Testament for an allotted twenty minutes each, followed by a ten-minute rebuttal and questions from the audience.

Initially, a Wright-Kinzer dialogue was supposed to be a less high-profile part of Wright's itinerary at the school, Kinzer said, but administrators realized the opportunity to draw a large audience by featuring the two theologians and therefore increased the invitation list to the broader local community. Kinzer, who is president emeritus and senior scholar of the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute and a Messianic Jewish rabbi, would have initially preferred that the event remain a small dialogue. "I was looking for the beginning of a constructive conversation," said Kinzer, "rather than some kind of head-to-head confrontation." After the debate, however, Kinzer recognized the educational benefits of appearing before a large group.

More than eight hundred Christians from local churches and students from the university attended the event and experienced the rarity of a Messianic Jewish theologian dialoguing with the world-renowned Christian New Testament scholar, retired Bishop of Durham, England, and research professor at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Since the university only promoted the event locally, Messianic Jews outside Alabama either missed the publicity or were unable to travel to Alabama.<sup>1</sup> David Rudolph, director of Messianic Jewish Studies at The King's University in Dallas, and Ryan Lambert, director of outreach at First Fruits of Zion (FFOZ), were two Messianic Jews determined to attend.

"It was a historic event," said Lambert, "and we wanted to be there to witness it and to show our support for Mark Kinzer."

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<sup>1</sup> More than 14,000 viewers have since watched the debate on YouTube.

Kinzer considers the debate a critical turning point for the Messianic Jewish community because of Wright's stature among Protestants and Catholics in academic and popular circles. "To have him engaging with issues that are coming from a Messianic Jewish perspective," said Kinzer, "elevates the issues." The debate is also significant to Kinzer because he maintains that the content of Wright's work is key in moving forward with a post-supersessionist theology and for laying the groundwork for certain elements of Messianic Jewish theology.

The organizer of the debate, Gerald McDermott, the Anglican chair of Divinity at Samford's interdenominational Beeson Divinity School, who also served as moderator, formulated two major questions together with Kinzer for the debate: 1. Are non-Messianic Jews members of God's covenanted people? 2. If so, do they as a people have a unique covenantal calling that distinguishes their calling from that of every other society or nation? Despite Wright's discussion of these issues throughout his eighty books, McDermott and Kinzer were hoping that Wright would definitively answer whether Jews as a people have an ongoing significance to God.

"Sadly, he did eventually," said McDermott, "and he revealed that he does not believe that covenant is ongoing."

Kinzer opened the debate expressing his gratitude to Wright for his Israel-centered rethinking of the New Testament. Wright is a major proponent of the New Perspective on Paul that attempts to set Paul within first-century Judaism. "Professor Wright has helped many to see that the story of Jesus is incomprehensible apart from the story of Israel," Kinzer said to the audience.

Kinzer continued with a detailed presentation that included overhead slides of New Testament texts in contrast to Wright who stood with a notebook and a New Testament on the podium and without visuals behind him. "It's been really good to sense that he and I in several ways are on the same page," Wright said in his initial remarks, "even though within that page there are then significant divergences."

In general, Wright and Kinzer share much in common, including the basic belief that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's Messiah—as Wright declared the night of the debate. They both affirm that the New Testament is an authoritative witness that applies Israel's covenant language, such as holy ones, beloved, and chosen, to the *ekklesia* of Jews and gentiles. According to Kinzer, they both oppose the Christian tradition that operates with a more generic, universal sense of humanity rather than uplifting Israel as the fundamental category of scripture. They also agree that Yeshua embodies Israel as the one-man Israel and that he is the embodiment of Israel's God.

For this debate, the critical divergence for Wright and Kinzer revolved around assessing the covenantal status and role in the divine plan for the Jewish people who don't believe in Yeshua—those currently outside the community of faith in Messiah, or the *ekklesia*. (Since the debate focused on this one feature, the significance of Jewish identity for

Jewish disciples of Yeshua was circumvented—another likely point of disagreement, according to Kinzer.)

The debate centered mostly on Paul's writings and principally on Romans 9–11. Kinzer and Wright mutually affirmed the existence of a faithful remnant within Israel as described in these chapters. Kinzer maintained, however, that the genealogical Israel that rejects Yeshua as Messiah still continues to endure as God's people, Israel. As a foundation for his argument, Kinzer asserted that the terms "Israel" (which appears sixty-nine times in the New Testament) and "Israelite" (which appears nine times) virtually always refer to the Jewish people.

Kinzer's rationale for the ongoing preservation of corporate Israel relied particularly on Romans 11:16: "If the part of the dough offered as first-fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, then the branches are holy." Kinzer considers the "whole batch" and the "branches" as the partially hardened Israel that is made holy through the first-fruits and by the root—which he interprets as the Jewish remnant, the patriarchs, or Yeshua himself. "These are the means by which God preserves Israel's holy identity," said Kinzer, "after the death and resurrection of the Messiah—the king which most of Israel still does not acknowledge."

In Wright's initial twenty-minute presentation, he sidestepped a direct pronouncement of the covenantal status and fate of the Jews outside the *ekklesia*. He described them as beloved because of the patriarchs—which lends them a kind of covenantal status—but for him, that lineage does not guarantee salvation or an end-time large-scale conversion. Kinzer considered Wright's assertions obscure. He wanted him to definitively express that Jews retain a different position covenant-wise than gentiles, even if they are outside the body of Messiah. "I had hoped he would be a little clearer on that," Kinzer said.

Kinzer maintains that Wright's writings present less ambiguity than his oral presentation about an ongoing covenant for the Jewish people. Wright's works describe the idea that gentiles enter the *ekklesia* from a lack of connection to God, while Jews do so out of an established covenantal relationship. Wright's works, therefore, according to Kinzer, acknowledge an existing relationship, identity, and status for Israel, different from the rest of the world, which for Wright are then confirmed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. For Kinzer, these ideas naturally engender the notion of an eternal covenant with corporate Israel.

The night of the debate, Wright imbued the Jewish people with a continued relevance, but only in the sense that honors their past memory and holiness. He asserted that their covenant calling ceases in Jesus, in whom God has fulfilled his covenantal purposes. "I don't see that calling as such in Scripture. I see a possibility and with that possibility, I see something whose analog is sacred space," said Wright, comparing Israel's memory to the sacredness he felt during his visit to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He admitted that the Wall, however, is no longer the residence of God's presence.

For Wright, that sacredness does not produce a continued covenant or role for corporate Israel. “As with sacred space, so with chosen people; there is a memory, there is a holiness,” added Wright, “which as Christians we respect, and which we honor, and which we long to see coming to whatever fulfillment God has.” These words reminded Rudolph, a New Testament scholar as well as a director at The King’s University, of the words of Augustine, the early theologian and church father (354–430 CE), in his letter to Jerome: “They had to be treated rather like the bodies of dead relatives which must be carried out for burial, not as a matter of form but with true reverence.”<sup>2</sup> In this letter, Augustine viewed Jewish observance as a dead body that needs to be buried, said Rudolph, albeit with respect and honor because of its former sacredness.

During the debate, Kinzer tried twice to target what he believed was Wright’s weakest point—Paul’s underlying reason for writing Romans 11. For Wright, Paul is concerned about the danger that gentiles in Rome will conclude that all Jews who have not yet believed in Jesus are “unsaveable” and cannot become part of the *ekklesia*. Wright then views Paul as arguing against those gentiles by relaying that God has not finished with the Jews and will still save some of them. Kinzer, however, sees no time in history that Christians thought Jews were unsaveable. For Kinzer, Wright’s view implies that Jews are no worse off than gentiles, with no prior affiliation to God. “I still marvel at it,” said Kinzer about Wright’s view. “Very few commentators and scholars have gone after this issue. It’s so obviously false to me.” Kinzer contended that Paul is making a much bolder argument about the sacred status of the Jews by asking whether God has abandoned Israel. For Kinzer, Paul declares Israel holier than other nations because of her special connection to God, which enables the preservation of her calling and her enduring election as a people despite her unbelief.

Clearly, the two theologians uphold different overall narratives in Paul’s writing of Romans 9–11. For Kinzer, that narrative recognizes those in Israel “who have stumbled” as integral to an entire story that prepares the way for Messiah’s return. That story begins with a considerable positive consequence of unbelief: salvation of the gentiles. In turn, gentile salvation causes jealousy and the repentance of Israel, which triggers the return of Yeshua, the resurrection of the dead, and the renewal of the cosmos.

“The actions of genealogical Israel are central to the unfolding drama from beginning to end,” Kinzer said.

By contrast, Wright’s narrative maintains that through the coming of Jesus, the one-man Israel, all the plans and purposes of God have become fulfilled, and all the privileges and blessings that God gave to Israel are transferred to a new community through that Messiah. For Wright, Paul is constructing a very deliberate argument throughout Romans 9–11 that comes full circle (similar to the structure of a Psalm): Paul begins his redefinition of Israel in Romans 9:6 (“Not all Israel is descended from Israel”) and ends in Romans 11:26 (“All Israel will be saved”). “Paul knows that he is polemically redefining,” Wright said. “He is taking these precious words, like Israel, and daringly

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo. Letter 82.

saying, ‘they belong to the Messiah. And therefore they belong to all the Messiah’s people.’”

Despite an apparent universalization of the promises made to Israel, Wright denounces the replacement theology that transfers the blessings from the Jewish people to Christians because Jews are also part of the new people of God. “It is saying that Jesus himself is where all the promises of God find their ‘yes’ in him,” said Wright, “and therefore all those who are in him [Jew and gentile] inherit those promises.” Rudolph remains convinced that there is replacement theology in Wright’s understanding. “From the standpoint of the church, it looks so beautiful,” said Rudolph, “because the church receives all of those blessings.” “Wright wants to communicate the positive side of it,” added Rudolph, “but the negative in Wright’s view is that those blessings are taken away from the Jewish people.”

Although Kinzer deliberately avoided the term “supersessionist” throughout the debate in reference to Wright, Wright pre-emptively brought it up when he first took the podium. “I find it singularly unhelpful,” he said about using the term broadly. He referenced his discussion of the word in his seminal book *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, where he identifies with a more nuanced definition. He defended his support for an alternative Jewish kind of supersessionism as described by Harvard professor of Jewish Studies Jon Levenson who stated: “The most Jewish thing about early Christianity is its supersessionism.” Wright explained that the various Jewish movements close to Yeshua’s time period, such as the Qumran community or that of Bar Kokhba, exhibited a type of Jewish supersessionism that claims one group as the faithful remnant of God and perceives everyone else outside that community. Speaking for the ancients, Wright said, “This is what our God is finally doing, what he has promised, and if you don’t join in you’re not really part of God’s people.” In other words, the loyal Jews during that time also see themselves permanently replacing the disloyal. Wright planted this idea of an “acceptable” supersessionism among the audience at the debate, but he fell short of explicitly linking it to “unfaithful” Jews outside the *ekklesia*.

Despite Wright’s distancing himself from the supersessionism that makes the church the new Israel, Lambert of FFOZ thinks supersessionism is deeply embedded in Wright’s paradigm. “At the end of the day, when you get beyond the surface in N.T. Wright’s viewpoint, though he denies being a supersessionist,” said Lambert, “he is a supersessionist.” Wright views Paul and the rest of the New Testament as redefining key terms such as circumcision, Israel, and the Jews, Lambert said, and expanding them to include all of God’s people.

Wright and Kinzer’s conflicting theologies led to opposing conclusions on the question of the centrality of the land of Israel. During the question period of the debate, an audience member asked about the connection of modern Israel to end-time prophetic events. Wright posited that the land of Israel becomes universalized by the death and resurrection

of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> For him, God's purposes now extend to the whole world, while Kinzer upheld an enduring significance for the land as the center of a redeemed world.

Sitting at an elongated table on stage beside Kinzer, Wright described his inability to see scriptural support for a return to the land. "The more I've looked at it over the last fifty years," he said, "the less plausible it seems to me." "I do not see the twentieth- and twenty-first century Middle Eastern political events as really in any direct way a fulfillment of either Daniel, or Ezekiel, or Acts 3." He declared the geopolitical events as a possible reaction to the Holocaust, but confirmed they are not scripturally undergirded. For Wright, there is no future unfolding drama in that piece of geography.

"Jews are no more important in God's eyes than the people of Kenya," said McDermott of Beeson Divinity School about Wright's theology, "and the land of Israel no more significant than the land of New Jersey."

Kinzer counteracted with the claim that the modern establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 has theological significance, especially in light of his views of the enduring covenant with the Jewish people, their relationship to the land of Israel, and the expectation of particular end-time events in that land. He cautioned, however, against drawing political implications, such as resolutions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from those theological convictions. Neither did he condone a Christian Zionism that glorifies the current political state and its politics.

Kinzer's most recent book *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*, which he referenced during the question period of the debate, addresses the future centrality of the city of Jerusalem as portrayed in Luke and Acts. For him, the author of these writings characterizes Paul's ministry strategy as one that continuously extends from and returns to Jerusalem. During the debate, Kinzer relayed the thesis of his book to Wright: He noted that the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome rather than Jerusalem, which he insists indicates an unfinished narrative for its author. Kinzer proposed that the author of Acts is deliberately conveying that the story will resume upon the return of Messiah to Jerusalem. "I love incomplete arcs," said Wright, still sitting beside Kinzer at the table, "but I'm not yet persuaded by that one."

Kinzer tried to impress upon Wright the need to examine the literary (how the author is presenting the story) rather than historical context of Acts. In a post-debate interview, Kinzer described Wright's approach to Acts as one that digs for historical information rather than as one that examines the literary-theological context of the book. For Kinzer that's an incorrect approach to the text. "As a result, he badly misreads key texts from Acts," Kinzer said.

Wright and Kinzer's arguments confused some of the students of the Beeson Divinity School who attended the debate, McDermott said. "I believe Dr. Wright was more

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<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, "Jerusalem in the New Testament," *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, P.W.L. Walker, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 53–77.

compelling, but Dr. Kinzer brought up some good points,” said James Spencer, an MDiv student who attended the dialogue because he was intrigued by Romans 9–11 and its relevance to the identity of Israel and the people of God. He thought Wright used a wider array of Scripture, weaved in church history, and displayed the ability to respond to Kinzer’s questions. He was particularly swayed by the part of Romans 11:23 that says “If they do not continue in their unbelief, they can be grafted in again.” He agrees with Wright who maintains that this is a key passage that reveals the reason behind Paul’s grief and prayers for Israel. “Wright is a brilliant rhetorician,” said McDermott, “and displayed such command of the rest of the Bible that the uninformed might have been persuaded by him.” Despite leaning toward Wright, the Beeson student said he will continue to read Romans 9–11 and prayerfully consider its meaning.

The Messianic Jews who attended the debate felt that Kinzer responded to the questions directly but that Wright presented more generalizations rather than straightforward responses. They were also disappointed that Wright admitted he had not read any of Kinzer’s books on Messianic Jewish theology (of which there are four). “I think it immediately communicated that Wright was not taking this debate seriously,” Rudolph said.

Kinzer ran out of time during his opening twenty minutes of the debate. He had hoped to bring up the idea in Romans 11 that the “gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” However, he was later able to relay the point that genealogical Israel must remain Israel and central to God’s purposes in history because of God’s eternal faithfulness to his people despite their waywardness. He questioned whether the church or even an entire creation can trust a God that abandons his promises.

Despite the theological sparring, Wright and Kinzer reiterated their appreciation for one another at the end of the debate. Wright confessed his perception of the awkward place that Messianic Jews hold in the Jewish and Christian worlds. “Many Jews will look at you with anxiety,” Wright said, “and many gentile Christians literally don’t know what to do with you.” As a result, Wright gently admonished gentile Christians to honor and embrace Messianic Jews as the older brother. “I hope we have modeled that a little bit tonight,” Wright concluded.

Overall, Kinzer profoundly appreciates Wright for prepping the groundwork for certain elements of Messianic Jewish theology. Wright breaks with the traditional Reformation approach to some key elements of Christian theology, Kinzer said post-debate. Kinzer’s life work has been to fight against the theologies that replace Israel and those that call an end to the covenants with Israel. Although Wright has challenged many of his Christian predecessors and colleagues, some still consider his conclusions essentially akin to one of the earliest Jewish-Christian dialogues of the second century: Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*. In this dialogue between a Christian and a Jew, the church becomes the true Israel. Wright starts with seeing Paul in his Jewish context but ends similarly to Justin Martyr, with no hope for the entire nation of Israel.

“It’s paradoxical,” said Kinzer, “I see a lot of my work as building upon a foundation that Wright’s laid, but then I try to take it in a direction that he doesn’t take it.”

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