

# From Death to Life: The Restoration of Jewish Yeshua-Believers in the Land of Israel

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## Introduction

The emergence of the Messianic Jewish (Hebrew Christian) self-identity between the years 1917-1967 is a unique phenomenon in the history of the "Yishuv" in Eretz-Israel, the Land of Israel. By 'Messianic Jews' it is meant Jews who voluntarily decided to embrace faith in Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth as Son of God and Redeemer, or as in one single case, to be discussed later, merely as Messiah and Prophet. The originality of this segment in Israeli society - which in Mandatory Palestine numbered circa 120 persons and roughly 150 around 1967 - was that they insisted on *not* being regarded as "converts to Christianity", but rather stressed their being called "Completed Jews" or "Messianic Jews".<sup>1</sup>

The chronological scope between the years 1917 and 1967 is an eventful period of 50 years, significantly marked by the transition of Jerusalem from one political hegemony to another: from its capture in 1917 from the Ottoman (Turkish) Muslim Empire by the British Christian Empire, and the reunification of the City in 1967 by the Israelis. Since Jerusalem always had a particular place in Old and New Testament exegesis, it also naturally held a central place within the contextualizing views of Messianic Jews.

Within the time spectrum of these two events in 1917 and 1967, representing two salient 'crossroads', one finds a most formative half-century within which modern Messianic Jewish thought in Eretz-Israel was shaped. In fact, Messianic Jewish hermeneutics of Biblical prophecy had as its focus both Jerusalem and the people and land of Israel at one and the same time. The Messianic Jews viewed and interpreted not only regional affairs in the Middle East, but also sought to trace prominent eschatological happenings within a world perspective and history.<sup>2</sup>

## Complexity of Nomenclature

The issue of nomenclature is one of primary importance within the history of the movement. When examining the terminology used in Messianic Jewish circles, it becomes crystal clear that they rejected any approach which might have classified them as 'Christians' *per se*. Even the term 'Hebrew Christians', and especially within an Eretz-Israel connotation, was not

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an updated English synopsis of my PhD dissertation "'Messianic Jews' in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity," 1996 (in Hebrew), which was carried out under the supervision of Prof. Gedalyahu Guy Stroumsa, from the Department of Comparative Religion, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. See *Mishkan*, vol. 27 (1997): 11-23. For further comparisons see also my article "Continuity and Change Among Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel: Before and Following the Establishment of the State of Israel", in: *The Messianic Jew*, vol. 66 (1993): 77-83 (Hebrew Version in: *Me'et Le'Et*, vol. 81-82 (1995): 23-27). See also recently Dan Cohn-Sherbok, "Modern Hebrew Christianity and Messianic Judaism," in: Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry, eds., *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2003, pp. 287-298 (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 158); and Pauline Kollontai, "Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity," in: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 3 (2004): 195-205.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Agnes Waldstein, "The Fig Tree and All the Trees," in: *Jerusalem (Jewish Christian Community)*, vol. 124 (January 1957), pp. 3-5; Cf. Gershon Nerel, "Israel at Fifty: Messianic Jews in the Land", in: *Shalom (CMJ Magazine, UK)*, 1998, pp. 9-10

always accepted among them. As Jews who followed the Messiah of the New Testament, they preferred to be called simply 'Messianic Jews'.

In Mandatory Palestine we do not find a uniform definition or term used by Jewish believers in Yeshua (which we shall refer to as = **JBY**) for their own self-identity. Most of those who were mainly connected to English-speaking churches and missionary societies, like the British “*London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews*”, also known as the “*Church Missions to Jews*” (CMJ) and the American “*Christian and Missionary Alliance*” (C&MA), did use among themselves the term 'Hebrew Christian'. This term was already well-known within the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world, at least since the second half of the 19th century.

However, more than semantic difficulties arose when the term 'Hebrew Christian' was used in Eretz-Israel. 'Hebrew Christian' conveyed mixed meanings when translated into colloquial Hebrew within a Hebrew-speaking milieu. JBY were aware of the fact that the title 'Hebrew Christian' was often understood as meaning complete separation from anything connected to Jewishness or a Judaic background, while this was not their intention in using the term.

Ambiguity also arose when the term 'Hebrew Christian' was understood to be related to the concept of 'Restoration'. JBY did express clear aspirations for restoring for themselves an archaic and authentic Hebraic nationality. This 'archaic nationality' was found actually in the first century A.D. and related to the first JBY in Jerusalem. Moreover, modern JBY also wished to attach themselves to literal biblical prophecy and biblical spirituality. However, they dropped the prefix 'Hebrew' and replaced it by the term 'Jew' in order to be related to the heritage of the Jewish world. In the Eretz-Israel milieu a term like 'Messianic Jew' enabled JBY to identify themselves both with modern Jewish nationality and 'Biblical Judaism' as being distinct from 'Rabbinical Judaism'.

By the adoption of the term 'Messianic Jews', JBY in Eretz- Israel also rejected the term 'Jewish Christians' or 'Judeo- Christians'. The difficulty they faced was mainly with the proper noun 'Christian', especially when it was translated into Hebrew - "נוצרי". They strongly rejected any possible equation between themselves and Gentile Christianity as manifested in Church History. In their writings we find a profound desire NOT to become "Gentilized" by any terminology or by any other inducement from non-Jewish followers of Jesus. Yet at the same time, they were compelled quite often to reject accusations from Gentile circles that they had, so to speak, some hidden or even apparent intentions to 'judaize' the Gentile Christians through their 'Jewish inclinations'. De facto, those accusations reflected Gentile-Christian suspicions that JBY had planned on purpose to regain "theological hegemony" over Gentiles, as it was in the first century.<sup>3</sup>

When the majority of JBY consented to define themselves as 'Messianic Jews', especially following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, it gradually became evident that within mainstream Jewish thinking the term "Messianic" could hardly be adopted exclusively for themselves. Historically, the term 'Messianic' was derived from 'Messiah' (=Christos, משיח), and was also linked to diverse holders of ideologies denoting a particular 'Messiah' or Savior. Such 'Messiahs' or 'messianic situations' could range from the sphere of religious

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gershon Nerel, “Modern Assemblies of Jewish Yeshua-Believers between Church and Synagogue,” in S. N. Gundry & L. Goldberg, eds., *How Jewish is Christianity: Two Views on the Messianic Movement*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2003, pp. 92-107.

persons or territorial concepts to completely secular concepts relating to non-religious Socialist utopias.

### **The 'Hebrew Catholics'**

From a theological perspective, a basic similarity is found between Messianic Jewish belief and various Protestant Evangelical teachings based on the New Testament alongside the Old. Yet at the same time when relating to JBY, we need to point also to another group: Jews, who following their baptism within the Roman Catholic Church, preferred to call themselves 'Hebrew Catholics'. Most of these 'Hebrew Catholics', however, would object to being called 'Messianic Jews', and prefer to be known as 'Christians' (=נוצרים). Such differences of nomenclature do not reflect merely semantic preference. The acceptance of the term 'Christian' (נוצרי) by Hebrew Catholics manifests a clear universalistic approach, a policy of integration into the Catholic Church. Some of them even aspire to become an approved and 'quasi-independent branch' within the Universal Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> The Messianic Jews, however, by rejecting the use of the Hebrew term 'נוצרי' (= 'Christian') wished to express their disconnection from the *Gentile* Church's history of the past nearly 2000 years. They rejected the term 'נוצרי' because it was linked to anti-Jewish Christian history.

However, most JBY endeavored to restore a historical and genuine self-identity as Jewish followers of Yeshua. Although they identified themselves with the first-century JBY, they still were divided in principle on how to shape and manifest such an identity vis-a-vis Synagogue and Church alike. In the context of the historical divisions between Catholics and Protestants, it became obvious that Messianic Jews would constantly differentiate themselves from 'Hebrew Catholics' - and vice versa. Such a dissimilarity was quite evident, although each group openly struggled against the assimilation of its members into the institutional Gentile Churches. In fact, both groups also denounced traditional Christian antisemitism, and insisted on maintaining a unique status, as Jews, among all other followers of Jesus, especially in still being part of the biblical 'Chosen People'.

'Hebrew Catholics' and Messianic Jews form de facto TWO modern Yeshua-movements. In our context it is indeed interesting to perform a systematic comparison between 'Messianic Jews' and 'Hebrew Catholics'. Such a "mechanism" may add to the illumination of specific issues which characterise the global restoration of JBY.<sup>5</sup>

### **Striving for Corporate Emancipation**

The attitudes of JBY towards establishing their own corporate institutions are observed not only on a national level with strong territorial roots, but are also reflected through their theological thinking. This is seen, for example, when they come to define those persons who would qualify to join their circles officially.

Basically, Messianic Jews in Mandatory Palestine were part and parcel of the Protestant missionary organizations located in central towns like Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Safed and Tiberias. A constant tendency was found among them to leave these Gentile institutions, and

<sup>4</sup> See recently Leon Menzies Racioner, "Hebrew Catholicism: Theology and Politics in Modern Israel," in: *The Heythrop Journal*, vol. 45 (2004): 405-415.

<sup>5</sup> See Gershon Nerel, "Bishop Jean-Baptiste Gurion and Two Modern Yeshua-Movements" in: *Mishkan*, vol. 40 (2004): 57-63.

even to avoid the use of traditional theological terminology; e.g., to drop the word “Church” (כנסת) and to use instead terms like 'Assembly' (קהל) or 'Alliance' (אגודה).

No doubt the factor of ongoing Hebraization within their circles as in the society surrounding them, such as the daily use and 'indigenization' of the Hebrew language, influenced their way of thinking. So did their growing awareness of the need to develop a genuine Messianic Jewish mentality which would distinguish itself from any characteristics or customs that would, so to speak, Gentilize them and cause them to lose their Jewish heritage and identity.

The outcome of this tendency was that JBY constantly attempted to develop new forms of grouping by themselves in order to better express, as well as maintain, their unique identity. Thus, they strongly insisted on shaping a distinct Jewish identity, which embraced the belief in Yeshua as Messiah and Son of God within their own phraseology.<sup>6</sup> However, they faced difficulties and misunderstandings, particularly with those expatriate Christian missionaries who were ministering in the Land and yet could only with difficulty grasp such 'separatist' or even so-called 'self-exalting' Jewish believers in Yeshua.

Thus, for example, a special attempt to establish an independent Messianic Jewish congregation can be traced in Jerusalem between the years 1925-1929. However, in English they called themselves 'Hebrew Christians', but in colloquial Hebrew and in Hebrew texts they used the term 'Yehudim Meshihiim' ('Messianic Jews'). The founders of this congregation were two Jews, Hyman Jacobs and Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, and a Norwegian missionary, Dr. Arne Jonsen. Jonsen and Jacobs published a statement of principles to serve almost as an enlarged creed or manifesto. This proclaimed their aspirations to restore the original and national entity of JBY as described in the New Testament. By this they expressed strong awareness of their need to observe the Jewish national customs and Holy Days originating in the Old Testament, particularly Circumcision, the Sabbath and Passover.<sup>7</sup>

There were heavy pressures exerted on them from their Gentile Mission Boards overseas. The supporters of Dr. Jonsen in Oslo and the board of the "Chicago Hebrew Mission" in the USA that supported Jacobs compelled them to keep Sunday and the Sabbath as *two days* for divine worship. The Sabbath was not to remain the single day for their weekly worship. Theological pressure was also put upon the leadership of this congregation, and they were accused of being "Judaizers" who experimented at keeping only the Sabbath Day or stressing the observance of Jewish festivals according to the Jewish calendar. Pressures of this kind, followed also by financial and personal inducements, finally blocked any possibility for such a revolutionary congregation, which at the same time was regarded, in a dialectical way, as a 'reactionary congregation'. Therefore, this first attempt to form an *independent* Messianic Jewish congregation in 20th century Jerusalem did not survive more than four years.

Both Jonsen and Jacobs were obliged to face investigators who came to Palestine to learn first-hand about their 'Judaizing' tendencies. At last Jonsen had to leave the country and

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Gershon Nerel, “Creeds Among Jewish Believers in Yeshua between the World Wars”, in: *Mishkan*, vol. 34 (2001): 61-79.

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Hjemdal, “Arne Jonsen - A Pioneer in Israel (1924-1929)”, in: *Mishkan*, vol. 20 (1994): 39-40.

Jacobs became an itinerant evangelist in Palestine.<sup>8</sup> Ben-Meir, who returned from 'Moody Bible Institute' in Chicago after studying there between the years 1927-1931, found the congregation disintegrated. He then occupied himself with fresh attempts to found larger territorial organizations of JBY covering Palestine and the Middle-East, rather than starting new local assemblies of JBY. Thus, the solution of Ben-Meir, and Jacobs as well, for shaping a genuine Messianic Jewish self-identity in Eretz-Israel was transferred from the local level to the wider regional level. They also had great hopes to crystalize such an identity through cooperation with the "International Hebrew Christian Alliance" (IHCA).<sup>9</sup>

In 1931 the first regional grouping founded by Messianic Jews was named in English - for their Gentile constituency - "The Hebrew Christian Fellowship of Palestine". However, in their internal Hebrew texts they used the term 'Messianic Jews'. In principle, their theological goal was to achieve an interdenominational fellowship without any kind of subordination to the traditional churches and mission organizations in Palestine. Among their proclaimed aims, just the principal ones should be mentioned: "...To unite Messianic Jews in Palestine and Syria; to establish and support urban branches; to witness corporately both to Synagogue and Church concerning the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope in Jesus; to introduce Jewish thought to Gentile Christians and the Gospel to Jews; to cooperate with the IHCA." They also bypassed any controversial issues in order to provide a wide common ground for as many of them as possible to join their 'Fellowship'.

In 1933 the "Fellowship" changed its official title and adopted a new name: "The Hebrew Christian Alliance of Palestine and the Near East". The requirements for admission to the "Fellowship/Alliance" were as follows: "Expression in public of faith in Messiah Jesus as personal Savior and Lord; belief in the divinity of Messiah Jesus; belief in his sacrificial death and resurrection; acceptance of the Old and New Testaments as the word of God and as the rule for their faith and lives." However, neither the issue of the Trinity nor the topic of baptism was mentioned as a stipulation for membership in that organization. The reason for that was the desire to present the broadest theological spectrum as a possible doctrinal basis in order to permit maximal membership by avoiding doctrinal confrontation on very problematic issues.

Abram Poljak was another active and influential personality among Messianic Jewish circles in Mandatory Palestine. In one of his early books titled "The Cross in the Star of David", he endeavored to launch a unique world movement that would crystalize a clear and solid identity for those Jews who believe in Yeshua. However, instead of focusing on a special Eretz-Israeli Messianic Jewish identity, Poljak ended up in English and German-speaking countries where he promulgated the idea of reciprocal coexistence between Jews and Christians through regular dialogue between them. Just like other leaders, such as Moris Sigel, Pauline Rose, Jacobs and Ben-Meir, Poljak was struggling to create a *corporate* witness of JBY in the Land. Like his colleagues, Poljak emphasized the need to

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<sup>8</sup> 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*, Division E (Contemporary Jewish Society), Jerusalem 2001, pp. 19-29 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> See also Frederick Levison, *Christian and Jew: The Life of Leon Levison, 1881-1936*, The Pentland Press, Edinburgh 1989, pp. 163-223.

institutionalize these activities. He implemented this mainly through publishing various articles in his magazine '*Jerusalem*'.<sup>10</sup>

### **Insecurity Among Jewish Believers in Yeshua**

Not every Jewish believer in Yeshua in Mandatory Eretz-Israel was willing to expose himself in public as such. A few dozens of so-called "Nicodemus Jews" (see John 3: 1-2) tried to keep secret their belief in Yeshua and for decades lived in this context with an underground mentality. Their main fear was that they would not be tolerated by normative Jewish society, and dreaded the possibility of jeopardizing their positions at work, and even being stigmatized as 'traitors'. Later, within the State of Israel, the phenomenon of "Nicodemus Jews" did not disappear. Alongside those who publicly declared their faith in Yeshua, many others endeavored to remain in the shadow. While examining the relationship between the 'open' and the 'closed' groups of JBY, it became evident that they were characterized by constant tensions. Usually the former strongly criticized the latter as being 'fainthearted' and 'opportunist'.

When the British Mandate over Palestine came to an end in 1948, the Jerusalem Anglican ecclesiastical authorities raised the issue of the future of JBY when the Jewish State would become a fait accompli. Their major concern related to those JBY who were linked to the "double British enemy", namely, the British missionaries and the British government. Therefore, "*Operation Mercy*" (or "*Operation Grace*", as it was also termed) was launched to evacuate from the country all "Hebrew Christians" who preferred not to remain within the anticipated new Jewish State. The operation was organized as a kind of 'spiritual Dunkirk', transferring about 80 persons to Liverpool in England.<sup>11</sup> Most probably, a strong motivation behind this operation was in the association of ideas relating to a modern equivalent of the first century Jerusalem community 'Exodus' to Pella in Trans-Jordan shortly before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

### **The First Decade in the State of Israel**

However, not all JBY left the country then. About a dozen remained, among them Shlomo Ostrovsky, Abram Poljak, Pauline Rose, Moshe Ben-Meir and Hayim Haimoff. As a result of this operation, a profound disunity was created among JBY. The majority followed the Gentile ecclesiastical policy; namely, that JBY should gradually assimilate within the non-Jewish Church society. The minority aspired to shape and maintain a unique identity within Jewish society as an integral segment within the Jewish State. No doubt this difference of outlook was rooted in the theological education and thought of individuals who had key positions within JBY circles.

A major consequence of "Operation Mercy" was that, with the departure of those evacuees in 1948, a community of JBY in Eretz-Israel ceased to exist, and a new situation emerged. "Operation Mercy" caused generation discontinuity, and also interrupted the sequence of "group overlap", i.e., caused the disintegration of local fellowships and actually produced a clear distinction between Gentile Church identity on the one hand and national congregation identity on the other hand.

<sup>10</sup> See a collection of articles in *The Jewish Christian Movement*, Patmos Publishers, London (?1955).

<sup>11</sup> Gershon Nerel, "'Operation Grace' Before the State of Israel was Born: The Evacuation of JBY from the Land," in: *Zot Habrit*, Organ of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel, vol. 20 (2004): 11-12 (in Hebrew), with a photograph of list of evacuees.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, a new era began in the history of JBY in the Land. Those very few who remained, reinforced by new JBY who moved into the Land through the massive 'aliya' (immigration) waves of the 1950s and 1960s, together formed a new foundation for local believers. They worked strongly to eliminate their minority status within the expatriate minorities of churches and missions in Israel. In fact, gradually they did become a self-determined ideological minority on their own.

Various efforts were made to establish their own independent fellowships in Israel. Thus, for example, the "*Union of Messianic Jews*" was founded already in 1950, and later it was replaced by the "*Israeli Messianic Jewish Alliance*" organized in 1954. However, both the "Union" and the "Alliance" were disbanded after a few years, mainly because of personal and theological disagreements. A central issue in those conflicts was whether to permit, on the one hand, the involvement of non-Jewish Christians, e.g. from the local missions and churches, and on the other hand, to permit the involvement of representatives from organizations like the IHCA.<sup>12</sup>

In reaction to attempts to create independent and genuine corporate entities of JBY, leaders among the churches and missionary organizations in Israel decried them as manifesting renewed tendencies of "Judaizing" the Gentiles who belonged to the universal body of believers in Jesus. Furthermore, fears were also expressed in the same circles in reaction to the possibility of having a modern Jewish-Israeli 'Protestant Bishop' in Jerusalem. Such a development, so non-Jewish Church leaders reasoned, would undermine the traditional authority and prestige of the existing Gentile ecclesiastical leadership. An independent and authoritative Jewish bishop, sitting on the See of James (Yaakov), brother of Jesus in Jerusalem, could, they reasoned, decrease Gentile spiritual prerogatives not only in the Holy Land but in the global Christian milieu as well.

After the Israeli "Union" and the "Alliance" had collapsed and disappeared in the 1950's, another organization was formed, this time by Hebrew Catholics, in 1957, which still exists. "*The Society of St. James*" and its constitution were approved as a unique "branch" within the Roman Church, and was actually incorporated into the Diocese of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Hebrew Catholic members in this 'Society', on the one hand, adopted both a Hebrew translation of the Latin Rite and subordinated themselves to the Catholic hierarchy, yet on the other hand, they still hoped to renew the original "primitive" Jerusalem influence of JBY within the Church Universal.

While among the supporters of the "Society" one could find Hebrew Catholics like the late Daniel Oswald Rufeisen, Bruno Hussar and Rina Geftman, one also could find opposition to it within the same circles. The late Carmelite monk Elias Friedman, of Jewish origin, for example, opposed the Society in principle for legitimizing assimilation of JBY within the Gentile Church. This, according to Friedman, comes without developing an autonomous Jewish identity of JBY, and without preserving their unique election and apostolate.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For additional data see, for example, Heikki Nurminen, "Eighty Years of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) in Israel," in: *Mishkan*, vol. 41 (2004): 63-67.

<sup>13</sup> "The Hebrew Speaking Communities," in: *Jerusalem* (Diocesan Bulletin of the Latin Patriarchate), Year 9, no. 3-4, June-August 2003, pp. 131-132.

<sup>14</sup> In general, see Elias Friedman, *Jewish Identity*, The Miriam Press, New York 1987, especially pp. 89-95. See also Judith Bratten, "Through the Hebrew Catholic Year," in: *The Hebrew Catholic*, No. 72, Fall 2000, pp. 17-23.

Another attempt to establish a genuine congregation for expressing the self-determination of Messianic Jews in Israel was through the official registration of the "Israeli Messianic Assembly - Jerusalem Assembly". Although this entity was nominally registered at the Ministry of Interior in 1958, in practice it did not become, as it was initially intended, THE national body representing the consensus of Messianic Jews in Israel. De facto, this Assembly functioned mainly as a local congregation in Jerusalem. The founders of this Assembly, among whom were Ze'ev (Shlomo) Kofsmann, Eva Kronhaus, and Rachel Grinberg, explicitly expressed their desire that through their Assembly they would revive and restore characteristics of the first-century Jerusalem congregation of JBY.<sup>15</sup> Thus, they actually wished to bridge a gap of almost 2000 years of history and mentality. In their theology, and particularly in Christological definitions, most of them deliberately preferred to avoid reference to any traditional ecclesiastical creed. Thus, they refused to adopt any 'creed', such as the 'Apostle's Creed', the 'Nicaean Creed' and the 'Athanasian Creed'. However, they were aware of the fact that obviously their non-Jewish Christian brothers in faith, both in Israel and abroad, did expect them to do so.

Nevertheless, they insisted on using New Testament terminology exclusively, without mentioning, for example, the concept of the "trinity" in the formal text of an approved creed. In other words, they were convinced that when coming to christological definitions, the use of the Hebrew language would naturally make a substantial difference. Thus, for example, within the one concept of "Messiah" (מָשִׁיחַ), they argued, the divinity as well as the humanity of the Savior were reflected.<sup>16</sup>

### **Liturgical Thought and Practice**

Dealing with liturgical thought and practice, two major topics deserve special attention: the celebration of feasts and rituals, and hymnology. Keeping the Jewish Sabbath had a special significance for JBY; Sunday observance was treated by Messianic Jews as "unbiblical". Hebrew Catholics, however, still kept the Sunday liturgy as the rule within the Latin Church. Some JBY, however, also discussed among themselves whether to formulate a particular "Messianic Sabbath Liturgy", including special prayers connected with lighting two Sabbath candles, as practised in many Jewish homes. Persons like Poljak and Ben-Meir even initiated a unique 'Sabbath Yeshua Liturgy', combining Jewish traditions and biblical texts in order to find some common ground with normative Judaism. Others, like Hayim Haimoff, rejected such tendencies by arguing that liturgies of this kind are extrabiblical and therefore irrelevant for JBY.

While Hebrew Catholics celebrated mainly Easter according to the Church calendar always on Sundays, Messianic Jews almost unanimously held to the concept that Passover should be celebrated only according to the Jewish calendar. Ben-Meir even elaborated a text of "A Messianic Jewish Hagadah", incorporating into it verses both from the standard Jewish traditional Hagadah and the New Testament. Furthermore, the celebration of the Jewish Passover also provided Messianic Jews with a unique opportunity to justify the practice of the 'Lord's Supper' by using only 'matza', the unleavened bread. In contrast to Hebrew Catholics, Messianic Jews rejected the doctrine of "transubstantiation" and celebrated the

<sup>15</sup> See Per Østerbye, *The Church in Israel*, Glerup (Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia XV), Lund 1970, passim; and Menahem Benhayim, "The Messianic Movement in Israel – A Personal Perspective (1963-1998)," in: *Mishkan*, vol. 28 (1998): 10.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Halapid* (The Torch), Organ of the Israeli Messianic *Kehila* (Assembly), vol. 1, Jerusalem, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960 (in Hebrew).



"Lord's Supper" basically as a symbolic act of remembrance. They argued that this reflected a New Testament theology and not merely a common Gentile Protestant theology.

As to the feast of Christmas in Mandatory Palestine and early days of Israeli statehood, most JBY celebrated this event. Later, however, only few of them celebrated Christmas, yet even those did not attribute particular importance to the date of the 25th of December, but rather focused on celebrating the message and act of Incarnation. Unlike Hebrew Catholics who followed the Latin Christmas ritual without dispute, among Messianic Jews one could find both those who justified the practice of a Christmas tree decoration and others, who only emphasized the preaching of an edifying Christmas message accompanied by Christmas carols. Messianic Jews also disapproved with the traditional custom of 'visitation' by the legendary figure of 'Santa Klaus'. In JBY circles, Chanuka, however, was also celebrated alongside Christmas. In Mandatory Palestine individuals like Ben-Meir emphasized the importance of correlating the two feasts in order to link Christmas to the Jewish national aspect of the feast of Chanuka. Haimoff, however, ignored not only the feast of Chanuka but also the feast of Purim as irrelevant to the 'Messianic Programme'.

The hymns that were sung in services of Messianic Jews during the years 1917-1967 were usually traditional church liturgical hymns translated from the English and/or the German into the Hebrew language. Most of the translation work was done by Moshe Ben-Meir, who also privately published three Hebrew hymnal manuals, among them "*Shirat Yeshurun*" which included some of his original hymns in Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> De facto, their hymnal corpus in the Hebrew language actually presented a special kind of creed by itself, focusing on the issue of salvation which was based on the life of the Messiah: his birth, teaching, crucifixion, resurrection and second coming. Thus, on the one hand, most JBY aspired to detach themselves from traditional Gentile hermeneutics and theological creedal formulas; on the other hand, through the adoption of traditional Church hymns, translated into Hebrew, they sensed no difficulty or menace vis-a-vis their identity.<sup>18</sup>

### **Attitudes towards the Return of the Jews to Zion**

Following the parable of Yeshua about the "blossoming fig tree", (Matt. 24:32) JBY like Ben-Meir, Ostrovsky, Haimoff and Kofsmann often preached that the interpretation of this parable lies with the national restoration of Israel to her ancient Homeland. Such persons considered their own times, and the 20th century as a whole, as the predestined period for the fulfillment of biblical prophecy regarding the return of Jews worldwide to Eretz-Israel.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, they also taught that Israel's restoration to its Promised Land had clear eschatological implications, and that the ingathering of the Jews and the establishment of a sovereign State would precede the second coming of the Messiah and the establishment of his millennial kingdom on earth.

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<sup>17</sup> Concerning distinctive Messianic music see also Haya & Menachem Benhayim, *Bound for the Promised Land*, Jerusalem 2003, pp. 144-145.

<sup>18</sup> During the last two decades Israeli JBY organized prolific conferences on Messianic music. These produced many new songs in Hebrew. See, for example, the song booklets titled *Zimrat 2002* and *Zimrat 2004*, compiled and published by the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel.

<sup>19</sup> For later developments, compare David H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 217-233. See also Gershon Nerel, "Attitudes of Messianic Jews (Hebrew Christians) towards Zionism, 1866-1948", in: *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division B, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 115-122 (Hebrew).

Among Hebrew Catholics as well, and especially those represented by Elias Friedman and Daniel Oswald Rufeisen, the notion prevailed that the Return of the Jews to Zion had theological significance. In such renewed national context they taught that JBY had a unique calling and vocation, and should be regarded as the real 'remnant of Israel' that would become a 'spiritual nucleus' bridging 'Synagogue' and 'Church', and even a spearhead for combatting idolatrous and apostate theologies that had infiltrated the "Ecclesia ex Gentibus". Friedman, however, did not expect all Jews to return to the Land, but only a small minority of them while the majority would remain outside Israel. Both Rufeisen and Friedman did point out, as against the traditional Catholic position, that the Jewish nation remained the 'Elect Nation' according to God's plan, which still has a unique universal mission to influence the Gentiles. Friedman even used the term 'Catholic Zionism' as an ideology dealing with Hebrew Catholics belonging to a revived 'Hebrew branch of the Church' - with no less spiritual authority than the first apostles in Jerusalem.

Thus, 'Catholic Zionism' would mean that the Holy Land becomes the 'National Vatican City for Israel'. Therefore, in Friedman's mind, 'Catholic Zionism' vis-a-vis secular Zionism would enable the 'spiritual nucleus' of Hebrew Catholics in the Land both to 'purify apostate Christendom' and to attract and influence the rest of the Jews and motivate them to turn to Yeshua. According to Friedman, the two Ratisbonne brothers Alphonse and Theodore, converted to Catholicism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were the forerunners of Herzlian Zionism in the Land.

However, for both Friedman and Rufeisen it was crystal-clear that the resurrection of Yeshua symbolically prefigured the national restoration of the Jews in Eretz-Israel. The analogy they made between the 'Shoah' (=Holocaust) and Golgotha was obvious: just as Yeshua suffered the agony of crucifixion and death and rose from the dead after three days, so the Jews were restored in their sovereign State three years after they suffered the agony of the 'Shoah' and under a death sentence from Nazi persecutors seeking to implement 'the final solution'.<sup>20</sup> In fact, all JBY in the Land stressed the interpretation that the historical phase of the "fulfillment of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25) had arrived and the end-time position of JBY should be manifested not only locally in Eretz-Israel but throughout the universal Church.

### **The Verdict of the Supreme Court**

The formal denial of Rufeisen's Jewishness according to the 'Law of Return' by a verdict of the Israeli Supreme Court in 1962 led to various reactions within JBY circles. Rufeisen himself started a life-long campaign to obtain recognition of his Jewishness *within* the Catholic Church as a Hebrew Christian. For this, he relied upon the Jewishness of the early Church, and proclaimed that he himself and those in his status were the direct heirs of the original Jewish Church. His Zionism concentrated on identifying himself with 'Jewish Christianity' in Eretz-Israel. However, his conservative opponent, Elias Friedman, supported the verdict of the Supreme Court, saying that Rufeisen had indeed lost his Jewish identity and should be regarded as a "Christian Israelite". Yet both Friedman and Rufeisen strongly objected to the total assimilation and disappearance of JBY within the Catholic Church as had been the case throughout Church history.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*, Oxford U.P., Oxford/New York 1990, pp. 167-170.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Daniel Oswald Rufeisen, "Hebrew Christians between Early and Later Christian Traditions," in: Torleif Elgvin, ed., *Israel and Yeshua*, Festschrift Caspari Center, Jerusalem 1993, pp. 49-55.

Reacting to the same verdict, Ben-Meir and Haimoff argued that Rufeisen represented to the Supreme Court the traditionally despised figure of the 'converted Jew', especially when he was wearing his friar's brown robe. However, both Ben-Meir and Haimoff used this opportunity to encourage JBY in the Land to focus on their Jewish identity and strengthen it. Thus, for example, they thought it would be imperative that JBY become totally independent from "Churchianity" and detach themselves from Church customs and hermeneutics, limiting the dispute between themselves as JBY and normative Jewish society to the one single issue: the crucified and risen Messiah and Son of God.

In other words, in all other matters except faith in the blood atonement of the Messiah and Son of God, they wished to formulate a biblical way of exegesis that would neutralize accusations against them as having become traitors to their Jewish heritage. Keeping the Jewish Sabbath and Feasts, as well as practicing circumcision, expressed for them the central and authentic Hebraic-Jewish national features of their faith.

### **Attempts to Establish Settlements**

On the agenda of JBY in Eretz-Israel we also find various attempts to found colonies of their own. Thus, for example, in the 1920's a small hen-farm was established near *Motza* in the Judean Hills near Jerusalem. Then in the 1930s the IHCA planned to establish a unique Hebrew Christian Colony near Gaza where 2000 dunams were purchased for this purpose. There was also another option to purchase Land near Acre (Akko). All these attempts failed. Notwithstanding these failures, we may point out the prophetic motives of the participants in attempting such settlement projects in order to be practically involved in the process of Jewish restoration and colonization of the Land. By trying to establish their own settlements they actually labored to present a Messianic Jewish alternative to the dominant prototype of secular Zionism.<sup>22</sup>

Outside mainstream JBY, the settlement called "Ir Ovot", founded in 1966 by the late Simha Pearlmutter in the Arava in the Negev, still exists. In fact, this is a "one person" settlement, limited to the wife and children of Pearlmutter. Also called "K'far Yeshua", it became better known because of archaeological excavations in the region which led to the unearthing of the biblical town of 'Tamar'. It did not, however, significantly affect the local Israeli body of JBY, but remained exclusively the residence of one man and a part of his family. Pearlmutter strongly criticized the New Testament as pagan and idolatrous literature. For him, Yeshua was only the suffering and 'potential' Messiah, and was far from being the Son of God or having any divine attributes.<sup>23</sup>

### **Eschatological Implications of the Six-Day War**

The Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War and the reunification of Jerusalem were soon interpreted by JBY as a significant "sign of the times" preceding the second coming of Yeshua and the establishment of his millennial kingdom in Zion. Ben-Meir, Poljak, Ostrovsky, Haimoff and Kofsmann repeatedly taught that full Jewish hegemony in Jerusalem

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem* (Excerpts from a Diary), Netivyah, Translated by Amikam Tavor, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 95; 145-147 (in Hebrew).

<sup>23</sup> Simha Pearlmutter, *The Tents of Shem* (A Messianic Jewish Manifesto to the Post-Holocaust Church), Waterskins Publishing, Brisbane, Australia, 1987.

meant the end of the 'times of the Gentiles' (*Kairoi Ethnon*), and that Gentile global spiritual leadership would begin to be replaced by JBY.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Jerusalem's reunification symbolized for them the approach of the satanic Antichrist who would rule the world. In their chiliastic hermeneutics, such JBY considered the Six-Day War as also preceding the eschatological battle of Gog and Magog which would introduce Messiah Yeshua's millennial reign in Zion over the whole world. Jerusalem would then become the center of the world, and God's promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be completely fulfilled.

In the wake of these end-time speculations, leaders like Ben- Meir and Haimoff also stressed that JBY should serve in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) as loyal citizens of the State, and if competent, even as officers. Thus, in comparison to the situation in 1948 when most JBY fled the country, in June 1967 many of them participated in the fighting on various fronts. Thus, their "Messianic Zionism" in 1967 was not merely a theoretical and "heavenly Zionism" but a practical one as well.<sup>25</sup> Actually, those few like Poljak, Ostrovsky, Haimoff and Ben-Meir who did not join the exodus of JBY from the Land in 1948 raised a new generation of JBY in Israel which developed a strong patriotic Zionism as part of their eschatological theology. Zionism, therefore, was not "courted" by JBY as a pragmatic or opportunistic ideology, 'a tool for achieving legitimation by normative Jewish circles', but was rather grasped as an immanent component of their theology. Thus, considering those who held to the concept of a "heavenly Zion" only, as well as those who found a unique balance between their loyalty to both 'earthly' and 'heavenly' Zion, one finds that the beliefs of both groups were rooted in their diverse understanding and applications of biblical prophecy.

### **Epilogue**

In summary, this paper draws a comprehensive mapping of the history and theology of Jewish believers in Yeshua in Eretz-Israel during the lifetime of two generations that witnessed the British Mandate over Palestine followed by the establishment of the State of Israel. The following conclusions are clear:

1. In Mandatory Palestine there was a minimum of interaction between the Jewish mainstream and the small minority of JBY, which also lived as a minority within a minority among Gentile Church and missionary circles. This tendency, however, was basically changed after the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>26</sup>
2. JBY developed a strong sense of the need to prevent their total social, cultural and theological assimilation within Gentile circles.<sup>27</sup> They rejected the 'gentilization' tendencies

<sup>24</sup> See Gershon Nerel, "Haim (Haimoff) Bar-David: Restoring Apostolic Authority among Jewish Yeshua-Believers," in: *Mishkan*, vol. 37 (2002): 59-78.

<sup>25</sup> Concerning the ideal of "Heavenly Jerusalem" among JBY before World War II see Gershon Nerel, "Zion in the Theology of Leon Averbuch and Shabbetai Rohold" in: *Mishkan*, vol. 26 (1997): 64-71.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Kai Kjaer-Hansen & Bodil F. Skjøtt, *Facts and Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*, Mishkan vols. 30-31, UCCI/Caspari, Jerusalem 1999, passim.

<sup>27</sup> See also, for example, Yaakov Ariel, "Evangelists in a Strange Land: American Missionaries in Israel, 1948-1967," in: *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 14 (1998): 195-213.

which prevailed in the past. At the same time, JBY developed no aspirations to “Judaize” the believers from the nations.

3. JBY focused on bridging the psychological gaps between themselves and the Jerusalem first-century disciples of Jesus as recorded in the Book of Acts in the New Testament. Their strong consciousness of historical affinity with the first disciples of Jesus strongly shaped their identity.<sup>28</sup>

4. JBY almost unanimously accepted the canonical Holy Scriptures comprising the Old and New Testaments as a 'fait accompli', and made no attempts to canonize new texts. On the other hand, they insisted on their right to provide new and independent scriptural interpretations, mainly as a community rooted in the Hebrew language. The revival of the Hebrew language in their circles has given momentum to new tendencies among them to redefine theologies and even historical creeds.<sup>29</sup>

5. Their attempts to achieve organizational independence from missions and historical churches in the Land, as for example within their home-fellowships, contributed to their success in shaping their collective self-identity. However, such developments were visible mainly after the Six-Day War. Through such organizational developments, we may regard the intellectual and social history of JBY in Eretz- Israel in terms of a movement, and not only in terms of theoretical theology.<sup>30</sup>

6. It should be noted that usually JBY were not deterred by threats which their opponents made against them that they were "corrupt missionaries". In their declared statements and writings as well as their deeds, most of them constantly emphasized that they have a civil right and a natural human right to share their faith with others. They actually ignored social and legal pressures to cease from the open dissemination of their beliefs. Responding to traditional rabbinic attacks against them, they often claimed that they have in conscience the obligation to "maintain a candlestick of witness" for Yeshua, even if they were delegitimized by normative Judaism.

The topic of this presentation is not an 'esoteric' issue. As it is wide open to anyone interested in messianic patterns of thought and practice, it provides much material for drawing historical, theological and social comparisons between JBY and other messianic groups past and present. Thus, for example, current comparisons between modern JBY and 'Chabad'

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<sup>28</sup> For an elaboration on this topic see, for example, Gershon Nerel, “Primitive Jewish Christians in the Modern Thought of Messianic Jews”, in: Simon Claude Mimouni & F. Stanley Jones, eds., *Le judéo-christianisme dans tous ses états*, Cerf, Paris 2001, pp. 399-425.

<sup>29</sup> See, Gershon Nerel, “Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* and the Modern Yeshua-Movement: Some Comparisons,” in: *Mishkan*, vol. 39, (2003): 75-76; Idem, “The ‘Flagship’ of Hebrew New Testaments: A Recent Revision by Israeli Messianic Jews”, in: *Mishkan*, vol. 41 (2004): 49-56.

<sup>30</sup> Some preliminary efforts in this direction already took place in Turkish Palestine. See Gershon Nerel, “Hebrew Christian Associations in Ottoman Jerusalem: Jewish Yeshua-Believers facing Church and Synagogue,” in *Revue des Etudes Juives* (REJ), Paris, vol. 161 (2002): 431-457.

messianic thought already reveal new dimensions that have hardly been considered until now.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See also, for example, Joel Marcus, "The Once and Future Messiah in Early Christianity and Chabad," in: *New Testament Studies*, vol. 47 (2001): 381-401. I thank Jorge Quinonez for drawing my attention to this reference.