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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)*

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# MISHKAN

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*Faith,  
Trauma  
and  
Stress*

# Bishop Jean-Baptiste Gurion and two Modern Yeshua-Movements

By Gershon Nerel

Sunday, November 9, 2003, an exceptional ceremony took place at the Church of "Notre Dame – Ark of the Covenant," annexed to the Monastery of the Sisters of St. Joseph, located above the Arab village of Abu-Ghosh, near Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, this is the biblical site of both *Kiryat Yearim* and *Emmaus*, on the Judean Hills. The solemn liturgy, including a choir and a variety of clerical robes, was performed for the episcopal ordination of Jean-Baptiste (*Yohanan Hamatbil*) Gurion, OSB, as the Assistant (Auxiliary) Bishop to Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> About 800 people crowded inside and outside the large church, among them also the elderly mother of the new bishop.

The major officiators were Monsignor Michel Sabbah,<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, personal representative of Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Pietro Sambini, the Apostolic Nuncio in Israel. Also about half a dozen other bishops, from different denominations, participated in the ceremony of laying hands on the newly consecrated episcopal leader.<sup>4</sup> During the ceremony a papal letter (*bull*), dated August 14, 2003, was read. This letter, signed by the Pope, was read in French and in Hebrew in the presence of all those who gathered there.<sup>5</sup>

According to the pontifical letter, the Pope personally appoints beside the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem an auxiliary bishop with the special task

1 "Upcoming Events," In *Christian Jerusalem*, Friday, Nov. 7, 2003, p. 7; "Hebrew-Israeli Catholics get New Bishop," in *Bulletin Associated Christian Press*, Jerusalem, no. 431 (Nov.-Dec. 2003): 2. See also at <http://www.cicts.org>

2 See, for example, "Rev. Father Jean-Baptiste Gourion, Auxiliary Bishop to Mgr. Michel Sabbah," in *Jerusalem* (Diocesan Bulletin of the Latin Patriarchate), vol. 9, nos. 3-4 (June-Aug. 2003): 130-132. "Olivetian Monk Named Bishop," at <http://www.osb.org/new/0303new.html> and Alain René Arbez, "Un évêque pour la communauté hébraïque d'Israël," at <http://www.upjf.org> (<http://www.upjf.org/documents/showthread.php?threadid=4972> This was removed from the website. Copy in Nerel Archive.)

3 Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem since 1988, is the first Palestinian to be named patriarch. The Arab-Christian theology of Michel Sabbah is openly expressed in his book *Paix sur Jérusalem – Propos d'un évêque palestinien*, written by Yves Teyssier d'Orfeuille, Desclée de Brouwer, 2002.

4 On the personal letter of invitation to the event in three languages (French, Hebrew and Arabic), all clergy were requested to come with white alb and stole.

5 I thank Rev. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, OFM, for providing the written text.

of the "pastoral care of the Catholic faithful of Hebrew expression" who live in Israel. Additionally, the Pope confers on Jean-Baptiste Gurion the titular byname of "Bishop of Lod (Lydda)," which is located southeast of Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, and during the fourth century AD became a Christian center.

The new bishop is of Jewish descent, born in Algeria in 1934, baptized at the age of 24 and entered the French Abbey of Bec as a Benedictine monk. In 1976 he moved to Israel, serving as Abbot of the *Olivetian Benedictines* at the Crusader "Church of the Resurrection" at Abu-Ghosh. Since 1990 Gurion has headed the "Society of St. James" (*Hevrat Ya'akov Hakadosh*) for the pastoral care of the Hebrew Catholics in Israel. This society was established in 1956, and its communities (today about 400 local citizens and residents) are concentrated in the cities of Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa and Be'er-Sheva.<sup>6</sup>

Since the times of the late Oswald Rufeisen, "Brother Daniel," (a Zionist Jew who was a Carmelite monk in Haifa, died in July 1998), there exist friendly personal relations between Messianic Jews and Hebrew Catholics in Israel.<sup>7</sup> Without hiding the clear theological differences between them, the basic common ground for these two Hebraic minorities is around the belief in Yeshua and in the New Testament. A particular common interest between Messianic Jews and Hebrew Catholics focuses around the fast and influential spread of Islam with its "Jihad" ideology against all the "infidels" – the Jews and the Western Christians.<sup>8</sup>

Gurion's ordination is understood as both historic and controversial. Roman Catholics who emphasize the historic side, point to the formal restoration of the ancient See of *Ya'akov* (James), the Brother of the Lord, who according to the New Testament (Acts 15:13) presided over the first *Kehilla* of Jewish Yeshua-believers in Jerusalem. Jesuit historian Francesco Rossi de Gasperis of the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Jerusalem comments on the current situation as follows:

The opposition to creating within Israel a Church 'for Israel' finds its deepest reason in the denial of the very existence of the State of Israel. But such a Church is the original figure of the Christian identity; it is the Church of the Apostle Peter, a community made of Jews faithful to the Torah and also believers in Jesus, the Son of God. Gurion's nomination as a bishop 'ad judaeos' signifies an historic turning point.<sup>9</sup>

6 Some sources mention only 200 members, see "Dom Jean-Baptiste Gourion," in *La Terre Sainte*, vol. 69, no. 569, (Jan.-Fév. 2004): 38. See also, for example, David Neuhaus, SJ, "Kehilla, Church and the Jewish People," *Mishkan*, 36(2002): 78–86.

7 Cf. Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 1990.

8 See, for example, Shlomit Raz, "Islam, Christianity and Judaism – Islam for Infidels (A Guide for the Perplexed)," An Open Letter, dated 2 Apr. 2003; Victor Mordecai, "The Islamic Threat Looms as America Sleeps," in *Israel Today*, no. 59 (Dec. 2003): 22.

9 See Sandro Magister, "Arab Patriarch Sabbah has an Auxiliary – But He Speaks Hebrew," at [http://213.92.16.98/ESW\\_articolo/0,2393,41875,00.html](http://213.92.16.98/ESW_articolo/0,2393,41875,00.html)

Francesco Rossi de Gasperis is fully aware of the challenge that the new Israeli Hebrew/Jewish bishop poses not merely for Palestinian Christianity, but to the entire universal Church. Such Catholics think that Gurion, the new "Hebrew/Jewish Bishop" in Israel, now bridges over a long gap that goes back to the second century AD, when the line of the Jerusalem bishops "of the circumcision" was replaced by the bishops "of uncircumcision." Thus, for example, Eusebius Pamphilus, the Father of "Church History" wrote in the fourth century that up to the year 135 AD, at the Bar-Kochba's revolt, there had been a series of 15 Jewish bishops in Jerusalem from apostolic times. Then the Jewish apostolic line ended.

Catholics see in Gurion's episcopate the modern revival of the 'Jewish Church' in Israel, yet within full Catholic garb, i.e., incorporated in a Catholic structure of episcopal succession. Namely, under the Catholic authorization of the *Magisterium* for the doctrinal teaching and the performance of the Latin liturgy, although it is translated into the Hebrew language, especially in that church. All these developments are under complete submission to the bishop of Rome.

However, we should also note that in the papal nomination of Jean Baptiste-Gurion, the word "Jew" or "Jewish" is systematically avoided, and not without a reason. All Catholic official documents intentionally avoid the term "Jew," while they speak either of a Hebrew speaking bishop, or a Hebraic community. Thus, the employment of the Hebrew language is naturally more convenient. This terminological distinction between "Hebrew speaking" and "Jewish" actually reflects a substantial complexity within this community – and within the entire Catholic church. Nowadays, the local Hebrew-speaking community is composed of many non-Jews who live and labor in Israel, among them spouses and relatives of Jews who immigrated to Israel from Eastern Europe and former USSR, or foreign workers from Catholic countries, like the Philippines.

Yet still the new bishop himself very much highlights his Jewish background and his Jewish identity. Gurion, in fact, talks about the *ripe time* to revive the Jewish branch within the universal church, and particularly in the land of Israel. Thus, for example, on the front page of a special booklet issued for Gurion's episcopal ordination, one can see the two ladies from the famous mosaic at the church of *Santa Sabina* in Rome representing the "Church of the Circumcision" and the "Church of the Gentiles." On the new booklet front page, the mosaic of the "Jewish Church" is placed on the higher level, as being the originator of the Gentile church. And in the same booklet, on the back cover page, Gurion also published his new episcopal emblem. This badge of office has several Jewish symbols, as follows: the *Magen David*, the Star of David, the Lion of Judah and Jerusalem, and the inscription "you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (Isa 66: 13). In the booklet's front and back cover pages, a

**Gurion talks about the *ripe time* to revive the Jewish branch within the universal church, and particularly in the land of Israel**

large olive tree is depicted.<sup>10</sup> The olive tree with the many branches symbolizes not only the Olivetan Benedictines, but also the nation of Israel, into whom the Gentiles were ingrafted (Rom 11: 16–21). In the same line, Gurion's episcopal Staff is made of an olive tree, taken from Bethlehem. Indeed, although the word *Jew* was "formally absent" at this event, yet the Jewish presence is still strongly attached to Gurion's personal position and to the community that he represents.

For those who point to the controversial side of Gurion's nomination, especially Palestinian Christians, the very creation of a special ecclesiastical jurisdiction for the Hebrew Catholics in Israel is viewed as a hard blow for the pro-Palestinian Patriarch in Jerusalem. Some have even claimed that the ordination of a Jewish bishop is completely political, in order to strengthen the Vatican's ties with Israel, and which will divide the Christians in the land even more. Thus, Zack Saliba, for example, a Palestinian Christian, writes:

This is the biggest joke that I have seen. It is so because once again the Christian Church succumbs to the dictates of the Zionist entity. We all know that Israel wants a foothold in the Catholic Church in the Holy Land. They do not like what Patriarch Michael Sabbah stands for and his influence in the Church ... Please tell me how many churches does the new Bishop have under his control? And how many people attend church of the so-called Hebrew Catholics? ... I am sorry that even within the Church we are allowed to be manipulated by these outsiders.<sup>11</sup>

Patriarch Michel Sabbah never concealed his view that he has always been against the idea of having a particular bishop *ad judaeos*. Then, there are also others, who view the new titular "bishopric" as merely designated for the non-Arab Christians in the land, without any particular Jewish characteristics, except for the Hebrew language, which de facto is even common among Israeli and other Arabs. The current *al-Aqsa Intifada* (2000–2004) has invigorated the tensions between Arab Palestinian Catholics and Israeli Jewish Catholics. It has brought to the forefront the dissonance in the church between the pro-Zionist Jewish Catholic minority and the Palestinian majority.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the two modern movements in the Land – Messianic Jews (in the State of Israel), and Palestinian Christians (in the

10 Ordination épiscopale de Monseigneur Jean-Baptiste Gourion, Evêque auxiliaire de Jérusalem, Notre Dame de l'Arche d'Alliance, 9 novembre 2003. The 32-page booklet, in French and Hebrew, includes prayers and invocations to more than 30 Saints.

11 <http://hcef.org/hceff/index.cfm/mod/news/ID/17/SubMod/Comments/NewsID/1025.cfm> (This was removed from the website. Copy in Nerel Archive).

12 See recently: Drew Christiansen, "A Campaign to Divide the Church in the Holy Land," in *America*, The National Catholic Weekly, vol. 188, no. 17, May 19, 2003.

13 See, for example, "Steps to Support the Mother Church," at <http://hcef.org/hceff/index.cfm/ID/118.cfm> and Gershon Nerel, "Primitive Jewish Christians in the Modern Thought of Messianic Jews," in: S.C. Mimouni & F.S. Jones, eds., *Le judéo-christianisme dans tous ses états*, (Paris, Cerf, 2001), 399–425.

Palestinian Authority) attempt simultaneously to represent the authentic "Mother Church" of the first century.<sup>13</sup>

Another dimension also deserves special attention. The very fact that the papal letter declares that Gurion bears the titular name of "Bishop of Lod" more than signals that nobody should even assume that there is now a new bishop of – or in – Jerusalem. The pontifical *Curia* in Rome is very careful not to re-create a potentially rival Jewish See in Jerusalem, particularly when the Hebrew Christians are involved, and associatively the early Jewish *Kehila* is always in the background. The Catholic Church is still much aware of the symbolism and authority of a revived Hebrew church, specifically if and when such a predominantly Jewish church becomes too independent.

Therefore, the solution which was introduced by the Vatican actually refers to another delicate historic issue: to revive Roman Catholic presence in Lod (Lydda). The story, in brief, relates to an old dispute, when in the 1870s the Latin Catholics lost their "Crusader rights" in the church of St. George in Lod to the Greek-Orthodox church. Instead of those Catholic rights in Lod, the Ottoman rulers of the land gave the ownership of the Crusader church in Abu-Ghosh to Catholic France. Although in the 19th century the Catholics received the Resurrection Church as a compensation in Abu-Ghosh, now they, in a way, regained their special position also in Lod.<sup>14</sup>

Bishop Gurion did not say much during the ordination ceremony. Besides thanking all who greeted him, he had just a brief sentence to say in Hebrew: "*Sof sof anahnu babait!*" meaning that "At last we are again at home!" By that he expressed his appreciation of the return to the Jewish roots of the faith. However, it is still a fact that Gurion himself retains his personal status in the land under the French Diplomatic Corps, without choosing to become an Israeli citizen. In fact, his monastery and church in Abu-Ghosh are a French ex-territory, under French flag. Following the ordination ceremony, about half of all those who were present in the church were also invited for a festive lunch at Moshav Yad Hashmona, in a distance of only three kilometers from the church.

All in all, Gurion's nomination does reflect the recognition of the Holy See in the need, and the significance, of a distinct Bishop for the Israelis. At the same time, however, it also looks that the appointment of a Catholic Jewish Bishop in Israel comes as a counterpoise to the dynamic emergence, and constant development, of the Messianic Jewish movement, mostly linked to the Protestant world. In other words, this Catholic move comes, de facto, to balance the "Protestant congregations" of Jewish

**The pontifical *Curia* in Rome is very careful not to re-create a potentially rival Jewish See in Jerusalem, particularly when the Hebrew Christians are involved**

14 See Joel Ben-Dov, Abu-Ghosh, Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem 2003, p. 54 (in Hebrew).

believers in Yeshua, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Moreover, thus actually the Vatican also meets the needs of the Association of Hebrew Catholics (AHC) established by the late Elias Friedman, OCD, (1916–1999) which for a long time has requested “the formation of a Hebrew Catholic Community *juridically* (sic) approved by the Holy See.”<sup>15</sup>

The same evening of Gurion’s ordination, Channel 2 of the Israeli TV reported the event with pictures taken at the ceremony. This followed some large cover-stories in the Israeli newspapers.<sup>16</sup> However, not all ‘fact’ which are published are also accurate, even when they come from the Bishop himself. Thus, for example, in an interview that appeared in *Israel Today* in January 2004, Gurion is quoted as follows: “Yes, I am the first Jewish bishop in *Eretz Israel* [the Land of Israel] in nearly 2,000 years!”<sup>17</sup> Yet historically this is not true. The first Jewish Bishop in modern Jerusalem after almost two thousand years was the Anglican missionary Michael Solomon Alexander. The story began with the solemn consecration of M. S. Alexander by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the Lambeth Palace in London, on Sunday, November 7, 1841. The establishment of a Protestant Bishopric in Jerusalem was a Lutheran-Anglican joint project, initiated by the King of Prussia, Frederick William IV and Queen Victoria. Although the new Jerusalem Bishopric was “Made in Germany,”<sup>18</sup> its concept was basically fueled by the millennial hopes that prevailed in the English-speaking world. It was particularly in Great Britain that eschatological expectations were strongly correlated with a literal Jewish territorial and spiritual renaissance, and Yeshua’s return.<sup>19</sup>

The appearance of a Jewish Bishop in 19th century Jerusalem, a “Bishop of the Circumcision on mount Zion,” immediately stirred the imagination and support of Anglican millennialists. The concept of a restored authentic Jewish Church was not just a dream, but now became a realistic and visible fact. Therefore, although Alexander was the official Episcopal representative of the Church of England in Jerusalem, clerically garbed, he was also regarded as a unique representative of the original Jewish Church. A contemporary book enthusiastically described the bishop

conveyed to the land of his fathers and to the city where David reigned, where the Son of God suffered for the redemption of man-

15 See, for example, *The Hebrew Catholic*, no. 77, Summer-Fall 2002, p. 2.

16 See, for example, Ariyeh Dayan, “The New Appointment of the Pope: A Bishop for the New Immigrants,” in *Haaretz*, Tuesday, 14 Oct. 2003, B4 (in Hebrew); Vered Kellner, “Abba Gourion,” in *Maariv*, Sofshavua, 17 Oct. 2003, pp. 50–54.

17 Aviel Schneider, “New Bishop in Jerusalem is Jewish,” in *Israel Today*, no. 60 (Jan. 2004): 20–21.

18 Alex Devine, “Abyssinia and the Holy Places – The Chevalier Bunsen and the Jerusalem Bishopric,” in: *The Palestine Weekly*, Jerusalem, October 8th, 1926, pp. 347–349.

19 See, for example, Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, London 1971, esp. pp. 44–55; 142. Cf. Yaakov Ariel, “The Rise of Christian Eschatology in the Wake of the French Revolution,” in: Richard I. Cohen, ed., *The French Revolution and Its Impact*, Jerusalem 1991, pp. 319–338 (in Hebrew).

kind; and where the Apostle St. James, the first {Jewish} Christian bishop, presided over the first Christian Church – the Church of the Circumcision.”<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the situation today within official Catholicism, many Anglican friends of Israel in the mid-19th century expected that the newly established Jerusalem Bishopric would soon become the most important and influential diocese in the world, and earnestly prayed for the full success of Alexander in this “Mother of all churches.” Furthermore, the supporters of the appointment of an Israelite bishop to succeed the Jewish See of St. James regarded the circumstances as a significant victory over the “domineering spirit” of the Church of Rome “which requires all to bow down to the idol of her pretended supremacy.” Obviously, at the very first stages of shaping the concept of a modern Jewish bishopric in Zion, those Anglican millennialists strongly wished to revive the See of St. James. For them it became a living testimony that Jerusalem, not Rome, is the *mother of us all*. Namely, “that the western Papacy is neither fitted nor destined to be the great center of unity to a distracted Church, or the channel of salvation to a ruined world.”<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, however, since 1976 all three inheritors of Bishop M.S. Alexander’s See are pro-Palestinian Arabs. Riah Abu El-Assal, the current Palestinian bishop of the Anglican diocese, was enthroned in Jerusalem on August 15, 1998. Yet unlike Alexander, Abu El-Assal strongly opposes the Zionist movement as well as Christian Zionism, mostly on theological grounds.<sup>22</sup>

To summarize, such a historic comparison is most striking. Although today the Hebrew Catholics and the Messianic Jews are still tiny marginal communities, they continue to attract much interest in the general public. It is not their numbers that matter, but rather their symbolic significance for both Jewry and Christendom.

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20 J.B. Cartwright, *The Church of St. James: the Primitive Hebrew Christian Church of Jerusalem*, London 1842, pp. vii-viii.

21 J.B. Cartwright, *The Church of St. James*, p. xii. See Gershon Nerel, “Hebrew Christian Associations in Ottoman Jerusalem: Jewish Yeshua- Believers Facing Church and Synagogue,” *Revue des études juives*, 161 (2002): 431–457.

22 See, for example, Riah Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between (The Extraordinary Story of an Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli)*, SPCK, London 1999; Idem, “A Christmas Message from Bethlehem,” 19 December 2000, at [www.archbishops.org/peace.htm](http://www.archbishops.org/peace.htm)

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