

The Theological and Cultural Challenge of *Messianic Jews*. Towards a New Jewish Paradigm?

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Zusammenfassung

Messianische Juden sind Juden, die den messianischen Charakter Jesus sowohl wie den in traditionelles Judentum übermittelten Kult synkretistisch annehmen. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die Entstehung dieser synkretistischen und im heutigen Israel marginalen Bewegung und behauptet, dass sie eine radikale Entwicklung in der zweitausendjährigen Geschichte der jüdisch-christlichen Beziehungen darstellt. Dieser Beitrag bietet eine allgemeine Einführung in den Begriff der jüdisch-christlichen Identität, eine kurze Geschichte von der ersten Gruppe der messianischen Juden im Land Israels, einen Überblick über den religiösen Synkretismus der messianischen Juden und ihren den kulturellen Einfluss auf den modernen Israel und, schließlich, die Implikation, dass *das messianische Judentum* für ein neues Paradigma innerhalb der verschiedenen Hauptströmungen des Judentums gehalten werden sollte.

Abstract

Messianic Jews are Jewish individuals who syncretically accept both the messianic character of Jesus and the ritual cultic practices provided by traditional Judaism. The present article examines the emergence of this marginal syncretic movement in contemporary Israel, and maintains that it represents a radical development in the bimillenary history of Jewish-Christian relations. This article offers a general introduction to the notion of Jewish-Christian identity, a brief history of the first group of Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel, the cultural influence and religious syncretism of the Messianic Jews in modern Israel, and, finally, the implication that *Messianic Judaism* is supposed to become the new paradigm within the various branches of Judaism.

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1. Introduction

Messianic Jews (*yehudim meshihim*) are Jewish individuals who syncretically accept both the messianic character of Jesus (hence: “messianic”) and the ritual-cultic practices transmitted by traditional Judaism (hence: “Jews”).¹

This marginal syncretic movement, which has emerged relatively recently in contemporary Israel,² represents a radical development in the bimillenary history of Jewish-Christian relations and manifests a novelty from many points of view: terminologically, as a new claim for a *cross-religious* identity between Judaism and Christianity; ritually, as the syncretic combination of Old and New Testament practices; and theologically, as the introduction of an innovative religious paradigm into the already variegated trends in contemporary Judaism.

This article is divided into four sections: (§1) a general introduction to the notion of Jewish-Christian identity from the *Judeo-Christianity to Messianic Judaism*; (§2) a brief history of the first group of *Messianic Jews* that spontaneously

¹ The necessity of adhering publicly to the faith in Jesus and of preserving their self-identity as Jews suggested the use of new terminology for defining this syncretic movement. Many appellatives used by past and present messianic movements were unsatisfactory for a number of reasons: the term Judeo-Christian, as clarified in the next paragraph, was too heavily loaded with bimillenary prejudices; the appellative *Hebrew Christians* (*ivrim notzrim*) was a definition largely used in English-speaking Protestant communities both in Europe and in the Land of Israel and might have implied the need for separating from someone’s Jewishness probably in accordance to the New Testament “Letter the Hebrews”; finally, the potentially neutral title “Jesus-believing Jews” might sound slightly odd, exactly because it recalled in its very words the assumption that Jewishness and Christianity should be kept apart and should not overlap. For a *religionswissenschaftlich* definition of “Messianic Jews,” see the final paragraph. For recent scholarship, see E. Kessler: *Messianic Jews*. In: E. Kessler – N. Wenborn: *A Dictionary Of Jewish-Christian Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p.292. On the institution of Messianic Jews, see for instance: M.S. Kinzer: *Finding our way through Nicaea: the deity of Yeshua, bilateral ecclesiology, and redemptive encounter with the living God*. In: *Kesher* 24, 2010, pp.29–52 and P. Kollontai: *Messianic Jews and Jewish identity*. In: *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3,2, 2004, pp. 195–205. See also the recent H. Rucks: *Messianische Juden. Geschichte und Theologie der Bewegung in Israel*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2014.

² Cf. L. Nason: *Ebrei ‘credenti’ in Gesù. Movimenti e tendenze dell’Ebraismo messianico attuale*. In «Chi credete che io sia?». Gesù nel suo e nel nostro tempo, Ferrara, Gallio, Ferrara 2007, pp.175–202; Cf G. Nerel: “Yehudim Meshihim” be-Eretz Israel (1917–1967): Megamot u-Temurot be-’Izuv Zehut ‘Atzma’it [“Messianic Jews” in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity], Ph. D. thesis Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997; cf G. Nerel: ‘Messianic Jews’ in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967). Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity. In: *Mishkan*, 27, 1997, pp.11–25; M. Benhayim: *The Messianic Movement in Israel: A Personal Perspective (1963–1998)*. In *Mishkan*, 28, 1998, pp.5–29.

located in the Land of Israel before the later emergence of American-based groups of *Jesus-believing Jews*; (§3) the cultural influence and religious syncretism of the Messianic Jews in modern Israel, with a particular emphasis on the elaboration of a new theological conceptuality on the basis of a new translation of Scripture; (§4) finally, the implication, as suggested by Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro, that Messianic Judaism shall be accounted for a new paradigm within the various branches of Judaism.

2. A Jewish-Christian Identity: From “Judeo-Christians” to “Messianic Jews”

The notion of Messianic Jews generically designates, as expected, a group of modern Jews who share both the belief in Jesus as the messiah and their affiliation to the people of Israel, as normed by Orthodox Judaism.

Such a definition is correct, yet too generic for appreciating the radical novelty of this religious movement. Therefore, the nature of Messianic Judaism shall be appreciated only in comparison (and in contrast) with other traditional expressions of Jewish individuals who believe in *Christian faith*. Among a number of definitions, three designations for Jews who believe in Jesus shall be singled out for their historical and theological importance: Judeo-Christians, Jesus-believing Jews, and Jewish Christians.

The notion of Judeo-Christians is obviously the most ancient definition for those Jews who followed the preaching of Jesus the Nazarene before and after his crucifixion. More specifically, this notion would be a (virtually neutral) denomination for Jesus believers who also adhere to Jewish institutions.³ This complex multi-faced identity was then variously determined before and after the destruction of the Second Temple: until before the destruction of the Second Temple (70 c. e.) and from the destruction of the Second Temple up to the sixth century, when “

³ New Testament literature provides a number of definitions for these Judeo-Christians that cannot be treated here in detail: *hellenistikoï* and *hebraioi* (At 6:1), probably alluding respectively to the Greek- and Aramaic-speaking Jews believing in Jesus; *nazarenoi* (Epiphanius); *Ioudaioi* meaning “those among James (Jakob)” (*times apo Iakobon*) (1Cor 1:12). For a simple survey of these definitions, see H. Lemke: *Judenchristentum Zwischen Ausgrenzungen und Integration*, München, Lit Verlag, 2001, pp. 56–67.

Christianity is clearly differentiated from Judaism, becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Distinctions in the identity patterns of Judeo-Christians can thus be summarized as follows:⁴

JUDEO-CHRISTIANITY	30 – 70 C. E.	70 – 500 C. E.
ETHNIC DIMENSION	Jewish	
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS	covenant Temple messiah	covenant messiah
RELIGIOUS PRACTICES	Temple messianic Torah	Synagogue (?) messianic Torah
GEOGRAPHICAL CENTER	Jerusalem	Jerusalem (?) Transjordan (?)

Up until the destruction of the Second Temple, the condition of being a Judeo-Christian involved both the attendance of the Temple (and its connected sacrificial rituals) and the observance of the *messianic Torah*, as preached by Jesus and the New Testament literature. After the destruction of the Second Temple and with the loss of a geographical center in Jerusalem, the condition of being a Judeo-Christian still involved the observance of the messianic Torah yet also progressively neglected the attendance of the Synagogue and its prayers – up to the point that Judaism and Christianity eventually resulted, by the sixth century, in two markedly differentiated religious movements from both theological and ritual points of view. This differentiation ultimately reflected the growing antagonism between Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians and Greek-speaking (Hellenized) Jewish Christians, especially when the latter were gradually outnumbered by Gentile Greek-speaking Christians. Whereas the Jewish ethnic element was predominant at the very early beginning of the Christian movement, this was progressively paired with (and ultimately surpassed by) the non-Jewish ethnic element, the Gentiles.

As a consequence, the notion of Judeo-Christians would play the fundamental function of contrasting Christians of Jewish origin with Christians of non-Jewish origin, although they both belonged to the new entity. Accordingly, the newly installed Gentile-Jewish *people of God* is paradigmatically described by Paul with his famous metaphor of the wild and domestic olive-tree, in a

⁴ E. D. K. Broadhead: *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010, p. 54.

quite polemical piece of accusation against those who still refrain from believing in Jesus:

“And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. [...] For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” (Rom 11:17–18 and 21–24)

Interestingly enough, here Paul is not alien to animosity against his Jewish fellows who (still) don't believe in Jesus, but his primary interest is not to degrade Jewishness but rather to provide a more comprehensive understanding for the complexity of the new people of God, whose Judeo-Christians are only a specification. By introducing the metaphor of an olive-tree, Paul provides a rabbinical example for describing a miracle of God: it is God himself who provides redemption both for Jews and Gentiles by *transgressing* the very prohibition of grafting a wild and domestic olive-tree, as later codified in the Jewish Oral Law.⁵ With respect to this, Paul's metaphor also reflects the complex ethnic composition of the emerging Christian movement that is no longer an exclusively Jewish rather an *ethnically-mixed* phenomenon, a Jewish-Gentile reality, as well as a growing antagonism among its branches. Indeed, the eventual disappearance of Judeo-Christianity by the sixth century in favor of the progressively predominant non-Jewish ethnic composition of the new people of God shall be treated as a consequence of four supplementary and congruent factors: i) the growing animosity of Christianity against (rabbinic)

⁵ For an investigation into this transgression of the prohibition of grafting a fruitful domestic tree with an allegedly sterile wild tree, as reflected in the later Mishnaic Law of Agriculture (*mKil* 1:7 and also *yKil* 3b, 1:7), see F. Dal Bo: A Reading of the “Epistle to the Romans” in Mithridates’ Latin Translation of Giqatilla’s “Gates of Justice” for Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. In: M. Perani e G. Corazzol (Eds): Flavio Mitridate mediatore fra culture nel contesto dell'ebraismo siciliano del XV secolo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale. Caltabellotta, 30 luglio-1 agosto 2008, Palermo, Officina di Studi Medievali, 2012, pp. 137–147.

Judaism, ii) Christian animosity against *heresies* (usually associated with Judeo-Christians), iii) the growing animosity of (rabbinic) Judaism against Christianity, and iv) the rabbis' animosity towards heresies (usually associated with Judeo-Christians). Since none of these phenomena can be fully treated here, they shall be summarized only in its most predominant traits:

i) the growing animosity of Christianity against (rabbinic) Judaism is probably the best known trait in the bimillenary history of Jewish-Christian relations and requires no detailed treatment. This animosity has been justified in time on account of a number of collateral (ethical, ethnical, theological, and sociological) issues and might be exemplified by the famous words from the later Gospel of John who accuses the Jews of affiliation with the devil (Joh 8:44). This metaphysical accusation against the Jews also acquired an apocalyptic nuance by maintaining that the final and eventual conversion of the Jews would be regarded as a sign for the end of days. With respect to these theological assumptions, the Jews had no other option but converting to the Christian faith *and* rejecting Jewish practices;⁶

ii) as a consequence, both Latin and Greek Church Fathers transferred their animosity towards Judaism onto Christian heresies that most specifically manifested some Judeo-Christian traits in doctrine and practice. As maintained by recent scholarship, early Greek and Latin Church Fathers targeted different "Christian" heretical sects (*Nazarenites*, *Ebionites*, *Elkasaites*, *Cerinthians* and *Symmachians*) that did actually manifest syncretic traits and some grade of relationship with the primitive Judeo-Christian community;⁷

iii) the growing animosity of (rabbinic) Judaism against Christianity is a relatively less prominent trait in the Jewish-Christian relations and is conventionally exemplified with the infamous early Medieval (?) Jewish text "Toledot

⁶ Christian authors maintained the Christian belief in the eventual conversion of the Jews in antiquity (i.e. Hippolytus and Irenaeus) as well as in modern times (i.e. Protestant Reformation). For present purposes, it might be useful to limit ourselves to the contemporary belief, shared by the so called *Christian Zionist*, that the foundation of the modern State of Israel is in accordance with Biblical prophecies and testifies the final *gathering* before the second coming of Christ. On this latter topic, see for instance: V. Clark: *Allies for Armageddon: The Rise of Christian Zionism*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2007, and G. Gorenberg: *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁷ For a comprehensive investigation of these sects and their Judeo-Christian traits, see again: Lemke: *Judenchristentum Zwischen Ausgrenzungen und Integration*, pp. 58–67.

Yeshu” (“The Life Story of Jesus”).⁸ Yet, recent scholarship has maintained that earlier rabbinic text both from the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud should also be treated as a covert, almost indecipherable theological-political polemic against Christianity delivered both by Palestinian rabbinic elite under social duress in the Christian-roman Empire and especially by the *Babylonian* rabbinic elite in force of the anti-Christian and anti-roman politics of the Parthian Empire;⁹

iv) as a consequence of this, both the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbinic elite transferred their animosity toward Jewish heretics (*myinim*) by using this expression to refer to a progressively broader range of unorthodox Jewish and non-Jewish individuals: members of the community of Qumran, Jewish Gnostics, Hellenist Jews, Sadducees, Judeo-Christians, and finally non-Jewish Christians.¹⁰

The convergence of these historical and theological factors (progressive disappearance of the Jewish ethnic element in primitive Christianity, emergence of Christianity also as a theological-political power in history, Christian animosity against rabbinic Judaism and Judeo-Christian heresies, rabbinic animosity against Christianity and Judeo-Christian heresies) led to a *frontal confrontation* between (rabbinic) Judaism and Christianity for most of the Medieval period. As consequence, Judeo-Christianity was inevitably rejected as an aberration, and no place was left for building a concretely Jewish *and* Christian identity. This official stance in the Catholic Church would eventually be surpassed only in contemporary times after the Second Vatican Council

⁸ The “Toledot Yeshu” is accounted as one of the most controversial books in history since it reports the life story of Jesus from a very negative and anti-Christian perspective. Its connections with early Jewish and pagan sources, rabbinic Judaism and Talmudic literature have recently been investigated in P. Schäfer, M. Meerson, Y. Deutsch: *Toledot Yeshu* (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited. A Princeton Conference, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2011. See also P. Schäfer: *Yeshu and the Talmud*. In: B. Isaac, Y. Shahar (Eds): *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2012, pp. 139–161; see especially M. Meerson – P. Schäfer (Eds): *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus. Two Volumes and Database*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2014.

⁹ See P. Schäfer: *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007, especially pp. 95–130.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive survey of these topics, see again: Broadhead: *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus*, pp. 284–300. For a most recent inquiry on this topic, see A. Schremer: *Wayward Jews: ‘minim’ in Early Rabbinic Literature*. In: *Journal of Jewish Studies* 64,2 2013, pp. 242–263 and, in particular, J.F. Stanley: *Jewish Christians as Heresiologists and as Heresy*. In: *Id.: Pseudoclementina Elchasaiticaque inter Judaeochristiana; Collected Studies*, Leuven, Peeters, 2012, pp. 516–531.

(1962–1965) and with the promulgation of the important document “*Nostra Aetate*”.¹¹

A notable exception to the Catholics’ intransigent rejection of (rabbinic) Judaism was the missionary activity of Anglo-Saxon Protestant churches in modern times. This missionary activity tried to renew relations with the Jewish people, provided their necessity of conversion. As such, it historically anticipates both the development of Messianic Jews and the Vatican II’s innovative statements on (rabbinic) Judaism. Nevertheless, it is not exempt from severe incongruences. On the one hand, Protestant missionary activity didn’t actually promote a more flexible approach to Jewishness with respect to Christian faith. For instance, the German scholar, historian and Christian Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705) was a pioneer in evangelic missions to the Jews and promoted peaceful (neither imposed nor forced) conversions of the Jews, especially in his latest work “*Hoffnung der Erlösung Israels*” [“*Hope in the Redemption of Israel*”], published in 1705. Nevertheless, he read much of traditional anti-Christian Jewish texts, such as the already mentioned infamous “*Toledot Yeshu*”, and believed that Jewish literature would be an essentially anti-Christian product.¹² On the other hand, a more accommodating attitude towards the Jews was later promoted by the German Protestant theologian Nikolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760). For the first time in history, he would promote a set of pastoral arrangements in order not to exclude by principle the simultaneous belief in the Christian doctrine and the observance of some Jewish practices. For instance, Zinzendorf established a *Judenkehille*

¹¹ It is not a coincidence that the first draft of this document was entitled „*Decretum de Judaeis*“ (“*Decree on the Jews*”), although it was never published. For a comprehensive analysis of *Nostra Aetate* in light of the Jewish-Christian relations, see P. Stefani: *Chiesa, Ebraismo e altre Religioni. Commento alla Nostra Aetate* [Church, Judaism and other Religions. A Commentary on *Nostra Aetate*], Padua, Il Messaggero, 1988. For recent and forthcoming scholarship on the Second Vatican Council, see M. Faggioli: *A Council for the Global Church. Receiving Vatican II in History*, Minneapolis, Paulist Press, 2015 (forthcoming) and id.: *Vatican II. Battle for Meaning*, Minneapolis, Paulist Press, 2012.

¹² For a detailed description of his missionary activity, see S. Pfister: *Messianische Juden in Deutschland*, Berlin, LIT, 2008. See also P. Blastenbre: *Ein Pionier des christlich-jüdischen Zusammenlebens: Johann Christoph Wagenseil zum 300. Todestag*. In *PaRDeS* 8, 2004, pp. 3–13; id: *Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705): Barockgelehrter, Philosemit und wissenschaftlicher Entdecker des Jiddischen*. In: *Jiddistik Mitteilungen* 27, 2002, pp. 8–13; H. Bobzin: *Judenfeind oder Judenfreund? Die Altdorfer Gelehrte Johann Christoph Wagenseil*. In: Id., G. Och (Eds): *Jüdisches Leben in Franken*, Würzburg, Ergon Verlag, 2002, pp. 33–51.

(a Jewish *qehillah*, ‘a congregation’) in Moravia and tolerated the syncretic celebration of specific Jewish practices, such as the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*), one of the holiest recurrences in rabbinical Jewish calendar, and the observance of some Shabbat rituals – albeit held on *Sundays* as if they were a Jewish-like celebration for the Christian holy day.¹³

This innovative approach to Christian Jewishness eventually led to a paradigm change in the traditional conception of Jewish-Christian relations. More specifically, it is this sensibility for Jewish rituals despite a positive faith in Jesus that encouraged the institution of a community for Jesus-believing Jews: namely, Jewish individuals who would *both* adhere to Jewish rituals *and* believe

¹³ See *ibidem*. This innovative approach is also derogatively called ‘Philosemitismus’. See for instance: F.H. Philipp: Graf Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf als Wegbereiter eines deutschen Philosemitismus. In: *Emuna*, 7 (1972) pp.15–25. On the possible influences of the Sabbatian movement unto Zinzendorf’s predication, see M.K. Schuchard: From Poland to London: Sabbatean Influences on the Mystical Underworld of Zinzendorf, Swedenborg, and Blake. In: *Holy Dissent* (2011) pp.250–280. Sabbatianism, a Jewish religious movement that arose from the predication of the *false messiah* Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) and was ideologically supported by the rabbi Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680), and especially its later development into Frankism, under the predication of the *false messiah* Jakob Frank (1726–1791), are notable Jewish messianic movements that also involved formal conversions to non-Jewish faiths (namely, Islam and Christianity) also supporting a more or less radical form of “anti-nomism.” It should also be mentioned that the long wave of Sabbatianism led in 1972 to the foundation of a contemporary syncretic and neo-sabbatian Jewish messianic movement, the *Dönmeb West*, established by the poet and kabbalist Yakov Leib Ha-Kohain (1934); notably, this movement is frequently mentioned in right-wing catholic press as a Jewish contamination of authentic Christian messianism. Neither Sabbatianism nor Frankism can be examined properly here and references are made only to their most relevant scholarship. On Sabbatianism, see the classical monograph of G. Scholem: *Sabbatai Sevi. The Mystical Messiah*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973 and its discussion among his most prominent students: I. Tishby: *Netive emunah u-minut: Masot u-mehkarim be-sifrut ha-Kabalah yeha Shabta’ut* [Paths of Faith and Heresy. Essays in Kabbalistic literature and Sabbatianism] Masadah, Tel Aviv, 1964 (on Moses Hayim Luzzatto’s discussion of some Sabbatian works) as well as Y. Liebes: *Sod ha-emunah ha-Shabta’it* [The Secret of Sabbatian Faith], Jerusalem, Byalik, 1995; see also G. Scholem: *Redemption through Sin*. In: *Id.: The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, Schocken, New York, 1995, pp.78–141, and also *id.*: *Mehkere Shabta’ut* [Studies on Sabbatianism], Tel Aviv, ‘Am ’oved, 1991; *cf. id.*: *Mehkarim u-mekorot le-toledot ha-Shabta’ut ye-gilguleha* [Studies and Sources on the History of Sabbatianism and its Metamorphosis], Jerusalem: Byalik, 1974 (with some Sabbatian sources); *cf.* the recent A. Rapoport-Albert: *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi: 1666–1816*, Oxford-Portland, Littman, 2011 (on some gender issues in Sabbatianism); *cf.* also J. Barnai: *Shabta’ut: Hebetim hevratiyim*. Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2000 (on the social background of Sabbatianism). On Frankism, see Y. Frank: *Sayings of Yakov Frank*, Oakland, Tzaddikim, 1978; P. Maciejko: *The Frankist Movement in Poland, the Czech Lands, and Germany (1755–1816)*, Oxford, University of Oxford, 2003 and the more recent *id.*: *The Mixed Multitude. Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

in Christian faith; in other words, Jewish individuals who would no longer be asked *either* to follow Jewish rituals and therefore reject Jesus' messianic title *or* to believe in Jesus and therefore reject Jewish rituals. Aside from other collateral developments in Christian Protestant movements,¹⁴ this paradigm change into Jewish-Christian beliefs has led to the innovative institution of the Messianic Jews.

3. A Brief History of Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel (1917–1948) and in the State of Israel (1948–1970)¹⁵

Just as Protestant missionary organizations played a main role in supporting missionary activity among the Jews in Europe, so did they play a similar role in the Land of Israel before the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. Protestant missionary congregations, mostly located in Jaffa, Haifa, Safed and Tiberias, gathered Jesus-believing Jews, and supported a pragmatically flexible but doctrinally traditional politics of conversion.

With respect to this, some relatively minority Jewish groups (probably around 120–150 individuals) progressively separated themselves from these traditional forms of congregation and sought an alternative, theologically

¹⁴ One can think of Protestant-evangelical Dispensationalism, founded by the Protestant theologian John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), who assumes that God has revealed to human beings in different ways and under different Biblical covenants during different historical periods. As a consequence of this, Dispensationalism maintains that the Church and Israel (both as ethnic and religious group) are not mutually exclusive but they might overlap as long as Israel embraces (in Judeo-Christian terms) the faith in Jesus. For a detailed vision of the history of Dispensationalism (Ultra-Dispensationalism, Revised Dispensationalism, and Progressive Dispensationalism), see Ch. Ryrie: *Dispensationalism*, Chicago, Moody Press, 1965. See also D. P. Fuller: *Progressive Dispensationalism and the Law/Gospel Contrast: a Case Study in Biblical Theology*. In: J. H. Scott, G. Downers: *Biblical Theology. Retrospect and Prospect*, Leichester, InterVarsity Press, 2002, pp. 237–249, and also M. E. Marty, R. L. Rubenstein: *The Odd Couple: Jews and Premillennial Dispensational Fundamentalism (P.S. 'and its cousins')*. In: *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44,1, 2009, pp. 122–135.

¹⁵ As for the chronology and some historical details, I closely follow the accurate report in G. Nerel: *From Death to Life: The Restoration of Jewish Yeshua-Believers in the Land of Israel*. In: F. Wright (Ed): *Israel: His People, His Land, His Story*, Eastbourne, Thankful Books, 2005, pp. 168–188. Accordingly, the foundation and existence of American-based Judeo-Christian groups such as “The Hebrew Christian Alliance of America” (19th century) then renamed as “The Messianic Jewish Alliance of America” (1915) as well as the later evangelic “Jews for Jesus” (1973) and the recent “Messianic Israel Alliance” (1999) shall not be treated in detail in the present paper. For an *American* perspective of the Judeo-Christian movement, see the rich monograph D. Cohn-Sherbok: *Messianic Judaism. A Critical Anthology*, Edimbourg, A&C Black, 2000, and Y. Ariel: *Evangelizing Chosen People. Missions to the Jews in America (1880–2000)*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

innovative kind of organization. In 1925 a Judeo-Christian congregation was established in Jerusalem with the support of three people: the Askhenazi former Rabbi theologian Hyman Jacobs,¹⁶ the Jerusalem-born and orthodox-educated Jew Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir,¹⁷ and the Norwegian Protestant pastor Arne Jonsen.¹⁸ Yet, the most prominent personality among them surely was Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir, not improperly called “the father of ‘Messianic Judaism.’”¹⁹ The magazine “Ha-Lapid. Biton ha-Kehillah ha-Meshihit ha-Israelit” [“The Torch. Journal of the Israeli Messianic Congregation being the Renewal of the Early Original Messianic Community”] supported proselytism as well as theological propaganda.²⁰ Through it, Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir

¹⁶ Hyman (or Hayim) Jacobs was born in Central Europe (possibly Poland), worked as a rabbi in Oil City (Pennsylvania), converted to Christianity in San Francisco and was ordained Presbyterian minister, moved to the Land of Israel in 1920 and presumably around the end of the 30s moved back to U.S. with his wife and their children, as reported by the local press (Holy Land Missionary Speak Here. In: Inwood Herald, 19/3/1942, p.1). He wrote two monographs on messianism: „Religion and Nationality” (Jerusalem, Azriel, 1927) and “Chaff and Wheath or False Messiahs” (Jerusalem, Sinai Press, 1935). For a biography of Hyman Jacobs, see G. Neral: Ha-Tzlav we-ha-Galil be-Tequfat ha-Mandat ha-Britit: Dat we-Le’omiot be-Kitevey ha-Missionar ha-Yehudi Hayyim Yi’akobs [The Cross and the Galilee during the Mandate Period: Religion and Nationality in the Writings of the Jewish Missionary Hayim Jacobs]. In: H. Goren (Ed.): New Galilee Studies, Tel-Hai, Academic College, 2009, pp. 99–131.

¹⁷ Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir (1904–1978) later worked as main editor for the “messianic Jewish” magazine „Kol Shofar” together with Abraham Ben Shraga (1900–1968). He reported many interesting remarks about Judeo-Christian mission in his autobiography, written in 1977 and published only recently: M. I. Ben Meir: From Jerusalem to Jerusalem. Autobiographical Sketches, Jerusalem, Netivyah Bible Instruction Ministry, 2006.

¹⁸ The foundation of *Hebrew Christian Church* is reported as news in the bulletin “The Christian Century. A Journal of Religion” (1926, 43, p. 1302). “The Christian Century” is a US-based Protestant magazine, founded in 1884 and probably the most influential Protestant magazine in America. On the missionary activity of Jonsen, see also K. Hjemdal: Arne Jonsen – A Pioneer in Israel (1924–1929). In: Mishkan, 20, 1994, pp. 39–40. Arne Jonsen apparently wrote a dissertation in Theology in 1922 on “Die Biblische Wüste in Altertum und Gegenwart” (Diss. Würzburg 1922–23), as reported in P. Thomsen: Die Palästina-Literatur. Eine Internationale Bibliographie in Systematischer Ordnung mit Autoren- und Sachregister, Leipzig, Hinrichs, 1972, p. 368). He also wrote a short article about *evangelizing* in Palestine: A. Jonsen: Met evangeliert bland Palestinas judar. In: Svenska Jerusalemens Föreningens Tidskrift, 27, 2–3, 1928, pp. 50–54.

¹⁹ K. Kjaer-Hansen: Ben Meir and Poljiak about Operation Mercy. In: *Mishkan*, 61, 2009, p. 12; cf. also M. Benhayim: The Messianic Movement in Israel – A Personal Perspective (1963–1998). In: *Mishkan* 28, 1998, p. 7.

²⁰ The magazine was published until 1961–1962 and directed by this editorial board: Zeev Shlomo Kofsman (a Jewish immigrant from France), Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir himself, Yecheil Goldin ben Abraham (a late Orthodox rabbi), and Rina Price (a Jerusalem-born woman of Anglo-Saxon origin). On Zeev Kofsman, see H. W. House: The Land and the People. An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises, Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1997, p. 63; on Yecheil

strongly supported the need *both* of believing in Jesus *and* observing Jewish national customs, as genuine and thus good products from the Old Testament, such as circumcision, Shabbat, and Passover. In his autobiography, written not without some slips of memory in 1977, Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir would emphasize the fundamental difference between *ordinary* gentile Christians and the Jewish believers stemming from his community:

“Their sole meeting place is at the Wall [i. e. the Western Wall, called also as ‘the Wailing Wall’], where they come to pray daily. Sometimes they meet either in a wood, in the open field, or in a secluded spot on the Mount of Olives. Most of them were vegetarians. They distanced themselves from Christians and would have nothing to do with missions. They were a closed community, as they desired to keep their Jewish heritage and not compromise it.”²¹

This separateness from other present Christian churches obviously implied rejecting their traditional conversion policy that Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir depicted severely:

“Here, in Israel, we have men and women who are useless, have no vision, and have come to convert Jews to their particular branch of Christianity and sabotage all efforts of Messianic Jews to unite and be effective in their witness and ministry.”²²

The missionary activity of Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir was supported also by a second notable individual: the Ukrainian-born and orthodox-educated Jew Abram (Bram) Poljak (1900–1963), a former music prodigy, who was married in 1924 to a Protestant Christian girl. He was arrested by the Nazis in 1933, imprisoned for some time, and eventually released. Shortly after that, as he himself reports, he left for the Land of Israel, where he attended the third annual conference of the *Hebrew Christian Alliance* and met Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, with whom he founded a Jewish-Christian congregation in the Land of Israel in 1935.²³ When he was back to London in 1937, he founded

Goldin, see also R. Santala: *The Midrash of the Messiah*, Finland, Kirjapaino Oy, 2002, p. 7; on Rina Price, see the sparse biographical remarks in: *Zot habrit. This is the Covenant. A Journal of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel*, 2000, 2, and G. Nerel: *Operation Mercy on the Eve of the Establishment of the State of Israel*. In: *Mishkan*, 61, 2009, p. 26.

²¹ Ben Meir: *Jerusalem to Jerusalem: Autobiographical Sketches by Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir*, p. 65.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 47; see also Nerel: *A ‘Messianic Jewish Church’ in Eretz-Israel?*, p. 45.

²³ A. Poljak: *The Cross in the Star of David*, London, The Jewish Christian Community Press, 1938), pp. 7, 15–16, 21, 35–40. For a bibliography on his works, cf. the following footnotes.

the *Jewish Christian Community* together with three other people: Pauline Rose (his wife), Agnes Waldstein, and Albert von Springer.²⁴ Abram Poljak at first published some texts in order to support his movement (which in post-war times also reached Germany, France, Swiss, England, and Australia). Yet the outbreak of the Second World War and the destruction of the European Jewry convinced him that it was necessary to support the Jewish-Christian dialogue more strongly rather than to focus on strictly Judeo-Christian theological issues.²⁵

For a full description of Abram Poljak's movement see S. Sharot: A Jewish Christian adventist movement. In: *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 10, 1968, pp. 35–45.

²⁴ Each of them intensively co-worked with the publishing house Patmos Publishers, official speaker for the Jewish Christian Movement. See for instance P. Rose: The Mission of the Jewish Christian Community. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 1, 1944–1949, pp. 9–11; id.: The Light of the Messiah. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 2, 1950–1951, pp. 33–37; id.: Jewish Christian Brotherhood of the Kingdom. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 3, 1951–1952, pp. 56–57; id.: The Conference in Strasbourg. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 3, 1951–1952, pp. 68–70; id.: The Power of the Spirit. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 4, 1953, pp. 90–92; id.: Confernces. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 4, 1953, pp. 96–98; id.: Our Protection. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 5, 1953, p. 108; A. Waldstein: Jewish Christian Tendencies in the World. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 1, 1944–1949, pp. 26–29; id.: The Jerusalem Conference of Messianic Jews. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 2, 1950–1951, pp. 44–45; id.: More than Conquerers. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 2, 1950–1951, pp. 46–47; id.: From Death into Life. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 4, 1953, pp. 77–79; id.: The Gates of Hell shall not Prevail against Us. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 4, 1953, pp. 88–89; A. Springer: Where Do We Stand. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 1, 1944–1949, pp. 22–23; id.: The Faith of the Prophets. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 2, 1950–1951, pp. 42–43; id.: Prayer League. In: *The Jewish Christian Community*, 5, 1953, p. 105. Cf. K. Kjaer-Hansen: Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy. In: *Mishkan*, 61, 2009, pp. 33–41, and id.: Ben Meir and Poljiak about Operation Mercy, pp. 12–20.

²⁵ Nason: *Ebrei Credenti in Gesù*, pp. 183–184; cf. Nerel: *Primitive Jewish Christians in the Modern Thought of Messianic Jews*, p. 416. Poljak was a very prolific writer mostly in German and occasionally in English: A. Poljak: *Meditationen*, Chemnitz 1922 (private print); id.: *Zwischen Menschen und Gott*, Moros-Verlag Chemnitz 1924; id.: *Judenchristen im Heiligen Lande*, Leipzig, Europäischer Verlag, 1936; id.: *Die judenchristliche Gemeinde*, Vienna 1937 (private print); id.: *Das Kreuz im Davidstern: Beiträge zur judenchristlichen Frage*, Vienna 1937 (private print; cf. English translation “The Cross in the Star of David”, 1938) and then *Neckargemünd*, Patmos-Verlag, 1951; id.: *Judenchristentum*, Thun, Aeschlimann 1939; id.: *The Bible on Faith Healing*, London, The Jewish Christian Community, 1939; id.: *Die jüdische Kirche*, Köniz-Bern, Verl. d. Judenchristl. Gemeinde, 1946; id.: *Das zertrümmerte Hakenkreuz*, Köniz-Bern, Verl. d. Judenchristl. Gemeinde Köniz-Bern, 1947; id.: *Unter dem Titel: Zertrümmertes Hakenkreuz: Hitler als Feldherr und Spiritist*, Stuttgart, Patmos-Verlag, 1952; id.: *Jerusalem, Jerusalem...*, Neckargemünd, Patmos-Verlag 1951; id.: *Judenchristen in Israel: Paulinische Judenmission; Judenchristliche Gemeinde*, Neckargemünd, Patmos-Verlag 1951; id.: *Krieg und Frieden: Predigten und Briefe aus Gefangenschaft*, Neckargemünd, Patmos-Verlag, 1951; id.: *Der Ölzweig*, Liebefeld-Bern, Patmos-Verlag, 1951; id.: *Briefe aus*

There is indeed a quite eloquent passage that clarifies the syncretic trait of this pioneering Judeo-Christian movement in the Land of Israel, originally published as a private print in 1937 and then re-published in book format in 1958:

“[I am] a Jewish Christian,’ I replied [...] ‘Why do you emphasize ‘Jewish?’ [...] ‘First of all because there are English, German and Russian Christians and second because I assume from your question that you make a difference between Jews and Christians. If you had asked me whether I’m a German, I would have said simply ‘no’, because I’m not a German but a Jew. Here there is actually a national difference. But if you make a difference between Jews and Christians, the way I understand things I cannot accept a radical division and must answer as my conscience demands [...]. My Christianity is also a Jewish duty. For the New Testament belongs to the Old, it is one. Jesus is a Jew, our spiritual king, the fulfillment of the Jewish law of destiny, the salvation of the Jewish spirit. The revelation of world history begins with Moses’ words, ‘In the beginning God created’ [Gen 1:1] and ends with the ‘Amen’ of John’s Revelation [Rev 22:20], ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!’ [Rev 22:21]. These words end the Jewish Bible, God’s gift of grace to his chosen people, the gift of our people to mankind. Let us not tear the first and the second apart, for thus we separate the soul from the body and we need both...’²⁶

The movement founded by Abram Poljak was characterized by overtly expressing its syncretistic *credo* both in Jesus and Jewish ritual institutions. Other minor Judeo-Christian groups, on the contrary, pursued a *secret* missionary activity in the Land of Israel and eventually relocated in United Kingdom: this is the case of the so called Nicodemus Jews, a tiny group of Jews who preferred to keep secret their belief in Jesus, living with an underground mentality, as allegedly prescribed by the New Testament figure of Nicodemus, who also didn’t disclose his faith in Jesus;²⁷ this is also the case of a group of “crypto-Jews,”

Jerusalem, Stuttgart, Patmos-Verlag, 1954; id.: *Auf dem Wege*, Möttlingen, Patmos-Verlag 1958; id.: *Die Weltlage im Lichte des biblisch-prophetischen Wortes*, Möttlingen, Patmos-Verlag, 1958; id.: *Trost und Hoffnung*, Möttlingen, Patmos-Verlag, 1963. On the figure of Abram Poljak, see also the digital documentation extant in the dedicated website: <http://www.abrampoljak.net/>.

²⁶ A. Poljak: *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde*. In: Id.: *Aus dem Wege*, p. 7.

²⁷ Nason: *Ebrei Credenti in Gesù*, p. 184; G. Nerel: *Primitive Jewish Christians in the Modern Thought of Messianic Jews*. In: S.C. Mimouni, F.S. Jones (Eds): *Le Judéo-Christianisme dans tous ses états*, Paris, Cerf, 1998, pp. 399–425; Nerel: *Messianic Jews in Eretz Israel (1917–1968)*, p. 13. The allusion to Nicodemus is obviously based on Joh 3:1–2.

who maintained the necessity of following secretly syncretic Jewish-Christian rituals also in the Land of Israel.²⁸

A turning point in the history of this community was the so called *Operation Mercy*: that is, the evacuation of Jesus-believing Jews in April-May 1948, at the termination of the British Mandate and the foundation of the State of Israel.²⁹ Some of them, like Hyman Jacobs,³⁰ accepted the evacuation as a token of appreciation for the *grace of God*, a sort of *Yeridab*³¹ that was saving them from imminent danger, namely the first Arab-Israeli War that broke out on May 15th 1948 and ended on March 10th 1949. Indeed, aside from obvious worries about an imminent conflict, the evacuation did actually seem to have a more theological-political motivation, as Rev. Hugh R. A. Jones overtly admitted in a letter sent to the former General Secretary G. H. Hill in London on June 4th 1948.³² Rev. Jones, head of the Church Missions to Jews (CMJ),³³ opens

²⁸ I am referring here to a minority group led in the 1920s by the *marrano* Artur Carlos de Barros Basto (1887–1961), who predicted the observance of crypto-Jewish rituals in the Land of Israel and published a Hebrew magazine called: “Ha-Lapid” (“The Torch”) described as “A Semi Annual Journal of the Society for Crypto Judaic Studies”. Notably, this magazine might have act as counterpart to the almost homonymous “The Torch” founded by the group of Messianic Jews. On this singular religious leader and his practices, see D. Canelo: *O Resgate dos Marranos Portugeses*, Belmonte (private print), 1996; cf. E. de Azevedo Mea, I. Steinhart: *Ben Rosh. Biografia do Capitão Barros Basto, o Apostolo dos Marranos*, Porto, Afrontamento, 1997; S.N. Beckwith: *Charting Memory. Recalling Medieval Spain*, New York, Taylor & Francis, 2000, pp. 39–40.

²⁹ G. Nere: “Mivtza’ Hesed.” *Ha-Pyinui shel Yehudim Meshihim mi-Eretz Israel be-Shanat 1948 [Operation Mercy. The Evacuation of Messianic Jews from the Land of Israel in 1948]*. In: *Iggud. Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, 2, 2005, pp. 83–109; id.: *Operation Mercy on the Eve of the Establishment of the State of Israel*. In: *Mishkan*, 61, 2009, pp. 21–32, and cf. the entire issue “Mishkan”, 61, 2009.

³⁰ For the pastoral activity of Hyman Jacobs in America, see the previous footnote.

³¹ *Yeridab* (literally *descent*) is the antonymous for *‘alyab* (*ascent*). These terms respectively mean the “emigration from Israel (to other countries)” and the “immigration to Israel (from other countries).” For the use of this term in political-sociological context see the recent: Y. Moshkovitz: *Is there an ‘Israeli Diaspora?’ Jewish Israelis Negotiating National Identity between Zionist Ideology and Diasporic Reality*. In: *Jewish Culture and History*, 14, 2–3, 2013, pp. 153–164. This specific use shall not be confused with the more complex one in mystical context, according to which the *yeridab* (as *humiliation?*) would be the prerequisite for a mystical *‘alyab*; see A. Kuyt: *The “Descent” to the Chariot. Towards a Description of the Terminology and Nature of the Yeridah in Hekhalot Literature*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1995.

³² Quoted in K. Kjaer-Hansen: *Operation Mercy According to Hugh R. A. Jones. Described in Two Letters from Jerusalem, June 4 and 5, 1948*. In: *Mishkan*, 61, 2009, pp. 4–11.

³³ The “Church Missions to Jews” was formerly called “The London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews,” and often referred as “The London Jew’s Society,” a missionary society founded in 1809 by british Protestants. See W.D. Rubinstein (Ed.): *The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 615.

his letter with a long, eloquent quotation from an unidentified “Evangelical Christian magazine,” which is quoting in turn from a second publication. This passage illustrates well the theological-political issues at stake:³⁴

“The lot of the Hebrew Christian in Palestine today is deplorable. It will be more so tomorrow; and when the British depart is likely to be unbearable. Zionism is not a religious movement basically, but a political one. It is only religious in the sense that most of its leaders and its adherents hate like poison those Jews who have embraced Christianity... It is confirmed by a writer in the current issue of ‘World Dominion’ who says in an article on ‘A Christian View of Palestine:’ ‘There are Hebrew Christians whose fate is pitiable; they hardly dare to be mentioned, such is the hatred of their Zionist brethren. A Christian Jew may not be admitted to Palestine on a Jewish immigration quota: Jews who are atheists or communists, or who reject the fundamentals of Judaism, are freely admitted as Jews. The Jewish Agency has ruled that Judaism is a purely racial concept, with one exception – no Christian, whatever his ancestry, may belong to the Jewish race.’”³⁵

Those who chose to stay in the newly born State of Israel were just a dozen, who believed that the “grace of God” had been manifested exactly with the foundation of the State of Israel after the terrible events of the Second World War. Abram Poljak and Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir did not leave exactly because of those very “theological-political” motivations that Christian Protestants protested. Both Abram Poljak and Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir called

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 5.

³⁵ The unidentified Evangelic Christian magazine mentioned here most possibly is “The Christian Century. A Journal of Religion” that not infrequently expressed very harsh opinions against Zionism and Jewish nationalism, as documented in J. Adelman: *The Rise of Israel. A History of a Revolutionary State*, New York, Routledge, 2008, pp. 95–99. As for the second quotation from the article “A Christian View of Palestine,” it might be identified with: D. Thompson: *Let the Promise be Fulfilled. A Christian View of Palestine*, New York, American Christian Palestinian Committee, 1946. Dorothy Thompson (1893–1961) was a Methodist-born, prominent American Journalist, former foreign correspondent from Nazi Germany (from which she will be expelled in 1934), who was initially in favor of the creation of the State of Israel and eventually moved to pro-Arab positions. On her political and journalistic activity, see S. Hertog: *Dangerous Ambition: Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson; New Women in Search of Love and Power*, New York, Ballantine, 2011. Notably, the Supreme Court of Israel (Justices: Menachem Elon, Aharon Barak and Avraham Halima) ruled on citizenship law in 1989 and with a boost to ultra-Orthodox religious interpretation of the state’s 1950 Law of Return, deliberated that members of Messianic Judaism do not qualify as Jews and therefore are not eligible to the legal *‘ahyah*. On these issues, see also D. Sedaca: *A Quarter of a Century of Messianic Judaism. Lessons to Be Learned and Expectations for the Future*. In: *Mishkahn*, 61, 2009, pp. 83–88; cf. also Cohn-Sherbok: *Messianic Judaism. A Critical Anthology*, pp. 167, 193–198, 202–203.

for a potentially dangerous yet fully evangelical commitment in the Land of Israel – at any cost and in conformity with the grace of God. Poljak recalled the Prophets and wrote:

“‘He who believes does not flee!’ Stay in the Land! Close ranks! Let us serve one another! If we must go hungry, let us be hungry together, and if we must die, we will die together. There is no fairer death than that on the way of faith in the Holy Land. Let us give thanks to God that he has given us an opportunity to prove our faith, our sincerity and faithfulness and to glorify the name of Christ in Israel – in the hour of need!”³⁶

Ben Meir quoted from the Psalms and accused harshly the *emigrants* back to Europe:

“God himself put an end to the British rule in Palestine – and to the work of several missions there. God let the unfaithful Hebrew Christians leave. Now Israel has been given a new beginning and new possibilities. God gave the Jews freedom in the State of Israel. And he has let the Jewish Messianic community bring the testimony about Jesus our Messiah out in the State of Israel. The days of the gentiles are over. Jesus Messiah will soon come again and sit on David’s throne. We are living in the beginning of the end. May we be ready! ‘You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favour to her; the appointed time has come.’” (Psalm 103:13)³⁷

Yet, despite the presence of Poljak’s and Ben Meir’s leading personalities and despite their theological-political commitment, the Messianic Jews movement strayed apart. For instance, those who didn’t leave the land and stayed in Jerusalem also during the 1948 siege departed from the original Messianic Jews congregation and found an autonomous Jerusalem Jewish Christian Fellowship that was led by Pauline Rose and that progressively moved to *more liberal* doctrinal tendencies, such as the rejection of the *second coming* of Jesus and the invocation of *God* in spite of *Jesus*, whose divine nature was set aside.³⁸ Abram Poljak worked intensively to normalize this supplementary challenge to the community of Messianic Jews together with the blow of “Operation Mercy”

³⁶ A. Poljak: Unsere Parole. In: *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde*, 138, 1948, p.5, quoted in Kjaer-Hansen: Ben-Meir and Poljak about Operation Mercy, p.18.

³⁷ M.I. Ben Meir: Israels befrielse – Sions nådetid. In: Karmel, 1949, p.82, quoted in Kjaer-Hansen: Ben-Meir and Poljak about Operation Mercy, p.17. On the reasons why Moshe Immanuel Ben Meir communicated in Norwegian, see footnote 9, p.13.

³⁸ Nerel: A ‘Messianic Jewish Church’ in Eretz-Israel?, p.46.

that severely affected the community and imposed a generational discontinuity. As a consequence, the community was progressively assimilated within the non-Jewish Church society and began following de facto the conventional *Gentile* ecclesiastical policy. This adherence to traditional pastoral customs made more severe the dismemberment of the original community that eventually suffered also from the defection of Abram Poljak himself in 1950.³⁹

After the departure of strong personalities such as Hyman Jacobs' and Abram Poljak's, the almost agonizing community of Messianic Jews was reinvigorated by the massive waves of immigration in the 1950s and 1960s that potentially brought new members.⁴⁰ The original community changed its name to "Union of Messianic Jews" (1950), later replaced with the "Israeli Messianic Jewish Alliance" (1954). Both were dismantled after a few years, mainly because of personal and theological disagreements, namely the crucial issue of whether or not to admit non-Jewish Christians among their members.⁴¹ This association was flanked in time by other affine yet ideologically independent institutions, such as: "The Society of St. James", named after the Judeo-Christian apostle James (Ya'qov) and founded in 1957 by the Hebrew Catholics Daniel Oswald Rufeisen, Bruno Hussar and Rina Geftman, and affiliated to the Diocese of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem⁴² and "The Israeli Messianic Assembly – Jerusalem Assembly," founded in 1958 by Zeev Shlomo Kofsman (among others) with the expectation of renewing the 1st century Christian primitive congregation but actually ministering mainly as a local entity in Jerusalem.⁴³

With the outbreak of the 1967 Six Days War, Israel annexed West Jordanian territories and, with them, the city of Jerusalem. The ability to enter the Holy City and the Western Wall of the Temple was theologically exhilarating both for Orthodox Jews and "Jesus-believing Jews." The latter ones, in particular, strongly emphasized the metaphysical importance of establishing Jewish

³⁹ Kjaer-Hansen: Ben-Meir and Poljak about Operation Mercy, p. 20.

⁴⁰ For a sociological analysis of immigration to Israel, see E. Leshem, J.T. Shuval: *Immigration to Israel. Sociological Perspectives*, New York, Transaction Publishers, 1998.

⁴¹ For additional data see, for example H. Nurminen: *Eighty Years of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM) in Israel*. In: *Mishkan*, 41, 2004, pp. 63–67.

⁴² *The Hebrew Speaking Communities*. In: *Jerusalem. Diocesan Bulletin of the Latin Patriarchate*, 9, 3–4, June-August 2003, pp. 131–132.

⁴³ Nerel: "Messianic Jews" in Eretz-Israel Messianic Jews' in *Eretz-Israel (1917–1968). Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity*, p. 15. For information about Zeev Kofsman, see previous footnote. See also P. Østerbye: *The Church in Israel*, Lund, Gleerup, Lund 1970 and Benhayim: *The Messianic Movement in Israel – A Personal Perspective (1963–1998)*, p. 10.

hegemony over Jerusalem and the surrounding territories and interpreted this as an obvious sign of the eschatological end of days and, in a genuine Judeo-Christian perspective, the imminent second coming of Jesus that would eventually install the millenary Kingdom of Zion.⁴⁴

These events unfortunately failed to lift the movement out of its incessant decline. Between the 1960s and the 1970s the core of the original Messianic Jews movement dissolved mostly due to natural causes. Many of its original cultural leaders either left the congregation and settled outside of Israel, as in the case of Abram Poljak and Arthur von Springer, or passed away without establishing a second generation of believers. Besides, also unsuccessful were the occasional attempts at renewing the so called “Jerusalem Fellowship,” like the one taken by Pauline Rose, who in 1965 founded an impermanent “Brotherhood of Goodwill” both addressed to gentile and Arabic Christians.⁴⁵ Consequently, at the beginning of the 1970s, the movement progressively ceased its activity. Many of his followers eventually joined other Judeo-Christian associations, mostly originally American-located ones that progressively supported the idea of evangelizing also in the ‘Holy Land’. With respect to this, since the 1970s, the history of Messianic Jews mostly overlaps with the one of Jesus-believing Jews, somehow affiliated or ideologically influenced by Protestant (Evangelical-Anglican) missionary associations in the State of Israel.

4. Neutralizing Traditional Christian Patterns: Towards a New Jewish-messianic Paradigm?

However, the progressive actual disappearance of this first Messianic Jews association located in the Land of Israel did not spell the end of its cultural influence on the forthcoming history of the Jesus-believing Jews in the State of Israel. Despite its temporary existence, the first Messianic Jews association encouraged, if not an eschatological diffusion of the Jewish belief in Jesus, at least an almost prejudice-free reconsideration of his historical and theological activity as well as an important elaboration of a new theological conceptual-ity that obviously involved the “strongholds” of traditional Christian beliefs: Jesus as a Jewish character, the name of Jesus, his messianic titles, Christology, the doctrine of Trinity, together with a number of cultic-ritual issues.

⁴⁴ See G. Nerel: Haim (Haimoff) Bar-David: Restoring Apostolic Authority among Jewish Yeshua-Believers. In: *Mishkan*, 37, 2002, pp. 59–78.

⁴⁵ P. Rose: *Widow on Mount Zion*, Ebury, W.H. Allen, 1973. Cf. G. Nerel: A ‘Messianic Jewish Church’ in Eretz-Israel? In: *Mishkan*, 29, 1998, p. 56.

a. Jesus as a Jewish Character: The Israeli Academic Interest in Jesus

It cannot be a coincidence if contemporary with the activity of these first Messianic Jews are the publications of two important academic monographs on Jesus as a Jewish religious leader and not simply as the founder of Christianity, which is the exemplary other religion than Judaism. Interestingly enough, both of the major academic supporters of this innovative Jewish interpretation of Jesus, namely Schlomo Ben Chorin and David Flusser, were either of German or Austrian descent and did actually publish their work in *German* and in Europe – as if Jewish academic audience were not yet quite ready for too unusual works:

In 1967 Shalom Ben Chorin⁴⁶ published a passionate monograph with the very eloquent title “Bruder Jesus. Der Nazarener in jüdischer Sicht” [“Brother Jesus. The Nazarene through Jewish Eyes”].⁴⁷ One of its most pregnant passages, Ben Chorin doesn’t share any Jewish messianic faith of any kind but speaks sympathetically about the messianic claim of the *individual* Jesus:

“This is the kind of man Jesus understood himself to be: a man who lives, as a man, a typically human life, without possessions and subject to pain. In designating himself ‘Son of Man’, Jesus does not stand before us as prophet or messiah, but as brother.”⁴⁸

In 1968 the well known historian and scholar David Flusser⁴⁹ wrote a detailed and scientifically impeccable monograph on Jesus and his prophetic religious activity with the explicit purpose of re-discovering his prominence in Second Temple Judaism. When, years later, Flusser reedited and updated his previous text, he still maintained a very Jewish reading on the *crux* of the Jewish-Christian relations, the dilemma between *love* or *Law*:

⁴⁶ Shalom Ben Chorin (literally: “Peace, the son of freedom”), the *nome de plume* for the German-born Jewish writer and theologian Fritz Rosenthal (1913–1999), studies German Studies and Comparative Science of Religion in German in 1931–1934, left to the Land of Israel in 1935, where he worked as a journalist and founded the first Jewish reformed community (*Har El Gemeinde*). On Shalom Ben Chorin, see G. Müller (Ed.): *Israel Hat dennoch Gott zum Trost*, Trier, Paulinus Verlag, 1978 with bibliography.

⁴⁷ S. Ben Chorin: *Bruder Jesus. Der Nazarener in jüdischer Sicht*. München, Beck Verlag, 1967.

⁴⁸ S. Ben Chorin, *Brother Jesus. The Nazarene through Jewish Eyes* [English translation], Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2001, p. 107.

⁴⁹ Gustav David Flusser (1917–2000) was a Austrian-born professor of Early Christianity and Judaism of the Second Temple Period at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. L. Malcom: *Bibliography of the writings of David Flusser*. In: *Immanuel*, 24–25, 1990, pp. 292–305; cf. Th. Clemens: *David Flusser zum 60. Geburtstag. Eine fragmentarische Biographie*. In: *Freiburger Rundbrief*, 28, 105–108, 1976, pp. 27–29.

“The germ of revolution in Jesus’ preaching does not emerge from his criticism of Jewish law, but from other premises altogether. These premises did not originate with Jesus. On the contrary, his critical assault stemmed from attitudes already established before his time. Revolution broke through at three points: the radical interpretation of the commandment of mutual love, the call for a new morality, and the idea of the kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁰

Moreover, the experience of this first Messianic Jews movement made unavoidable the preservation of a number of Jewish customs among almost every Judeo-Christian association that might have pursued proselytism. Traditional Protestant missionary activity had necessarily to tolerate, if not even to encourage, the observance of a number of Jewish ritual-cultic practices as well as to follow complex translation choices in order to *neutralize* the anti-Judaic charge in traditional ecclesiastical texts. This implied the large redefinition of traditional Christian terminology and its rendition according to messianic Jewish standards.

b. The Name of Jesus

Although the present article has extensively used the traditional appellation of Jesus in order to designate the central figure of Christianity, Messianic Jews usually avoid to refer to this transmitted name form and prefer an original, Hebrew version: *Yehoshua*.

Indeed, the name *Jesus* itself required some reconsideration, since neither the Greek form nor the Hebrew form for it might sound sufficiently neutral and free from prejudices. On the one hand, the Greek name *Iesous* would clearly sound to close to the traditional European form *Jesus*. On the other hand, also its Hebrew variation *Yeshu* might have sounded too familiar with anti-Christian Jewish apologetical literature, since it was in fact used as a sobriquet for the fully spelled theophoric name *Yehoshua*, “The Lord is salvation.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ D. Flusser: *The Sage from Galilee. Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius*, Grand Rapids, Eedermans Publishing, 2007, p. 55. This text is indeed a revised and updated version of his 1968 work “Jesus in der Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten” (Berlin, Rotwohlt 1968) then published in English with the title “Jesus” (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1997).

⁵¹ The derivation of the English form *Jesus* from the fully spelled Hebrew form *Yehoshua* is complex and influenced by numerous cross-cultural transitions. Modern lexicographers agree that the Biblical name *Yehoshua* also had an abbreviated form *Yeshua* and even a shorter form *Yeshu* (with final letter *ayin*) that was probably read as *Yisbo* by Aramaic-speaking Jews. This latter pronunciation is then reflected in the Greek translation as *Iesous* and then transmitted as *Jesus* in Latin and other modern languages. The rabbinic form *Yeshu* (without the final letter

c. Jesus' *Messianic* Titles

The expansion of the Messianic Jews movement also implied a similar reconsideration of Jesus' traditional messianic titles ("messiah", "son of man", "savior," "the atoned one") that abound in New Testament literature. Therefore, "messianic Jewish" translations both of Old and New Testament were progressively required by believers and members of these congregations.⁵² For sake of simplicity, let us compare the famous opening of Paul's "Letter to the Romans" in its traditional King James Version (KJV) and in two modern messianic Jewish version, the one of the "Orthodox Jewish Bible" (OJB) and the one of the "Tree of Life Version" (TLV):

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures). Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name: Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ." (Rom 1:1–6 according to KJV)

'ayin) might reflect either the Greek-Latin version of the original Hebrew name *Yehoshua'* or also be a further genuine extremely short abbreviation, as evident by some ancient Jewish ossuaries. Only later shall the rabbinic form *Yeshu* (without the final letter *'ayin*) be interpreted as a sobriquet and reflect an evident derogatory use, as in the already mentioned early medieval (?) text "Toledot Yeshu". Besides, this traditional interpretation was rejected by the already mentioned academic scholar David Flusser, who maintained that the letter *'ayin* was dropped in conformity to the Galilean pronunciation of the time (D. Flusser: *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*, New York, Adama Books, 1987, p. 89). On the onomastics of the name *Yehoshua'* and its use in Hebrew inscriptions in the Second Temple period, see T. Ilan: *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity Part I: Palestine 330 BCE–200 CE*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2002, p. 129; cf. also R. Bauckham: *The Names in the Ossuaries*. In: Ch. L. Quarles (Ed.): *Buried Hope or Riesen Savior? The Search for the Jesus Tomb*, Nashville, B&G, 2008, pp. 80–81. For same magic uses of the name of Jesus (in several variants), see Schäfer: *Jesus in the Talmud*, pp. 179–180.

⁵² There are a number of *English* translations that are akin to messianic Jewish sensibility or at least more compatible to their need for neutrality or Jewish sensibility: the 1972 Heinz Cassirer's version of the New Testament (H. W. Cassirer: *God's New Covenant. A New Testament Translation*, Gran Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989), the „Complete Jewish Bible“ published in 1998 by the messianic Jewish Israeli scholar David H. Stern (Jerusalem, Jewish New Testament Publication), „The Orthodox Jewish Bible“ published in 2002 as a translation-paraphrase by the messianic Jewish author Philipp E. Goble on account of Yiddish and Hasidic vocabulary (accessible also online: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Orthodox-Jewish-Bible-OJB/>), and finally the 2014 "The Tree of Life Bible" version (accessible also online: <https://tlvbible.com/>).

“From Sha’ul, an eved of Rebbe, Melech HaMoshiach Yehoshua, summoned to be a Shliach, set apart for the Besuras HaGeulah of Hashem, Which Hashem promised beforehand through His Neviim in the Kitvei HaKodesh. The Good News of Redemption of Hashem concerns the Zun fun Der Oybershter (Ben HaElohim of Hashem) born from the zera Dovid, as far as basar is concerned, But, as far as the Ruach Hakodesh is concerned, appointed to be Ben HaElohim in power by means of Moshiach’s Techiyah [Resurrection] from HaMesim. Through him and for the kavod of his Name, we have received unmerited Chen v’Chesed Hashem and the Shlichus for the tachlis (purpose) of bringing about the mishma’at of emunah among all Nations, Among whom you also are summoned to belong to Rebbe, Melech HaMoshiach Yehoshua.” (Rom 1:1–6 according to the “Orthodox Jewish Bible”)

“Paul, a slave of Messiah *Yeshua*, called to be an emissary and set apart for the Good News of God, which He announced beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures. Concerning His Son, He came into being from the seed of David according to the flesh. He was appointed *Ben-Elohim* in power according to the *Ruach* of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. He is Messiah *Yeshua* our Lord. Through Him we have received grace and the office of emissary, to bring about obedience of faith among all the nations on behalf of His name. And you also are called to *Yeshua* the Messiah.” (Rom 1:1–6 according to “Tree of Life Version”)

The KJV translation provides a traditional calque of the keywords from the Greek original, whereas the Jewish messianic translations avoid this and provide two different versions, on account of their *Jewish sensibility*. These variations are displayed in the following chart:

GREEK	KJV	OJB	TLV
<i>Saulos</i>	Paul	Sha’ul	Paul
<i>Jesus</i>	Jesus	Yehoshua	Yeshua
<i>apostolos</i>	apostle	shaliach ⁵³	emissary
<i>euangelion theou</i>	gospel of God	<i>Besuras HaGeulah</i> of <i>baShem</i> ⁵⁴	Good News
<i>uios theou</i>	Son of God	<i>Zun fun Der Oybershter</i> ⁵⁵	Ben-Elohim
<i>Christos</i>	Christ	<i>Melech HaMoshiach</i> ⁵⁶	the Messiah

⁵³ Rabbinic Hebrew for “emissary”.

⁵⁴ Ashkenazi-spelled Hebrew for “tidings of Redemption by the Lord”.

⁵⁵ Yiddish for “Son of the Almighty”.

⁵⁶ Ashkenazi-spelled Hebrew for “the King Messiah”.

Needless to say, KJV conforms to a well-consolidated tradition of transferring Greek concepts directly into English mostly by calque. It is such a conventional habit, supported by most of the *Western* translation of the New Testament that it mostly goes unnoticed. It is exactly against this kind of phraseology that Jewish messianic translations react with a sophisticated way of rendering the New Testament and virtually jeopardizing bimillenary Christology. Apart from its idiosyncratic Askhenazi transcriptions of Hebrew terminology, OJB abounds in overwriting the original text with *more Jewish* nuances and insists in instilling an allegedly *Hebrew-Hasidic sound* into the original Greek. No differently does TLV also avoid the conventional rendering of the Greek text, providing a less extreme yet radical translation by systematically providing a more *Jewish sensitive* version of the text. As clearly displayed in the chart above, conventional Christian terminology almost disappears from Jewish messianic versions and opens to a set of radical questions both about the divinity and the messianic condition of Jesus. Jesus' messianic titles are indeed deeply revised and transformed into a religious category that could hardly be compatible with conventional Christian theology. For brevity's sake, let focus only on the very interesting rendering of the Greek *uios theou* ("son of God") that might reflect an original Hebrew (?) *ben elohim* and that is rendered accordingly in both these Jewish messianic translations. Both the Yiddish *Zonder Oybersther* ["Son of the Almighty"] in OJB and the Hebrew transcription *Ben Elohim* in TLV serve two simultaneous purposes: on the one hand, they *neutralize* the allegedly misleading conventional (KJV) translation as "the Son of God;" on the other hand, they refer this expression back to an allegedly Hebrew-Aramaic subtext that a bimillenary convention has systematically covered up and therefore reinstate its very original *Jewish messianic* meaning. In so doing, the Messianic Jews reading New Testament literature act under the presupposition that the original Greek text would include a Jewish meaning that for most modern speakers would not be recognizable there because of a misinterpreted chain of translations and tradition. Although this kind of Jewish messianic hermeneutics might be linguistically interpreted as a form of over-interpretation,⁵⁷ this cultural attitude shall rather be compared to a sort of deconstruction of consolidated Christology, exactly because it shakes its

⁵⁷ *Over-interpretation* is indeed close to linguistic manipulation and typically concerns the textuality of law. On this topic, see M. Galdia: *Legal Linguistics*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 2009, p. 202.

terminological basis. It should not be surprising, then, if ecclesiastical Christology and the traditional doctrine of Trinity are poorly received in Jewish Messianic circles.

d. Christology, Trinity, and Cultic Practices

The assumption that the Jewish messianic church would virtually bridge the bimillenary gap of history and mentality implied, either deliberately or consequently, the need to dissimulate the reception of traditional Christology and the Nicaean notion of Trinity. On the one hand, terminological difficulties arose, such as the actual impossibility of receiving a *Christology* if there was no longer such a definition of Jesus as a Christ rather as a Messiah, according to the covert Jewish meaning of the transmitted term *Christos*. On the other hand, the emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, as it was equally well reflected in the Israeli academic milieu, implied the impossibility of receiving the Nicaean Creed as well as the inevitable opposition to any Protestant (Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals and Calvinists) backgrounds that would have claimed more traditional doctrinal assumptions by the Messianic Jews. With respect to this Messianic Judaism appears to contribute mostly to *katagogic* Christology, *embodying* the very Jewish historical Jesus that lived in the Land of Israel by mimicking his ritual and cultic practices.⁵⁸ Messianic Jews usually reject the traditional Catholic celebration of Passover and, with it, the doctrine of “transubstantiation” that, on the contrary, is well accepted by (Catholic) “Hebrew Christians.”⁵⁹

5. Conclusion: Towards a New Paradigm?

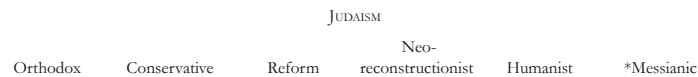
This brief overview of the Messianic Jews movement shall conclude with a passionate apology, recently provided by the reformed Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro that addressed mainly to this movement in America and sharply remarked some contradictory reactions, both from the traditional Christian

⁵⁸ The doctrinal term *katagogic* (“descending”) as opposed to *anagogic* (“ascending”) is usually derogatory. In the present case, as suggested by Dr. Brian Scalise (Liberty University) in his paper “Messianic Judaism Contribution to Christology”, the term is used in its most literal sense as a branch of Christology that is mostly concerned with the act of *incarnation* into the body of Jesus. See cf. M. Erickson: *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academics, 2005, p. 684.

⁵⁹ Nerel: *From Death to Life: The Restoration of Jewish Yeshua-Believers in the Land of Israel*, pp. 8–9.

and traditional Jewish sides. American Jews usually consider Messianic Jews “not only traitors for leaving the fold but also liars for claiming they are Jewish, not Christian,”⁶⁰ as if every Jew would be liberally entitled to take a choice to believe “almost anything but Jesus as Lord.”⁶¹

Yet, Harris-Shapiro moves from religious-sociological assumption and maintains that just as “Jewishness” appears to accept as part of itself secular humanistic Jews as well as Jewish Buddhists, then it should also accept Messianic Jews, as its sixth main branch:⁶²



According to this picture, which is both realistic and fascinating, there should be a place for Messianic Jews among the various forms of contemporary Judaism. This suggestion might be impressive, but it still doesn't solve the problems that Messianic Judaism poses. In particular, effective political, theological, and communitarian policies must still be conceived with a view to actually *bringing back to life* the primitive Judeo-Christian community of the first century, as Messianic Jews usually claim to seek to do, but it is indeed a massive challenge.

⁶⁰ C. Harris-Shapiro: *Messianic Judaism. A Rabbi's Journey Through Religious Change in America*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2000, p. 15. Cf. F. Shapiro: *Jews for Jesus. The Unique Problem of Messianic Judaism*. In: *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 16, 2011, pp. 1–16.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 179, and in particular pp. 167–213, while Harris-Shapiro is trying to define the “authenticity” of “Messianic Judaism.” Cf. also Cohn-Sherbok, who fundamentally accepts Harris-Shapiro's proposal but with the exception of including also Hasidic Judaism in the list (Cohn-Sherbok: *Messianic Judaism. A Critical Anthology*, p. 212).