

European Messianic Jews – at the Crux

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INTRODUCTION

Sir Leon (Leib) Levison, the son of a Rabbi in Safed, prominent British Hebrew Christian and first president of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance ‘never ceased to call himself “a Jew by race and a Christian by grace”’ (Levison, 1989: xi). Implicit in that are messages of identity and self-perception which reflect upon the question: What is *The Role of Messianic Jews in Europe Today?* This question has been variously answered by Jewish believers in Yeshua since the nineteenth century, not always in accord with Levison’s statement.

CRUCIAL TO THE WORLD

Jews and Jesus have never been separated by much in Europe. Anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic activity has occurred over such a long period of time, with such persistency, intensity and over such a wide political and geographic landscape that we now classify it according to categories, or ‘strains (religious, racial, economic, and political)’ (Brustein and King, 2004: 39). In all of these spheres, the experience of the Jewish believer in Jesus has not been appreciably different from other Jews.

The third and fourth decades of the twentieth century were remarkable in terms of the number of European Jews who came to believe in Jesus. Estimates are upwards of 230,000 prior to the Shoah (Glaser, 1999: 181). These believers were often members of their national churches, and their conversion documented via baptismal records.

Jewish believers in Yeshua often viewed their role as related to that of the people of Israel, of whom they saw themselves as a part. In this, their role was vitally important to both Israel and the world. A representative of this view is found in the person of Levison. On September 9, 1925, upon being elected First President of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, he preached to the assembly saying 'You and I have been preserved and our race has been preserved under God for a great cause, and I believe we [the IHCA] shall see that great cause for which we are preserved, coming more largely into our vision, and we shall serve that cause...' (Schonfield, 1936: 250). While the 'great cause' for which Israel has been preserved is indeterminate, Levison clearly understood that the Jewish believer was part of it.

Some Jewish believers in Yeshua were even more assertive in their connection to greater Israel and this significance that bore. On Good Friday in 1891, Joseph Rabinowitz proclaimed that 'The time has also come to be convinced that the mocking words of Christ's enemies: "Hail, king of the Jews!" in reality may easily be fulfilled. For the Jews may even yet arise and in accordance with God's will - like other people - become a living nation; this will be when they come to faith in the Messiah of their people and all people, Jesus of Nazareth - the King of the Jews.' (Kjær-Hansen, 1995: 190) His was a vision for the Jewish people to be united under King Messiah, taking its role as one of the nations of the world.

It was not only JBY who felt that Israel had a key role in world affairs. Harping on an old theme, Thompson wrote: 'When we deal with this race we are at once brought face to face with the supernatural, for if behind the march of human events there be no preternatural power, then their very preservation is an inexplicable mystery' (Thompson, 1902: 17-18). It is through the Jewish people that all nations should be blessed (27). In Thompson's view, missions to the Jewish people is incumbent upon the church. In this environment, and

probably in agreement with Thompson, the question of the European Jew was thus not so much ‘what is our role in Europe?’ but ‘What is our role in the world?’.

CRUCIAL TO THE CHURCH

Jewish believers in Yeshua also saw themselves as significant to the church. Only Jewish followers of Yeshua, from within the church, could advocate as they did for their own people. Conscious of anti-Semitism, Jewish believers have therefore sought to combat its influence in the church. Aware of the church’s danger of shipwreck, drifting aimlessly from its ancient moorings, Jewish believers have also sought to remind it of its connection to the Hebrew Bible.

An example of this is seen in the example of Morris Zeidman who emigrated from Poland to Toronto as a young man early in the twentieth century (Nessim, 1995: 88-89). Coming under the influence of Shabtai Rohold, Zeidman later became his successor, taking over the leadership of the Presbyterian mission to the Jews and the Hebrew Christian Synagogue that Rohold had established in 1913.¹ Zeidman’s work had much to do with relieving the suffering of Jewish immigrants to the new world. Thus he continued the work of the mission that Rohold had led. During the war years, this led to an emphasis on relief work to the thousands of displaced persons who somehow made their way to the New World. Due to Canadian immigration policy, it is fair to say that whatever expectations may have been at the outset, very few Jews were among them (Abella and Troper, 1983). Thus Zeidman found himself more and more serving the poor of the city as a whole. Nevertheless, his Jewish sympathies did not abate. Exhibiting concerns common to Hebrew Christians, ‘His aim was to interpret Jewish problems and life to Gentile Christians and help the Canadian Church to avoid the heresy of Marcion’ (Zeidman, 1990: 20). He thus admirably fit the pattern of a Jewish believer in Yeshua seeking to remedy the church’s deficit in sympathy for both the Jewish people and the Hebrew Bible.

¹ In 1913, it was, according to the minutes of the Presbytery, the only congregation of its kind in North America (Gartenhaus, 1979: 155)

CRUCIAL TO ISRAEL

Jewish believers in Yeshua also had a deep concern for the evangelisation of the Jewish people. It would be a Jewish believer who initiated what would become the

At the beginning of the twentieth century they had a leading role in establishing at least two important mission agencies. These were the Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, established by David Baron and Charles Andrew Schönberger, and the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews (London Jews Society), initially founded by Samuel C.F. Frey.² By the end of the century missions led (and in the main staffed) by Jewish believers would become even more prominent. Jewish participation in outreach to the Jewish people has arguably helped realise Leopold Cohn's vision 'that Jews would come to believe in Yeshua, yet still maintain their Jewishness' (Sevener, 1994: 30).

Undeniably, the vast majority of Jewish believers in Yeshua have found their place within the Gentile Christian world. In that world they have had an influence disproportionate to their numbers as Appendix A partly demonstrates. Thus the consensus view as to the role of the Jewish believer in Europe has for all practical purposes been that it is realised through participation in the Church. This view is probably best articulated by Richard Wurmbrand, who asks 'But is it really one's own people who constitute the supreme value? ...And, faced with the alternative of choosing between Jesus and our people, if they demand that we should renounce Him, we choose Jesus...' (Wurmbrand, 1970: 13). Without actually rejecting or turning his back on his Jewish people, Wurmbrand took his own advice. As the founder of Voice of the Martyrs (Release International, in the UK), Wurmbrand became a leading figure in the Christian world towards the end of the century. The current appointment of the paternally Jewish Bishop Justin Welby as the next Archbishop of Canterbury has in recent weeks been a favourite point of discussion even in the Jewish press (Sykes, 2012).

² A.E. Thompson surveys the principal missions to the Jews as of 1902. The Mildmay Mission and the Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, the London Jews Society, the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland and Ireland, the Lutheran Church of Germany, the Friends in England (1902: 79-106). For the LSPCJ in particular, see its centenary history and a brief account of how the work of J.S.C.F. Frey was taken over from the 'dissenters' by members of the established church (Gidney, 1908: 33-34).

FORCING THE CRUX

Jewish believers in Yeshua have always had those among them who would force the issue, and not let it die. What is their role? Messianic Jews are in a sometimes uncomfortable position, by their very existence they challenge the established boundaries of Church and Synagogue. If there is one thing that Jewish believers in Yeshua seem to have agreed upon, it is that Jews can believe Yeshua. As Pauline Kollontai states, 'Messianic Judaism may be the point at which these established boundaries are weakened or strengthened. Meanwhile it continues to challenge normative Jews on the question of what it means to be Jewish and to raise other questions about the way in which religious groups define themselves' (2004: 203). It is hard to avoid the corollary possibility – that Messianic Judaism challenges normative Christianity on the question of what it means to be Christian. Consciously or wittingly, Messianic Jews have had a role in both spheres, and by virtue of that have had a role in society as a whole.

Amidst increasing study of the question from the Jewish side, Jewish believers have recently begun to stand up for themselves within the Jewish world. Canadian Jewish studies student Daniel Gilman recently took his professors to task in a paper arguing that 'Studying Canadian Messianic Jews within the context of the broader Jewish community is a legitimate and informative subject of analysis within Jewish Canadian studies... it is clear that this is an issue that concerns the Jewish community' (Gilman, 2009: 15). European Messianic Jews cannot be far behind.

CONCLUSION

Echoing Leib Levison's hopeful message at the start of this paper, possibly many such Jewish believers would concur with Daniel Juster who argues that 'There is a destiny for Israel and the Church that they are bound to fulfill. For the Church, it is to rule as the Bride Queen by Messiah's side in the age to come. For Israel, it is to be the chief of the nations. ...The Messianic Jew will participate in both of these' (Juster, 2007: 45). Messianic Jews have hope, a hope that has given them a self-consciousness and identity that begs to be acknowledged. It is also a hope that propels them into the centre of European and

international life. This is David Stern's point in writing that 'by virtue of being in both the Jewish community and the Church, Messianic Jews are doubly involved, occupying the position of greatest tension and greatest energy potential, and thus have the greatest motivation to help resolve history's greatest conflict [between the Jewish people and the Church]. (Stern, 1988: 41).' Jewish believers in Yeshua evidenced a painful awareness of this tension throughout the last century. Their various answers to it in explicit statements and implicitly in actions, show that

Possibly Hebrew Christianity's favourite heretic Hugh Schonfield put it the best, in his characteristically visionary way. 'As the "Times of the Gentiles" run out it is probably that Jewish Christianity will steadily regain its original position of authority and will enunciate simple and universal principles of Christian belief in which the Unity of God and the Messiahship of Jesus will be the fundamentals, acceptable alike to Jew and Gentile. Jewish Christians will become the intermediaries between the East and West, the healers of the old wounds, the heralds of the Kingdom of God' (Schonfield, 1936: 18).

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APPENDIX A

SOME 20TH CENTURY EUROPEAN JEWISH BELIEVERS IN YESHUA

David Baron, 1855-1926, Russia – England, founder Hebrew Christian Testimony to Israel, author.

Leopold Cohn, 1862-1934, Hungary – N.Y., Rabbi, evangelist, founder of the Williamsburg Mission to the Jews (Chosen People Ministries)

Rachmiel Frydland, 1919-1985, Poland – USA, rabbinical student, evangelist.

Jacob Gartenhaus, 1896-1984, Austria – Tennessee, evangelist.

Isaac Hellmuth, 1819-1901, Poland - Bishop of Huron, Canada, founder of University of Western Ontario.

Jacob Hirschfelder, 1819-1902, Canada, Founder of Biblical Studies as a discipline in Canada.

Jacob Jocz, 1906-1983, Poland – Toronto, third-generation JBY, missions leader, noted theologian and author, president of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance.

Mark Kagan, 1885-1965, Riga – London, Hon. Dir. Chosen People Ministries (UK) in the 50's and 60's, evangelist, author.

Leon (Leib) Levison, 1881-1936, Safed - England, author, fund-raiser for Jews during WWI, knighted by the king, president of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance.

Igtnatz Lichtenstein, 1825-1909, Rabbi, unbaptized advocate for Yeshuic faith, author.

Yecheil Zvi Lichtenstein, 1831-1912, Romania, rabbi, mystic, married Rabinowitz's sister, author *Toldot Yeshua*.

Ernest Lloyd, 1913-2010, England – Northern Ireland, evangelist, leader, speaker.

Gustav Mahler, 1860-1911, composer, Metropolitan Opera, NY Philharmonic director.

Claude Montefiore, 1858-1938, not a JBY but sympathetic to Christianity, author on New Testament studies.

Hugh Montefiore, 1920-2005, Anglican bishop, noted author.

Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, (施约瑟, Joseph Shi) 1831-1906, Tauroggen, Lithuania – Shanghai, Anglican Bishop of Shanghai, Translator of New Testament into Mandarin, SSchereschewsky is honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on October 14.

Hugh Schonfield, 1901-1988, London, Biblical scholar, author, heretic.

Eliezer Urbach, 1921-2011, Poland – Colorado, holocaust survivor, influential Messianic leader.

Richard Wurmbrand, 1909-2001, Romania – California, ransomed(by IHCA) opponent of communism, author, founder of Release International (Voice of the Martyrs)

Morris Zeidman, 1894-1964, Poland – Toronto, pastor of the ‘Christian Synagogue’ in Toronto, founder of the Scott Mission.

19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN JEWISH BELIEVERS IN YESHUA OF NOTE

Benjamin Disraeli, 1804-1881, England, Prime Minister under Queen Victoria.

Alfred Edersheim, 1825-1889, Austria to England, Pastor and Oxford Theologian, noted author.

Charles Freshman, 1819-c. 1880, Hungary – Ontario, rabbi, evangelist, church planter.

Ridley Haim Herschell, 1807-1864, Poland - England, a founder of the British Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Jews (now Christian Witness to Israel), noted preacher.

David Mendel (August Neander), 1789-1850, Göttingen – Berlin, author, theologian, historian.

Felix Mendelssohn, 1809-1847, Leipzig, grandson of Moses M., composer, pianist, organist and conductor.

Joseph Rabinowitz, 1837-1899, Moldova, Rabbi, credited as founder of Messianic Judaism.

Adolph Saphir, 1831-1891, Hungary, Bible Commentator.