



The infant church in Jerusalem faced a quandary: what to do with Gentiles who desired to be part of the new body of Messianic believers. Today, the concern is reversed. How should the church view Jewish believers who want to express their nationality and heritage? Are Messianic congregations necessary, or should Jewish believers be incorporated into the Gentile church? How Jewish should a Messianic congregation be?

In *How Jewish Is Christianity?* one non-Jewish contributor and four Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus) consider two different viewpoints on how Jewish disciples of Jesus can articulate and live out their faith. William Varner argues that we do not need the Messianic congregation because all the needs of Jewish believers can be met in the church. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, John Fischer, Gershon Nerel, and Louis Goldberg maintain that Messianic Jews and congregations each have a part within the body of the Messiah as distinct entities, and they discuss different nuances of this view.

This book furnishes each perspective with a forum for presentation, critique, and defense, allowing you to draw your own conclusions. It also offers a perceptive chapter on the future for Messianic Jews and a directory of Messianic movement organizations.

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2 VIEWS ON THE MESSIANIC MOVEMENT

- William Varner
- Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum
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- Stanley N. Gundry series editor
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COUNTERPOINTS

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MODERN ASSEMBLIES OF JEWISH YESHUA-BELIEVERS BETWEEN CHURCH AND SYNAGOGUE¹

An Israeli Response to William Varner

Gershon Nerel

My response to the question “Do we need Messianic congregations?” is to replace the question mark at the end of this phrase with an exclamation mark. We *must* have congregations of Jewish believers in Yeshua! Inherently, it should be noted that any talk about not needing Messianic congregations de facto implies that all the Jews, and among them also Jewish Yeshua-believers, do not need to remain a distinct community. A brief look into historical facts clearly demonstrates that Jewish believers in Yeshua, when requested to find all in all within Gentile churches, eventually lost all Jewish characteristics. History also proves that the initial “entry ticket” of Jewish Yeshua-believers into those churches gradually ended, sooner or later, with a national “exit ticket” from the Jewish commonwealth.

¹I owe special thanks to the late Haim Joseph (Haimoff) Bar-David, a faithful disciple of Yeshua (1905–1991) and a pioneer in the Land of Israel since the times of the British Mandate. Haimoff/Bar-David, who was proud to be named a *biblical fundamentalist*, persistently provided a living example and encouragement for a new generation of Israeli Yeshua-believers. See Gershon Nerel, “Haim (Haimoff) Bar-David: Restoring Apostolic Authority among Jewish Yeshua-Believers,” *Mishkan* 37 (2002): 59–78.

In essence, the leading question that needs to be asked is this: “Why did the Messianic congregations disappear from the historical narrative of the church?” The answer is *not* to be discovered within Holy Scripture but rather in the explanations rooted in the aftermath of the *historical interactions* between Jews and Gentiles. The examination of the “need for Messianic congregations” depends ultimately on searching the historical domain, honestly and unsparingly, and *not* focusing exclusively on the biblical text. The theme of “congregations of Jewish Yeshua-believers” is *not* to be exhausted only within theological speculations but should relate to post-biblical developments realistically affecting Jewish survival.

The New Testament, indeed, nowhere nullifies the rationale for maintaining distinctive assemblies of Jewish believers in Yeshua. At the same time, however, both Gentile and Jewish congregations of believers in Yeshua cannot avoid facing the fervent sparks of the historical and current dissonance between Jews and Gentiles. Specifically, the real question behind the scenes is, “Who should hold the leading spiritual authority?”

As a matter of fact, throughout history Jewish believers in Yeshua faced opposition not only from their brethren within the synagogue but also from their brethren within the church. Sadly, yet all too often, the long-lasting encounters—even confrontations—between Gentile and Jewish believers in Yeshua also reflected struggles about control, human interests around prestige, and particularly about theological hegemony. The question before us is how to bridge the historical gap of the last two millennia in the relations between Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua, restoring Jewish congregations in a way that basically resembles the situation in the first century A.D. In order to facilitate the reading of this response, I am going to refer to Jewish believers in Yeshua by the acronym JBY.

WHO IS A HERETIC?

Almost always, church and synagogue placed JBY on the marginal side of esoteric heretics, as opposed to the mainstream nonheretical “orthodox believers.”² It was particularly within the repeated apologetic debates between church and synagogue that the existence of JBY groupings was negated,³ and in fact the

same way of thinking still affects the contemporary attitude of many churches towards JBY.

Since the early centuries when the “church of the uncircumcision” outnumbered the “church of the circumcision,” it became clear that congregations of JBY created a perpetual problem, even a threat, to the mushrooming Gentile churches.⁴ Whereas the Gentile Christians acted to stand apart from the synagogue and all the Jews, they also did their utmost to classify “Jewish Christians” under the categories of an old sect or a new cult. Practically, many leaders within both church and synagogue have systematically discredited, disinherited, and delegitimized the survival of independent groupings of Jewish believers in Yeshua.

Paradoxically, on the one hand the majority of the Gentile churches expressed sharp anti-Jewish attitudes toward JBY, while on the other hand they welcomed them with a vast “bear hug.” This double-faced approach usually resulted in the assimilation of JBY within the institutional churches and then in the surrounding non-Jewish society. In recent times, however, the phenomenon of corporate and autonomous groupings of JBY has reached a momentous watershed in the course of history.

BACK TO HISTORY

After an absence of about eighteen centuries, various associations of JBY have reappeared within current history. The modern movement of JBY is again taking its place on the stage of history—mainly through the establishment of distinctive congregations and alliances. Alongside the watching eyes of both church

⁴See F. Stanley Jones, “Introduction,” in Simon C. Mimouni and F. Stanley Jones, eds., *Le Judéo-Christianisme dans tous ses états* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2001), 13–14. Cf. Gershon Nereel, “A Marginal Minority Confronting Two Mainstreams: Jewish Followers of Jesus Confronting Judaism and Christianity (1850–1950),” in Shulamit Volkov, ed., *Being Different: Minorities, Aliens and Outsiders in History* (Jerusalem: Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2000), 283–97 (Hebrew).

⁵See Ora Limor, *Jews and Christians in Western Europe: Encounter between Cultures in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv, 1993), 68–76 (Hebrew). Cf. Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians* (Tel-Aviv, 2000), 26–39, 82–93 (Hebrew).

⁶See James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 92–95.

and synagogue, these corporate entities emphatically embrace the axiom that they are reentering history not merely as legitimate and autonomous entities but also as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, linked to the national restoration of Israel.

The historical reappearance of modern assemblies of JBY has been a developing process in the last two centuries. In reality this movement progressed side by side with two other occurrences: the activism of millenarian evangelicals on the one hand, and the accomplishments of Herzlian Zionism on the other.⁵ Consequently, the unprecedented return of JBY into the historical arena considerably challenges nowadays the historical heritage of both church and synagogue. Especially after the Holocaust and the foundation of the state of Israel, congregations of JBY have stimulated the church to examine its own traditions and norms vis-à-vis its Jewish roots.

At the same time, in fact, modern congregations of JBY do form a fragmented movement, much like the reality within mainstream church and synagogue, yet most JBY share the vision of being no less Jewish than Yeshua himself and his first disciples. Still, many Messianic congregations are strongly influenced by the Gentile churches and their denominational teachings and traditions. However, these influences are not necessarily negative. Thus, for example, when certain Israeli congregations of JBY are singing traditional church hymns and carols translated into poetic Hebrew, they nevertheless *do not* feel that this hymnology is detracting the congregation from Jewish characteristics or Hebraic identity—as long as they introduce fresh insights into biblical exegesis.

Nowadays it occurs in many congregations (and not only in Israel) that JBY are reexamining the traditional definitions concerning Christological formulas and eschatological issues deeply anchored in church history. Thus, in opposition to the traditional creeds of the churches, some JBY reformulate the historical definitions regarding the Trinity and the divinity of

⁵Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Cf. Gershon Nereel, ‘Messianic Jews’ in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity (Dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem), 1996.

Yeshua. By doing so, these assemblies endeavor to exclusively focus on biblical vocabulary. For example, certain congregational creeds deliberately omit the term *Shilush* (Trinity), arguing that it is an idolatrous concept of paganism “because it teaches that Yeshua and the Holy Spirit are gods on their own merit,” thus originating from “churchianity” and not from the Bible.⁶

Unfortunately, sometimes such theological redefinitions of Christological issues can lead eventually to the total denial of Yeshua’s divinity.⁷ Yet similar topics certainly shape the congregational agenda of JBY—either openly or covertly.⁸ At the same time, one should not automatically conclude that whenever congregations of JBY rephrase the historical creeds about Christology they reject Yeshua’s divinity. In fact, most congregations of JBY do believe in Yeshua’s full divinity, even when not referring to the historical term *Shilush*.

THE TRAP OF MIXED NOMENCLATURE AND PRAXIS

Groupings of JBY frequently adopt the terms “Messianic Judaism” and “Messianic synagogues” in order to highlight their linkage with mainstream Jewry. At the same time, and almost unanimously, they refrain from using the appellations “church” and “Christian,” thus wishing to distance themselves from the *goyim*, the Gentiles, who within Jewish collective consciousness are still expecting their assimilation. Furthermore, together with the appellations of “Messianic Judaism” and “Messianic synagogue,” many JBY also endeavor to adopt ceremonial traditions of rabbinical Judaism (for example, men covering their heads, using ritual prayers from the *siddur*, and congregating around folkloristic dance—practices that actually have no biblical foundation).

⁶See Tsvi Sadan, “The Trinity—Midrash or Dogma?” *Israel Today* (Jerusalem, November 2001): 20.

⁷See “Messianic Jews Debate the Deity of Jesus,” *Israel Today* (Jerusalem, November 2001): 21.

⁸See Gershon Nerel, “Creeds among Jewish Believers in Yeshua between the World Wars,” *Mishkan* 34 (2001): 61–79.

In my view, these JBY wrongly assume that with an outward dress of “Jewish nomenclature” and ceremonial symbols they can get the acceptance of mainstream Jewry. As a matter of fact, it was the Israeli Supreme Court that put an official end to such naive hopes. Functioning as the final legal instrument of the Jewish state, the Israeli *Bagatz*—High Court of Justice—has again and again ruled that a Jew, even if observing *all* rabbinical traditions of “Judaism,” yet at the same time also believing in Yeshua, is regarded as “a Jew embracing another religion.” Consequently, such a person is no longer considered to be a Jew.⁹

Accordingly, a Jew who believes in Yeshua is automatically placed outside the boundaries of normative Judaism, no matter the nomenclature or praxis that he or she adopts. Thus, it is precisely the opposite direction that JBY need to follow. JBY should stand aloof from rabbinical Judaism and challenge its “Jewish” legitimacy and authority—just as Yeshua himself did. In other words, contemporary JBY should redefine authentic Jewishness. Instead of following traditional Judaism or the synagogue, JBY should embrace only solid biblical principles, with no reference whatsoever to the Jewish oral law, the *Halakhah* (rule of conduct), which is still far from being the final authority among all Jewry.

In addition, because Judaism and synagogue continue to maltreat the name of Yeshua and still excommunicate his Jewish disciples,¹⁰ it is not only out of context but even pathetic that congregations of JBY wish to follow rabbinical culture and institutions. Therefore, when JBY confuse their Jewish ethnic and national identity with synagogue patterns of thinking and behavior, they fail to appreciate the centrality of Yeshua and his message. In other words, the “Synagogue JBY” are actually confusing fundamental biblical priorities with attitudes that at best marginalize Yeshua. Thus, in my opinion, when JBY adopt the rabbinical terminology and practice of Judaism and synagogue, they totally lose focus and mislead not merely themselves but many others as well.

⁹*Beresford vs. Ministry of Interior Affairs*, Verdict of the Israeli High Court of Justice (file no. 265/87, 25 December 1989 [Hebrew]). Cf. leading case of “Brother Daniel,” Oswald Rufeisen, and Benjamin Shalit, in A. F. Landau, ed., *Selected Judgments of the Supreme Court of Israel* (Jerusalem, 1971).

¹⁰See Yehuda Liebes, “Mazmiah Qeren Yeshu’Ah,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1983/84): 313–48 (Hebrew).

Moreover, while religion and nationality are inseparable within Jewish tradition, ethnically only one Jewish nation still exists. However, theologically we can easily point to the existence of several "Judaisms."¹¹ Thus, for example, Rabbinical/Orthodox Judaism differs fundamentally from Secular/Humanistic Judaism.¹² Similarly, substantial differences apply with regard to Reform and Conservative Judaism. Therefore, another focal question today is not about who may belong to Judaism but about what Judaism is. Or, what is the definition for "authoritative Judaism" in light of the diverse "Judaisms" within the Jewish commonwealth? And more specifically, through which of the diverse "Judaisms" can one identify the real Messiah and Redeemer?

Currently this acute problem is dramatically reflected among the Jewish opponents of the "Lubavitcher Messiah," sarcastically criticizing the large *Chabad* movement as "a religion closest to Judaism."¹³ Interestingly, the Chabadnic Messianic Jews even attribute divinity to their "Messiah" and expect his resurrection. Nowadays, some other dead and living rabbis within Jewry are emphatically considered by their followers to be *the* Messiah. Among the names we can mention, for example, are the late Rebbe Nachman of Breslav and Rebbe Kook.¹⁴ Furthermore, Israeli assemblies of JBY need to carefully define the use of the term "Messianism," because it is also combined today with territorial aspirations of political right-wingers within Israeli society such as the followers of "Gush Emunim" (Bloc of the Faithful).¹⁵ The complexity of designations, ideologies, and

¹¹See Amos Mokadi, *The Challenge: A New Jewish Paradigm* (Tel-Aviv, 1997 [Hebrew]).

¹²See Yehoshua Arieli, "On Being a Secular Jew in Israel," *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, 45 (1988): 49–60. Cf. Dedi Zucker, ed., *We the Secular Jews* (Tel-Aviv 1999 [Hebrew]).

¹³See David Berger, "The Rebbe, the Jews, and the Messiah," *Commentary*, vol. 112 (2001): 23–30.

¹⁴See Seffi Rachlevsky, *Messiah's Donkey* (Tel-Aviv, 1998), 291–93, 365–66 (Hebrew).

¹⁵See Maurice Bowler, "Chabad, Gush Emunim and Messianism," *The Messianic Jew* 67 (1994), 30–33; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Tel-Aviv, 1993), 111–200 (Hebrew).

actions interrelated within the Messianic domain calls us to carefully define our terminology.

Reasonably, therefore, we should ask this: With which sector of "Messianic Judaism" does JBY wish to be part and parcel? For me this is merely a rhetorical question, since even the term "Messianic" cannot exclusively be applicable as a name for JBY. As a result of the contemporary situation, systematic differentiation must be made between three blurred terms—Judaism, Jewry, and Jewishness—and these specifications are not mere semantic games.

To summarize, therefore, in order to escape an unavoidable conceptual trap, which, in fact, can also lead to confusing the Word of God with human traditions, congregations of JBY should abandon the terms "Messianic Judaism" and "Messianic synagogue." These terms cannot even be optional, as they automatically cause chaotic confusions and misrepresentations. Therefore, I would offer a solution to this trap by simply avoiding any "ism." JBY should only adopt the biblical term *talmidim*—disciples—of *Yeshua* (Acts 6:1–2; 20:1). This scriptural designation, or simply *ma'aminim be'Yeshua*—believers in *Yeshua*, immediately calls for orderliness within the polyphonic labyrinth of our times.

CONFRONTING THE CHURCH'S ANTI-JEWISH LEGACY

The "church of the uncircumcision" contributed much to the liquidation of the original JBY and even now attempts to limit the influence of today's congregations of JBY. The church of the Gentiles defined its own identity by expressing contempt toward Jewish characteristics—including JBY. During many centuries the church developed anti-Jewish doctrines and declared that it had replaced the Jews as the real "chosen people."

Historically, the Gentile church fathers not only insisted that JBY must become 100 percent Christians, without any Jewish characteristics whatsoever, but developed strong anti-Jewish exegesis based on a theology of systematic differentiation of the Gentiles from the Jews.¹⁶ Contemporary JBY confront such attitudes

¹⁶See François Blanchetière, *Enquête sur les racines juives du mouvement chrétien* (Paris, 2001), 507–14.

down to this day because too often the churches want to see JBY as museum exhibits. Many churches view congregations of JBY as associates not to be fully trusted or accepted—those who pose a danger to the Gentile establishment and tradition.

Because the congregations of JBY regard themselves as an integral part of physical Israel, this stands in the way of the self-definition of the Gentile churches as the “true Israel” (*Verus Israel*).¹⁷ In fact, from the early centuries the church opposed the option of having independent assemblies of JBY, as this remained a standing menace for her own *raison d’être*, threatening to overthrow Gentile prerogatives of theological leadership and prestige. Thus today many church figures struggle, mostly behind the scenes yet sometimes out in the open, *against* having a “Jewish church,” a distinct assembly of JBY, *within* the universal church.¹⁸ Such church leaders simply want JBY to integrate inside the Gentile churches, yet it is a very dangerous decision to remove an independent presence of a Jewish element among the universal body of believers.

As part of its anti-Jewish policy to legally authenticate its own inheritance through the invalidation of Jewish foundations, the church replaced the Jewish calendar with a new one. The change of the biblical lunar calendar, as well as the observance of Sunday, obviously affected not only the keeping of the seventh-day Sabbath but also the biblical Passover, since Easter always had to fall on a Sunday.¹⁹ Hence, when modern congregations of JBY still follow the biblical/Hebraic calendar for their feast celebrations, they are frequently treated by non-Jewish believers as “obsolete workers” who put their hands to the plow and look back (Luke 9:62).²⁰

¹⁷See Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: The Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁸See Gershon Nerel, “‘Verus Israel’?: Jewish Believers in Jesus—A Challenge for the Church,” paper presented at the international conference on The Dynamics of Antisemitism in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century (Jerusalem, 13–16 June 1999).

¹⁹See Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 165–235.

²⁰See *Grace and Truth*, *Collectio Hebraica Hierosolymitana* (Jerusalem, 1948), 82 (Hebrew).

The issue of circumcision provides another example of the church’s anti-Jewish attitudes. Throughout the Middle Ages and until recent times, churches required JBY to adopt “professions of faith” by which they had to undertake not only to stop “carnal circumcision” but also to renounce this practice publicly.²¹ Historically, the church opposed circumcision among JBY, not merely because it gave no salvation credit, but also because the church refused to tolerate any outwardly Jewish national sign uniquely and perpetually belonging to the seed of Abraham (Genesis 17:1–14). In other words, the change of the calendar and the abolition of circumcision as a national act for JBY were instrumental in the church’s triumphalism over the Jews. The established Gentile church deliberately disassociated itself from Jewish/biblical rites—particularly in order to enforce its absolute authority over the *kehilot* (congregations) of JBY.²² Unfortunately, this is not merely a remote episode.²³

One observes today as well within the universal body of Yeshua-believers the question, “Who should hold the theological hegemony?” These feelings not only exist but still shape the identity of both Gentile and Jewish believers in Yeshua. But this is mostly an undercover phenomenon, since nowadays it is politically incorrect to pronounce such ideas in the open.²⁴

Protestants as well as Catholics refuse to recognize JBY as proper Jews, and therefore demand that they get out of the Jewish community, over and over relying on the misinterpretation of a partial verse—“There is neither Jew nor Greek” (Galatians 3:28). This partial quotation makes use of a third of a biblical verse, ignoring the fact that the quotation also deals with male and female and master and servant, each of whom retain their distinctiveness.

For example, in 1964 the Lutheran World Federation officially declared that the term “Hebrew Christian” (and I would

²¹Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, 394–97.

²²Oded Irshai, “The Church of Jerusalem—from ‘The Church of the Circumcision’ to ‘The Church from the Gentiles,’” in *The History of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 1999), 61–114 (Hebrew).

²³See Melanie Phillips, “Christians Who Hate the Jews,” *The Spectator* (16 February 2002).

²⁴See Nerel, “Verus Israel?” 15–16 (see <http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/absdynam.html>).

add how much more the term “Messianic Jew”) “introduces unbiblical divisions into the church.”²⁵ This statement inherently was not merely a refutation of terminology relating to individual JBY vis-à-vis the Gentile church, as some had thought.²⁶ The real fear expressed here was, in fact, of separate and unassimilable “Jewish churches.” However, just as there are natural differences between male and female within the church itself, it is natural to distinguish between Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshua. Within congregations, JBY have a distinct calling and testimony to witness about the Jewish Messiah both for church and synagogue. Obviously, however, while there is no biblical commandment for women to form their own branch within the church, still there exists a clear biblical call for Israel’s permanent distinctiveness.

ISRAEL’S IRREVOCABLE ELECTION

Against various aspects of the historic “Replacement Theology” within the churches, the modern congregations of JBY stand today as a living example that God has neither rejected nor forsaken the “apple of his eye,” his people Israel (Zechariah 2:8). These assemblies reflect a reality that corresponds to the words of the apostle Paul, who clearly promotes the doctrine of Israel’s election *as a nation*: “as far as election is concerned, they [Israel] are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (Romans 11:28–29). Consequently, the modern congregations of JBY, as in the first centuries, represent the unique remnant of Israel “chosen by grace” (Romans 11:5). In other words, this remnant must remain a distinctive body, retaining its unique characteristics within its own congregations and fellowships.

While contemporary assemblies of JBY stand as the “first-fruits” of Israel, they also point to the rest of the nation of Israel as God’s elect (*am segula*), that eventually those living during Messiah’s return will be saved in a wonderful way (see Romans

²⁵“The Church and the Jewish People,” *The Lutheran World*, vol. 11 (1964): 266.

²⁶See H. D. Leuner, “Is ‘Hebrew Christian’ Theologically Correct?” *American Hebrew Christian*, 51 (1966): 3–9.

11:26–27). At the same time, however, the church of the Gentiles cannot take the place of physical Israel by claiming that it is the “true Israel.” According to God’s perpetual election of Israel as a nation, JBY must also keep their distinctive corporate identity even within the present time frame of the body of Messiah.

It is absolutely true that the non-Jewish believers in Yeshua participate in Israel’s spiritual heritage (see Ephesians 1:3–5), yet this universal election does not cancel the particular election of Israel. Israel has to remain separate—as there is an election within an election. Obviously, from the viewpoint of atonement and salvation there is no difference whatsoever between Jew and Gentile, yet from a *functional* perspective, Israel—and within it the assemblies of JBY—has a unique calling. This calling is to remind the Gentiles about their Jewish roots and to interpret Scripture in a new way (for example, to show that *Sha’ul* (Paul) did not betray his people but also stands as a faithful “apostle to the Jews.”²⁷

THE TIMES AND THE FULLNESS OF THE GENTILES

The restoration of authentic assemblies of JBY is “life from the dead” (Romans 11:15). God works uniquely through such congregations, and we can see that they appear increasingly on the public agenda of both church and synagogue. Likewise, the present territorial restoration of Israel, with Jerusalem as its sovereign capital, is the clear fulfillment of the “dry bones” prophecy, nationally awaiting Israel’s spiritual revival (see Ezekiel 36:22–28; 37:1–14). *Medinat Israel*, the state of Israel, poses a great challenge to the *Golah*, the Jewish Diaspora, while Israeli congregations of JBY embody a double challenge—challenging both the Gentile churches and the Jewish assemblies of JBY that wish to remain in the Diaspora. As now “the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24), a new era dawns with the modern congregational movement of JBY.²⁸

²⁷See Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *How a Jew Explains Ephesians* (Jerusalem, 1978).

²⁸See Hubert Panteny, “This Time and Our Task,” *Jerusalem*, vol. 62/63 (Nov./Dec. 1951): 6–8.

Nowadays there is much apostasy within the churches, and they desperately need a reformation. Today a variety of unbiblical doctrines anchored in New Age philosophy, in environmental "green theology," in "success theology," and in feminism, as well as in the deification of humanity, to mention only a few, are spreading within numerous churches.²⁹ These churches must place reformation ahead of revival.³⁰ This reformation should come not only from within the Gentile churches themselves but also from the assemblies of JBY as they introduce a "Jewish Reformation."

Israel as a nation and particularly the modern congregations of JBY present today a special test for the Gentile churches. The churches must realize that the congregations of JBY have a unique task that only Jews can fulfill. A basic example would be the real, not semantic, shift from "missionizing" to *witnessing* about Yeshua.

NEITHER GENTILIZING NOR JUDAIZING

In the present time, while churches seem willing to welcome the conformist *individual* JBY, most of them repudiate such *corporate* entities. This is especially true when the Gentile churches view the congregations of JBY as nonconformist and "schismatic" dissidents. History has shown that the greatest wrong of the churches has been the Gentilizing of JBY, despite what is being said to the contrary.³¹ Following historical precedents, many Gentile churches still turn a deaf ear to the biblical truth that the non-Jewish believers in Yeshua "do not support the root, but the root supports [them]" (Romans 11:18). As the wild olive shoot is grafted into the cultivated olive tree and *not* vice versa (see Romans 11:17–24), the Gentile churches should naturally acknowledge the distinctive assemblies of JBY.

Congregations of JBY should maintain their Jewish identity, yet by all means they should not seek to Judaize the Christians

²⁹See Hank Hanegraaff, *Christianity in Crisis* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1993).

³⁰See Dave Hunt, *Beyond Seduction: A Return to Biblical Christianity* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1987), 29–43.

³¹See M. J. Levy, "To Atone for Christendom's Greatest Wrong to the Jews," *Hebrew Christian* 1 (1929): 194.

from the nations. Conversion to "Judaism" by circumcision or any other external practices should be fully rejected. Similarly, JBY should not be Gentilized by denying their right to corporately observe the God-given—not rabbinical—customs of the Jewish people. In such a congregational way JBY remain loyal to national Israel, thus giving a sense of natural belonging and self-confidence within the same family—and the Gentile churches should sympathetically support this.

Congregations of JBY should definitely not be comprised exclusively of Jews, yet those non-Jews who join them should come with the attitude of Ruth the Moabitess, and they should be accepted and welcomed as she was. The entire mixed congregation should still maintain a biblical Jewish—not rabbinical—identity. This can be best accomplished in the Jewish state, not in the Diaspora, as JBY become immersed in a Jewish culture and naturally practice the Jewish calendar and holy days in workplaces and schools. Only in Eretz-Israel (the land of Israel) can assemblies of JBY maintain a Hebraic identity together with non-Jewish believers—without Gentilizing or Judaizing each other.

EPILOGUE

Any study concerning the legitimacy and authority of modern congregations of Jewish believers in Yeshua should focus on the *combination* of biblical verses and the historical developments of the last two millennia. Historically, both church and synagogue shaped their own identity by neutralizing the distinctiveness of corporate entities of JBY. Even today, in fact, the very existence of independent congregations of JBY is still provoking both Jewry and Christendom. Recently, however, while more churches manifest growing interest in their Jewish roots, they are also willing to admit the church's wrongdoing against JBY and repent.³²

Nowadays, it is through their congregations, not only as individuals, that JBY are influencing bit by bit both mundane and sacred history. They are back in the historical arena in order

³²See, for example, Peter Hocken, *The Glory and the Shame: Reflections on the 20th-Century Outpouring of the Holy Spirit* (Guildford, England: Eagle, 1994).

to fulfill a significant role within the eschatological developments still expected to take place. Modern assemblies of JBY are no longer an episodic “nonissue” that can be simply ignored.

Therefore, on the basis of historical experience, one may expect that, without the existence of autonomous and viable assemblies of JBY, the beliefs of the Gentile church are constantly liable to the danger of relapsing into neo-paganism. It is no secret that those churches that have distanced themselves from Jewish-biblical components have also retreated from the Word of God. Humanistic compromises and liberalism have deeply penetrated the church. Nonbiblical doctrines and cultic theology control many aspects of church life. The parallel congregations of JBY with their Hebraic teaching of Scripture can be an inducement to return to the plain meaning of Scripture. Congregations of JBY have the task of a corporate watchman, warning and challenging both church and synagogue according to the fundamental teachings of the Bible.

The very fact that *congregations of JBY lack a two-millennia tradition* helps them to easily find the bridge between themselves and the first-century model of JBY as portrayed in the New Testament. In fact, modern congregations of JBY fully credit the Gentile church for the preservation and the canonization of the New Testament and accept the scriptural canon as a fait accompli.³³ Congregations of JBY, as self-governing entities, accept the canonical text and the guidance of the Holy Spirit for their spiritual legitimacy and authority. Even without the historical continuity of a formal apostolic succession, congregations of JBY are *not* an anachronism. In reality these congregations form a tangible bridgehead with the Jewish assemblies of the early centuries.³⁴

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, the existing “church market,” either on the Protestant or the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox side, can hardly offer an alternate authentic place for the autonomous congregations of JBY. Even having

³³See Gershon Nerel, “The Authoritative Bible and Jewish Believers,” *Messianic Jewish Life* 73 (2000): 16–19.

³⁴See Daniel C. Juster, “The Government Question for the Messianic Congregations,” *Kesher* 10 (2000): 46–47.

fully authoritative assemblies of JBY *within* the church establishment is not realistic. Rather, as free and self-governing entities, loyal to both King Messiah and the nation of Israel, congregations of JBY should exist *alongside* the Gentile church; and as two autonomous brotherly bodies within the body of Messiah they can fruitfully influence each other. Cooperation will come more readily with the churches among the nations, and so Yeshua will really appear as *Ahinu* (our brother) and the best friend of the Jews.³⁵

³⁵See Evert van der Poll, *De Messiaanse Beweging* (Putten, Netherlands: Shalom Books, 2001), 291–308.