

## To Be (Messianic) or Not to Be?

By Baruch Maoz

The Messianic Movement has become a familiar feature in the kaleidoscope of shades and colors of those who profess to follow Jesus. What is the Messianic Movement? What is its history? What are its views? How should Christians view this movement? This article will endeavor to answer those questions, however briefly.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT IS THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT?

The Messianic Movement presents itself as an indigenous effort on the part of Jewish believers in Jesus to express their faith in terms of their national culture, with the primary goal of reaching their people with the Gospel. The Movement's cultural practices are purportedly culled from Jewish religious custom, while the majority of adherents view themselves as part of the body of Christ. Some within the movement view the observance of Jewish religious culture as the duty of Jewish believers in Jesus, and attach various degrees of spiritual advantage to such observance. Others insist that Gentiles are also benefited thereby.

The overwhelming majority of adherents to the Messianic Movement are not Jewish; the *de facto* Movement's primary appeal is not to the Jewish community but to the fringes of the church. A good deal of what is purported by the Movement to be Jewish custom is not such, or is a contorted version of that custom, in some cases hardly recognizable as truly Jewish.

The distinctive of the Messianic Movement is its emphasis on Jewish custom, both biblical and rabbinic. It tends to play down aspects of its faith that are considered distinctly un-Jewish, such as the Trinity and the deity of Christ; some associated with the Movement deny the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Others affirm that Jews faithful to Judaism may be saved apart from faith in Jesus.

### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT

The appeal of Jewish custom, biblical and otherwise, to disciples of Jesus is as old as the Faith of Jesus itself, and has a certain logic: after all, if faith in Jesus involves faith in the God of Israel, and if Gentile followers of Jesus have entered into the Faith of Israel, it is natural to expect that they would be bound by the law God gave Israel. It is further logical to assume that the Jews, presumed to know the law best, would be best equipped to interpret the law. That is why the letter to the Galatians, Romans, Ephesians and Hebrews were necessary. However natural, those assumptions are radically incorrect: the Law has had its fulfilment in Christ, and Jews without Christ are as blind to God's truth as is any man.

The first modern attempt to bring Jewish Christians into an alliance was commenced in England in 1813. The association was called "Bnei Abraham" (Hebrew for "Sons of Abraham"). On May 14 of 1867, Dr. C. Schwartz proposed founding a Hebrew Christian Alliance of Great Britain, to be followed later by Alliances in different parts of the world.

The Hebrew Christian Prayer Union was founded in England in 1883. Within less than seven years, membership rose from 147 to 600, and branches were established in Russia, Norway, Germany, Romania, Palestine, and the United States. In the early and mid 1900s a

number of leading Jewish Christians arose. Among these was Rabinowitz in Kisheneff; Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein in Tapio-Szele, Hungary; Sabetai Benjamin Rohold in Palestine; and Daniel Tsion in Bulgaria.

In the wake of what seemed to be a significant wave of Jewish conversions to Christ, The Hebrew Christian Alliance of Great Britain was formed in 1866. In 1898 the Mildmay Mission to the Jews founded a Jewish Christian congregation in London—an overtly Christian congregation among the Jews, with few Jewish trappings.

In the US, on May 22, 1901, Mark Levy, a Jewish Christian from Britain, convened the Boston Conference of the Messianic Council. He proposed to create a formal means of association for all Jewish believers in Jesus in North America. In response, the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America (HCAA) was formed a good many years later, in 1915, with the primary goal of promoting the Gospel among the Jewish people. The HCAA was to provide fellowship to Jewish believers, all of whom worshipped in Christian churches. Heated discussions as to the wisdom, biblical grounds, and feasibility of establishing distinctly Hebrew Christian congregations were held. The idea was firmly rejected on biblical grounds.

Hebrew Christians were eager to play an active role in the Zionist movement because they held their people's best interests at heart and therefore affirmed the political goals of the movement. They also sought recognition by their people and perceived the Zionist Movement to serve as a useful means to that end. Their support was welcomed by the Zionist Movement, but they were excluded from participation. Nevertheless, the HCAA took part in endeavors to settle in Sinai, near the Dead Sea, in Gaza, and elsewhere in what was then Palestine.

In 1925, the Alliance was broadened to form the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (the IHCA). Within a decade it had established affiliated alliances in North and South America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In 1927, Sir Leon Levinson, first president of the IHCA, claimed that there were some 147,000 Jewish believers in the world. These all held to an evangelical faith and, almost to a man, were members of Christian churches.

The European Alliances largely disappeared during the Second World War, as the Jewish community was decimated by the Nazis. The American and British Alliances enlisted to assist, rescue, and support their fellow Jews wherever possible. Following the war and in response to lingering anti-Semitic attitudes, efforts were made in the USA and Britain to establish separate Jewish Christian congregations. David Bronstein had already founded, in 1921, the Peniel Center, which engaged in evangelism and provided social services to Jewish immigrants in Chicago. In 1934, the center became the First Hebrew Christian Church. (In the early 1970s, under the leadership of Daniel Juster, the congregation became a Messianic congregation and changed its name to Adat HaTikva.)

In the 1960s, a new generation began to make its presence felt. Impacted by the anti-Establishmentarian views of those years, many Jewish converts to Christ had little allegiance to the church and a strong desire to distinguish themselves. Faith in Jesus led to a renewed understanding of the value of the Old Testament and of their Jewishness. They began to call for the adoption of Jewish traditions in the context of worship, spiritual disciplines, and evangelism, resulting in a more aggressive assertion of Jewish identity. The result was an evolution from what was originally known as "Hebrew Christianity" (namely, Jews who affirmed their Jewish national identity alongside their faith in Christ, and who served and worshipped in Christian congregations) into today's "Messianic Jewish Movement" (Jews

and others who affirm Jewish identity, religious practice, and culture as important aspects of their faith in Christ, and who worship in Messianic congregations).

This process was hotly contested by American Hebrew Christians who immigrated from Europe. It was also opposed by the British Hebrew Christians until 1975. Most saw no room for what is now the Messianic Movement. Yet, in June 1975, the name of the HCAA was changed to the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA). Martin Chernoff had become the President of the HCAA in 1971 and spearheaded the change. He served the MJAA as President until 1979 and was followed by his two sons, Joel (President during the years 1979-1983) and David (President during the years 1983-1987).

A new terminology was forged: Jews were no longer to be converted; they were to be “completed.” Jesus became “Yeshua,” the law became the “Torah,” the church was “the congregation” or even “the synagogue,” biblical names were to be pronounced in their supposed original Hebrew form, and so on. The late Manny Brotman (1939-1999) established the Messianic Jewish Movement International (MJMI), and laid the groundwork for The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, founded in 1979.

The Messianic Jewish Alliance of America is affiliated with alliances in fifteen countries, including Israel. The International Messianic Jewish Alliance (IMJA) seeks to represent the common interests of Jewish believers throughout the world by way of affiliated national alliances. The professed purpose of the International Alliance is to care for the spiritual and material welfare of all Jewish believers and to maintain within the Jewish people a witness to Yeshua the Messiah.

An example of one of the more extreme forms of Messianic Judaism is OMJRA (the Observant Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Association), an association of Messianic Rabbis. One of the goals of the association, as described in the OMJRA booklet, is “to promote the validity and necessity of Torah observance amongst the leadership of the Messianic Movement in general.” The association was founded in 1995 by Rabbi Yehoshua M. Othniel, who had “become disillusioned with the lack of Torah within the congregations where he studied and worshipped,” and “felt the need to promote the richness of a Torah-observant lifestyle among his fellow believing Jews.”

According to one estimate, there are now some 500 Messianic congregations worldwide. Most of these are in the United States, with a number in England, Holland, Germany, and a growing number in the former USSR and its satellite countries. The so-called 150 Messianic congregations in Israel are largely made up of Jews who profess a saving faith in Jesus, most of whom do not adhere to rabbinic traditions in their congregational and private lifestyles, although the traditional Jewish holidays are celebrated as a matter of national culture.

## **MESSIANIC JEWISH BELIEFS**

The majority of Messianic Jewish congregations are broadly evangelical in their beliefs, with additional features of belief distinctive to the Movement. The Shalom Messianic Congregation in Northern Ireland offers a glimpse into a typical yet moderate Messianic Statement of Faith.<sup>2</sup> The congregation’s views of the Scriptures, of God, of man, of sin and of salvation are identical to those of any evangelical church, although they are couched in Hebrew and Jewish terms. For example, concerning the Scriptures, the Statement affirms:

We believe that the Bible, consisting of the Tanach (Torah, Prophets, Writings) (Holy Scriptures) and the later writings commonly known as the B'rit ha-Chadashah, also commonly referred to as the New Testament, is the only infallible and authoritative word of God. We recognize its divine inspiration and accept its teachings as our final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

Messianic congregations, to my knowledge without exception, affirm a Pre-millennial and often a Dispensational eschatology, which is a major plank in their faith and praxis. The Shalom Congregation Statement says,

We believe in God's end-time plan for the nation of Israel and for the world. We believe in the physical and spiritual restoration of Israel/Jewish people, as taught in the Scriptures, and that the greatest miracle of our day has been the rebirth of the State of Israel according to prophecy. We believe that the 12 tribes of Israel are the modern day Jewish people both in the land of Israel, and outside the land of Israel.

Concerning a Messianic Jewish identity the Congregation affirms,

We believe that Jewish people (physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, whether through the mother's or the father's bloodline) who place their faith in Israel's Messiah, Yeshua, continue to be Jewish.... We believe that Gentiles who place their faith in Yeshua are "grafted in" to the Jewish olive tree of faith, becoming spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham. We believe in observing and celebrating the 7th day Sabbath (sundown Friday to sundown Saturday). We believe that the Jewish Holy Days given by God to Israel/Jewish people have their fulfilment in and through the Messiah Yeshua.

We believe that true "Biblical Judaism," the faith of first century believers, which we seek to practice, acknowledges the continuity of faith in the one true God, revealed throughout the Scriptures and ultimately manifested in God's Son, Yeshua the Messiah.... We believe that the Jewish feasts and Holy days are to be remembered and taught by the ingrafted "called out" Church. We believe that all these appointed times find their fulfilment through Yeshua our Messiah ...

We believe that we must teach against any false doctrines and practices that have crept into the body of Messiah. These include Easter, Christmas, the replacing of the biblical 7th day Sabbath with Sun-day, saints days and all other pagan influences.... We believe that the Torah is a lifestyle, and not an issue of salvation.... We believe that the Torah is Adonai's standard of Holiness, and that His commandments are not to be taken lightly and disregarded.

Note the insistence that "the Jewish feasts and Holy days are to be remembered and taught by

the in-grafted ‘called out’ Church,” that “the Torah is Adonai’s standard of Holiness, and that His commandments are not to be taken lightly and disregarded.” In other words, Jewish and non-Jewish Christians alike are obliged by the Mosaic Law (in its entirety, no distinction is made between one aspect of the Law and another), and that this is God’s “standard of Holiness.” This notwithstanding the later statement to the effect that

We believe that the “middle wall of partition” has been broken down, and now we worship the God of Israel together. Jews remain Jews and Gentiles remain Gentiles. Gentiles do NOT become “Israelites” and shouldn’t try to act or dress like ethnic Jews/Israel.

ORMJRA’s statement of faith is, in this respect, more stringent: “We believe with complete faith that this Torah will not be exchanged nor will there be another Torah from the Creator, Blessed is His Name.... We believe with complete faith that the Creator, Blessed is His Name, rewards with good those who observe His commandments, and punishes those who violate His commandments.”<sup>3</sup> OMJRA’s Statement has nothing to say about the Trinity or the deity of Christ, nor of sin, atonement or redemption, nothing about the incarnation, Jesus’ perfect life, his death, resurrection, or ascension.

The International Messianic Jewish Movement offers a Concise Messianic Statement of Faith<sup>4</sup> in which it states in the 8th clause:

We believe that it is crucial for us to understand theologically, that the primary purpose in HaShem’s giving of the Torah, as a way of making someone righteous, only achieves its goal when the person, by faith, accepts that Yeshua is the promised Messiah spoken about therein. Until the individual reaches this conclusion, his familiarity of the Torah is only so much intellectual nutrition. Only by believing in Yeshua will the person be able to properly understand HaShem, and consequently, his Word. Therefore, we strongly encourage all believers, both Jews and Gentiles, to affirm, embrace, and practice these foundational laws (Torah) and ways (halakha, i.e., practical applications) as clarified through the Torah (teachings) of Messiah Yeshua (Ex. 19 & 20; Deut. 5; Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 5:17-19; Rom. 3 & 4; 1 Cor. 7:19; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 14:12).

And in the 11th Clause;

We believe that Jewish followers of Yeshua are called to maintain their Jewish, biblical heritage and remain a part of their people Isra’el as well as the universal Body of Believers. This is part of their identity and serves as a witness to HaShem’s faithfulness. We believe that Gentile Believers in Messiah are grafted into the Jewish Olive Tree, Isra’el (Rom. 11), thereby making them fellow citizens and full-participants with the Commonwealth of Isra’el (Eph. 2), thus granting them the divine privilege of following the whole of the Torah (see paragraph 8 above).... We believe that this same Torah is a foundational revelation of the righteousness of HaShem and serves as a description (along with the rest of the Scriptures) of the lifestyle of the Redeemed Community

(James 1:16-27).

So, keeping the Mosaic Law is the way one is made righteous, Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus are to keep the whole of the Mosaic Law, ritual and all. Nothing is said in this Statement about forgiveness or grace.

## **THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT'S VIEW OF JUDAISM AND OF THE CHURCH**

The Movement's name implies its desire to be considered a branch of Judaism and its reticence to be identified (at least by the Jewish people) as an expression of Christian faith. However, the Movement's increased effort to appeal to the church, and its dependence on Christian moral and financial support, has forced it to find ways to come alongside Christian churches at the same time.

A wide range of relations toward Judaism can be found among Messianics. Some affirm the religious authority of the rabbis and of Jewish tradition. Others have preferred to limit that authority to matters of culture. Still others view Judaism as a deviation from biblical norms while acknowledging that Jewish national culture is largely framed by Judaism. Finally, there are those who eschew any ongoing practice of Jewish national or religious custom, submerging their Jewish identity *in toto*.

In consequence, the Messianic Movement's relationship with the church has been ambivalent in the best of circumstances. Most of its members are not the product of the Movement's evangelistic efforts, certainly not within the Jewish community; they have been garnered from the peripheries of Christian churches of every description. At the same time, the Movement looks to the churches to accord it legitimacy, even in the eyes of its adherents and members.

It is disconcerting to note the increased incidence of Jews and Gentiles, who once affirmed a living faith in Christ but have since converted to Judaism, deny the Trinity, including the deity of Christ, and look to the rabbis to guide them on the path to salvation. Paul was clear in this respect:

We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles, know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified (Gal. 2:15-16 NIV).

The author of the letters to the Hebrews warns:

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Heb. 2:1-4).

## AN ASSESSMENT OF THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT

A good deal of any necessary Christian assessment of the Messianic Movement is implicit in what we have seen of its characteristics. There is a great deal lacking in the Movement in terms of vital Christian truth. **Its tendency to downplay or neglect teaching on the Trinity and on the deity of Christ makes it suspect.** Its emphasis on “Torah obedience” and lack of sufficient emphasis on the atoning work of Christ tends to replace salvation by grace with a works righteousness. It is no wonder that, in response to a somewhat similar situation, Paul stated that such an approach nullifies the grace of God and implies that “Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:2—and Paul was speaking to Peter, a fellow Jew!).

In addition, the Messianic Movement’s preference to read the Bible in light of Jewish rabbinic tradition imposes on Scripture a human interpretive grid, and one most of whose ingredients did not even exist in the days of our Lord (the now-common celebration or demonstration of Passover Seders in Christian churches is based on the false assumption that the Seder as we know it existed at that time).

Messianic Jewish practice is only purportedly Jewish. In fact, in many cases, it is a misconstrual, a form of aberrational presumptive Judaism: Sabbath meals and all other Jewish feasts are celebrated in the home, not in the synagogue; there is no such thing as “dauidic dancing”; women do not officiate in synagogue worship, wear a talit or a yarmulkeh (a skullcap). Religious Jews who witness such strange practices are either amused or incensed; they are not moved toward the Gospel. Most Jewish Christians from an Orthodox Jewish background shy away from Messianic congregations for that very reason.

By establishing a distinctive other than Christ, the Messianic Movement is dividing the church. By attributing spiritual advantage to keeping the Law and Rabbinic tradition, they are creating an anthropocentric elitism: truly spiritual followers of Jesus will keep the Torah.

Nor is Messianic Judaism evangelistically effective. The majority of Jews converted to Christ are converted through the traditional witness of the church. Most of the growth of the Messianic Movement is due to the number of Gentiles joining, striving to be Jewish or act as if they are. The average Jew looks upon Messianic practices as a superficial ploy designed to cause him to put down his defences. In response, he puts them up further.

Happily, there are exceptions to every rule. One can find reasonably evangelical Messianic Congregations that affirm the deity of Christ, confess the Trinity, and view the Torah and tradition merely as matters of national culture. But these are few and far between, and are exceptions that prove the rule. Here and there one can find a Messianic Congregation with a reasonable proportion of converted Jews, some of whom were converted through the witness of the congregation, and perhaps one or more formerly Orthodox Jews. But these too are rare and do not disprove the general conclusion, namely that Messianic congregations would best merge into solid churches and serve the Lord there.

## THE FUTURE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Christians are divided in their views of the future with regard to the Jewish people. However, it seems to me that those who affirm God’s freedom and sovereignty, insist on grace towards sinners as the grounds of salvation, and adhere to a grammatical-historical approach to

Scripture, have no grounds to deny God's purposes as described in Romans 9-11. These speak of God's amazing, unilateral mercy toward the Jewish people who, in spite of their sinful rejection of the Gospel, will be conquered by it to such a meaningful extent that those who witness this event will exclaim that "all" Israel has been saved (Rom. 11:26). This, says Paul, will be the harbinger of such a blessing to the world that it can be compared with nothing short of a resurrection.

How good it is to know that the fate of individuals and of nations is in the sure hands of a merciful God.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive discussion, readers are referred to my book, *Come Let Us Reason Together* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See their website at <http://shalommessianiccongregation.weebly.com/smc-statement-of-faith.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.omjra.org/faith.html>, clauses 9, 11.

<sup>4</sup> <http://messianic.wikidot.com/a-concise-messianic-statement-of-faith>.