

Messianic Jews as a Challenge for Interpreting Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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Sarah Jacobs¹ decided to move from New York to Jerusalem with her non-Jewish husband. Feeling a deep and life-lasting love for Israel, she has volunteered in several charity organisations in Israel, participated in Sar-El (the Israeli Defence Forces programme for non-Israeli volunteers), and prayed for Israel on a daily basis at the Western wall. Sarah's parents are strictly observant Orthodox Jews from New York who emigrated to the US from Hungary. Some of their relatives died in the Holocaust. Sarah herself is not Orthodox anymore, although she faithfully observes the Sabbath, Shavuot and Passover and considers all this – together with many other aspects of her Jewish way of life – to be an essential part of her identity and her relationship with God. After two-years of working in Israel, Sarah wanted to exercise her *aliya* or 'Right to Return' as she and her husband decided to settle in Jerusalem. But this was not to be. Sarah was denied Israeli citizenship for one reason only: when questioned about her religious beliefs she stated that she believes that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

We need not bother with the legal intricacies of the Israeli Law of Return to see that, were we to continue to analyse Sarah's case, we would run directly into several controversial – and, in the context of the study of Jewish-Christian relations, fascinating – issues: the contemporary battles regarding the understanding and definition of Jewishness, the Jewish frustrations with and strong objections to Christian proselytism, the nature of the historically developed delineations between Christianity and Judaism, and more. Among these social and theological problems which

tend to cluster around Messianic Jews (or around the mere fact of their existence in noticeable numbers!) are some which pose serious challenges to mainstream interpretations of Jewish-Christian dialogue as an interfaith enterprise.

Before thinking further about some of these issues, some clarifications are in order. First, Messianic Jews are not a homogenous group, much less an organisation with a common leadership and structure. There are many Messianic Jewish groups and several 'alliances' in the USA and some in the rest of the world. Most Messianic Jews can be seen as a peculiar, 'culturally contextualised' instantiation of evangelical Christianity. On the other hand, as we shall see, generalisations and labels like these can also distort our understanding of the movement.

While most are ethnically or 'biologically' of Jewish descent, many Messianic Jewish congregations and organisations are open to gentile members, especially to those who are sympathetic towards or are prepared to accept at least some aspects of 'Jewish way of life' (how much, is contested). The majority of Messianic Jews are strong supporters of Israel and/or Zionists, but at the same time very missionary minded: they feel called to witness to the Jewish community about Yeshua – that he is the *Mashiah* of Israel. Some are more aggressive in their approach than others: while some strive to bring other Jews into their 'synagogues' and engage them in conversations in order to convince them of Jesus' messiahship, others refrain from any confrontation or direct persuasion techniques, seeing these as ethically and religiously inappropriate.²

The (in)famous Jews for Jesus, known for their confrontational methods of evangelisation, are seen by many Messianic Jews as being outside of the MJ movement altogether. Within the MJ movement, but especially among more conservative or 'orthodox' strands of Messianic Judaism – those who observe the Sabbath, Jewish festivals, follow the kashrut dietary laws,



The pulpit in Christ Church, in the Old City of Jerusalem. Its congregation describes itself as 'evangelical Anglican' and is considered to be one of the most well-known Messianic Jewish communities in Jerusalem.

and perform circumcision – Jews for Jesus are strongly criticised. These critiques also reflect some debates within the MJ movement itself, as Jews for Jesus and some strands of MJs are criticised not only because of their strongly divisive behaviour, but also for the shallowness of their Judaism: for sacrificing understanding and their very Jewishness for 'getting the Jesus message across' while merely putting a thin veneer of Jewish symbols on their simplistic replacement theology. So, while Jews for Jesus are in some sense outside of it, the variety within MJ movement which ranges from the 'lightly Jewish' to 'Orthodox Messianic Jewish', and from those who promote more aggressive mission, to ones who are very moderate, is still considerable.

In addition to this, there are other relatively new groups – not older than 30 or 40 years – whom together with Messianic Jews we could designate as 'culturally Jewish Jesus believers'. These include liberal ('non-evangelical') Messianic Jews, Jewish Seventh-Day Adventists, modern-day Ebionite Jews (who don't believe either in Jesus' divinity nor in his resurrection, but profess to follow him as 'the anointed' man), and others. While there are significant differences between these, their common feature is their Jewish self-understanding. It is fair to say that most of these groups are looked

upon with suspicion, frequently condemned and not recognised as legitimate partners for dialogue by most religious leaders and academics in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the West or in Israel.

This marginalisation and condemnation has its good and bad reasons. The missionary stance of most Messianic Jews is seen by many Jews and Christians who are involved in the dialogue to be incompatible with the main presupposition on which the whole dialogue process should rest: to accept the partner in dialogue as an equal and as what (s)he is in his or her own self understanding. Furthermore, some Messianic Jewish congregations and individuals have been playing 'hiding games', concealing their identity and their Christian beliefs, as well as their missionary agendas. For instance, some, while describing their places of worship as 'synagogues' – by itself hardly an immoral move – arrange them and the services held there in such a way that, to an unsuspecting visitor, they are almost indistinguishable from certain types of Jewish synagogues. In such congregations, their Christian identity is purposefully concealed. One of my friends has even told me a bizzare story about a 'Gentile Messianic Jew' – a non-Jewish evangelical Christian who joined a Messianic Congregation – he once met, who attired

himself as an Orthodox Jew (with the black hat, untrimmed beard, peyot-sidecurls, and all!) in order to 'witness' to the Jews! All this is indeed disturbing and can hardly allow for a meaningful dialogue and mutual respect. Jewish reluctance to accept the groups who want to belong to the wider Jewish community, but at the same time cut directly into the centuries old – but still largely open – wound caused by Christian attempts to convert Jews to Christianity, is more than understandable. Such 'disguise techniques' in order to proselytise also hampers relations between Jewish groups and those Christians who seek to build relations with Jews based on trust, honesty and mutual appreciation.

However, mixed with these legitimate concerns, there can also be questionable reasons for disqualifying Messianic Jews and any other 'culturally Jewish believers in Jesus' as credible partners in dialogue, or even not recognising such as 'legitimate' religious groups altogether. We need to recognise the fact that there are many Messianic Jews and members of similar groups who simply *cannot* disassociate themselves from their Jewishness even if they wanted to. I vividly remember a testimony of one Jewish man who converted to Seventh-Day Adventist Christianity. He was explaining how hard he tried for many years in order to feel at home in a Church with a usual western (Anglo-Saxon) style Christian liturgy. He couldn't, for example, really relate to the hymns that exulted death and dying (even of Jesus, for our sins) but instead always felt that at the centre of his worship of God should be a celebration of life: of the joy of living in God, celebration of family and of community life, and also celebration of God's love for Israel. After many years of such internal battles he finally found himself most at home in a fairly traditional Jewish worship which included some Jesus-centred features and combined liturgy in English and Hebrew. Eventually, he became a leader of a Jewish Seventh-Day Adventist congregation* in the US. Many Messianic Jews share similar feelings and deeply personal reasons for retaining and insisting

upon their Jewish identity. We must be careful not to dismiss their interpretation of their own Jewishness as dishonest or even fake, simply because many of them are at the same time missionary minded. It is wrong to regard either their Jewishness or their belief in Jesus to be simply a matter of choice which could be reversed or pitted one against another.

In addition to this, for many Jewish Jesus-believers the discovery of how deeply Jewish not only Jesus but the whole New Testament actually is, is very significant. The other side of the coin of this discovery is a realisation that the dominant forms of Gentile Christianity have built their centuries old traditions (of worship, of theology, of their relation to Israel and so on) upon imperfect and in some cases clearly erroneous interpretations of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. How,

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many Messianic Jews ask, could it possibly be wrong or impossible to be a Jew and a Christian at the same time today, when it was not only possible but clearly the predominant option in the times of the earliest Church? Their strong conviction that the 'parting of the ways' was not either theologically or historically *necessary*, together with their feeling that they have found a way to bring together (again!) two great faith traditions which have developed a harmful animosity towards each other through the ages, gives Messianic Jews and similar groups an incredibly strong sense of calling.

For many of us, such an understanding is naive at best, and for some it is a distortive illusion. We do not live in the first century CE anymore, but in the twenty-first. As one of my lecturers has put it in one of the spontaneous discussions we had at the CJCR in Cambridge (I am paraphrasing):

"The fact that most of the first century Christians were Jewish does not mean that being a Christian and a Jew at the same time is still possible today, let alone that it is desirable." The Christian and Jewish traditions in which most Christians and Jews find their own self-understandings and their spiritual nature today, are clearly separate, in many aspects incompatible, and to some extent appear to be even incommensurable. Even the interpretation of central terms like 'Messiah', 'Israel', 'salvation' and 'Scriptures', and the ways of reasoning about God and the Scriptures have developed through different usages and contexts in several traditions within both religions. To bring these traditions together, even to engage them in a meaningful dialogue where the partners strive to really understand each other's 'worlds' and views, can be a serious challenge. How much greater challenge

is any attempt to blend or meaningfully combine both worlds into a single and consistent religious system? Necessarily, some features of one and/or the other have to be radically reinterpreted or abandoned.

Of course, Messianic Jewish theologians would claim that they have found ways to do just that, and that this is at the very centre of their theological development of the last four decades. And again, we need to be careful not to dismiss such claims lightly, if only for cultural – and not theological – reasons (by 'we' here I mean especially more liberal or post-liberal Christians and Jews). Christians, Jews and Jewish-Christian relations cannot escape the cultural shift in the Western world and beyond, towards a more thoroughgoing religious pluralism and tolerance towards new religious movements which has been happening since the 1970s. Among other things, we now live in the age of "revival of

* Jewish Adventist congregations which are a part of worldwide Seventh-Day Church exist in the US, South America, and Israel.

the heresies", which has implications for J-C relations. The minority groups on the fringes of both Christianity and Judaism cannot be delegitimised simply because they believe differently from orthodoxies. And this holds also for syncretistic movements like Messianic Judaism.

In the light of this, we should re-consider the claim that the existence of Jewish Christianity in the first Century does not mean that a contemporary Jewish Christianity is possible or desirable. What kind of possibility – or, a lack thereof – are we talking about? Theological? Logical? Cultural? Historical? We are aware today more than ever how religious identities have been, and are *fluid*: they are changing through time as Jews, Christians and other religious people find themselves in ever-new social contexts. Religious identities are socially and historically constructed by past and present communities, and this means they are not fixed forever but possess an inherent instability, however long-lasting and 'unchanging' they may seem. Fresh developments and new constructions within Christianity and Judaism – including those at the edges and cross-sections of both traditions – even if heretical and disagreeable to most, could very well prove to become a significant development for the history of both faiths as time goes on. Given the fact that Messianic Judaism is still a growing religious movement (although not homogenous) which came from a few hundred in the early 1970's to more than two hundred thousand adherents today, we should be clear that the movement is here to stay.

Contemporary Jewish Christians should not be dismissed on *a priori* grounds or on the basis of long-lasting deposits of both traditions which pose as eternal truths (like "Christians should never judaize by keeping Jewish festivals or Shabbat", or "It is impossible for a believing

Jew to also believe in Jesus as Messiah", etc.). Rather, they should be – as they sometimes are – engaged with theologically and culturally and where possible and reasonable, invited and included in dialogue. It is not dismissal but (difficult) dialogue which has the greatest potential to change, soften and 'force' partners to think and rethink their positions, attitudes, and sometimes even identities of any religious group. As for my part, it was through acquaintance with Messianic and Seventh-Day Adventist Jews whom I met on my Christian journey, that I became interested in Judaism, the wider context of Jewish-Christian relations, and Jewish history for its own sake. So, although I don't share the methods for theological reflection and biblical interpretation of most and don't approve of proselytising methods of some of them, it is very unlikely that I would ever have studied Jewish-Christian relations had I not first browsed Messianic literature, listened to MJ music and attended one or two Messianic services in Israel.

An expert on Messianic Judaism, Yaakov Ariel observes: "How the movement struggled to do justice to the two religious traditions and the challenges it faced can shed light on the relationship between the two faiths."³ Seen from this perspective, the story and even the very presence of such 'trouble makers' as Messianic Jews can constructively challenge some Christians and Jews to critically rethink and reinterpret some of the long held and unquestioned positions. For example, should those Jews who find themselves believing in Jesus as Israel's Messiah,

be asked or even forced to give up or denounce their Jewish identity? Or, should Jewish converts to Christianity become "gentilised" and join the gentile Churches as the evangelical missionary establishment in the US argued in the 1970's (most evangelical missionary organisations have since reversed their position and now approve MJ)? Are the Buju's (Buddhist Jews), Jewish Rastafarians or secular Jews more Jewish than Messianic Jews?

These questions may not have easy answers. But they are here for us to think about, and it would be a shame if they would not be pressed on our consciousness in such an unavoidable way by the presence of Messianic Jews and similar groups. So, despite disagreements many Jews and Christians have with their beliefs and despite our disapproval of some of their actions, this should be a good enough reason why we should consider accepting such groups on their own terms and give them, in appropriate contexts, the benefit of the doubt. Their existence and growth for more than three decades now has implications for the interpretation of Jewish-Christian dialogue today as a whole.

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NB: Some names in this article have been changed.

Sources and further reading:

- Rausch, David: *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity* (Mellen Press, 1982)
Yaakov, Ariel: *Evangelizing the Chosen People*: (University of North Carolina Press, 2000)
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(Endnotes)

- 1 Her story is taken from a newspaper article by Daphne Berman: "Aliya with a Cat, a Dog and Jesus", *Haaretz* (June 10, 2006)
- 2 See David Rausch's *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology and Polity* (Mellen Press, 1982)
- 3 A. Yaakov, 'Judaism and Christianity Unite!: The Unique Culture of Messianic Judaism', in *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*, eds E.V. Gallagher and W. M. Ashcraft (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006, 191)