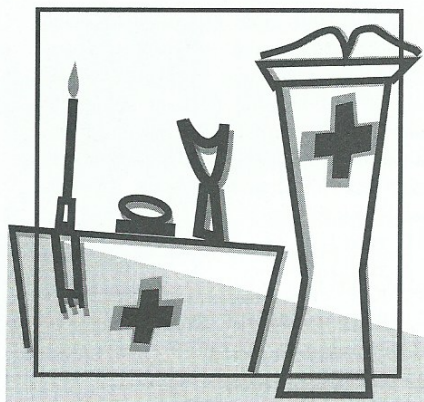




# Messianic Jews in Church and Synagogue

***Richard Harvey***

As Christians from all denominations join with Lutherans in their celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the start of Martin Luther's Reformation, for one group (at least) the celebrations are deeply problematic and bittersweet. These are Jewish believers in Jesus who cannot ignore the legacy of Luther's anti-Judaism and its tragic effects on their families and relationships with Lutherans today. These Messianic Jews believe that Jesus is the Messiah while retaining aspects of their Jewish ethnic, cultural, and religious identity.[1]

I write as a Jewish believer in Jesus, born in the United Kingdom, brought up in the Liberal Jewish Synagogue ("Reform" in the U.S.), who became a believer in Jesus in the 1970s.[2] My family originates from Germany, having changed their name from Hirschland to Harvey in the 1930s, so my interest in Jewish-Christian relations and the German-Jewish experience has been deeply personal. As a theologian within the Messianic movement I have a particular interest in reconciliation, both between Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians in the light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and also between Jews and Germans in the light of the *Shoah.*

*Messianic Judaism is a Jewish form of Christianity and a Christian form of Judaism adopted in recent years by an increasing number of Jewish people worldwide who believe in Yeshua as the promised Messiah.*

### *A Brief History of Messianic Judaism*

Messianic Judaism can be defined as a Jewish form of Christianity and a Christian form of Judaism—a cultural, religious, and theological expression adopted in recent years by an increasing number of Jewish people worldwide who believe in Yeshua (as Jews often prefer to call him) as the promised Messiah.[3] Messianic Judaism finds its expression in Messianic congregations and synagogues and in the individual lifestyle of Messianic Jews who combine Jewish identity with belief in Jesus.

There have always been Jewish believers in Jesus since the time of the early church. These "followers of the way" or Nazarenes were known and accepted by the church fathers—Jerome, Justin Martyr, Epiphanius—but as Judaism and Christianity went their separate ways in the fourth century, it became increasingly unacceptable to both ecclesiastical and rabbinic authorities to grant the legitimacy of Jewish expressions of faith in Christ.[4] Excluded from the synagogue for their belief in the Trinity and divinity of Christ, and anathematized by the church for their continued practice of Jewish customs, these believers came to be known as Ebionites ("the poor ones") and were constantly suspected of legalism and Adoptionist christology.[5]

Small groups of Jewish Christians survived in the east, and Jewish converts to Christianity were afforded protection in the midst of an anti-Semitic European church by institutions such as the *Domus Conversorum* ("house of converts"), which was maintained by royal patronage. But it was not until the modern missionary movement and an interest in mission to the Jewish people that a community of testimony of Jewish Christians reappeared.

In 1809 Joseph Samuel Christian Frey, son of a rabbi from Posen, Hungary, encouraged the formation of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews, which later became the Church's Ministry among the Jewish People (CMJ). In 1813 Frey founded the *Beni Abraham,* a community of Jewish Christians that met under the auspices of Anglicans. Encouraged by CMJ and other Jewish missions, the growing number of Hebrew Christians, as they called themselves, formed their own Prayer Union (1866), British (1888) and International Alliances (1925), and developed their own liturgies and Hebrew Christian churches in Europe, Palestine, and the U.S.[6]

By the end of the nineteenth century it was estimated on the basis of baptismal statistics that over a million Jewish people had become Christians, many for reasons of assimilation and emancipation from the ghettos into European society with access to commerce, education, and secular society. Nevertheless a recognizable number—such as Alfred Edersheim, Adolph Saphir, Augustus Neander, and Bishop Samuel Shereshewsky—wished to retain aspects of their Jewish identity alongside genuine faith in Christ. They were a blessing to the church and a testimony to their people.[7]

After the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the establishment of the state of Israel, Jewish believers in Jesus from a new generation were concerned with rediscovering their ethnic roots and expressing their faith from a Jewish perspective. In the wake of the Jesus movement of the 1970s, "Jews for Jesus" moved from a slogan used on the streets of San Francisco to an organization of Jewish missionaries to their own. At the same time, the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America encouraged the establishment of Messianic congregations and synagogues. In Israel a new generation of native-born Israelis (*sabras*) were finding the Messiah and starting Hebrew-speaking congregations. By the end of the twentieth century an international network of Messianic groups had come into existence with denominational, theological, and cultural distinctives but was united with the Gentile church and one another by their common in belief in Yeshua.

### *Contemporary Expression*

Today there are some 150,000 Jewish believers in Jesus worldwide, according to conservative estimates. More than one hundred thousand are in the U.S., approximately five thousand in Israel, and the remainder are found throughout the approximately sixteen million worldwide Jewish population. There are over three hundred Messianic groups in the U.S. and over 120 in Israel. Whilst they are not uniform in their beliefs and expression, the majority adhere to orthodox Christian beliefs on the uniqueness and deity of Christ, the Trinity, the authority of Scripture, and so forth, while expressing these beliefs in a Jewish cultural and religious context that affirms the continuing election of Israel, understood as the Jewish people, and the ongoing purposes of God for His people.[8]

Messianic Jews to varying degrees observe the Sabbath, keep kosher food laws, circumcise their sons, and celebrate the Jewish festivals, seeing Jesus and the church in Acts as their models and examples. They celebrate Passover showing how Yeshua came as the Passover lamb and practice baptism as linked to the Jewish *mikveh* or ritual bath. They worship with their own liturgies based on the synagogue service with readings from the Torah and the New Testament. Pointing to Paul's teaching in Romans 9–11 and his practice on missionary journeys, their hermeneutic of Scripture repudiates traditional Christian anti-Judaism ("the Jews killed Christ") and supersessionism (the church has replaced Israel and become the "new Israel"), arguing for forms of Torah observance that testify to the presence of the believing remnant in the midst of unbelieving Israel as a witness to the Messiah.

### *Theological Distinctives*

Messianic Jewish Theology has developed in the light of its Protestant Evangelical background and its engagement with Jewish concerns. The doctrinal statements of Messianic Jewish organizations are orthodox but are often expressed in Jewish rather than Hellenistic thought forms, more closely linked to Jewish concepts and readings of Scripture. Many Messianic Jews are influenced by the Charismatic movement, although an increasing number are opting for more formal styles of worship using the resources of the Jewish prayer book and standard liturgical features such as the wearing of prayer-shawls (*tallit)* and the use of Torah scrolls.

Most Messianic Jews are premillennial in their eschatology, seeing God's purposes for Israel being played out with various degrees of linkage to the present political events in the Middle East. Many advocate *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) for Messianic Jews, although the majority of Messianic Jews still live in the diaspora. A growing number are concerned for reconciliation ministry with their Arab Christian neighbors.

Messianic Jewish theology is a theology constructed in dialectic with Judaism and Christianity, refined in discussion between reflective practitioners engaged with Messianic Judaism, and developed into a new theological tradition based on the twin epistemic priorities of the continuing election of the Jewish people and the recognition of Jesus as the risen Messiah and incarnate Son of God. Its key concerns are the nature and functions of the Messiah, the role of the Torah, and the place of Israel in the purposes of God. Its ongoing fashioning of Messianic Jewish identity, self-definition, and expression in lifestyle and liturgy are the visible manifestation and practical application of its theological activity.

Messianic Jewish Theology is thus theoretical and theological reflection that arises from the faith and practice of Messianic Judaism. It is a theology of Jewish identity linked to belief in Jesus as Messiah. It is a type of theology, both dogmatic and speculative, that is eclectic in its form and content, covering relevant aspects of Jewish and Christian thought, theology, and praxis. It is arranged according to the key issues and topics that concern the contemporary Messianic movement. It is articulated in heteroglossic modes,[9] speaking to the Jewish and Christian publics, combining the two modes of discourse of Jewish and Christian thought but challenging, renewing, and redefining them to

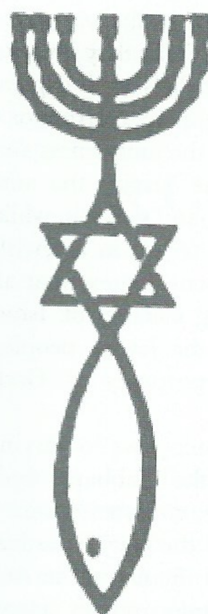
form a coherent synthesis of meaning around the revelation of the Messiahship of Jesus and the Jewishness of this belief. Messianic Jewish theology coheres around the Messiahship of Jesus and the Jewishness of following him. It resonates with and relates to a variety of points of contact with Judaisms and Christianities, Jewishnesses and Christian identities. It seeks to articulate itself intelligibly and intelligently within Jewish and Christian contexts.

Messianic Jewish theology arises from the existence of Messianic Jews and their desire to express their beliefs and reflect on them in a disciplined fashion for the growth and maturity of the movement and for the glory of God. Messianic Jewish theology seeks to make explicit what is implicit and to deliberate over what is embedded in Messianic Jewish practice. Messianic Jewish theology also aims to set new directions for Messianic Jewish practice, articulating Messianic Judaism's inner voice and logic.

### *Current Challenges and Possible Future Directions*

Whilst the internal structure of the Messianic movement must continue to develop and mature in order to hold over the next generations, and its theology must be clarified and developed in several areas such as a much-needed, engaged political and ethical theology in the light of the ongoing conflict in Israel/Palestine, perhaps the most pressing challenge, both theologically and ecumenically, has been to articulate effectively the Messianic Jewish position at the table of interdenominational and interreligious dialogue.

It is not for nothing that Messianic Jews are influenced by the nature of Jewish-Christian relations and relations within the church. From a position of being a group on the margins of both church and Israel—remember Jerome's words about Jewish



*Messianic Seal of Jerusalem: menorah, Star of David, and ichthus*

Christians, that in seeking to be both Jewish and Christian they are neither—Messianic Jews now are a visible group who situate themselves within both church and Israel and make the audacious claim to be the "missing link" between the two. Not in an evolutionary Darwinist metaphor arguing for a superseding of the old by a new and improved Christianity, it rather proposes a link between the two faith communities that demonstrates their ongoing and essential unity. James Parkes quotes former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple as saying, "When Judaism and Christianity parted company, the truth was divided."[10] Messianic Jews exist to restore the division and reconcile the divided parties despite the problematic nature of their involvement and the challenge they bring to both groups.

In recent years two important initiatives, the Roman Catholic-Messianic Jewish Dialogue group and the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Christ, have developed to broaden the dialogue between Messianic Jews and the historic churches and to interact with Jewish believers in Jesus who have found their home in the mainstream churches rather than the Messianic synagogue. The Roman Catholic-Messianic Jewish Dialogue began as a confidential initiative encouraged by Pope John Paul II.[11] It now involves Messianic Jewish and Roman Catholic leaders such as Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna and meets informally to discuss, pray, and engage in fellowship. The Helsinki Consultation brings together Jewish believers in Jesus from Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Messianic groups to encourage Jewish believers within the traditional churches and to address theological and pastoral issues that concern them as they identify as Jews within denominations that have not always been sympathetic to such a position.[12]

### *Lutherans and Messianic Jews Together*

From this brief overview of the Messianic movement it will be apparent that Lutherans have by and large yet to take cognizance of this young, small, and challenging movement. Have Luther's greatest fears been realized—a group of Jesus-believing Jews challenging the church and its teachings by maintaining not only their ethnic and cultural identity as Jews but seeing no contradiction between Torah observance and their place within the universal body of Christ? While recent studies such as the New Perspective on Paul (and now beyond that, "Paul within Judaism"[13]) advocate the Jewishness of the life, faith, and practice of the first followers of Jesus, it seems a step too far to allow such continued identification with Jews and Judaism within the church itself.

Furthermore, for Jews and Messianic Jews, Luther's legacy of anti-Judaism remains a barrier to understanding the truth of the gospel for which Lutherans stand. In the light

of the five hundredth anniversary of the posting of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, many Lutheran groups have made statements distancing themselves in repentance and shame for Luther's views and their effects, but there is still much ground to be covered both theologically and interpersonally. I would dearly like my family to hear some positive news at this time of celebration and commemoration, and also for my fellow Messianic Jews to know they will be welcome in Lutheran churches and not accused of legalism or Judaizing if they retain aspects of Jewish life and practice. I dare say that for a church with such a strong emphasis on the nature of grace and the problem of the law this will take some doing.

However, on a more positive note, Lutherans have much to teach Messianic Jews about the nature of the gospel, the freedom that it brings, and the nature of the universal body of Christ. Especially in Israel/Palestine, Lutherans can bring together divided peoples in the unity of faith and in the honoring of Christ as Lord of the church and Lord of the nations. Messianic Jews have much to learn from Palestinian Lutheran bishop Munib A. Younan's cry for justice, peace, and reconciliation in the midst of conflict.[14]

There are indeed serious theological, social, and political challenges that Messianic Jews pose to both Christians and Jews, and these cannot be quickly removed or easily avoided. What is needed is three different but related conversations. Not only that between Jews and Christians but also between Jewish Christians and Christians from the nations, and between the Jews who believe in Jesus and the majority who do not. May this article be a small contribution to such conversations.

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Richard Harvey is based in London, where he writes, researches, and teaches on the Messianic Jewish movement worldwide. *LF*

*Notes*

1. This article summarizes some of the material of my doctoral dissertation, published as Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009). Literature on the Messianic Movement has grown substantially in the last forty years. Key publications include: Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Mission to the Jews in America, 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (London: Cassell, 2000); *Voices of Messianic Judaism: Confronting Critical Issues Facing a Maturing Movement*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Baltimore: Lederer, 2001); Dan Juster, *Jewish Roots: A Foundation of Biblical Theology for Messianic Judaism*, rev. ed. (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2013); Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Re-defining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); David J. Rudolph and Joel Willetts, *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Richard Robinson, *The Messianic Movement: A Fieldguide for Evangelical Christians* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate, 2006); David Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Pubications, 2007).

2. Richard Harvey, *But I'm Jewish: A Jew for Jesus Tells His Story* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate, 1996), available at <www.jewsforjesus.org/files/pdf/ebooks/harvey.pdf> (this and subsequent websites accessed April 15, 2016).

3. In one sense, all Jews are "messianic" in that they are or should be waiting for the coming of the Messiah, but I use the term to describe those "Jesus-believing Jews" who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. See the discussion of terminology and definitions in *Mapping Messianic Judaism*, 8–12.

4. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2006.

5. *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, eds. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Halvik (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

6. Michael Darby, *The Emergence of the Hebrew Christian Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Boston: E. J. Brill, 2010).

7. Hugh Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 2009 [1933]).

8. There are no accurate statistics for the numbers of self-identifying Jewish believers in Jesus, and the term "Messianic Jew/Judaism" continues to be subject to negotiation and boundary-processing. For a recent discussion see Richard Harvey, "The Conversion of Non-Jews to Messianic Judaism: A Test-Case of Membership and Identity in a New Religious Movement," World Congress of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2013, available online at <www.dropbox.com/s/v44gqbrx7mn787m/WUJs%20paper%20Harvey%20300914e%20academia.pdf?dl=0>.

9. A term associated with Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). It is used in analysis of postcolonial discourse and identity.

10. The quote is hard to authenticate, but it is true nonetheless, whoever first said it!

11. For a history of the dialogue and some of the papers discussed, see Mark Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Boston: Cascade, 2007) and Mark Kinzer, *Israel's Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2012).

12. See <helsinkiconsultation.squarespace.com/> for details of papers presented at the 2015 Consultation in Moscow.

13. *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

14. Munib Younan, "Beyond Luther: Toward A Prophetic Interfaith Dialogue For Life," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).