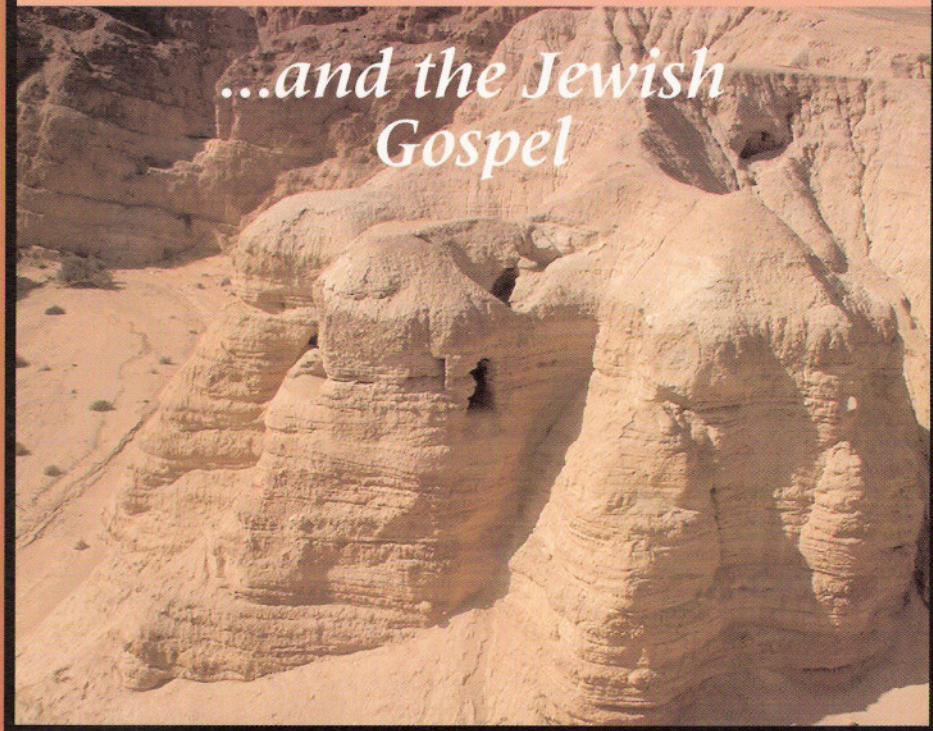


# THE QUMRAN SCROLLS

*...and the Jewish  
Gospel*





# THE QUMRAN SCROLLS *...and the Jewish Gospel*

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



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THE QUMRAN SCROLLS

# Qumran, Messianic Jews, and Modern Self-Identity

By Gershon Nerel

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947-1956, contemporary Messianic Jews, also known as Hebrew/Jewish Christians, have repeatedly referred in their writings to the documents and people of Qumran.<sup>1</sup> Why do modern Jewish believers in Yeshua, who accept either the messiahship or the divinity of Yeshua, or both, express an interest in the Qumran scrolls and community?

In this paper I present a preliminary study of ideological mechanisms among contemporary Jewish believers in Yeshua (= JBY) which enable them to rediscover their own Jewish roots through the old writings of the Judean Desert. Although on the surface such efforts may look like mere virtual attempts, nevertheless they do reveal another dimension within the reality of an ongoing process that shapes the parameters of non-monolithic Jewry, composed of several Judaisms.<sup>2</sup>

## Qumran, Messianic Jews, and Karaites

Historically, as a result of the rejection of the halachic traditions (Oral Law) by both JBY and Karaites, Rabbinism excluded them from mainstream

1 See, for example, Raymond Chasles, "Manuscript Discoveries," *Jerusalem*, 92 (1954), 6-8; Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, "Of Whom Speaketh the Prophet?" *The Alliance Weekly* (August 15, 1956), 5; Menachem Benhayim, *Jews, Gentiles and the New Testament: Alleged Antisemitism in the New Testament* (Jerusalem 1985), 68-70; Joseph Shulam with Hilary Le Cornu, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1998); David Sedaca, "Lifting the Veil of an Archaeological Mystery," *Messianic Jewish Life*, 72 (1999), 4-7, 22-31. The leading theme of this issue of *MJL* was phrased as follows: "Dead Sea Scrolls – Unveiling the Hidden Mysteries of First-Century Messianic Judaism" (sic!); "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community – Part 2: The Qumran Community," *Chai*, 205 (1999), 7; Amy Smith, "The Dead Sea Sect and the New Testament Messianic Connection," *The Messianic Outreach*, 19 (2000), 17-20; Zvi Sadan, "Qumran by Eliette Abecassis," *Book Review, Kivun*, 34 (2003), 15 (Hebrew); Michael Tuval (in Hebrew), "On Hanoch Ben Yered, the Sins of the Irim, the Corpse of Moses and Yehuda the Brother of Yeshua," *Kivun*, 38 (2004), 11; Yeshayahu Yeshurun, "David Flusser and his Books *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* and *Second Temple Judaism, Its Sages and Literature*," *Kivun*, 40 (2004), 18; Michael Tuval, "To Whom did God Reveal His Secrets?" *Kivun*, 40 (2004), 7.

2 Cf. the insistence of the rabbinic scholar Jacob Neusner that one should talk about the Judaisms of the late Second Temple period. See J. Neusner, W. Scott Green, E.S. Frerichs, eds., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), ix-xiii.

Jewry. Therefore, when today these two "excommunicated groups" relate to Qumran, they adopt a pre-rabbinic precedent which existed more than 2000 years ago. Thus, after many centuries that the Messianic and Karaite movements have challenged the theological monopoly of Rabbinism as the *only* normative Judaism,<sup>3</sup> they take advantage of the Qumranic heritage to express their identification as authentic Jews. In other words, the originality and genuineness of the ancient Jewish boundaries that shaped the first-century communities are now "resurrected" in the modern national consciousness of Karaites and JBY.

Today, in the State of Israel, there are approximately 5,000 Messianic Jews<sup>4</sup> and 25,000 Karaites.<sup>5</sup> While Karaism survived during the past 1,100 years, the modern movement of Messianic Jews has existed only during the past 200 years. Through their parallel yet unequal 'extension' to the Qumranic authors and scrolls, Karaites and Messianic Jews try to bridge two historical gaps. Karaism, from its own perspective, searches for Karaite roots and literary remains *before* the eighth century in order to maintain a Karaite claim of antiquity which goes back to the Second Temple period. Actually, the Karaites find in the ancient people of the Scrolls their Jewish predecessors.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to Daniel Lasker of the Ben-Gurion University in the Negev, some Karaites even argue that:

the Karaites are the direct biological or spiritual descendants of the Dead Sea sect, whose writings were preserved (underground as it were) from the first until the eighth or ninth centuries until the flowering of what is known today as Karaism. Karaism is not, therefore, a medieval aberration but rather an ongoing expression of an alternate Judaism that has existed at least from Second Temple times.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Messianic Jews today do not really need Qumran, as the Karaites do, in order to prove their antiquity. David Sedaca, former Executive Secretary of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance, argues as follows:

- 3 Concerning the topic of "Jewish-Reformation" see J. Van Den Berg, "Proto-Protestants? The Image of the Karaites as a Mirror of the Catholic-Protestant Controversy in the Seventeenth Century," in J. Van Den Berg and Ernestine G. E. Van Der Wall, eds., *Jewish-Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1988), 33-49; Gershon Nerel, "Torah and Halakhah among Modern Assemblies of Jewish Yeshua-Believers," in S. N. Gundry and L. Goldberg, eds., *How Jewish is Christianity: Two Views on the Messianic Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 152-165.
- 4 Guesstimates vary from 4,000 to 7,000, in about 100-120 Messianic congregations and fellowships. See Baruch Maoz, *The Jewish Christian Church in Israel: Now and in 2010* (Rishon LeTzion: HaGefen, 2001?), 1; Aviel Schneider, "Israel's Messianic Community and the Nations," *Israel Today*, 74 (2005), 20.
- 5 Yaakov Geller, "The Karaites, Their Calendar and Customs," *Bar-Ilan University's Parashat Hashavua Study Center* (July 3, 2004), 5 note #1, at [www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/emor/gel.html](http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/emor/gel.html).
- 6 See Yoram Erder, *The Karaite Mourners of Zion and the Qumran Scrolls: On the History of an Alternative to Rabbinic Judaism* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2004), 12-23, 421-429 (Hebrew).
- 7 Daniel J. Lasker, "The Dead Sea Scrolls in the Historiography and Self-Image of Contemporary Karaites," *Dead Sea Discoveries*, 9 (2002), 285.





In essence, the Dead Sea Scrolls are the only direct documents from the time when Messianic Judaism and rabbinical Judaism went their separate ways... the Dead Sea Scrolls help us to focus more on the person of the Messiah than on the religious body that his followers developed in time... With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now have something to help us compare the early Christian writings with Hebrew and Aramaic literature... Now we have contemporary verbal expressions in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thus, we can understand more of the language of Yeshua, the Gospels and even the Epistles, because we now know the meaning of these words and phrases.<sup>8</sup>

As it turns out, Messianic Jews<sup>9</sup> and Karaites<sup>10</sup> relate individually to the Dead Sea Scrolls in order to demonstrate *their* Jewish counterbalance to Rabbinism. Additionally, from a linguistic perspective, JBY view the Qumranic documents as a witness to the Hebraic infrastructure of the Gospels. Consequently, they find no reason to disagree with the hypothesis of the late Prof. David Flusser that the earliest Gospel prototype was written in Hebrew, not Aramaic.<sup>11</sup>

### **Qumran, the Old Testament, and the Gospel**

The late Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir (1905-1978)<sup>12</sup> reasoned how the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm the Messianic interpretation that the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah points to Yeshua.<sup>13</sup> Concerning the verse "For the transgression of my people [*ami*] was he stricken" (53:8b), Ben-Meir highlighted the fact that the difference between the two words *ami* (my people) and *amo* (his people) is in their being written with a Hebrew *wav* or *yod*. A *wav* can be made into a *yod* by cutting off half of its foot.<sup>14</sup> Thus, he concluded, the discovery of the Isaiah scroll furnishes strong evidence that the *wav* is correct and that the Masoretes, i.e. rabbinic Judaism, have shortened the *wav* in their text to make it appear to be a *yod*. Namely, to leave the *wav* unmutated would amount to a concession on their part that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel.

According to Ben-Meir, the discovery of the great Isaiah Scroll removes

8 Sedaca, 23, 31-32.

9 Benhayim, 69.

10 J. Lasker, 286.

11 Gershon Nerel, "The 'Flagship' of Hebrew New Testaments: A Recent Revision by Israeli Messianic Jews," *Mishkan*, 41 (2004), 56.

12 Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Netivyah, 2001; Hebrew); Gershon Nerel, *'Messianic Jews' in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996), 248-261, 284-290 (Hebrew).

13 On this subject, see articles by Bartelt, Elgvin, and Santala in *Mishkan*, 43 (2005).

14 Some Qumran scribes do not discern between *yod* and *wav*, others only have a slight difference, while others again discern clearly between these letters. Thus, an original *wav* could easily and incidentally be changed into a *yod* in the process of scribal transmission.

the confusion and eliminates the possibility of reading into the text a word which would support a false theory. Therefore, he concluded, in their Hebrew Bibles Messianic Jews should not hesitate to correct the word *ami* to read *amo*, by restoring the missing portion of the *wav*. Then, instead of reading "for the transgression of *my* people was he stricken," one would read "for the transgression of *his* people was he stricken."<sup>15</sup> So, then, Ben-Meir 'recruited' a Qumran text in order to introduce a Messianic exegesis about the Messiah. He opposed the rabbinic hermeneutical tradition with a polemical attitude, yet without any apologetic excuses.

Before Ben-Meir's criticism of the Masoretic text based on Qumranic Isaiah, the late Abram Poljak (1900-1963), editor of *Jerusalem*,<sup>16</sup> used the Qumranic Isaiah in an affirmative way – to prove the harmony between the Masoretic text and the Gospel. In his magazine, Poljak published an article by Raymond Chasles on the value of the Qumranic Isaiah for verifying the Gospel's message. According to this argument, the Qumranic Isaiah contains all 66 chapters which form the book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, without additions and without gaps. Because all these chapters are presented under the name of the prophet Isaiah without any differentiation, it is claimed, the theory of modern Bible critics loses considerable credibility.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Messianic Jews also employ the Qumranic Isaiah to authenticate the evangelists, who quote in the gospels *one* prophet Isaiah. In other words, such JBY ignore the modern critical theories of a "second" and a "third" Isaiah.<sup>18</sup>

## Qumran and the Jewishness of the New Testament

In *Kivun*, an Israeli Messianic magazine, Michael Tuval promotes the thought that Qumran literature produces substantial evidence about the Jewish roots of the New Testament. Tuval argues that the fragments of the apocryphal book of Enoch discovered at Qumran shed a special light on the background of the Epistle of Jude (*Yehuda*). In his opinion, 1 Enoch is the "key" to understanding the Jewish message of the Epistle of Jude.<sup>19</sup> Tuval also argues that both the Qumran group and Yeshua's early disciples originated from the sectarianism of the Second Temple period. As such, both communities searched the Old Testament to legitimize their

15 Ben-Meir 1956, 5.

16 See, for example, Gershon Nerel, "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, 2000), 283-297 (Hebrew).

17 Chasles, 7.

18 Cf. Gershon Nerel, "The Authoritative Bible and Jewish Yeshua-Believers," *MJL*, 73 (2000), 16-19. For some comparisons see also Serge Ruzer, "Who is unhappy with the Davidic Messiah? Notes on biblical exegesis in 4Q161, 4Q174, and the Book of Acts," *Cristianesimo Nella Storia*, 24 (2003), 229-255.

19 M. Tuval, "On Hanoch Ben Yered, the Sins of the Irim, the Corpse of Moses and Yehuda the Brother of Yeshua," *Kivun*, 38 (2004), 11; Tuval, "A Great Miracle was There," *Kivun*, 42 (2004), 8 (both Hebrew).





admired teachers. Therefore, when the Synoptic Gospels, and Matthew in particular, talk about Yeshua "fulfilling the prophecies," they actually reflect the same Jewish method of biblical commentary (*peshet*) which prevails in Qumran.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, Tuval also claims that Qumranic leaders, such as the *Teacher of Righteousness*, were presented as divine, and this idea/reality influenced Yeshua, who affirmed his own divinity.<sup>21</sup> However, one must add that although Tuval aims to prove that the New Testament sprang up within a genuine Jewish environment, i.e. is not a gentile production, he actually criticizes the primitive disciples of Yeshua, who went, in his eyes, "too far" in *worshipping* their lord as God. In other words, Tuval actually protests against Yeshua's disciples who placed him alongside YHWH. For that, Tuval insists, there is no precedent within the Qumran literature.<sup>22</sup> So through his analysis of Qumran documents, Tuval de facto expresses his personal discontent that Jews, past and present, dare to accept the full divinity of Yeshua.

### Refutation of "New Testament Antisemitism"

Through an analysis of the vocabulary and style of the Dead Sea scrolls, Michael Tuval also discusses the alleged antisemitism in the New Testament. Scriptural verses such as "you are of your father the devil" (Jn 8:44) and "brood of vipers" (Mt 3:7), according to Tuval, reflect the common mode of parlance among the rival sects of the Second Temple period. The use of blunt words against the opponents of the Qumran people, Tuval argues, was common, even including terms such as evil, corrupt, and hypocrite. Thus, he explains, if the attacks against the Pharisees/Jews in the New Testament are understood within the *internal* context of a sectarian and provocative Judaism, then one can easily understand the sources of this passionate mode of expression.<sup>23</sup>

However, I would like to add that Tuval treats these issues mainly from a textual perspective, and totally ignores two other points: first, the possibility of a unique divine self-consciousness in the speeches and status of Yeshua; and second, the sharp "anti-Jewish" remarks spoken by the Old Testament prophets. Furthermore, Tuval's explanation is not original. Other Messianic Jews, for example the late Ludwig Dewitz, have noted the fact that the Dead Sea Scrolls open a linguistic door to Second Temple Jewry with their "enthusiastic" language – like those passages in which they condemn the High Priest as wicked and belonging to the sons of darkness, while they regard themselves as the sons of light, the true Israel. This apparent "anti-Judaic" attitude is a clash of opinions *within*

20 Tuval, "To Whom did God Reveal His Secrets?" *Kivun*, 40 (2004), 7 (Hebrew).

21 Tuval, "When the Logos was God," *Kivun*, 41 (2004), 8 (Hebrew).

22 *Ibid.*

23 Tuval, "On the Sons of Satan, Children of Hell and Descendants of Vipers," *Kivun*, 43 (2005), 8 (Hebrew).



Jewry, and the New Testament has nothing to do with gentile antisemitism stemming from prejudice and hatred.<sup>24</sup>

### Essenes: Anti-Model for Early and Modern Kehila

Messianic Jews make use of the Qumran discoveries in different ways. For example, in the writings of Joseph Shulam, leader of the Messianic *Roeh Israel* congregation and *Netivyah* Center in Jerusalem, the Essenes appear as a negative model of dissidents. Shulam actually views the Essenes as schismatics who unilaterally distanced themselves from the other groups of first-century Judaism, including the Pharisees and the early disciples of Yeshua. Consequently, by a historical-social analogy, Shulam dismisses the Essenes as a model because of their negative attitude about the Jerusalem Temple. In other words, Shulam wishes that modern JBY would follow in the footsteps of the early *Talmidei Yeshua*, Yeshua's disciples, who, unlike the Essenes, continued to worship in the Temple and observed the basic Pharisaic/rabbinical traditions.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, Shulam places both ancient and modern JBY on one side, and contrasts them with the Qumran Essenes on the other. Unlike the Essenes, who considered the Second Temple, its priests, and the synagogues of the time to be evil and defiled, Shulam argues that modern JBY are part and parcel of Jewry, both halachically and nationally.

Shulam also contrasts the book of Acts with the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament for contemporary practical purposes. He argues that the Acts of the Apostles reflects a "positive" model for modern Messianic Jews, since first-century JBY did observe the oral law of the Jewish sages alongside the Torah of Moses, and even Paul did nothing against the normative practices and services in the Temple. Moreover, Shulam highlights the fact that the early *kehila* (church) did not see any conflict between the validity of Yeshua's sacrifice on the cross and the continuation of worship in the Temple. "Yeshua's sacrifice must have been considered the completion or perfection of the sacrificial system of the Temple," Shulam writes, "but not the annulment of it."<sup>26</sup>

At the same time Shulam also points to the fact that the late and influential Prof. Yigael Yadin held the opinion that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to a group from the Essene community who accepted Yeshua as the Messiah, yet were disappointed and desperate almost to the point of giving up their faith. Although Shulam is careful not to fully ascribe to Yadin's theory, it is nevertheless clear that he does accept Yadin's view that the attitude of the Epistle to the Hebrews on the Temple in Jerusalem reflects the Dead Sea sect's views. And, therefore, according to



24 Ludwig Dewitz, "Is the New Testament Anti-Jewish?" *The Hebrew Christian*, 57 (1984), 52-53.

25 J. Shulam, "The Early Church and the Jerusalem Temple," *Teaching From Zion*, 10 (1997), 22-24.

26 Shulam 1997, 24-25.

Shulam, "these views of the Essene community [as reflected in Hebrews – G.N.] could have been different from those of the Pharisees who became believers."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the implication of the first-century situation for Messianic Jews today, according to Shulam, would categorically focus on the differentiation between the desirable model of the Acts of the Apostles and the undesirable model of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Acts is presented with the "positive" examples of enduring connection and observance of normative Jewish heritage and lifestyle, while Hebrews is portrayed with a sectarian nonconformism which does not "fit" a modern Messianic Jewish group – like the one led by Shulam – that is committed "to the restoration of the First Century Church."<sup>28</sup> Shulam thus uses Qumran texts and scholarship in a radical critique of the New Testament canon. Further, Yadin's view of Hebrews has not received much support in the following generation of scholarship.

### **Qumran and Paul's Epistle to the Romans**

In his commentary on the Jewish roots of Paul's epistle to the Romans, Joseph Shulam refers widely to Qumranic literature. In fact, he quotes largely from the Dead Sea Scrolls and presents manifold comparisons with these documents, which range from the *Commentary (Peshet) on Habakkuk* [1QpH], the *(Community) Rule* [1QS], and the *(Thanksgiving) Hymns* [1QH], up to the *Florilegium* [4QFlor.] and the *War Rule* [1QM]. De facto, Shulam's basic aim is to prove that Paul was immersed within Second Temple Jewish thought, and therefore Paul's theological outlook is very close to that of the Qumran authors.<sup>29</sup>

Shulam openly admits that he treats the Qumran documents more textually and theologically than historically, and that he follows the scholarship and methodology of David Flusser.<sup>30</sup> Thus, following Flusser, Shulam explains that Paul's argument about God's election of Israel (Rom 11:5) is strongly influenced by the idea of "His choice of grace" found in the Qumran literature.<sup>31</sup>

### **Epilogue**

Both Qumran and Masada still hold great symbolic value. Just as the heritage of the Zealots at Masada continues to shape the identity of

27 Shulam 1997, 25 n.10.

28 Shulam 1997, 27. See also Joseph Shulam, "The Temple, Synagogue, and Early Community," *Teaching From Zion*, 16 (2004), 15.

29 Shulam and Le Cornu, 9-11 and *passim*.

30 Shulam and Le Cornu, 10-11, 69. See also David Flusser, "The Dead Sea Sect and Pre-Pauline Christianity," *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 23-74.

31 Shulam and Le Cornu, 365-366. Cf. also recently Hilary Le Cornu with Joseph Shulam, *A Commentary on The Jewish Roots of Galatians* (Jerusalem, Netivyah/Academon, 2005), 507-512.





modern Israeli patriotism, the heritage of Qumran is employed by modern Messianic Jews in order to reevaluate their identity. For modern Jewish Yeshua-believers, who are a marginal minority vis-à-vis the rabbinic establishment, Qumran stands nowadays as an authentic and legitimate "identity reference." In a way analogous to early Qumran Judaism, Messianic Judaism today manifests the pluralism that characterizes the diverse religious expressions of the Jewish people, alongside Karaite, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and secular Judaism.

Recently two Israeli archaeologists, Yitzhak Magen and Yuval Peleg, questioned the prevailing theory that the Dead Sea Scrolls were scribed at Qumran by monastic Essenes. Magen and Peleg rather assume that the Scrolls were smuggled from various libraries – not only from Jerusalem – to the Judean Desert, in order to save them from the suspected violence and destructiveness of the Roman legions.<sup>32</sup> Whether the ancient Scrolls originated in Qumran itself, in Jerusalem, or elsewhere in Judea, they remain a cardinal issue for the identity-building of many Messianic Jews (and Karaites).<sup>33</sup> Through these authentic and unprecedented documents from the Second Temple period, they have found new support for stressing their self-identity.

Interestingly, between the years 1961–1983 the Southern Baptists in the State of Israel irregularly published a magazine in three languages – Hebrew, English, and Arabic – titled *Hayahad*.<sup>34</sup> This name comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls and means "The Community." Modern Baptists actually "resurrected" ancient Qumran – in order to identify, by literary means, a distinct religious minority inside the Jewish State, a brotherhood where gentile Christians, expatriates and locals, coexist together with Messianic Jews. Eventually, however, *Hayahad* survived merely as a relatively brief episode.

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32 Lauren Gelfond Feldinger, "A Crack in the Theory," *Jerusalem Post Online Edition* (Dec. 16, 2004).

33 About "theological archaeologists" and the conflict of identity among Hebrew Catholics and Jews who adopted Russian Orthodox Christianity, see recently Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen: Jewish Identity, The Soviet Intelligentsia and the Russian Orthodox Church* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2004), 112-128.

34 *The Hayahad Digest*, P.O.B. 11174, Tel Aviv, Ed. Chandler Lanier. The last issue, vol. 8, no. 32, appeared in June 1983.