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“Messianic Jews” in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967) Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity

Gershon Nerel

The aim of my dissertation is to portray and analyze an unknown phenomenon in the Land of Israel in the 20th century, namely the emergence and development of "Messianic Jewish" self-identity. By "Messianic Jews" I refer to Jews who voluntarily decided to embrace faith in Jesus (Yeshua) of Nazareth as Son of God, personal Redeemer and Messiah. The New Testament, along with the Old, became for them an integral part of Holy Scripture. The uniqueness of this segment of Israeli society — which in Mandatory Palestine numbered about 250 persons and roughly 500 around 1967 — was that they insisted on not being regarded as "converts to Christianity," but rather as "Completed Jews" or "Fulfilled Jews." Thus they emphasized attachment to their Jewish heritage and Jewish national characteristics. Simultaneously, therefore, they strongly opposed assimilation within gentile Christian society.

The chronological scope of this research is set between the years 1917 and 1967, 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 Muslim Empire by the British Christian Empire, to 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

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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.

Complexity of Nomenclature

When examining the terminology used in Messianic Jewish circles, it becomes 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 always accepted. As Jews who followed the Messiah of the New Testament, they preferred to be called simply "Messianic Jews."

In Mandatory Palestine, however, we do not find a uniform definition or term used by Jewish believers in Jesus (JBJ) for their own self-identity. Most of those who were mainly connected to English-speaking churches and missionary societies, like the Anglican "Church Mission to Jews" and American "Christian & Missionary Alliance," did use among themselves the term "Hebrew Christian." This term was well-known within the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world since 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. JBJ 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.

JBJ expressed clear aspirations for restoring for themselves an archaic and authentic Hebraic nationality. This "archaic nationality" was found actually in the first century AD and related to the first JBJ in Jerusalem. Furthermore, modern JBJ did not at all wish — like many among the supporters of secular Zionism — to detach themselves from literal biblical prophecy and biblical spirituality. On the contrary, they dropped the prefix "Hebrew" and replaced it with the term "Jew" in order to be more related to the conventional Jewish world. In the Eretz-Israel milieu a term like "Messianic Jew" enabled JBJ to identify themselves with both modern Jewish nationality and "Biblical Judaism" (as distinct from "Rabbinical Judaism").

By the adoption of the term "Messianic Jews," JBJ 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 — *Notzri*. They strongly rejected any possible equation between themselves and gentile Christianity as manifested in church history. The majority of JBJ consented to define themselves as "Messianic Jews" especially following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. In America, however, this happened only in 1975. ("Messianic Jews" was only officially adopted in May 1997 at an international conference in Mexico).

References to "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 JBJ, 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 *Notzrim* ("Christians"). Such differences of terminology do not reflect merely semantic preference. The acceptance of the term "Christian" by Hebrew Catholics manifested 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. The Messianic Jews, however, by rejecting the use of the Hebrew term for Christian wished to express their disconnection from the gentile Church's history of the past nearly 2000 years. They rejected the term "Notzri" because it was linked to anti-Jewish Christian history. However, most JBJ endeavored to restore a historical and genuine self-identity as Jewish followers of Jesus. Although they identified themselves with the first-century JBJ, 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 anti-semitism, 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 Catholic thought in our context is basically being contrasted with Messianic Jewish ideology as a "methodological mechanism," in order to better comprehend and more precisely elaborate the features adopted and promulgated by Messianic Jews. In other words, in this dissertation I do not intend to perform a systematic comparison between "Messianic Jews" and "Hebrew Catholics." Rather, I refer to "Hebrew Catholics" as "exploration group" thereby

illuminating specific issues which required additional examination of themes related to Messianic Jews.

Striving for Corporate Emancipation

Chapters II and III of the dissertation present the attitudes of Messianic Jews towards establishing their own corporate institutions on a local-national level with strong "territorial roots." Their efforts in this direction naturally reflected their theological thinking, especially when they came to define those persons who would qualify to join their circles officially. These two chapters are divided on the one hand between the period of the three decades of British Mandate in Palestine, and on the other hand the first two decades of the State of Israel. 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 even to avoid the use of traditional theological terminology; e.g., to drop the word "church" and to use instead terms like "assembly" or "alliance."

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. One notes a growing awareness of the need to develop a genuine Messianic Jewish mentality to distinguish themselves from any characteristics or customs that would gentelize them and cause them to lose their Jewish heritage and identity.

The outcome of this tendency was that JBJ constantly attempted to develop new forms of grouping by themselves in order to better express, as well as maintain, their unique identity. Thus, they insisted on shaping a distinct Jewish identity and "Jewish theology," which embraced the belief in Jesus as Son of God within their own phraseology — and this without necessarily accepting traditional church creeds and articles of faith. Therefore, they also faced difficulties and misunderstandings, particularly with those expatriate Christian missionaries who were ministering in the Land. Many gentile Christians could only with difficulty grasp such "separatist" or even so-called "self-exalting" Jewish believers in Jesus.

Thus, for example, a special attempt to establish an independent Messianic Jewish congregation can be traced in Jerusalem between the years 1925-1929. Although in English they still called themselves "Hebrew Christians," to be understood by their supporters, in colloquial Hebrew and in Hebrew texts they used the term "*Yehudim Meshichiim*" ("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 JBJ 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 performing the act of circumcision and observing the Sabbath day and the feast of Passover.

There were heavy pressures exerted on them from their gentile Mission Boards overseas. The supporters of 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 Jacobs and Jonsen were obliged to face investigators who came to Palestine to learn about their "Judaizing" tendencies. At last Jonsen had to leave the country and Jacobs became an itinerant evangelist in Palestine. 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 JBJ covering Palestine and the Middle East, having in mind the biblical boundaries of the Promised Land. 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 of crystalizing such an identity through cooperation with the "International Hebrew Christian Alliance" (IHCA) founded in London in 1925.

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 are 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, like demanding baptism for stipulating membership, 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. Again, the reason for that was the desire to present the broadest theological spectrum as a possible doctrinal basis in order to permit maximal membership.

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 Jesus. However, instead of focusing on a special Eretz-Israeli Messianic Jewish identity, Poljak ended up mainly 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 Morris Sigel, Pauline Rose, Jacobs and Ben-Meir, Poljak was struggling to create a corporate witness of JBJ in the Land. Like his colleagues, Poljak emphasized the need to institutionalize these activities. He implemented this mainly through publishing various articles in his magazine "Jerusalem."

Insecurity Among Jewish Believers in Jesus

Not every Jewish believer in Jesus 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 Jesus 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 Jesus, many others endeavored to remain in the shadows. While examining the relationship between the "open" and the "closed" groups of JBJ, it became evident that they were characterized by constant tensions. Usually the former strongly criticized the latter as being "fainthearted" and "opportunistic."

When the British Mandate over Palestine came to an end in 1948, the Jerusalem Anglican ecclesiastical authorities raised the issue of the future of JBJ when the Jewish State would become a *fait accompli*. Their major concern related to those JBJ 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. 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 70 AD.

The First Decade in the State of Israel

However, not all JBJ left the country in 1947-48. Only a few remained, among them were Shlomo Ostrovsky, Abram Poljak, Pauline Rose, Moshe Ben-Meir and Hayim Joseph Haimoff. As a result of this operation, a profound disunity was created among "Palestinian" JBJ. The majority followed the gentile ecclesiastical policy; namely, that JBJ 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 JBJ circles.

A major consequence of "Operation Mercy" was that with the departure of those evacuees in 1948, a community of JBJ 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.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, a new era began in the history of JBJ in the Land. Those very few who remained, reinforced by new JBJ who moved into the Land during 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 an independent self-determined ideological minority.

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, the involvement of representatives from organizations like the IHCA.

After the Israeli "Union" and the "Alliance" had collapsed and disappeared in the 1950s, an organization was formed by Hebrew Catholics in 1957 and it 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. 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 JBJ within the universal church.

While among the supporters of the "Society" one finds Hebrew Catholics like Daniel Oswald Rufeisen, Bruno Hussar and Rina Gefman, one also finds opposition to it within the same circles. The Carmelite monk Elias Friedman, of Jewish origin, for example, opposes the Society in principle for legitimizing assimilation of JBJ within the gentile church. This, according to Friedman, comes "without developing an autonomous Jewish identity of JBJ, and without preserving their unique election and apostolate."

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 with the Ministry of Interior in 1958, in practice it did not become, as was initially intended, a 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 JBJ.

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 "Nicene 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," they argued that the divinity as well as the humanity of the Savior were reflected.

Liturgical Thought and Practice

In the fourth chapter of the dissertation, dealing with liturgical thought and practice, two major topics are discussed: the celebration of feasts and rituals, and hymnology. Keeping the Jewish Sabbath had a special significance for them; 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 JBJ, however, also discussed among themselves whether to formulate a particular "Messianic Sabbath Liturgy," including special prayers connected with lighting two Sabbath candles, as practiced in many Jewish homes. Persons like Poljak and Ben-Meir initiated a unique "Sabbath Jesus Liturgy," combining Jewish traditions and biblical texts in order to find some common ground with normative Judaism. Others, however, like Hayim Haimoff (who in the early 1970s changed his family name to Bar-David), rejected such tendencies by arguing that liturgies of this kind are extrabiblical and therefore irrelevant for JBJ.

The Feasts of Passover and Easter were also discussed, yet other Biblical festivals such as Rosh Hashana (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Succot (Tabernacles) or Shavuot (Pentecost) were not mentioned in writings of JBJ as often. 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 biblical 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 "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, most Messianic Jews, although they celebrated Christmas, did not attribute particular importance to December 25, 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. Systematically they also disapproved of the traditional gentile custom of Santa Claus. In many JBJ circles, Chanuka, however, was also celebrated alongside Christmas. 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 (Bar-David), however, ignored not only the feast of Chanuka but also the feast of Purim as irrelevant to the "Messianic Programme." He emphasized the New Testament perspective only in hermeneutics and liturgy of JBJ.

The hymns that were sung in services of Messianic Jews during the years 1917-1967 were usually traditional church liturgical hymns, translated from English and German into Hebrew. Most of the translation work was done by Moshe Ben-Meir, who also privately published three Hebrew hymnals, among them "Shirat Yeshurun" which included some of his original hymns in Hebrew. De facto, their hymnal corpus in Hebrew actually presented a special kind of creed, focusing on the issue of salvation based on the Messiah's birth, teaching, crucifixion, resurrection and second coming.

Thus, on the one hand, most JBJ aspired to detach themselves from traditional gentile hermeneutics and theological credal formulas; on the other hand, the adoption of traditional Church hymns translated into Hebrew, caused no difficulty or menace vis-a-vis their identity.

Attitudes towards the Return of the Jews to Zion

The fifth and last chapter of the dissertation deals with the topic of "Theological Approaches towards the Return to Zion and Zionism." Following the parable of Jesus about the "blossoming fig tree," (Matt. 24:32) JBJ 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. Furthermore, they also taught that Israel's restoration to its Promised Land had eschatological implications, and that the ingathering of the Jews and the establishment of a sovereign state would precede the second coming of the Messiah. Then Messiah's millennial kingdom would be established on earth — with Jerusalem as its capital.

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 a renewed national context they taught that JBJ 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 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 Jesus. The two Ratisbonne brothers Alphonse and Theodore, according to Friedman, were the forerunners of "Herzlian Zionism" in the Land.

However, for both Friedman and Rufeisen it was clear that the resurrection of Jesus 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 Jesus suffered the agony of crucifixion and death and rose from the dead after three days, so the Jews were restored to 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."

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 JBJ circles. Rufeisen himself started a 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 and those in his status were the direct heirs of the original Jewish church. His Zionism concentrated on identifying 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 JBJ within the Catholic Church as had been the case throughout church history. 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 JBJ in the Land to focus on their Jewish identity and strengthen it. Thus they thought it imperative that JBJ become totally independent from "churchianity" and detach themselves from church customs and hermeneutics, limiting the dispute between themselves as JBJ and normative Jewish society to 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 JBJ in Eretz-Israel we also find various attempts to found colonies of their own. Thus, for example, in the 1920s 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.

Outside mainstream JBJ, the settlement called "Ir Ovot," founded in 1966 by Simcha 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 JBJ, 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, Jesus was only the suffering and "potential" Messiah, and was far from being the Son of God or having any divine attributes.

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 JBJ as a significant "sign of the times" preceding the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of his millennial kingdom in Zion. Ben-Meir, Poljak, Ostrovsky, Haimoff and Kofsmann repeatedly taught that full Jewish hegemony in Jerusalem meant the end of the "times of the gentiles" (*Kairoi Ethnon*), and that gentile global spiritual leadership would begin to be replaced by JBJ.

Furthermore, Jerusalem's reunification symbolized for them the approach of the satanic Antichrist who would rule the world. In their chiliastic hermeneutics, such JBJ 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 JBJ should serve in the Israel 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 JBJ 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.

Actually, those few like Ostrovsky, Haimoff and Ben-Meir who did not join the exodus of JBJ from the Land in 1948 raised a new generation of JBJ in Israel which developed a strong patriotic Zionism as part of their eschatological theology. Zionism, therefore, was not "courted" by JBJ as a pragmatic or opportunistic ideology, "a tool for achieving legitimation by normative Jewish circles," but was rather grasped as an imminent 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, we find that the beliefs of both groups were rooted in their diverse understanding and applications of biblical prophecy.

JBJ: A "Menace" or a Challenge for the Christian Churches?

Almost unanimously JBJ in the Land denounced and rejected the doctrine of "Replacement Theology," namely that the universal church became the "true Israel," inheriting all biblical promises given to physical Israel. JBJ insisted that theologically the Jews as a people still remain unique as an elect nation in a divine plan. Therefore, they argued, because they have a sense of belonging to

their nation, they represent the "first fruits," the avant guard, who should introduce authentic Messianic exegesis and practice to the world. However, while expressing such reformatory tendencies, JBJ also claimed that they do remain a vital organ in the cosmopolitan Body of Messiah. In fact, almost all JBJ in the Land stressed the dispensational interpretation that the historical phase of the "fulfillment of the gentiles" (Rom. 11:25) had arrived. Consequently the end-time position of JBJ should be manifested not only locally in Eretz-Israel but throughout the universal church.

In writings of JBJ 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 JBJ had planned on purpose to regain "theological hegemony" over gentiles, as it was in the first century.

In reaction to attempts to create independent corporate entities of JBJ, as well as a unique Messianic Jewish orientation, 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. The "menace of JBJ" was grasped as they would raise claims towards renewing a theological hegemony on grounds of spiritual primogeniture. Such a development, so non-Jewish church leaders reasoned, would undermine the traditional theological authority and prestige of the existing gentile ecclesiastical leadership. An independent and authoritative Jewish bishopric, sitting on the See of James, the brother of Jesus, in Jerusalem, could decrease and even overthrow gentile spiritual prerogatives not only in the Holy Land but in the global Christian milieu as well.

Epilogue

In summary, this research is a first attempt to draw a comprehensive mapping of the history and theology of JBJ in Eretz-Israel during the lifetime of two generations. These generations witnessed the British regime 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 JBJ, which also lived as a minority within a minority among the missionary circles. This tendency, however, was

basically changed after the establishment of the State. In Israel JBJ initiated their integration within Jewish society.

2) JBJ developed a strong sense of the need to prevent their total social, cultural and theological assimilation within gentile circles. They rejected the "gentilization" tendencies which prevailed in the past.

3) JBJ focused on bridging the psychological gaps between themselves and the first-century Jerusalem 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. However, this "restoration tendency" was not uniform but rather had a diversity of expressions.

4) JBJ 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.

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 JBJ in Eretz-Israel in terms of a movement, and not only in terms of theoretical ideology.

6) It should also be noted that JBJ usually 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 Jesus, even if they were de-legitimized by normative Judaism.

7) The topic of the present dissertation 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 JBJ and other messianic groups past and present. Thus, for example, future scholarly comparisons between JBJ and "Chabad" messianic thought might reveal new dimensions that researchers have not considered until now.

Messianic Jews and Academic Work

Editorial

This issue of *Mishkan* focuses mainly on academic work about and by Messianic believers. The contributions give a glimpse of some of the academic work which has been done in recent years and, in some cases, is still being done.

It holds positive implications for the future that people both involved in Jewish evangelism and with a mind to engage in academic study invest resources on scholarly works related to Jewish evangelism and Messianic believers. It is true that there is often some honor attached to an academic dissertation but this has, as a rule, been preceded by a time of deprivation — particularly for one's family. This can often be witnessed in the prefaces of these dissertations. Allow me to quote from Irina Livinskaya's book, which is reviewed in this issue of *Mishkan*. Her acknowledgments conclude with these words:

"I am especially grateful to my mother and to my husband who showed much patience and accepted with understanding my physical absence from St. Petersburg for long periods, and then my spiritual absence despite my physical presence in St. Petersburg, while I was writing this book."

Sad to say, there are still people among Jesus-believing Jews and gentiles alike who not only regard academic work on faith matters with a considerable amount of scepticism but even consider it dangerous to one's faith. But even as it is true that it is not a sin to be a Jew, it is also not a sin to have been given a good brain — whether Jewish or gentile — and then use that brain in the service of the gospel.

In my imagination I can still see the young Israeli Messianic student in front of me. Early this year she informed the board of a foreign mission society, which was visiting Israel, about the evangelical student work in Israel. Unprompted she told us that in her Messianic congregation she did not receive much support and understanding of her wish to start an academic career. On the contrary, she felt that some members of her congregation thought that she was entering a dangerous road.

When I heard this, I recognized the attitude I confronted when I grew up many years ago in Denmark — an attitude which hinders the hopeful learner.

It is true that academic work with the Bible has sometimes resulted in the