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*"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us
and we beheld His glory,
glory as of the only begotten from the Father,
full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)*

An Interaction with a New Book on Modern Jewish Believers in Yeshua

Gershon Nerel*

August 2000 a new book was released on the modern history of two movements: the missions and Jewish believers in Yeshua.¹

With this remarkable magnum opus, Yaakov Ariel establishes a unique prototype in the modern historiography of Jewish Christian encounter. From a panoramic perspective, Ariel vividly tells the sensitive story of "Jewish conversion to Christianity" – primarily in America but also in the land of Israel – in particular during the 20th century. This is a well-documented and balanced book, examining theological teachings, symbols and social interconnections, from both Christian and Jewish conventional standpoints. Following the evangelization initiatives, Ariel describes the effects of these activities among Jewish believers in Yeshua (JBY), then portrays the reactions of mainstream Judaism, reform and orthodox.

Here Ariel depicts a stimulant phenomenon that can no longer be viewed as episodic or inconsiderable. With the professional tools of a historian, a sociologist and a theologian, Ariel provides his extensive observations concerning modern JBY. Therefore this book is a rich, solid and updated mine of information on issues that are of special interest to Jews and Christians alike.²

Ariel skillfully demonstrates that alongside the unilateral targeting of Jews by the missionary organizations, there also existed a bilateral track: the ongoing process of mutual exchange of ideas between Jews and Christians. While gentile Christians were evangelizing the chosen people, usually with respect and far from using the Church traditional teachings of contempt, they themselves were also influenced by Jewish ways of thinking and practices. Thus, for example,

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1 *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000*, Yaakov Ariel; The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2000. Pp. 367.

2 For additional comparisons, see, for example, Mitchell Glaser, "A Survey of the History of Missions to the Jews in New York City 1900-1930," in: *Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism Bulletin*, no. 38 (Nov. 1994), pp. 12-27.

both sides became more aware and cautious about ancient prejudices relating to the other group. Hence, Ariel de facto introduces an original post-polemic approach into the study of modern Jewish Christian encounter.

A Post-Polemical Era

In this study on Messianic values and Messianic groups, Ariel focuses on the fundamentalist Protestant understanding of Israel's election, and Israel's place in a divine plan formulating humanity's history of salvation. The salient thread of scarlet throughout Ariel's presentation is the dispensationalist theology, that so deeply shaped Protestant policy to systematically evangelize the Jews. Conservative American Protestantism, following earlier German Pietism and Anglican Puritanism, was heavily motivated by a premillennialist understanding of the course of human history and the special role of Israel in it. For such evangelical groups, the Jews were the historical Israel, *the* chosen people, predestined to perform a dominant role in the great events of the end times (pp. 10; 81; 164; 253).

Expectations about fulfilled prophecy concerning the Jews returning to the land of their forefathers, and eventually accepting Yeshua as their promised King Messiah, played a significant role within the missionary circles. From cover to cover, Ariel insistently reminds his reader about this hermeneutical leitmotif. Throughout the entire book the reader is compelled to realize how powerfully the eschatological interpretations influenced the fundamentalist streams. Consequently, basic theological issues like who is *verus* Israel (true Israel), as well as Jewish and gentile believers who have to share a common biblical heritage, are presented here from a non-polemical perspective.

It is striking that Ariel's post-polemic scholarly approach actually correlates with the fresh historical assessments of Prof. Israel Jacob Yuval from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Namely, that following the *Shoah* (Holocaust) and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, a new era dawned in the reciprocal understanding and perceptions among Jews and Christians. According to Yuval, the restoration of the Jews to their homeland about half a century ago, indicating the end of their compulsory exilic status, revolutionized the classical Christian polemics against the Jews and Judaism. That is to say that in recent generations the grounds for Christian theologians' traditional anti-Jewish polemics came to an end.³

However, alongside these post-exilic and post-polemic arguments, we should remind ourselves that the roots of such new theological perceptions among Christians are to be placed earlier than half a century or even two

³ See recently Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians*, Am Oved, Tel Aviv 2000, especially pp. 12-13; 16-18; 28-39; 301-305 (in Hebrew).

centuries ago. The starting point actually goes back to the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation in the period between the 16th-18th centuries.

The Impact of the Bible

When Protestants started to focus upon the role of Israel within their premillennialist exegesis, they already visualized the eschatological meta-history as a factual reality. Thus several centuries *before* the Jews returned to their land, in the eyes of conservative Protestants the biblical meta-history of Israel's messianic future already stood as a realistic setting.

In other words, the preoccupation of Protestants with the vernacular Bible is the key to understanding the urge to evangelize the Jews. Thus, for example, the new Bible translations, the establishment of Bible societies, and in particular the use of Bible portions in evangelism with a literal interpretation of biblical prophecy, all greatly contributed to energize the missions movement to the Jews (see pp. 75; 134-135; 304). "Broadly, in Catholicism the emphasis has been laid on the Church and on the Bible as understood within the Church, while in Protestantism the stress has fallen on the Bible and on the Church as created and recreated by the Word of God enshrined in Scripture."⁴

The Imminent Return of the Messiah

In the historic disputations between Christians and Jews, the theologians mainly focused on past events, often dealing with the theme of Israel's rejection and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. In the modern post-polemic era, however, one discovers that Christian theologians highly focus on eschatological events. Ariel rightly demonstrates that when the Protestant missionaries eagerly attempted to evangelize the Jews, they had in their minds, as well as in their daily talks, the special place of the Jews in the millennial messianic age (pp. 17-18; 34).

Throughout his book, Ariel succeeds to highlight the following motto: because American Protestants expected the soon second coming of Yeshua, prior to the establishment of his millennial kingdom from Jerusalem (Revelation 20), they also anticipated the national restoration and the spiritual conversion of the Jewish people. The rise of territorial Zionism in the Land of Israel, for example, was interpreted by the missionaries as a clear "sign of the times" (Matthew 16:3), indicating that the eschatological drama was beginning to unfold (pp. 13; 51; 140; 214).

Interestingly, today ecumenical Catholicism develops its own pattern of post-polemic attitude. Following *Nostra aetate*, Catholics increasingly

⁴ Eric Fenn, "The Bible and the Missionary," in: S.L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (The West from the Reformation to the Present Day), Cambridge 1963, pp. 383-384.

disseminate the teaching of Israel's unique role in end times events. Leading theologians of the Roman church now officially highlight the eschatological role of the Jewish people, especially vis-a-vis the second coming of Yeshua. Thus, for example, the Latin church talks about the mystery of the Jewish people within the eschatological finality.

Today Catholic prelates openly refer to contemporary Jews as the continuation of biblical Israel, "according to their Election." In other words, now we also see Catholics who revise the traditional replacement theology of the church. In connection with Yeshua's second coming, Catholics produce a new dispensational vocabulary, with eschatological terms like "Israel's plenitude of redemption," and the end-time newness of all Israel "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11: 25).

Thus, while the Catholic Church emphasizes interfaith dialogue, it also reaffirms its role to witness (not "missionize" in the sense of assimilation) about the Good News especially to the Jews. At the same time, however, Catholics equally stress that the Jews must, even after their acceptance of Yeshua, keep their Jewish identity in a unique form.⁵ Thus, for example, Hebrew Catholics feel free to announce that the divine plan of salvation has entered the phase of the apostasy of the gentiles.⁶

Such developments within the Catholic Church are most surprising, especially when compared to the Protestant milieu. In his book, Ariel is systematically analyzing the growing division between the liberal 'modernists' and the conservative 'fundamentalists' in American Protestantism. Thus, it is ironic that when more Protestant liberals demand to abandon the evangelization of the Jews (pp. 132-133; 184-185; 239), it is the Catholic conservative "ecumenicals" who endorse an agenda of witnessing about Yeshua to the Jews. Upon their imminent eschatology, these Catholics now fully support the unique and enduring identity of JBY without asking for their assimilation.

A Post-Apologetic Era

As a matter of principle, Ariel does accept as authentic and reliable the different kinds of narratives originating from *within* the movement of JBY. For example, in contrast to many traditionalist historians, Ariel does not doubt the intrinsic truth and the usefulness of biographical accounts written by JBY (pp. 167-168). Similarly, Ariel also does not question the reliability of the information he gathered through many personal interviews, reports, tracts and books produced

⁵ Jean-Miguel Garrigues, "Antijudaïsme et théologie d'Israël," in: *Radici dell'antigiudaismo in ambiente Cristiano*, Atti e Documenti no. 8, Vatican 2000, pp. 321-335.

⁶ *The Hebrew Catholic*, Publication of the Association of Hebrew Catholics, no. 72, Fall 2000 - Jubilee Year, p. 2. See also 'News and Notes' and other articles there, especially pp. 3-9.

by JBY. Generally Ariel views all these primary sources as genuine and valid historic material.

However in some exceptional places in his book, even when dealing with trustworthy texts and documents, Ariel still sticks to the biased opinion that writings of JBY have to be defined as "apologetic." This happens also in cases in which the author knows personally the trustworthiness of his sources, as well as the accuracy of various texts and documents. Namely, just because some information is presented by JBY, including scholarly material, Ariel still remains suspicious and "warns" his readers that a specific source "takes an apologetic line" (pp. 247-249; 316; 324). Thus, when the author of the book exposes certain data as "apologetic," he indirectly says that he personally does not fully agree with the views expressed in that "apologetic data."

In our computer and internet generation, it is especially evident that any social or political "propaganda" or commercial advertising bombardment, are simply "apologetics" for some cause, purpose or product. Individuals as well as corporations openly develop their marketing skills. Indeed, in almost every area in our lives we observe someone using techniques of (mass) salesmanship, as they are "selling" something abstract or physical (see pp. 101; 205; 215).

Ariel himself offers an example of this "marketing." After he decided to publish his own *Edut* (testimony) about his personal experiences in Syria, as a young Israeli Prisoner of War in 1973-1974, there is no justification to define his painful memoir accounts as an apologetic narrative of a veteran soldier.⁷

Therefore, in an era of "no more polemics and no more apologetics," the real legitimate reservations should focus on the issue of ethics.⁸ Unfortunately, it is a historical fact that occasionally unethical methods were employed by missionaries, and Ariel does relate this in his book (pp. 69-70; 234). Yet, of course, integrity and morality are most significant issues in every sphere (in the field of scholarly work, for example), and not only in missions. In sum, unconventional opinions or theses that dare to oppose mainstream views should not be too hastily labeled as "apologetic."

Jewish Yeshua-Believers in the Land of Israel

Large parts in Ariel's book deal with the history of JBY in Mandatory Palestine and in the State of Israel. American missions quite naturally were interested to extend their activities to the major arena of the eschatological drama: *Eretz-Israel*, the biblical land of Israel. Old missionary organizations, like the *Chicago Hebrew Mission*, which in 1953 changed its name to *American Messianic Fellowship*, and the *Christian and Missionary Alliance* (C&MA), played significant

⁷ Yaakov Ariel, *The Road to Damascus: A Story of a Prisoner*, Sifriat Poalim, Tel Aviv 1999, p. 91 (in Hebrew).

⁸ See, for example, David Brickner, "An Ethical War: The Struggle for Integrity in Jewish Evangelism in North America," in *Mishkan*, no. 19 (1993), pp. 14-20.

roles in Jewish evangelism in the land of the Bible (pp. 24-25; 116-117; 141-143). New organizations like *Jews for Jesus* and *Ariel Ministries* are also an interesting part of that mosaic.

Several facts about personalities and the situation in Palestine and later Israel need to be rectified. First, Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir did not immigrate to Palestine (p. 99). Ben-Meir was born in Jerusalem in 1905, and in 1927 went to Chicago to study at Moody Bible Institute. After three years, on February 28, 1930, Ben-Meir returned to "dear old Palestine" and settled in Haifa.⁹ Second, during the 1930s and 1940s Haim Haimoff (Bar-David) was in Jerusalem a local staff evangelist with C&MA for more than a decade. This was before Haimoff became a missionary for the *American Board of Missions to the Jews* (ABMJ) and then the *American Association for Jewish Evangelism* (AAJE) (pp. 117-118; 148). Third, not all missionaries in Israel were paid an American salary (p. 148).¹⁰

Fourth, contrary to what Ariel says (p. 141), Hyman Jacobs, the representative of the Chicago Hebrew Mission in Mandatory Palestine in the 1920s, *did* want to establish an independent congregation of JBY in Jerusalem. Thus on November 22, 1925 Jacobs and his friend Dr. Arne Jonsen founded in Jerusalem a Hebrew-speaking congregation of "Yehudim Meshihiim" (Messianic Jews). It was the mission headquarters in Chicago that firmly opposed Jacobs. He was accused of practicing "too Judaistic" characteristics in a newly founded congregation between the years 1925-1929. As a matter of fact, Jacobs had to face the Mission's accusations that he was a "Judaizer," bordering on heresy.

Eventually Jacobs was forced to "repent" and to abandon the congregation that originally had been so important for him. Thus Jacobs subjected himself to the Mission's agenda. De facto Jacob's *Manifesto Nationality and Religion* (1927) was attacked and rejected by the *Chicago Hebrew Mission*. Jacobs ended his career in Palestine as an itinerant missionary.¹¹

"Messianic Judaism" - A Product of the Diaspora, for the Diaspora

The shaping of the American Messianic Jewish movement is a weighty part of Ariel's book. Step by step the reader discovers how older generations of Hebrew Christians turned to be a young and energetic Messianic Jewish

⁹ Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *Personal Diary*, unpublished manuscript (In Gershon Nerel's collection).

¹⁰ Interview with the late Haim Joseph Haimoff, Ramat-Gan, December 1986, and with his widow Rachel (Shelly), in July 1994. See also Gershon Nerel, "Rachel Bar-David: Mother of a Modern Israeli Messianic Jewish 'Tribe'," in: *The Messianic Jew and Hebrew Christian*, vol. 67 (1994), pp. 66-70.

¹¹ See Gershon Nerel, "The Formation and Dissolution of a 'Messianic Jewish' (Hebrew Christian) Community in Jerusalem in the 1920s," in: *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, The World Union of Jewish Studies/ Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2000 (Forthcoming).

movement. The author shows how Messianic Judaism remained the offspring of the missionary movement, "and the ties would never be broken" (p. 223).

A most significant observation that Ariel makes about the American Messianic Jewish community is described as follows: "In sharp contrast to the demographics of American synagogues, the Messianic communities consist mostly of persons of the baby boom and baby buster generations and Generation X - those who have come of age in the 1960s and later. It lacks older generations" (p. 248).

In addition to this observation, we should also mention that the current leadership in the American Messianic Jewish movement gained its higher education in missionary or denominational institutions. The basic theological reasoning of this leadership is rooted in the Diaspora, surrounded and influenced by traditional Church dogmatics.

It is no secret that American Messianic Jewish communities lack the influence and experience of older generations of JBY. Practically, the American scene lacks the substantial background and insights of senior theologians that lived in the decades prior to the 1960s and 1970s. The sharp separation from the old guard of Hebrew Christians was too premature. The way that the current leadership develops Messianic Judaism in America actually serves to safeguard the Jewish identity of Jewish believers in Yeshua in the Diaspora.

The tools for that survival in the Diaspora are the rabbinical traditions and rites. Thus, their substantial goal is to perpetuate the existence of JBY in the *Golah* - the Jewish dispersion. A major outcome of this situation is that in reality the message of Messianic Judaism replaces the message of the Kingdom of God, and even comes instead of the teachings of Yeshua himself.

One cannot avoid making comparisons with the situation of JBY in the state of Israel. In Israel JBY are struggling differently with issues such as "who is/who is not a Jew." The theoretical and practical expressions of Judaism in Israel are constantly shifting. Unlike in America, for example, cooking and eating East-European food are non-issues. Furthermore, also the designation "Messianic Jew" in a Hebrew-speaking milieu is more and more inaccurate, because the followers of other "Messiahs," like the *Lubavitcher*, are by definition also Messianic Jews. Thus Israeli JBY now attempt to introduce a direct Hebrew nomenclature like "*Yehudim Hassidei Yeshua*" - Jewish followers, or disciples, of Yeshua. Such an appellation leaves no room for misunderstandings. Davidic folk dance is also a non-issue in Israel.

In contrast to the situation in America (pp. 226; 233), JBY in Israel don't call their brethren teachers or elders rabbis, and their schools are not *yeshivot*. Unlike in the Diaspora, most Israeli JBY express their Jewishness without observing rabbinical traditions. Practically, to be an Israeli Jew one has to be an integral part of the local society. Israeli JBY serve in the IDF and their children attend Israeli public schools, so they daily share their lives within the Jewish society. It

is obvious especially in the state of Israel that observing rabbinical traditions does not mean that one practices authentic Judaism.

Most Israelis are secular Jews.¹² An Israeli Jewish believer in Yeshua simply lives in the land and follows the Old and New Testaments. Of course the *Torah* is and remains significant for JBY, but it is the real centrality of Yeshua that makes the difference. Meanwhile some American JBY still think that it is enough to obtain a certificate of Israeli citizenship or to own a flat in the land, while *de facto* they continue to live and raise their children in America.

Summary

The second page of this book informs the reader that large parts of Ariel's research have already appeared, in a different form, in other scholarly journals. Indeed, Ariel is a prolific and original historian, who publishes many and groundbreaking articles that deal directly and indirectly with the theme of the present synthesis. It is obvious that Ariel's pioneer and systematic contributions on various aspects have now reached substantial fruition.

I would recommend that within the future editions of this book, which most probably will follow, the index part will be completed, updated and enlarged. Ariel's valuable text deserves a comprehensive index. Major entries like "autobiography," "Americanization," "Cross," "Haggada," and "Judaizer," to mention only few, should appear in the book's index. Other entries that are already listed, like "End Times" and "Charismatics," again to mention only few, are incomplete. In next editions the reader will benefit if provided in the index with most variations of key-terms.

As Ariel's study deals extensively also with JBY in Israel, it seems to me that the sub-title of the book is misleading. Perhaps in the next editions of the book, the sub-title should rather say American Missions to the Jews. Thus *prima facie* the reader would not expect to find only a discussion about the situation in America.

This timely book will undoubtedly capture a central place in every serious discussion and bibliography dealing with the modern movement of Jewish Yeshua-believers. I would strongly recommend that as soon as possible Ariel's book will be translated also into other languages – including Hebrew.

¹² See, for example, Yedidyah Yitzhaki, *Principles of Jewish Secularity (With an Uncovered Head)*, Haifa University Press/ Zmora-Bitan 2000 (in Hebrew), especially pp. 174-175.