

*A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People*

# MISHKAN

Issue 86, 2023



## Jesus-Believing Israelis

### *Survey – Reviews and Responses*

- Rolf Kjøde • Yaakov Ariel • Aaron Eime • Timo Vasko  
Martin Rösch • David Serner and Alexander Goldberg

### *From the Israeli Scene: Reflections on 40 Years of Caspari Ministry*

- Knut H. Høyland

### *Book Reviews*

- Rich Robinson

# MISHKAN

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Cover Design and Picture: Heidi Tohmola

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Subscriptions, back issues, and other inquiries:  
**[caspari@caspari.com](mailto:caspari@caspari.com)**

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# MISHKAN

A FORUM ON THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

**Mishkan** is a journal dedicated to biblical and theological thinking on issues related to Jewish evangelism, Hebrew-Christian/Messianic-Jewish identity, and Jewish-Christian relations.

**Mishkan** is published by the Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies.

**Mishkan**'s editorial policy is openly evangelical, committed to the New Testament proclamation that the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus (Yeshua) the Messiah is "to the Jew first" (Romans 1:16).

**Mishkan** is a forum for discussion, and articles included do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or Caspari Center.

**Mishkan** is the Hebrew word for "tabernacle" or "dwelling place" (John 1:14).

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Dear *Mishkan* reader,

The topic of this double issue of *Mishkan* is the survey about Messianic congregations in Israel that the Caspari Center published in 2022. The research was conducted by Caspari staff members David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, and the results were reported in our new book, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*.

For this issue we asked some ministry leaders and scholars, both from Israel and abroad, to evaluate the outcome of the research. Five of them took up the challenge and wrote their thoughts in a review. We want to heartily thank them for giving their time and effort to this undertaking!

The first article in this issue of *Mishkan* is a short description by the book's authors of their key findings, giving readers some additional background information about the research process. If you have not yet familiarized yourself with the survey, start with this article. You can purchase *Jesus-Believing Israelis* [here](#). The last article in this issue of *Mishkan* is a response by Serner and Goldberg to the reviews, which answers some of the questions raised.

In spring of 2023, the second edition of the survey came out, featuring small changes and corrections. The writers in this issue of *Mishkan* have used the first edition in their articles.

In the upcoming year, we plan to publish a helpful book for those who are not deep in the Israeli Messianic movement. The booklet "The Israeli Messianic Movement: A Short Guide for the Perplexed" will also be available later through the Caspari Center.

Let's dive into the discussion!

*Caspari Center Staff*

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# The Latest Survey of the Israeli Messianic Movement: The Authors' Invitation to Friendly Critique

*Alexander Goldberg and David Serner*

Over its forty years of existence, one of the Caspari Center's major contributions to the academic study of Messianic Judaism was made in 1999, when two Danish theologians who were working at the center, Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt, released the survey *Facts and Myths about the Messianic Congregations in Israel*. The authors were certainly not the first ones to describe the Jesus-believing communities of Israeli Jews; quite a few researchers published data on this subject before them, at different times and in varying formats. The uniqueness of Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt's research was in its scope and method. They covered virtually all known Jesus-believing Israeli communities where Jews worshipped and obtained their data on individual communities by personally interviewing their leaders or members. Their findings were thus based on first-hand sources, and the interviewees were asked to help dispel myths about the Israeli Messianic movement by providing only factual information, especially about the numbers of congregants and their growth rate. The survey was published both as a double issue of *Mishkan* and a book and became a standard resource on the subject. If one was to summarize its main findings, it could very well be something like this: The Israeli Messianic movement in 1999 numbered approximately 5,000 people and was divided into about 80 fellowships. The believers made up 0.1% of the general population at the time. They were mostly evangelical in their theology and of predominantly immigrant background.

In 2017 the Caspari Center started planning the release of an updated version of the "fact book" on Israeli Messianics, hoping to publish it in 2019, twenty years after the first printing of *Facts and Myths*. The need for such an undertaking seemed clear: while the Israeli Messianic movement has certainly grown over the two decades since the release of Caspari Center's first survey, it seems that the eagerness to create hype around that growth has not changed much. While the need to address the challenge of facts and myths once again was obvious to us, the idea that the Caspari Center should leave that task to someone outside of the organization since the center was behind the first survey seemed unsatisfactory. Two factors, however, caused a delay in the publication: the sheer volume of work, which we underestimated during the planning phase, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the first printing became available only in February 2022, and the data we presented was relevant as of March 2020, before Israel went into its first lockdown.

## The Method and the Results: A Brief Overview

Like our predecessors, we invested much effort into personally interviewing all the congregational leaders that would consent. For an interview to happen, we obviously had to learn about the congregation's existence, get the leaders' contact information, explain the project, and secure cooperation. While Israeli fellowships do not form a denomination or a congregational union, they do network in different ways; thus, identifying them and establishing contacts with their leaders was not difficult for the staff of a ministry with an established reputation. Before the project was officially launched, David Serner did a series of consultations with a number of key Israeli Messianic pastors, presenting the idea of a new "reality check" and receiving affirmations

of support. A fairly small number of pastors and leaders refused to participate for different reasons; depending on the particular situation of each congregation, the book either simply mentions the fact of its existence without disclosing any information about it or it also includes some details. A fewer number objected to the project as a matter of principle. At any rate, our total figures take into consideration all of the fellowships whose existence was verified.

In addition to personally communicating with the leaders, we conducted an anonymous online survey of rank-and-file Israeli Messianic believers. The questions in that survey focused on various aspects of an individual's spiritual journey, such as ethnic background, circumstances of coming to the faith, congregational affiliation, and religious identity and practices. Their answers, once processed collectively, showed a close correlation with the results of surveying the leaders and completed the picture of the identity and faith practice of an average Israeli Messianic believer as of November 2020.

Both surveys were carried out with the view of identifying different language subgroups that constitute the Israeli Messianic movement. While it was impossible for us to track the precise numbers of individuals for each of the mother tongues represented within the movement, we did focus on five major languages that are used in the main service for virtually all the congregations and house groups: Amharic, English, Hebrew, Russian, and Spanish (which are listed both here and in the book in alphabetical order). We also zoomed into each subgroup, describing its history in the Land, and analyzing its unique characteristics.

Comparing the results of our research to those of the 1999 survey—which fills only a couple of pages in our book—will be of special interest to someone who wants to see the dynamics of the Israeli Messianic movement over a period of twenty-plus years. These dynamics are certainly encouraging in many ways and sobering in other ways. In a nutshell, it shows that while the movement has grown a lot, it is essentially still an immigrant movement. Other data obtained from the personal interviews of leaders suggests that while the Israeli congregations enjoy theological and financial support from the Israel-loving segment of global evangelicalism, that support is a potential source of dependence.

Our main purpose was providing reliable, updated information about the Israeli movement. With regard to the international Christian community, we intended to present a picture of the reality that would rely solely on first-hand sources—the congregational leaders themselves, who were asked to be as factual as possible, and the individual believers, who had no personal stakes whatsoever in the anonymous online survey in which they took part. With regard to the Israeli Messianic community, figuratively speaking, we hoped to provide a mirror which would be as reflective as possible. Our own role was not in establishing “right” and “wrong” beliefs and practices, with the exception of orthodox Christology: we included only a few congregations that did not profess Jesus the Messiah to be both fully divine and fully human. All other characteristics of communal or individual expressions of the faith were simply described by us, without attaching any personal opinion or evaluation.

## How is the Response?

In terms of feedback, as of today, the situation is mixed. Quite a few Christians from the nations that knew about the project sound very appreciative of our book and see it as a research milestone for the Israeli Messianic movement. The local community's reaction, however, has been very different: it has been mostly silence. Based on the statistics of first print copies that were sold, we can see that quite a few local pastors purchased a copy, and we can safely assume that they read at least some parts of it. Knowing the Israeli culture, one can also safely assume

that had the “mirror” we produced been too twisted, the public outcry would not have subsided. The local community’s silence is therefore explained not by a lack of willingness to point out the research’s flaws, but by at least two other reasons we can think of. The first is linguistic: most Russian-speaking pastors, who represent the largest language subgroup, do not read English, and thus, almost half of the Israeli Messianic leaders are currently unable to familiarize themselves with the book. The second is, in all likelihood, of a different nature. The second largest language group, as of March 2020, were congregations with Hebrew as the language of the main service. Although many of them offer translation into other languages, their main target audience is, naturally, native-born Israelis. Yet the latter constitutes only about 20% of the total number of believers in the fellowships, as per our findings, and the percentage of native-born Israelis among congregational leaders is even smaller (18%). Thus, while it is the Hebrew-speaking congregations who would claim the strongest identification with such concepts as “local,” “indigenous,” and “Israeli,” the survey shows a much more complex reality.

## Key Characteristics of the Fellowships

We reached 273 Messianic fellowships out of 280 confirmed fellowships. In 136 fellowships the main language is Russian; in 83, Hebrew; in 30, Amharic; in 16, English; in 6, Spanish; and in 2, Romanian. Thus, the ratio of Hebrew to other languages is 30 to 70. Russian-speaking congregations constitute half of the total. The total number of individuals in Messianic fellowships was 15,323.

Apart from the Christology issue already mentioned, we found most (but not all) congregations have the following characteristics:

1. The legal status of an *amuta* (a non-profit organization).
2. No ownership of property.
3. Similar customs for the main service.
  - a. The setting is non-liturgical. With possible exceptions for the *Shema*,<sup>1</sup> the Aaronic blessing, and occasionally, the Lord’s Prayer, the service does not follow any fixed texts for prayer or scripture reading.
  - b. The meeting opens with a short free prayer and a number of worship songs and continues with announcements and taking offerings, followed by the main part, consisting of the sermon. It may or may not include the reading and/or commentary on the weekly Torah portion. It normally concludes with either a free prayer or the Aaronic blessing, which is in some cases preceded by a few more prayers for various needs.
  - c. The children and youth are present in the main service with the adults during worship, and then they move elsewhere for their own sermon or Bible lesson.
4. No denominational identification.

The overwhelming majority of the congregational leaders we interviewed confirmed that they do not fully identify with any Christian denomination and do not use any denominational tag, such as Baptist or Pentecostal, or any interdenominational one, such as evangelical or charismatic. But they do see evangelicalism as the set of beliefs that best corresponds to their own.

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<sup>1</sup> The first Hebrew word of the traditional proclamation, “Hear oh Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6:4–5).



5. A positive attitude towards charismata.

We found that charismatics constitute an overwhelming majority in Israeli Messianic fellowships: about 76% believe that the spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 are important tools available to the Messiah's body today. Analyzing data across the various groups, we have also concluded that the percentage of charismatics is higher among congregations with a main language other than Hebrew. In other words, the Hebrew-speaking congregations are, on average, less charismatic. This does not necessarily mean that the congregational members do not practice the gifts in their lives; the congregations are often a mix of believers from different backgrounds. It is simply a statement about the average attitudes of any given leadership.

6. Friendship evangelism.

Evangelism is practiced primarily through friendships—connections made naturally at work, in the neighborhood, et cetera.

7. No expectation to follow orthodox Jewish *halacha*.<sup>2</sup>

We found that only five congregations encourage their members to lead a Jewish lifestyle on weekdays and do not content themselves with Sabbath and holy days traditions. The rest may read the weekly Torah portion, but they do not view traditional rabbinic law observance as important or a desirable daily routine. This does not mean that all Israeli Messianic Jews are completely indifferent to Judaism. Some do relate to it on a deeper level than just holiday observance; for example, some keep *kashrut* (dietary laws) to some degree. However, it does mean that Israeli Messianic believers have certain strong reservations about Jewish orthodoxy.

8. Take Holy Communion once a month, and the elements are understood symbolically.

On average, 70% of all the Israeli fellowships administer Communion once a month; 16%, weekly; 5%, quarterly; and smaller percentages follow other options: either more or less frequently. Of all that responded, 62% hold a symbolic view of Communion. This means that they view the bread and wine (or grape juice) as mere symbols of Christ's body and blood, which are taken to honor the words of Jesus to do this in remembrance of Him.

9. View the state of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies.

Virtually all congregational leaders we interviewed said that modern Israel is a fulfillment of the biblical prophecies about the end-time restoration of the Jewish people. In the Israeli Messianic movement, eschatology is anything but undervalued. Not all congregations have a strong focus on this theme, but it is an underlying lense.

10. A positive attitude towards the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Almost all congregational leaders said that bearing arms and service in the IDF is normative and encouraged by the congregation, but the individual young person is free in their conscience to make their own decision.

11. No statement of faith.

Very few congregations have a written statement of faith. Still, the use of a statement widely varied, ranging from being almost forgotten or a part of a website to being clearly stated and new members being required to sign it.

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<sup>2</sup> *Halacha*: a collective body of Jewish religious laws based on the scriptures and rabbinic traditions.

## Conclusion

Those curious to learn further details can purchase their hardcopy of the survey through the Caspari Center's website or at our office, or a PDF version is available on Amazon. Research of this kind always has room for improvement. More penetrating questions could have been asked. Results from other researchers of the Israeli Messianic movement could have been referred to. The list could go on. We are therefore most grateful to the authors whose papers are presented below for their critical assessments of our book, and we are happy to interact with them.

*David Serner holds an MA in Divinity from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He has served with the Caspari Center as Director of International Studies since 2014 and is on the editorial board of the Mishkan journal. He was the project leader of Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships.*

*Alexander Goldberg was born in Russia, where he earned an MSc degree in Electrophysics from Nizhny Novgorod State Technical University. He has served with the Caspari Center as its Israel Director since 2009.*

# Finding Unity in Diversity

*Rolf Kjøde*

## Introduction

It is a great achievement to have this exploration of the Messianic movement in Israel available. Obviously, Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt's groundbreaking study from 1999, with all its value, had to be replaced by one which took into consideration twenty years of change and, as it turned out, a remarkable growth.<sup>1</sup> Let me express my gratitude to the Caspari Center for making this possible and congratulations to the two researchers for an excellent outcome.

I will organize my response in the following way. To start, I will touch upon some methodological issues connected with the project. Then, I will give my response to and comments regarding the contents of the study under four headings: First, I will give some shorter comments on a number of issues highlighted in the study. Second, I will dig a bit deeper into the challenges faced by a community of believers in Jesus that are, to a great extent, linguistically separated and how this is also relevant in a European migration context. Third, I will question an underlying topic in the report about followers in the synagogue and how this relates to a larger missiological discussion about other believers with a faith background. Fourth, I will analyze the theological leanings of the fellowships that are registered in the survey and those who are not. This response will not look too much back. The report gives good explanations and interpretations of the relationship between the reports in 1999 and 2022.

## Methodology

The report is largely of good quality when it comes to the choice of research methods. The complexity of the Messianic movement has developed in a number of ways over the decades. The researchers have thus chosen well to widen the scope. To get a full picture, more than one method is necessary. Of course, the primary method was empirical, but then it was both quantitative and qualitative—quantitative because we have been waiting for the numbers regarding the movement's expansion and qualitative, with in-depth interviews, because we need to frame the movement within a defined identity and theology to make sure we know what we are discussing. I find it helpful that the survey discusses the material in general under the "Summary" and then breaks the same facts into "Subgroups."

One thing I would like to see more of is a discussion with other research material from the years between 1999 and 2022. For instance, I wonder why there is no discussion in the report about Erez Soref's 2017 study on the recent Messianic movement in Israel.<sup>2</sup> How do these two investigations confirm one another? How do they differ? What elements in one of them would be

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<sup>1</sup> Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt, *Facts and Myths about the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (Jerusalem: United Christian Council in Israel and Caspari Center, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Erez Soref, "The Messianic Jewish Movement in Modern Israel," in *Israel, the Church and the Middle East*, eds. Darrell Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 137–150.

useful to illuminate the other? Such questions are vital for an even more comprehensive assessment.

The authors have addressed the methodological issue of including those who refused an interview in the survey. In my opinion, they give good reasons for the way they have handled this, even though it is ethically disputable that they have given presentations of such congregations that “will be recognizable if one already knows them.”<sup>3</sup>

One huge difference from the 1999 report is the increased number of congregations and groups. While Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt had the opportunity to give a broader presentation of all the groups at the time, that would go far beyond the framework of the new report. Even though things have changed over the years, the descriptions in the *Facts and Myths* report are valid as historical background information for many of the fellowships that are still alive and prospering. The strength of the recent report, however, is in its assessment of the facts, where it is far more extensive than the 1999 report (including a “Summary,” “Subgroups,” and “Online survey”). This comes from natural reasons because there are more facts to be assessed and there is the possibility of valuable comparison with the previous report. Thus, even though the former report was relatively brief in developing the results of the survey, it helps the discussion in the recent report.

Let me kindly mention a few issues for discussion. During my reading, I became uncertain of how the report related the statistics and interviews of pastors to the online survey of Jesus-Believing Jews (JBJs) in Israel, and I would like to know more about how they balanced these in the broader assessment called “Summary of observations.” The report clearly admits that there are uncertainties connected with the online survey because of a reluctance to participate from the Russian-speaking segment. Even though 487 online participants is a large enough representation for a group of 9,000 adult JBJs, the imbalance of linguistic groups makes such use of the interviews more problematic. However, I found the online section informative and interesting, and I will come back to some of it later.

Second, I will touch upon an issue that seems statistically unclarified. The question about the role and status of children in the fellowship of believers might be sensitive due to differing theological positions on the child’s faith and role in the body of Jesus. The report does not say anything about this, but the reader who wants to know more about the number and role of children among JBJs has to compare sporadic statistics.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the overall number of children in the assemblies is presented, counting approximately one fourth of the congregations. I wish the report could have also helped estimate the number of JBJ children in the congregations and thus given an even more correct total of JBJ adherents. Nothing is said in the report that shows a reluctance to count children in. On the contrary, the total number of children is estimated. Why not the JBJs? In many churches, a higher view of the children’s role as followers of Jesus has come to the forefront. I wish this was specified more clearly regarding JBJ children.

Third, let me mention two tiny issues that came to my attention while reading the report from a Western secular context. When presenting marital status, the category of unmarried

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<sup>3</sup> David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 99–101.

cohabitants is not mentioned.<sup>5</sup> As this phenomenon is sadly common even in churches calling themselves evangelical in the Western world, I wonder whether it is largely non-existent among JBJs in a partly secular Israel. The report does not say anything about this. The other tiny issue regards the question of believers not belonging to a fellowship. The authors consider 20% of believers not belonging to a fellowship to be “quite high.”<sup>6</sup> One wonders: compared to what? Again, in comparison to Northern European standards, the Israeli number of believers not affiliated with congregations is rather low. So what would the expectations be in a JBJ context, and why would that differ from other comparable societies?

Lastly, the actual numbers of Spanish and Romanian fellowships seem so low that they are without much statistical value, other than their added number in the overall statistic. One should be very careful in drawing conclusions about these groups, so the authors were right to omit these categories in the online survey statistics. Even the labels of English and International are relatively small in number, but they were well established even in the 1999 survey, which makes comparison an important part of the new survey.

## General Impressions

The authors invite the reader on an illuminating journey with a number of interesting findings. Some of them will be assessed separately further on in this article. Let me just briefly mention a few others here, starting with the important issue of how this tiny Messianic minority relates to the Jewish majority in Israel. The report asks the congregational leaders to what extent they experience opposition from the majority culture, which is labelled “harassment” throughout the survey. As an outsider living in a different part of the world, I certainly have heard something about this from general descriptions. However, the information in the survey is unique as it offers specific information to grasp an updated image of the situation. Two very interesting and grave observations are the extent of “severe opposition” towards Hebrew-speaking groups of believers in Jesus (40%) and the amount of “both mild and severe opposition” towards Amharic-speaking groups (77%).<sup>7</sup> These are high numbers. Even though society at large seems to be more “in favor of all minorities in general,” according to the authors, this does not include Jewish believers in Jesus, as the Law of Return “seems to be used exclusively against personal belief in Jesus.”<sup>8</sup> I will acknowledge the authors’ sober assessment without sweeping these problems under the rug.

Another issue is the socio-economic shape of the JBJ group. This is directly expressed to a very limited extent in the survey, but there are a couple of elements that might raise questions for further assessment. The Messianic fellowship obviously consists of many recently migrated people. These are largely less well-established persons in the society and, presumably, less affluent than the average Israeli. This is probably expressed in a number of ways, even though the financial data in the survey is limited. Only English-speaking congregations tend to give away donations of a noticeable amount.<sup>9</sup> This is hardly a surprise because, in general, “the

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<sup>5</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 241.

<sup>7</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 78–79.

<sup>9</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 72.

history of the English-speaking fellowships is interlinked with that of the international churches and mission activity” and thus more likely to be well-established socio-economically.

As for foreign support, the information is limited: 88 of 140 responses to that question said that they do not receive support regularly, meaning that at least 50 congregations do.<sup>10</sup> However, half of the fellowships have not been addressed in this survey. This could be an area of further investigation as it might say something about the socio-economic profile of the JBJ community. The authors only touch upon this issue in their assessment of the community’s growth, as compared to the general population, in reference to Winter, Gladwell, and Perbi, on the issue of lacking self-sustainability.<sup>11</sup> One reason why this is interesting is that Israel, in general, is comparable to Western secular and affluent countries far more than the poorer countries of the world where we normally find less evangelized ethnic groups. To what extent are Jesus-believers in Israel more self-sufficient than tiny minorities of Christians among the Gentiles? And what is the expected socio-economic development of a JBJ group consisting, statistically, of more recent migrants than the average population?

In general, pastoral leaders hold a much lower educational standard than is expected in society at large for that sort of responsibility.<sup>12</sup> A tendency of anti-intellectualism might, for a number of the congregations, also stem from such attitudes in the Pentecostal tradition that many of the Amharic and Russian congregations are marked by, but it seems likely that the relatively low educational level among pastoral leaders also reflects the general socio-economic status of JBJ fellowships.<sup>13</sup>

### “Same same, but different”

To me, the most striking impression from reading the survey is the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the JBJ community. Not that I am surprised, but it raises a number of questions leading to further reflections. I am specifically interested in how this might develop. Which tendency will be stronger? How can unity be expressed in diversity? This will be dependent on a number of variables. As we expect *aliyah* (the immigration of Jews to Israel) to proceed, we will probably see a continuous growth of linguistically separate groups of JBJs. We know that migrating people are vulnerable as they have no roots in their new society. If Messianic groups can manage to meet the needs of new migrants because they can identify with their challenges, this could be a reason for further growth. On the other hand, we will probably also see a different development. State authorities normally aim to integrate migrants into ordinary society, as do the migrants themselves. Living on the fringes of society is generally of little interest. One hopes and strives to socialize upwards.

At least for second generation migrants, learning the national language and partaking in ordinary society is crucial. In European churches, and for example, in the European Lausanne Movement, this is currently a big strategic issue. We see second generation migrants of believers struggling to find their place in the churches. Should they be loyal to their parents and family

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<sup>10</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 64–65.

background—which is more strongly valued by migrants than Westerners—and remain in their ethnic churches, or should they join the cultures and spiritualities of Western churches to which they are less accustomed? Many tend to fall between two stools—or worse, due to this emotional conflict, they leave the Christian community. In the long haul, this means that many fall prey to the dominant secular mindset. This also applies to much of the Muslim migrant population in Western countries.<sup>14</sup>

As for the Israeli Messianic movement, it is a real challenge that only 17% of senior leaders in these fellowships are native-born Israelis.<sup>15</sup> The number of *sabras*<sup>16</sup> is at 20%, with the Hebrew-speaking congregations at 28%, far beyond the other language groups. The dominant Russian-speaking group is as low as 3%. The report does not offer any comparison of these numbers with the society at large. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, 78% of the total Jewish population were *sabras*.<sup>17</sup> This discrepancy between the Messianic fellowships and the society at large seems to me to be of vital interest for the JBJ movement to ponder. The difference in numbers indicates a gap between the JBJ fellowships and the Israeli society in general that will take time to bridge. The report does not say much specifically about the missional culture and zeal of the Messianic fellowships. What we know is that they are in a period of tremendous growth with a lot of relatively recent believers. Even if the missional aspect of the movement is strong, as the growth indicates, these differences in sociological composition represent a serious cultural communication problem that might not be swiftly mended. It is positive that the number of believers among migrant groups has grown so rapidly, but to what extent has the Messianic community become more visible and relevant to the dominant Hebrew-speaking population over the last two decades? Or, to put it differently, how does the JBJ movement work strategically to bridge what seems like such a wide gap from the outside? These are issues of immense importance that await further exploration.

What we do see in the study is that the movement has developed over the years to become much more established nationwide.<sup>18</sup> Congregations are now remarkably well distributed across the whole country, while in 1999, “Haifa was the indisputable leader.”<sup>19</sup> This distribution in more and more places and in all regions gives better accessibility to the gospel of Messiah for more and more people. Furthermore, the report states that Jewish religious practices have increased significantly among Messianic believers. This trend “across age groups” indicates “a significant increase in participation in Jewish life after coming to the faith.”<sup>20</sup> Together, with a widening geographical representation across the country, this must be considered a positive sign for future relations with the society at large.

Let us also look at the issue of unity and diversity among groups of believers. How have relations between the rather different groups of Jewish believers in Jesus developed over this

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<sup>14</sup> Ronald Mayora Synnes, “Ethnicity Negotiations: Strategies of Young Muslims and Christians in Oslo,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31 (2018): 139–156.

<sup>15</sup> Serner and Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Sabra*: a native-born Israeli (from the Hebrew *tzabar*).

<sup>17</sup> “Immigration and Naturalization,” Jewish Virtual Library, last updated January 11, 2023, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/latest-population-statistics-for-israel>.

<sup>18</sup> Serner and Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis*, 176–181.

<sup>19</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 177.

<sup>20</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 329–230.

time span? In general, different local communities share a relatively evangelical and, for many, even a charismatic theological profile. This seems to be a unifying element. The report also mentions a number of networks of believing groups, some of them having their base in what we might call “leading congregations.”<sup>21</sup> From the report, though, it is not obvious to what extent any of these networks cover the whole movement or what the relations between them are. For a tiny movement, as JBJs in Israel still is, it is important to aim for unity, not least in the very rich linguistic and cultural diversity of the movement. From the information in the survey, it is not easy to see how any existing network can manage to mirror the comprehensiveness of the JBJ movement. For example, non-Hebrew speakers are underrepresented at the national conference (*Kenes Artzi*), *Tikkun* consists of charismatic fellowships embracing active apostolic leadership, and *Sarigim* mainly consists of Hebrew-speaking, English-speaking, and international fellowships.<sup>22</sup> We never get any impression of how the dominant group—those from Amharic- and Russian-speaking backgrounds—has been integrated into these networks. It is critical that this is uncovered.

While the report gives some insight into a minority of Jesus-believers joining ordinary synagogues, I also tried to see if the label “Messianic synagogue” was used synonymously with “congregation” or “fellowship.” Over the years, we have heard such labels being used by JBJ fellowships that, for example, choose to follow orthodox Jewish liturgies. Searching through the material, I found a few fellowships with a matching profile, but I could not find such a label being used.

Lastly, in this review of how unity works in diversity for Messianic fellowships, I will touch upon their relation to the wider community of Gentile believers in Christ, specifically, the Christian Arabic community. Obviously, the survey did not and should not research these churches.<sup>23</sup> It mentions briefly, though, *natzrut* (Christianity) in the country, which has a far higher number of believers in Jesus than the Messianic movement.<sup>24</sup> I happened to be in Israel in 2010 with a small group of Norwegian mission leaders. While meeting with representatives for the Kairos Palestine Document of 2009, I raised the question of whether they had any communication with their sisters and brothers on the Jewish side of the Messianic movement. The question obviously came as a surprise, as this was totally out of their scope and agenda, and they were maybe even surprised to hear that there is such a movement. Let me raise it the other way around in this context as well. The survey is, for obvious reasons, restricted to Jewish believers in Messiah, and the number of them in Arab-speaking churches are few. My concern here is how the believers in Jesus as Messiah of all ethnic groups relate to one another as minorities in Israel. Clearly, this is a minefield of history, theology, current problems, and deep and lasting emotions that are far more profound than an outsider is able to catch. However, how does the body of Jewish believers in Israel think about and work on the ministry described by the Jewish apostle Paul, that “[Jesus’s] purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace” (Eph 2:15, TNIV)?

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<sup>21</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 74–75.

<sup>22</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 113–114.



## Followers in the Synagogues

Let us move on to what many will consider to be the other end of the scale. Jewish believers in Jesus who worship in synagogues are, according to the survey, not very many, and they seem to share an interest in not being exposed. In light of the tense history and current hostility in society against Messianic believers, this is understandable. We have seen that Hebrew-speaking fellowships experience the most harassment from the rabbinic community, and believers in Jesus who remain in the synagogue report different kinds of expulsion: “Most expected to face one form of harassment or another once their beliefs [were] fully exposed.”<sup>25</sup>

What they represent, however, is a wider range of believers in Jesus than the relatively conformed group of JBJs who are closely related to evangelical theology. To some extent, this is comparable to what we see in the Muslim world. The missiologist John Travis (pseudonym) introduced in 1998 the C1 to C6 Spectrum, a typology of different Christ-centered communities in the Muslim world.<sup>26</sup> The model has been widely disputed, particularly the C5 typology about keeping their Muslim identity and partly remaining in the mosque.<sup>27</sup> This is not the platform to extend that discussion. Travis’s spectrum is, nevertheless, very helpful and might also be used in reflections on being a Jesus-believer from various religious or worldview backgrounds. Jonas Adelin Jørgensen has explored how Muslims come to faith in Jesus in Bangladesh and Hindus in India while, at the same time, trying to adapt their belief as much as possible to the culture of their faith backgrounds.<sup>28</sup>

As for the movement of Muslim-Background Believers, it contains a set of hotly disputed theological issues. Less controversial is the avoidance of using words like “Christian,” “church,” and “Christianity.” On the other hand, to what extent—or in what form—do they confess the *Shahada*<sup>29</sup>? What about belief in the Trinity? Should believers be baptized, and should they share in Holy Communion? What is the authority of the Quran in relation to the Bible?

Clearly, much of this comes from a different approach than a Jewish tradition. The Bible is altogether Jewish. The *Shema*<sup>30</sup> is clearly also the basis of the way God is confessed and worshipped in the new covenant. The authority of the Old Testament prophets is confirmed by Jesus in the New Testament: they communicated revelation from God. In my view, this is radically different from the main challenges within a Muslim context. While biblical faith and Old Testament Judaism are the background and source of our faith in Jesus as Messiah and Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises, Islam, from the seventh century, has had no revelatory role, adopts a non-trinitarian monotheistic thinking, and makes use of only bits and pieces of the Jewish and Christian traditions.

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<sup>25</sup> Serner and Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis*, 90.

<sup>26</sup> John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum” and “Must All Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?” *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 34 (1998), 407–408.

<sup>27</sup> Phil Parshall, “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (1998), 404–406, 409–410.

<sup>28</sup> Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas: Two Case Studies of Interreligious Hermeneutics and Identity in Global Mission* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> The Muslim profession of faith: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.”

<sup>30</sup> The first Hebrew word of the traditional proclamation, “Hear oh Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6:4–5).

However, there are some recognizable challenges within a Jewish context as well, and some of them are mentioned in the study. How does a follower of Jesus in the synagogue co-opt the *Shema* and the trinitarian pattern of Matthew 28:18–10 or 2 Corinthians 13:13? How do they worship Jesus? What about the external means of grace that the Lord instituted in baptism and Holy Communion? Or what about the question of revealing oneself as a follower of Jesus, which most Jesus-believers in the synagogues, according to the survey, have not?<sup>31</sup> We should respect that some Jesus-believers with a Muslim background, for a time, may remain silent in the mosque due to the danger of harassment and even persecution, and we also must have patience with those who remain silent in the synagogue. However, in a Jewish, secular, or Muslim context, does the New Testament permit this as a long-term strategy for any witness? These, and a few more issues, are mentioned by the authors, and I find it very important to make further investigation in that field.

## Theological Profile

We have already touched upon important theological issues in the previous paragraph. Let us add a few more reflections here. Fewer Messianic fellowships than I expected encourage their members to follow orthodox Jewish *halacha*<sup>32</sup> in their daily lives. The numerical growth of believers largely happens among ethnolinguistic groups that have shallower roots in the established Jewish society. While some relate to denominational labels like Pentecostal, Lutheran, Reformed, and Baptist, most do not. According to the study's presentation of each congregation, many new fellowships stand in relation to persons and groups coming from abroad, not least from the US. To me it seems likely to lead the general evangelical profile back to this. The report does not say much about other Messianic initiatives in Israel, but in public life, organizations like One for Israel and Jews for Jesus are profiled as witnesses for Jesus as Messiah. The program *I Met Messiah* reaches out to hundreds of thousands of Israelis on social network platforms. During the first year of the project (2015–2016), it had the immense number of 14 million views. It would be of interest to know more about the interactions between the local fellowships and these evangelistic and highly public Jewish initiatives. What is the correlation between local growth and public visibility?

This correlation is also telling regarding theological matters. The report clearly states that the overall majority of fellowships carry several characteristics of evangelicalism. The two organizations, in general, hold equivalent positions. Central theological figures in the same environment have, for decades, been integral to the work of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism. This consultation has been central to the Lausanne Movement since at least 1980. The Lausanne Covenant should probably be considered the most representative expression of global evangelical theology since 1974. Thus, there are obvious historical lines from global evangelicalism to Messianic Jews holding influential theological positions.

One might ponder why the report is trying to establish its own and, in my opinion, less precise definition of evangelicalism instead of referring to a publicly established source like the

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<sup>31</sup> Serner and Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis*, 88–89.

<sup>32</sup> *Halacha*: a collective body of Jewish religious laws based on the scriptures and rabbinic traditions.

Lausanne Covenant.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively, the authors could refer to David Bebbington's quadrilateral: evangelical theology is marked by "biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism." All four words might be presented preferably without the suffix "ism," but I suggest we let that be. Obviously, we are aware of the ambiguity of the label. The right-wing political use of it in the US is relatively far from what we find in the Lausanne Covenant or the Cape Town Commitment. However, the report's use of "evangelicalism" could be made more accurate by referring to Bebbington or the Lausanne Covenant. That said, the Bible, the cross, salvation, conversion, and evangelistic activity are all well represented in the authors' list of characteristics. Still, I think that the missional profile of evangelicalism in the Lausanne Covenant and in Bebbington could be better emphasized in the report, both in their definition and throughout the presentation.

My second comment on theology relates directly to the online survey and its very open question, "What is the gospel to you?"<sup>34</sup> The report does not say anything about the language(s) used in the online survey. That might illuminate our understanding of why the word "life" came at the top of the list. Is there more to this, linguistically, among Amharic- and Russian-speaking Israelis than we, as foreign readers, will immediately observe? My reason for mentioning this is my surprise at the word. My guess is that "life" would hardly peak in a poll among Norwegian Christians. While the report confirms that no response options were given to this open question, it also says that the answers were assigned into categories. It is not clear exactly how that was done. The remaining list of words is rather long and a bit hard to interpret. It is interesting as far as it reaches, but to give further meaning, it needs to be followed up with in-depth questions.

My last observation in this section briefly visits the slightly different profile of the Hebrew-speaking community of believers in Jesus. Even though numbers of Hebrew-speaking fellowships have more than doubled since 1999, the report states that "the rise was not as substantial as might have been expected."<sup>35</sup> What caught my interest was the number of theological differences that occurred between the JBJ group at large and the Hebrew-speaking groups. The underlying question is how these issues are likely to develop in the greater community of believers and how these theological differences will develop between the groups.

The Hebrew- and English-speaking communities differ significantly from the Amharic- and Russian-speaking ones on Torah reading in the services. Coming from a Lutheran background, at first look, I found the low Torah observance in the services surprising. The historical church in Europe has an established tradition of reading from the scriptures. I would expect Jewish fellowships of believers to read them no less. While I fully trust the explanation that the two latter groups are "largely non-liturgical," I still ponder how this will develop if they want to communicate in the larger Jewish context of society.<sup>36</sup> The two former groups have been established in the country for longer and might thus be seen as more adapted to the context. However, will this happen with other ethnolinguistic groups too? This is an important question in the process of finding a way out of the margins and into the larger society, which is a pivotal missional issue for any Jesus-believing fellowship.

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<sup>33</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 38–40.

<sup>34</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 225–228.

<sup>35</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 49, 130.

<sup>36</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 61–62.

One important reason why this seems like an open question to me is the strength of the charismatic freedom regarding traditions and liturgies and, consequently, a loss of the contents that a good liturgy carries. The global Jewish community has been preserved over the centuries by its rich traditions, feasts and festivals, Sabbath observance, readings and prayers from the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), and so on. How does a low church, evangelical, charismatic tradition with a Western style of worship find its way in this religious culture? There is no skepticism about ordinary charismatic theology or other sorts of American impulses in this question, but a concern that gaps are not bridged for the gospel. The Hebrew-speaking fellowships represent a different profile on these issues; “only” 45% of them identify as charismatic, while the overall number is 76% (100% of the Amharic!).<sup>37</sup> I do not see it as a way forward to give up the sort of charismatic profile found in a majority of the fellowships, but this spirituality needs to find the richness of liturgy, traditions, and Torah readings on their way deeper into the Jewish society for the sake of the gospel.

Lastly, let me briefly comment on the issue of gender roles. The Hebrew-speaking congregations are markedly more traditional on gender issues in congregational leadership than the other groups, specifically in regard to “teaching authority.”<sup>38</sup> We find a variety of opinions in all groups on these issues, so it is not a black and white question. Vered Hillel and Lisa Loden emphasize that this is “one area where only limited changes have occurred due to deeply rooted ties to traditional churches,” and thus, there is “little opportunity” available for gifted women in congregational leadership or teaching roles.<sup>39</sup> As orthodox Judaism is also known for its conservative attitudes on gender roles, one is likely to ask whether a culture of restrictions on the female pastorate is influenced by the leading rabbinic traditions. Hillel and Loden state that “the majority of Messianic Jews and congregations . . . shy away from any form or practice of ‘orthodoxy,’ which is equated with rabbinic tradition, except for their view on roles of women in religion.”<sup>40</sup>

While Loden and Hillel see both traditional churches and Jewish orthodoxy as possible sources for conservative attitudes among Messianic congregations, Alec Goldberg points to the “influence of Western theology on female leadership” as a reason for changes since 1999.<sup>41</sup> Even though there are very few female pastors or theological teachers in Messianic congregations, attitudes have changed, and Goldberg observes that the “openness of the Israeli Messianic movement to female spiritual leadership is growing.” He continues: “many developments in the Israeli Messianic movement, including the attitude toward female spiritual leadership, are identical to drifts of Western evangelicalism—the part of global Christendom that the Israeli Messianic mainstream is aligned with more than with any other.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 68–134.

<sup>39</sup> Vered Hillel and Lisa Loden, “The Place of Women in the Israeli Messianic Jewish Community,” *Mishkan* 84 (2021): 114–118.

<sup>40</sup> Hillel and Loden, 117.

<sup>41</sup> Alec Goldberg, “The Israeli Take on the Female Question,” *Mishkan* 84 (2021), 110.

<sup>42</sup> Goldberg, 110.

## Final Comments

To conclude, what I can see in this very valuable survey is a movement finding itself in between a context of global evangelicalism and a national Jewish majority culture. In missional terms, it is crucial that it finds its way into the larger Israeli community. In the nineteenth century, missiologists Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn gave us the principle of three selves: “self-governance,” “self-support,” and “self-propagation.” It seems that the Messianic movement in Israel is self-governed and self-propagating and, to an increasing extent, also self-supported. Anthropologist Paul Hiebert added “self-theologizing.”<sup>43</sup> My question is to what extent and how quickly the movement of Jesus-Believing Jews will stand rooted in Israel and become recognized by other Israelis as part of the Jewish culture and community. From the JBJs’ side, that process demands profound theological reflection. How will the JBJ movement proceed on the question of balance between its particular Jewishness and its universal belonging to a much larger community of believers in Jesus of all ethnicities and languages?

*Rolf Kjøde (1959) is Associate Professor of Missiology and Practical Theology at NLA University College in Bergen, Norway. He was also a Bible school teacher and principal, Director of the Norwegian Council for Mission and Evangelisation, and General Secretary of Normisjon.*

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<sup>43</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 195–196.

# Jewish Believers in Jesus in Contemporary Israel: New Developments and Insights

*Yaakov Ariel*

Anyone interested in the contemporary movement of Jewish believers in Jesus and religious life in Israel will welcome the publication of this survey conducted by David Serner and Alexander Goldberg.<sup>1</sup> The presence of Jewish believers in Jesus, also known as Messianic Jews, has grown exponentially in Israel over the last two decades. Veteran observers of the movement might still remember the handful of congregations that operated in the country before the 1980s, with merely a few hundred core members taking part in religious services and social activities. Matters changed considerably in the 1980s–2020s when thousands of new immigrants—most of them from the former Soviet Union, North America, and Ethiopia—joined existing communities or established new congregations of Jewish believers in Jesus. In addition, belief in Jesus has become more prevalent among young Israeli Jews, whose parents’ generation took little or no interest in Jesus and even distanced themselves from what they considered to be a non-Jewish faith. If members or visitors had previously encountered most Messianic Jewish leaders and communities in the country, by the turn of the twenty-first century, this was not the case anymore. Estimates of the number of Jewish believers in Israel, as well as the linguistic, demographic, and liturgical divisions among the congregants, have varied considerably, stirring a growing need for reliable surveys.

In 1999, the Caspari Center sponsored the first national survey of its kind, which was conducted by Danish researchers Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt. The survey provided much needed data and was a welcomed addition to the literature in the field of Jewish believers in Jesus, especially in Israel. The current survey, which came twenty-three years later, is more than merely an update of the previous publication, although the number of congregations of Israeli believers in Jesus has grown considerably since 1999. The new survey is more comprehensive and offers extensive statistics and diagrams that, at times, may be even more significant than the list of (almost all) congregations in the country and the information provided separately on each of them.

Serner and Goldberg did their best to ensure that all the congregations and fellowships that serve as spiritual homes to Israeli believers in Jesus were included in the survey. One technique they used was to divide the country into six different regions, providing separate lists of congregations in each area. They also added two non-regional categories: anonymous and international groups. In addition, the authors included an appendix on Catholic and Orthodox churches and other communities where Jewish believers in Jesus are, at times, congregants. The data the researchers collected was based on information that pastoral leaders were willing to provide. Some pastors provided more data than others, while some chose to remain anonymous, hidden from the eyes of potential antagonists. This marks a striking difference between surveys of religious communities in Israel and those in the United States, where churches, synagogues, and other religious communities readily provide information about the location of their compounds or buildings, names of pastors and other employees, and hours of activities.

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<sup>1</sup> David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022).

Remaining secretive is an unlikely choice in America, where tax exemption laws and building security regulations rule out anonymity or hiding vital data. In contrast, wishing to protect local communities of Jewish believers in Jesus, Serner and Goldberg have not provided the addresses of the congregations or the names of their leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Lists of and data on individual congregations of Jewish believers in Jesus are only part of the book's contribution to knowledge in the field. The most valuable section of the book is its "Summary of Observations."<sup>3</sup> The number of fellowships in the country in 2020 was 280, seven of which the survey was unable to reach. The congregants numbered more than 15,000. Of these congregants, 42% were members of Hebrew-speaking congregations, although such communities made up only about 30% of the total number of fellowships of Jewish believers in Jesus. This means that non-Hebrew-speaking congregations had fewer members, on average, since the number of Hebrew-speaking communities was 83, which is roughly 30% of the overall number of fellowships in the country. The largest number, 136, was that of Russian-speaking communities. Thirty fellowships were Amharic speaking, and sixteen were English speaking. There were also Spanish- and Romanian-speaking communities. While the survey offered little demographic details on lay membership, it revealed that only 17% of the senior leaders were native-born Israelis.

Analyzing the answers the leaders provided, Serner and Goldberg have constructed common theological denominators among the fellowships they surveyed. This includes "eschatological restorationism: the State of Israel is a fulfillment of biblical prophecies about end-time double restoration (physical and spiritual), although not a complete one."<sup>4</sup> Messianic congregations in Israel follow an evangelical premillennialist eschatological faith, which sees the return of the Jews to their ancestral land and the building of a Jewish commonwealth there as "signs of the time," in preparation for the imminent return of Jesus to earth. The authors also point out that all communities are orthodox in their Christological outlooks, following the resolutions of the Council of Chalcedon.

Most congregations follow an evangelical liturgy in which Communion is usually administered no more than once a month, and only a small minority considers the Communion elements to be more than symbolic. Again, in resemblance to the American scene, charismatic teachings and practices have strongly influenced Israeli believers in Jesus. Of 250 fellowships, 76% answered that they believe in the "availability of spiritual gifts" and are at least partially charismatic. This marks a huge change from the character of Messianic Judaism in Israel of previous generations, where charismatic practices were hardly seen, or even known, before the 1970s. Another area that has witnessed a remarkable change is the acceptance of women in leadership positions among communities of Jewish believers in Jesus. Most fellowships are currently open to such an egalitarian reality.

Another feature that has changed throughout the years is the Jewish character of these communities. As is the case in America, most Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel are non-observant. Only four fellowships encourage their people to live according to *halacha*.<sup>5</sup> However, while in 1999 only three congregations owned a Torah scroll, this item has become more widespread in Israeli fellowships.<sup>6</sup> A large and probably growing minority of congregations read

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<sup>2</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 246–371.

<sup>3</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 45–85.

<sup>4</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 47.

<sup>5</sup> *Halacha*: a collective body of Jewish religious laws based on the scriptures and rabbinic traditions.

<sup>6</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 52.

from the weekly portion of the Torah. This minority ranges from 9% of Amharic-speaking congregations to 38% of English-speaking congregations, who are obviously influenced by the practices prevalent in congregations of Jewish believers in Jesus in North America. These differences point to the plurality of Israeli fellowships of believers in Jesus. Leaders and members of different congregations come from different ethnic backgrounds, bringing with them diverse cultural experiences and various traditions of conducting their assemblies. While the movement of Israeli believers in Jesus as a whole demonstrates a remarkable theological uniformity, and the different communities share similar interpretations of the Christian faith, it is evident from the survey that this is not the case when it comes to practice. Perhaps because of its outstanding agreement on faith, the movement as a whole allows for remarkable variety in ethnic, linguistic, and communal choices, as well as in such matters as leadership, the inclusion of Jewish elements in their services, and the implementation of charismatic practices.

There is much more that can be said about the survey and the information it provides. The book offers a rich portrayal of the current Israeli scene in a manner that makes the details accessible to all readers. It is sophisticated, yet at the same time, it is straightforward. It offers compelling insights coupled with reliable data. I therefore highly recommend this book.

*Yaakov Ariel is a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the University of Chicago. He has written several books and numerous articles on Christian–Jewish relations, including on the movement of Messianic Judaism.*



# Hidden Figures: What Known and Unknown Numbers Reveal

*Aaron Eime*

International believers come to live and work in Israel for all manner of reasons. I arrived in Israel in the summer of 1998 and have remained ever since. I had not heard a voice from heaven saying “Get thee to Jerusalem!” That was never a part of my calling. Instead, in unorthodox fashion, I had driven to Jerusalem from London on an adventure in a 1973 VW Camper van simply to visit places and read the Bible *in situ* (in its original place). When I arrived in Israel, I went to Christ Church in the Old City of Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup> something that many English-speaking Protestant visitors in Israel do. It was there that I encountered Jewish believers in Jesus for the first time. I witnessed a community of Messianic Jews, Christian Arabs, and people of all denominations and creeds working and worshipping together and quickly joined them. The Messianic movement was a new phenomenon to me, and in my curiosity, I wanted to know just how many Jewish people followed Jesus as the Messiah. At the time, people were banding around the number of 15,000 Jewish believers in Israel. Of course, I had no way of confirming such a number and neither did I ask where those numbers came from; like everyone I knew, I simply accepted this as the facts on the ground. Then, in 1999, *Facts and Myths about the Messianic Congregations in Israel* by Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt was published.

*Facts and Myths* was a watershed moment for the Messianic movement—the first survey of its kind. There was disappointment in the revelation that the movement was not as large as people perceived it to be, mixed in with positive affirmation that the data suggested the movement was indeed growing. There was debate about whether the survey should have been conducted in the first place, criticisms of the methodology used to gain the data, and arguments about whether the information should have been made public at all. Over twenty years later, these same debates and discussions have resurfaced with the publishing of Caspari Center’s latest survey by David Serner and Alexander Goldberg.

*Jesus-Believing Israelis* is a treasure trove of informative data and yet, at the same time, remains an incomplete work. The survey provides a snapshot of how faith in Jesus as the Messiah is currently being expressed in Israel. This snapshot is not comprehensive but limited in scope, as was its predecessor. Serner and Goldberg acknowledge some of the difficulties with nomenclature. The title itself evokes the initial question: Who are the Israelis that are actually included in the research? Literally speaking, Jesus-believing Israelis would include Arab Israelis and Gentiles with Israeli citizenship, however unapologetically the focus of the survey is on the Jewish followers of Jesus. The authors discuss the problem of their broad definition of a Messianic believer. They note the ongoing tension between Jewish ethnicity versus Jewishness in practice, be it liturgy, worship style, theology, or halachic<sup>2</sup> tradition.<sup>3</sup> These issues are highlighted but not solved. This was never the purpose of the survey. I respect the detailed, exhaustive work accomplished by the Caspari team in contacting, meeting with, and persuading

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<sup>1</sup> The international community at Christ Church is described in detail in the survey: David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022), 418.

<sup>2</sup> *Halacha*: a collective body of Jewish religious laws based on the scriptures and rabbinic traditions.

<sup>3</sup> From my own experience twenty years ago, after living and working in Israel for one year, if you had asked me “What are Messianic Jews?”, I would have replied, “They are Pentecostals and Baptists that speak Hebrew.” A rather ignorant definition, I admit.

Messianic leaders to provide information about their communities. In essence, this is a form of vulnerable exposure for the local community, and so I also respect all the shepherds and congregational leaders for their willing participation.

I have been living and working at Christ Church for the past twenty-four years. For those who have never been to Christ Church, it is a collection of buildings that form a compound hosting the oldest Protestant church in the Middle East, a coffee shop with a large courtyard, a library, a small museum, and a pilgrim guest house. Christ Church welcomes over 50,000 Israeli visitors every year. Over many years of engagement, we have noted a developing awareness among secular Israelis to the growing Messianic movement. Many secular visitors tell us that they personally know Messianic Jews, live near Messianic believers, or have visited other Messianic communities before. Some of the questions they ask us about Jewish believers are how many there are, what *halacha* and festivals they observe, and whether their children will be considered Jewish. In response to these constant questions, we added a display in our museum explaining and promoting Jewish believers in Jesus throughout history. One of our panels proclaims the number of Jewish believers in Israel to be, broadly speaking, 30,000. This number has appeared on the internet, is echoed in the believing community in Israel, and has even turned up in Israeli newspapers and was quoted by Yad L'Achim, a Jewish anti-missionary movement, as part of its warning against Christians.<sup>4</sup> We were thus a little surprised and taken aback when the number promoted by the survey in *Jesus-Believing Israelis* was almost half of that which we had claimed. Initially, we defended our larger number, noting all the Israeli believers who do not attend a community and thus were not included in the survey, except through approximations. However, if the only takeaway from *Jesus-Believing Israelis* is a debate on the final total of believers, then I think we have missed some important information that the survey has produced.

The snapshot produced by Serner and Goldberg does indeed reveal some excellent news. Since the publication of *Facts and Myths*, Jewish followers of Jesus have tripled in number from 5,000 to 15,000. This is unprecedented growth over a twenty-year period in a believing community anywhere in the world. With the majority of pew surveys coming out post Covid-19 reflecting a decline in church attendance in Western countries, it is a welcome relief to hear some good news in Israel. The body of Messiah is growing and that should be something to celebrate. It was noted that the growth of Israeli Jewish believers in Jesus has also been three times faster than the growth of the general population.<sup>5</sup> Missiologists will note that the growth is across the demographic spectrum but more weighted in the Russian- and Amharic-speaking communities, who have the tendency to worship in their respective tongues. Leadership remains largely non-Israeli, as was the case in the *Facts and Myths* survey. The *Jesus-Believing Israelis* survey also noted that the community was slightly less formally educated than previously and that most communities remain financially insecure with many relying on overseas assistance. I knew from experience that many of the smaller *kehilot*<sup>6</sup> in the country had difficulties getting anywhere close to a balanced budget. What struck me was how untrained much of the local leadership is. I had perhaps ignorantly assumed that since the creation of the Israel College of the Bible there would have been a pendulum swing towards higher education amongst the pastors of Messianic communities, but this has obviously not been the case. In talking with my local circle of Jewish believing friends who attend local congregations, I noted that no one seemed particularly

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, none of us can actually quote a real source on this information; we simply regurgitate an accepted (and perhaps wishful) number.

<sup>5</sup> Serner and Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis*, 112.

<sup>6</sup> *Kehila* (singular), *kehilot* (plural): congregation, community.

bothered or concerned by this phenomenon. Rather, what has become important is the character of the shepherd over and above academic background. I also know from personal experience with the underground church in China that they have had the same development; they have also grown exponentially with predominately local, untrained leadership based on integrity.

This is very valuable information for those studying methodology of mission, not only from a historical perspective but also from a future perspective of potential new missions in the Middle East. As the community grows—and it is most definitely growing—the questions become “From where do we source shepherds for these new communities?” and “Do we want them to be trained?” and “How do we train them?” The nature of local accountability was another issue raised by the survey. If the shepherds of Israel are largely untrained without going through Bible colleges and sending agencies, how are they commissioned into ministry and under what authority do they operate? Currently, this does not seem to be a major concern for the local believers I personally engage with. However, I do think that this will need to be discussed in the near future. The current leadership is aging: many of the local pastors have been in their roles since the publication of *Facts and Myths*. Should the world continue on for a few more generations, a new crop of leaders will be required and these questions will come to the foreground. Who will make these decisions and determine the criteria for leadership remains to be seen. As the Messianic bodies are largely independent of each other, these questions will be initially tackled at the individual community level.

It is very important and noteworthy that *Jesus-Believing Israelis* acknowledges a high level of non-participation in a local *kehila* amongst the Messianic community.<sup>7</sup> Anyone who has spent time in Jerusalem and engaged with the local Israelis will have met with several Jewish followers of Jesus who do not attend regular worship services, and I suspect that this number does indeed skew the final total of Jewish believers in Jesus. This is a hidden figure in the survey, and it is probably impossible to ascertain its true numeric value. But it is not the number of non-participants that should be questioned but why this demographic is choosing non-participation in the first place. Again, drawing from my twenty-four years of experience in Israel, I count as personal friends eight local Israeli believers who do not attend a congregation at all.<sup>8</sup> These are Jewish believers from Moroccan, Libyan, Yemenite, and Persian descent who, along with their spouses, have chosen to leave their worshipping communities. Their families have been in the land since the War of Independence and the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands. Thus, they are all second or third generation Israelis, and yet they all report disillusionment with their local congregation and frustration at not being able to find an “indigenous” expression of worship. By “indigenous” they do not mean rabbinical, which they also see as foreign and unattractive, but something undefined and probably undefinable that they call “biblical.” They all attended congregations when they first came to faith in Jesus: they all told me how they went to camps for believers and got involved in Bible studies, and many became active in evangelism in one form or another. Over time, they all drifted from established congregational life. Their non-participation impacts the pool of potential new leaders by reducing the accessible supply of talent for growing congregations. How non-participants will influence theology, worship style, and

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<sup>7</sup> Some communities chose not to respond to the survey, which may slightly skew the real numbers of Jewish believers in Israel. I know one community, close to 300 believers, that I suspect was not counted in this final survey.

<sup>8</sup> As an Anglican deacon, I engage with the Hebrew Catholics in ecumenical meetings. The Hebrew Catholics are a larger community than is generally thought. There is considerable argument amongst the Protestant and Messianic bodies over whether Catholics are “Christian” enough to be included in any survey. I find those arguments very unhelpful, and I think that a sizeable Hebrew Catholic expression of faith reveals a need within the growing Messianic movement for liturgical forms of worship in Hebrew.

interaction with *halacha* to produce a community that they will then choose to attend remains unclear. If the Holy Spirit has given gifts to all, then this includes non-participants who, through choice, will not have the opportunity to express those gifts to the benefit of the wider body of believers. I think this might be one of the key challenges for the Messianic body to overcome. This engagement occurs against the backdrop revealed by Serner and Goldberg: that is, the good news that the number of Jesus-believing Israelis is growing and that it is a healthy growth indeed.

*Reverend Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church, Jerusalem and a teacher and Bible historian for The Church's Ministry Among Jewish People (CMJ) Israel. He studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in their master's program with a focus on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation of the Bible.*

# The Caspari Center's Systematic Survey Gives a Comprehensive Picture of the Growing Messianic Communities in Israel

*Timo Vasko*

## Initial Remarks

David Serner and Alexander Goldberg have successfully carried out a significant and challenging survey, for which I congratulate them!<sup>1</sup> This study, published in 2022, is, as the name implies, restricted in time and area, strictly adhering to its task and carried out in a systematic way. It focuses specifically on the body of Jews who believe in Jesus as the Messiah in Israel's Messianic congregations, house groups, and other Christian communities. The result is a well-structured, detailed follow-up study. It covers a wide Messianic community of believers in Israel, although not quite all of it. This study is a significant addition to the survey published in 1999: *Facts and Myths about the Messianic Congregations in Israel* by Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt.

This latest study is an online survey that was conducted from September to November of 2020. The research method used was based on primary sources and the data obtained has produced a wealth of new and valid information. The survey used source evaluation and names and faced problems appropriately. The responses were given in Amharic, English, Hebrew, and Russian. The questions were quantitative and qualitative: they took into account demography and the lived experience of small groups as minorities in Israel. Overall conclusions representing the whole community were drawn from the responses of individuals. The communities with their surrounding areas are in six main locations: Jerusalem, Northern Israel, Haifa, Central Israel, Tel Aviv, and Southern Israel. In addition, the survey included communities that transcend national borders: anonymous, internationals, Catholic and Orthodox churches, and other groups. In the community profiles section, each fellowship is described in a similar way: their name, history and leadership, theology, any harassment experienced by this specific community, and the sources of the information published in the book (e.g., pastoral interviews). A crystallized result was obtained from the abundant available data. A clear and concise presentation of their conclusions is a particular merit of the study's authors.

The research gives a good overall view of the wide variety of Messianic congregations and house groups that exist in Israel and their theologies. In this context, a house group has fewer than twenty members; any number exceeding this forms a congregation. The survey takes into account linguistic subgroups and geographical locations. International communities and churches with Messianic Jews have also been included. Statistical numerical reviews and graphical representations shed light on the many details of different groups.

In Israel, presenting the numbers for different segments of the population has its own vast problems. For example, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in 2020 the number of Christians in Israel was about 180,000, of whom about 40,600 were non-Arabs. The CBS does not specifically record the numbers of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, nor Messianic Jews who believe in Jesus. According to the survey, both the total number of participants in the spiritual activities of Messianic congregations and house groups and the

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<sup>1</sup> David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022).

number of Jews who believe in Jesus have increased in Israel between 1999 and 2020. In 1999, 4,957 adults and children belonged to 81 Messianic congregations and house groups; of these, 2,178 adults were Jews who believed in Jesus. In 2020, according to the figures, there were 15,323 adults and children in a total of 273 Messianic congregations; of these, 8,125 were Jewish adults who believe in Jesus, representing 25% of the Jewish adult population in Israel (only 6% in 1999). The large number of Christian/Messianic-Jewish congregations with different names (273) is perplexing and evidence of unfortunate division among Christians and Messianic Jews, which a Jew seeking his way to Jesus will face. This situation is a major ecumenical challenge.

The Messianic movement is very diverse. The unifying factor is national unity. Theologically, it has its roots in the God of Israel. Some communities are very traditional and want to focus solely on key points of faith in their services. Some have links to old traditional denominations, or some exist within traditional churches. Others are close to Pentecostals, Baptists, and other free churches. There are several categories, and what the Messianic movement consists of covers a wide scale. Messianic Judaism, however, is a national process in which a certain unity is adhered to.

In the survey, “Messianic Jews” are broadly defined as “Jewish believers in Yeshua” or “Jewish believers in Jesus” (JBJs). Messianic Jews (*Yehudim Meshihim*) do not use the word *notzrim* (Christians) of themselves, as it can carry allusions to anti-Semitic parts of church history. Hebrew-speaking Catholics, on the other hand, use the word *notzrim* because they want to belong to the traditional Roman Catholic Church. Throughout history, Jews who believe in Jesus have integrated into many different denominations. In this survey, a Jew is someone who has at least one Jewish grandparent. Therefore, according to the original Law of Return (1950), they have the right to immigrate and obtain Israeli citizenship.

## Jewish Roots in the Formation of Theology

In Israel, there is currently a first generation who can live in peace in their own communities according to their Jewish identity and, at the same time, have faith in Jesus Christ. In the past, Messianic Jews joined traditional churches. It has been important for these believers to remind traditional churches of their own Jewish roots. Many Jews living in Israel who believe in Jesus feel that their identity is constantly and comprehensively challenged. This perspective on identity could, more extensively, be part of the next study. The minority status of Jews who believe in Jesus on Israeli soil today does not directly compare to the situation of the early followers of Jesus, but there are similarities in the experiences of minorities. Even then, house groups played a central role.

Theological elements that are part of Messianic Judaism and important for identity are, in short, the celebration of Jewish festivals, solidarity with other Jews, and distancing oneself from the terminology used by traditional churches (e.g., *kehila*<sup>2</sup> vs. church or congregation; Messianic vs. Christian; Yeshua vs. Jesus; Messiah vs. Christ).

Judaism is the historical environment in which Jesus and the apostles lived. Thus, it is natural to think that the way to know the Messiah is often via a deeper knowledge of Judaism. Knowing the Hebrew roots is a prerequisite for understanding Jesus’s speech in different contexts (e.g., “You have heard it was said . . . but I tell you . . .”). In this way, Jesus anchors his followers’ way of life and understanding of the kingdom of God specifically to himself.

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<sup>2</sup> *Kehila* (singular), *kehilot* (plural): congregation, community.

In the early days of the church, Christians had a Jewish frame of reference for all doctrine and life. The early church soon felt that Paul's teaching about the law was intended to be an attack against Judaism—but this is not what Paul meant. It is clear that non-Jews do not have to embrace Judaism to become Christians.

Traditional churches, or pre-Reformation churches, only have real significance to Messianic Jews when they display their true Hebrew-Jewish roots. This tradition has a long history, even reaching the present day. For example, the current Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, considers himself the successor of the bishop who celebrated Yom Kippur in Jerusalem in the sixth century.

There are many questions related to the identity of Messianic Jews and the challenges Messianic Judaism poses. Messianic Jews do not have a uniform dogmatic theology or theological unity with each other; unequivocally, only Jesus Christ unites them. In view of the social situation in Israel and the international background of many people, Jesus gives all Messianic Jews their identity.

In Israel, Messianic theology is always developed when questions need to be resolved. In Messianic Judaism, the Bible is understood within the framework of Israel's history, but the framework of Judaism also means something. The religious background of an individual has a strong influence on biblical interpretation.

Even so, some Messianic congregations base the substance of their existence on the Christianity of traditional churches and not on Judaism. However, when the focus is on the worldwide church of Christ, it must be taken into account that unity is not uniformity. In the body of Christ, there are both Messianic Jews and non-Jews. Every nationality has its own expressions and different ways of reading the Bible, proclaiming the gospel, and living everyday life. Belonging to and living as a member of the body of Christ is central to Messianic Judaism. However, the anti-Semitic history of traditional churches immediately brings problems to the discussion. It is problematic if the Jewish and non-Jewish elements are not adequately balanced. The starting point in Messianic Judaism is always the history of the people of Israel and Judaism. In Messianic Judaism, the texts of the Bible are filtered through Jesus Christ; with this prism, a Christian community is formed. At the same time, the discussion about these theological questions leads toward a certain unity among the Messianic groups.

## Perspectives on Mission in Israel

Messianic Judaism is not the traditional Christianity of long-established churches, nor Judaism, but something else. Messianic Judaism is, from the outset, anchored in the history of the people of Israel and Judaism. What does this have to offer to the rest of Christianity in the current situation in Israel? Messianic Judaism is part of the Israeli people and Jewish culture and tradition; therefore, it knows how to communicate in an Israeli context, so Messianic Jews are the best witnesses for the Messiah. That is why, for example, one should not really come to Israel from abroad as an outsider to do mission work with the idea that Jesus could be proclaimed in various ways only in a short time, and then leave the country. Sometimes foreign missionary organizations realize that missionary work must be done in Israel—something that has to happen for Jesus to return. It is important to be part of Israeli society. Only then will there be integration and, at the same time, an increasing understanding of Judaism. It is essential to lead new believers in Jesus into Messianic communities that stay in the country. Foreign missionary organizations also tend to introduce new believers to the theology and terminology of their own churches. They do not guide new believers to Messianic congregations but to their own

traditional churches. This has been—and still is—problematic. However, in the worldwide church of Christ there are circumcised and uncircumcised Christians; together, they are the body of Christ. Christianity has its roots in the Judaism of the Old and New Testament periods. Traditional churches must accept the entitlement of Messianic Jews to their own roots and the biblical interpretation that rises out of it.

In Israel, the Messianic movement has a missionary vision. There are tensions between the Messianic movement and, for example, the Catholic Church because its relationship with Judaism is solely focused on dialogue. What is problematic in the dialogue between Christians and Jews is not defining who is actually engaged in that dialogue. There are different groups and viewpoints on both sides. Therefore, one must also ask what it means to follow Jesus as individuals instead of talking about it from an institutional point of view. The problem with the Catholic Church is that it does not want a strong Jewish agenda included in its services. Protestant churches tend to be more flexible in this respect.

## Conclusion

The paths of the ecclesiastically oriented—that is, Hebrew Catholics and those within other traditional churches—and the Messianic movement are quite different from each other. The latter wants to go its own way, emphasizing Christology as the center of Christianity (i.e., Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, both God and man) and the Bible (the Old and New Testaments in Hebrew) as its sole authority. They have little interest in, for example, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the creeds of the traditional churches, since they were created by the churches and do not arise from Judeo-Hebrew roots and sources that must be read “in the light of Christ.”

The theological problems relating to the identity of Jews who believe in Yeshua are currently being further clarified in many contexts. Studies have highlighted differences, similarities, and questions of interpretation relating to various concepts of God, terminology, and, among other things, participation in Jewish holiday celebrations among Messianic Jews.

Accomplishing the mission of the worldwide church of Christ to reach out to the Jews in modern Israel requires that it is primarily carried out by the citizens living in Israel, who are able to communicate the gospel in an appropriate way, beginning from Jewish roots. At the same time, a wide range of support from abroad for the implementation of this mission in Israel will be needed in the future.

Jews have the right to be Jews and return to their roots to find Christ. The Messianic movement in Israel and in other countries has a message from the Jewish world to Christians throughout the world. Messianic Judaism is also a prophetic movement; as such, it is not only a historical phenomenon, but it is moving forward for the sake of the future.

*Timo Vasko, PhD, is Adjunct Professor in Missiology at the University of Helsinki. He has also worked as a mission theologian at the office of the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland.*



# An Attempt to Appreciate a New Eye-Opening Survey

*Martin Rösch*

The value of this book consists in an in-depth overview of Jesus-Believing Jewish citizens of the state of Israel, subdivided on one hand into four languages—Amharic, English, Hebrew, and Russian—and, on the other hand, into geographical areas. The authors have found that the numbers of Jesus-Believing Jews in Israel have tripled since 1999, when the first survey had been published.<sup>1</sup> Readers who are keen to meet representatives of the Messianic-Jewish movement in the land, especially congregations, can find plenty of information to help them contact the leaders. The title *Jesus-Believing Israelis* may, at first glance, lead to the expectation that the entire spectrum of Jesus-believing Israelis is being described—including, for instance, Arab and Armenian Christians. The subtitle, however, by naming Messianic fellowships, clarifies that the survey concentrates on Jewish followers of Jesus, the Messiah. Nevertheless, the authors also take a closer look at congregations and fellowships that define themselves as “Christian” in a broad sense (including the Seventh-Day Adventists), under the condition that their members include at least a Jewish minority. I have found some exceptions:

- *Beth El Community*, based in Zichron Yaakov, a *kibbutz* (agricultural community), was founded in 1963 by German Christians as a “contribution to the welfare of the Jewish people and the State of Israel” and is comprised of about 800 members. The authors mention that “As in 1999, the community still has no ties with local churches or Messianic congregations and does not evangelize.”<sup>2</sup>
- *Church of the Redeemer* (in Jerusalem’s Old City) is owned by the Evangelical Church in Germany’s Jerusalem Foundation. Services are attended by German-speaking expatriates. It is also the home of congregations that belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the Danish Seaman’s Church and Churches Abroad organization.<sup>3</sup>

The authors summarize: “We saw a variety of approaches to the faith, ranging from general Christian belief systems to a clear Jewish faith and practice. Becoming a believer strengthened Bible studies and some Jewish religious practices, such as circumcision, which increased in frequency. . . . The overwhelming majority identified as Messianic or Messianic-Jewish, whereas others endeavored to not be labeled or used the terms ‘follower or disciple of Jesus.’”<sup>4</sup>

The congregations with a Jewish majority of believers cover a wide range within the Christian stream, which is forming a minority among Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel. I have found two examples that are situated far from each other:

- *Grace and Truth Christian Congregation* is based in Kanot, near Gedera. The authors describe it as follows: “Grace and Truth . . . defines itself as Reformed Baptist and affirms the London Baptist Confession, the Westminster Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism (in Hebrew). It has also played a key role in establishing an informal

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<sup>1</sup> Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil Skjøtt, *Facts and Myths about the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (Jerusalem: United Christian Council in Israel and Caspari Center, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022), 446–447.

<sup>3</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 423–424.

<sup>4</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 241.

fellowship of 9 Israeli congregations that define themselves as Christian Reformed and to some extent share this theology.”<sup>5</sup>

- *Hebrew Catholics*: “Hebrew Catholic churches are defined as Roman Catholic communities dedicated to developing Hebrew-speaking Catholic communities in the state of Israel. They first appeared in 1954–55, and they originally intended to serve primarily Israeli Jews with their family members. . . . St. James Vicariate for Hebrew Catholics, which affirms one can believe in Yeshua and remain a Jew, has continued working towards a more Jewish expression in the Catholic Church. . . . As of 2020, new Hebrew Catholic communities have been added to the four that were founded in 1955 (Beersheba, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa). . . . One of the above-mentioned communities is charismatic, the rest are not. The weekly Torah portion is commented on once a month in Jerusalem, in a joint service with a non-Orthodox, non-Messianic synagogue, Kehilat Zion. . . . the relationship between Hebrew Catholics and Israeli Messianic believers remains almost non-existent. . . . the situation is probably caused mainly by the Israeli Messianic mainstream’s negative view of all Christian churches that existed before the Reformation, with the exception of the early Jewish church of the first two centuries AD.”<sup>6</sup>

Of the 38 congregations and house groups in the Jerusalem area that consider themselves Messianic-Jewish, I had the opportunity to visit two during their Shabbat services:

- *Beit Geula* (Jerusalem Assembly): The survey summarizes its statement of faith as “theologically Baptist” and “non-charismatic.” The meetings and the members are described as follows: “The meetings are in Hebrew with English translation from the front and 6 languages in simultaneous translation by earphones (Russian, French, Spanish, German, Korean, and Chinese). Altogether, there are 400 people in the congregation, including 130 children. An estimated 63% have Jewish heritage, with about 160 being native Israelis.”<sup>7</sup> I could not find a significant difference from the service of a non-charismatic free church in Germany or Switzerland—except for the language and the day of the meeting (i.e., on Shabbat instead of Sunday).
- *Roeh Yisrael*: The authors of the survey report that “Roeh Yisrael’s theological profile has not changed over the years. Although 65% of the members are not Jewish, the congregation identifies with Judaism rather than with Christianity. While accepting the deity of both Yeshua and the Holy Spirit, the congregation does not accept Church creeds, which “are not binding to us, but rather the written Word of God as understood in its historical context.”<sup>8</sup> One of the services that I attended consisted of half an hour of praying and singing from the *Siddur* (Jewish prayer book), followed by a sermon and Holy Communion. This means that the service is at least partially similar to an orthodox synagogue service.

An impressive example of the diversity within the Messianic-Jewish movement is the understanding and practice of Communion as part of the meetings. Some services consist of a sermon and Communion on every Shabbat. Other fellowships practice Communion once a year as part of the Passover celebration. Some congregations understand Communion as a memorial

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<sup>5</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 323–324.

<sup>6</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 438–440.

<sup>7</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 246.

<sup>8</sup> Serner and Goldberg, 254.

of the sacrificial death of the Messiah. Others teach and practice that it conveys the presence of the Messiah himself to the participants.

In addition to my own observations of Messianic-Jewish congregations, I would like to share what two Messianic-Jewish families in Israel have told me about their opposite reasons for leaving the same Messianic congregation. One family left because they disliked the use of traditional Jewish elements within the worship services, like wearing a *tallit* (Jewish prayer shawl) and reading from a Torah scroll. I would describe their attitude as more Christian-charismatic than Messianic-Jewish. The other family left because they missed the appreciation of Jewish heritage as an integral part of congregational life. It is no wonder that this family uses the Shabbat *Siddur* for Kabbalat Shabbat (the Friday evening service that welcomes the incoming Shabbat) in their home.

I hope that the next survey will address the different and often contradictory understandings and uses of the legal aspects of the Torah among Israeli believers in Jesus. One example of these contradictions is found in the works of two authors who fall within the Messianic-Jewish spectrum in Israel, both of whom were mentioned in the Caspari Center's survey. Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz state in their plea to teach Torah and live according to its rules that "the relationship of the non-Jewish person to the Torah is one of permission and encouragement . . . They are entitled to follow Torah."<sup>9</sup> Baruch Maoz contradicts this view: "Paul says, follow Christ and in so doing you will fulfill the law. . . . Jews who believe in Jesus should not observe the Mosaic law as a matter of religious duty because doing so is to rebuild what Messiah has destroyed. If keeping the law is not necessary for the spiritual health of Gentiles, why is it necessary for Jews? . . . Either the law conveys spiritual advantage, or such an advantage is the gift of God's grace."<sup>10</sup>

There are many more questions that I assess to be worthy of asking in a future survey that explores Messianic-Jewish fellowships:

1. What are the methods that believing individuals, house groups, and congregations apply in order to share their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel with their relatives, neighbors, and colleagues?
2. What do Messianic-Jewish believers think about the notion (broadly accepted by Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe) that the Jewish people are living in an eternal covenant with the God of Israel? Is there therefore no need for the Jewish people to hear and accept the gospel of the Messiah Jesus?
3. What do Messianic-Jewish believers think about Gentile followers of Jesus who, in a humble and sensitive way, proclaim him as the "King of the Jews" before members of the people of Israel? I have in mind at least two leading persons in the Messianic-Jewish movement who mention Gentile followers of Jesus whose testimony contributed in a decisive way to their knowledge of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.
4. What is the percentage of Jewish men and women with an orthodox background who have discovered Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and joined a Messianic-Jewish house group or congregation?
5. How do Messianic-Jewish believers in Jesus view the Christian feasts (Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost)? Are there biblical grounds for acknowledging them as complementary to

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<sup>9</sup> Ariel and D'vorah Berkowitz, *Torah Rediscovered: Challenging Centuries of Misinterpretation and Neglect* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 1996), 64–69.

<sup>10</sup> Baruch Maoz, *Come Let Us Reason Together: The Sufficiency of Christ and the Unity of the Church – Jews and Gentiles Together* (Laurel, MS: Audubon Press, 2009), 79.

the biblical Jewish feasts? I remember an essay by Messianic-Jewish pastor Howard Bass, “In Defense of Christmas,” which—according to my understanding—confirms this kind of complementarity.

6. What about Messianic-Jewish eschatological expectations? Is the millennial reign of the Messiah from earthly Jerusalem the only accepted expectation? What about amillennialism? What about the rapture? What about a third temple and a renewed sacrificial system in the millennium? What about a “learned skepticism” concerning eschatology (represented, for instance, by Baruch Maoz)?
7. How do Jewish followers of Jesus in Israel understand his announcement: “I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Lk 13:35, NIRV)? The entire people of Israel welcoming Jesus—will this be a consequence of his second coming or a precondition for his return?

This list of questions has been assembled from a European evangelical Christian perspective. I am aware that the answers from the representatives of the Messianic-Jewish movement could easily fill many books. I would also be interested to hear questions from fellow Messianic-Jewish believers to us, the Gentile followers of Jesus. Finally, I would like to express my grateful appreciation for the exhaustive research that the two authors of the latest survey have completed over the past few years. The results are eye-opening!

*Martin Rösch is a pastor emeritus of the United Protestant Church in Baden, Germany. Until 2019, he was the Theological Director of AMZI (Association for the Messianic Testimony to Israel) in Switzerland and Germany.*

# Response to Reviews of *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*

*David Serner and Alexander Goldberg*

Since our survey about Jesus-believing Israelis came out, it has received both harsh comments and productive criticism, but it has also been highly praised. The book has been presented at various conferences, the 18th World Congress of Jewish Studies in August 2022 being the most prominent.

In this double issue of *Mishkan*, we want to thank those who have taken time to review the book and have started a dialogue about the congregations and fellowships in Israel. However, as Aaron Eime mentions in his article, the work is incomplete. Indeed, there is still much reflection needed and there are many areas where one can go deeper and explore more of this phenomenon of Israeli and Jewish believers in Jesus. Below we will respond to some of the comments and questions raised by the contributors to the current articles.

## Numbers

One question that keeps coming up in the discussion of the survey is our data on how many Messianic believers exist in Israel. We do not claim to know the total number of believers in Jesus in Israel, but we do claim to know how many were in a congregation in 2019–2020. One thing that can be confusing when speaking of people and numbers in Messianic fellowships is the term “Messianic.” When we suggest that about 15,000 people were worshipping in Messianic fellowships, we do not claim that they are all Jewish. In fact, only 73% of these adults have a Jewish heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Rolf Kjode addresses this question about numbers and asks why we have not compared our study to other surveys. He specifically mentions the survey published by Erez Soref in his article “The Messianic Jewish Movement in Modern Israel.”<sup>2</sup> Soref’s article suggests that there are at least 30,000 Messianics in 300 congregations, whereas we present data suggesting only 15,000 Messianics in those same congregations and even fewer being Jewish. This question is a delicate matter. It is a valid and relevant question, and we have discussed it internally at length. In the end, the Caspari Board opted for our survey to stand alone and—instead of publishing a detailed comparison—believed that our research would show readers of both surveys why our numbers differ. We would be happy to engage in discussions of our survey if invited.

Aaron Eime is aware of the existence of certain groups that he suspects we have not included. He believes they could drive the numbers up, but we can confirm that after checking with him which groups he had in mind, all the groups and fellowships in question have been included, although not necessarily mentioned for security reasons. It is our firm belief that the total number of the fellowships’ members do not exceed 20,000 (groups 1–9).

Our numbers are based on information from the local congregations themselves, not on extrapolation. We have not been approached with the existence of fellowships that we did not

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<sup>1</sup> David Serner and Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis: Exploring Messianic Fellowships*, 1st ed. (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022), 101.

<sup>2</sup> See *Israel, The Church and the Middle East*, eds. Darrel Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 137–150.

know of and had not already accounted for. An example is Eime's suggestion that a certain fellowship had not been included, but when checking the suspicion, it turned out that we were aware of the fellowship in question. These questions arise due to the opportunity of complete anonymity for the fellowships, which was necessary for the survey to take place at all. About forty fellowships chose to be anonymous, and a few more were not described at all in the publication, but they are all part of the data that was collected and their numbers and views are part of the statistics. We are aware of the existence of some fellowships that were below our radar, and we estimated their possible number. If our estimation is reasonable, the total number of individuals in them would not change our results in any considerable way.

Yaakov Ariel mentions the striking difference between the need for anonymity in the Messianic fellowships in Israel but less so in the US. He asks what could be the reason. Although this can be difficult to answer, one obvious reason is the difference between the opposition encountered by the Messianic fellowships in Israel and those abroad (in general, and in the US in particular). While a strong anti-Jesus sentiment is a part of the spiritual DNA of Orthodox Judaism, specific expressions of that sentiment largely depend on the context. Israel lives in constant tension between its two identities—a state that is both democratic and Jewish—and Israeli Orthodox Judaism does not hesitate to behave as if it is the sole legitimate religion for ethnic Jews. Religious pluralism and free competition for Jewish souls in Israel is a sin according to this nation's Orthodox Jewish institutions, and Messianic Jews are by far not the only non-Orthodox Jews that experience the consequences of this attitude (cf. the ongoing debate about non-Orthodox conversions). In the Diaspora, on the other hand, this claim can't be made as vocal as in Israel, for fear of damaging PR with the surrounding non-Jewish society. Therefore, the character and intensity of the opposition encountered by Messianic fellowships outside of Israel is incomparably milder and lower. The experience of Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel since the establishment of the state has been that of an unwelcoming attitude, to say the least. The existence and activities of anti-missionary organizations testify to that experience. Harsh attacks on fellowships or demonstrations outside meeting halls also further the thought that one might want to be somewhat careful about what is shared publicly if there is a chance of severe harassment. This all serves to answer why about forty fellowships opted for anonymity; we were surprised that all the other fellowships were okay with the level of exposure our publication provides.

Kjode is curious about how many of the children are Jewish and why we have not presented these figures. Although it will be interesting to see the future of the fellowships as the children grow up and take prominent roles in their communities, we have not gone into detail about their heritage. Our interviews suggest that most children have a Jewish heritage, but we do not know for sure. The reason for not giving this detail derives from the definition in our survey of who we consider Jewish,<sup>3</sup> so to avoid this discussion during the interviews, we decided not to pursue the question any further.

Furthermore, the congregants' Jewish ethnicity is a somewhat sensitive matter, not only to the Russian-speaking pastors but also to other language groups. It is, first of all, difficult for the leaders to know exactly who is ethnically Jewish in the congregation and to what degree. Congregants do not declare their ethnic background when they join the congregation, and the leadership pursuing details on that matter may be perceived as solidarity with the Ministry of the Interior in clearly distinguishing between Jews and non-Jews. Belief in Jesus is viewed as a

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<sup>3</sup> We define being Jewish as: "someone who has at least one Jewish grandparent, and therefore had the rights under the original (1950) Law of Return to immigrate and receive Israeli citizenship." See Serner and Goldberg, 34.

betrayal of Jewish loyalty, so many would be happy to emphasize (if not overemphasize) their Jewish background to somewhat compensate for that perceived deficiency.

Martin Rösch asks for the number of previously Orthodox Jews who have joined fellowships of Jewish believers. This is a very interesting question that could have been asked, but we did not secure any definite answers to it. It is clear that there are such people in the community, but it is equally clear that they are a tiny minority. One of the anonymous fellowships that works with ex-Orthodox people experiences harsh opposition and attacks because of that, and the number of these converts remains very low. It does seem that those coming from an Orthodox milieu do not attend fellowships that have a strong focus on *halacha*<sup>4</sup> or rabbinical thoughts. Whether this is due to the fact that these fellowships are also a tiny minority within the communities in Israel or if it is a conscious choice remains to be discovered. Further research is needed to map the details and reflections of these individuals.

In his article, Eime brings up who we call “lonely sheep”—believers who are not attending any congregation. He mentions a few anecdotal stories to further his point. Many believers in Israel can relate to those stories and have numerous similar relations. The number of those lonely sheep is impossible to know for sure. However, our survey suggests that those believers who were once part of a fellowship, but are no longer, constitute approximately 20% of believers in Israel.<sup>5</sup> This should give rise to thoughts within any community, church, or congregation as to why people stay away. At the same time, numbers might not differ too much from lonely sheep in other countries, and it is worth doing further research on this phenomenon. Furthermore, internet interaction and other anonymous ways of communicating suggest that quite a few believers never had any connection to a fellowship or to other believers. Kjøde suggests that our estimation of the lonely sheep number could be too low. It is unknown how many actually exist, but those connected to the movement do not seem to be more than 5,000 according to our online survey. Despite this estimation, no one will ever know the number of believers who are utterly alone in ultra-Orthodox milieus or behind their computer screens, and nothing valid can be said about them. However, we hear reports from different ministries that interact with them that they are not just a few.

Kjøde grasps the low number of *sabras*<sup>6</sup> in the Messianic communities, compared to the 78% of native Israelis in the overall population: “This discrepancy between the Messianic fellowships and the society at large seems to me to be of vital interest for the JBJ movement to ponder. The differences in numbers indicate a gap between the JBJ fellowships and the Israeli society in general that will take time to bridge.” We did not analyze this gap, but it is definitely connected to the influx of immigrants that come to faith. He also asks, “To what extent has the Messianic community become more visible and relevant to the dominant Hebrew-speaking population over the last two decades?” The question of visibility is sometimes connected to the harassment that the community experiences. This seems to lower the willingness to become public. On a positive note, we have heard stories of greater acceptance of Messianic believers in Israeli society—for example, in the army. In the Caspari Center’s Media Review, one can track the development of more positive descriptions of believers in the Israeli media. We did not find any nationwide strategy to influence the public, but many local fellowships work in close relationship with their surrounding areas and have a positive influence in their communities.

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<sup>4</sup> *Halacha*: a collective body of Jewish religious laws based on the scriptures and rabbinic traditions.

<sup>5</sup> Serner and Goldberg, *Jesus-Believing Israelis*, 108.

<sup>6</sup> *Sabra*: a native-born Israeli (from the Hebrew *tzabar*).

## Uncertainties

Kjøde is puzzled by the online survey and how it is connected to the larger survey. He also asks about the significance of the Russian-speakers' underrepresentation in the online one. In our opinion, that underrepresentation is not bad enough to affect the overall results in any significant way, and the online survey provides excellent insights into both the Russian-speaking community and the remaining communities, particularly the Hebrew-speaking community. That the survey supports the pastors' claims about their congregants is, in our opinion, striking. Of course, the choice to include both an online survey and personal interviews with pastors opens up many questions that require further research.

Kjøde also asks how the Russian and Amharic speakers are integrated into local networks. This is a complicated question to answer, as they are part of many gatherings, but at the same time, they are completely separate entities that are not influenced by the same streams as the English- and Hebrew-speaking pastors. There are several local networks within each language group, but there is no network that aims to include all language groups. As a result of their different backgrounds, the Russian- and Amharic-speaking pastors form their own networks, but some are still part of the larger Hebrew- or English-speaking networks. That being said, the Hebrew- and English-speaking congregations welcome people from all ethnic backgrounds, and our survey found that, indeed, most of their fellowships are multi-cultural and multi-lingual. This feature makes them a little bit different from all other Messianic fellowships that are more homogenous in their expressions.

Kjøde also inquires about the categorization of the answers to the online survey's question "What is the gospel to you?" If the answers were expressed in similar terms or phrases, they would be grouped together. For example, if one respondent talked about the gospel giving them life today and another one said the gospel meant they are truly alive, both answers focus on "life" and were thus put in the same category. The other categories were chosen on the basis of the same principle. One exception is the category of "creedal": it put together answers that either had all or part of the classical creeds, like the Apostles' Creed, or quoted specific verses from the New Testament.

The concept of a "Messianic synagogue" that one might have expected to find is missing from our book. This is due to the fact that only extremely few congregations have a building and a liturgy that resemble those of a synagogue. The fellowships that accept rabbinical authority or *halacha* are very few. Furthermore, individuals who fully accept rabbinical authority (on matters of orthopraxis and not theology) usually attend regular synagogues.

When assessing the growth of the Messianic movement in Israel, Kjøde asks, "To what extent are Jesus-believers in Israel more self-sufficient than tiny minorities of Christians among the Gentiles? And what is the expected socio-economic development for a JBJ group consisting, statistically, of more recent migrants than the average population?" Kjøde explains why this is important to him: "One reason why this is interesting is that Israel, in general, is comparable to Western secular and affluent countries far more than the poorer countries of the world where we normally find the less evangelized ethnic groups." Other studies of the JBJ community in Israel suggest that Israeli believers are represented in all layers of Israeli society. According to these studies, the influence of JBJs seems to be growing as they are found more and more in positions that make this influence possible. However, we are not in a position to comment with certainty on these matters. To compare Christians among the Gentiles with Jesus-believing Israelis requires more research.



Timo Vasko raises the issue of identity by saying, “Many Jews living in Israel who believe in Jesus feel that their identity is constantly and comprehensively challenged. This perspective on identity could, more extensively, be part of the next study.” He continues with statements like “The theological problems relating to the identity of Jews who believe in Yeshua are currently being further clarified in many contexts.” It is a valid concern, but as we did not research those identity questions in relation to the fellowships, we would like to point to the doctoral thesis of Keri Warshavsky, which discusses these issues in depth.<sup>7</sup> However, it seems to us that the identity problem is more difficult for the Israeli society and Christians looking at JBJs rather than a crisis for JBJs themselves. They have found their Jewish Messiah, and most experience a greater connection to their Jewishness because of this. They do not seem to struggle with being Jewish or having faith in Yeshua. Rather, the issue is how that faith expresses itself in a congregational setting and in the lifestyle of the Jewish believer. That is a matter apart from self-identity and the community wrestles with these issues, but they are not connected per se to their self-understanding or their identity as both Jewish and a follower of Jesus—at least, not as far as we have observed in our interviews with pastors and elders across the country.

## Theology and Terms

To say that the charismatic or non-charismatic fellowships do not have a liturgy at all, as Kjøde suggests, or that “this spirituality needs to find the richness of liturgy, traditions, and Torah readings on their way deeper into the Jewish society for the sake of the gospel” seems to us to be a bit of a stretch. The question of liturgy and the lack of it in the fellowships is one that the Caspari Center also has addressed in its liturgical reflection group that has met a couple of times. Of course, the Messianic fellowships do not draw upon the vast traditions of the traditional churches, as the services’ forms and structures are similar to many evangelical or Pentecostal churches. Nonetheless, many congregations wrestle with the idea of how to contextualize or find an expression that includes typical elements found in Jewish tradition, like the *Shema*<sup>8</sup> and the *Parashat Hashavuah*.<sup>9</sup>

Kjøde makes a very valid observation when it comes to our definitions. We decided, one might say wrongly, not to point to the Lausanne Movement’s description of evangelicalism nor to David Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition with its “biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism” orientation. In hindsight, this could have guided the comparison to evangelical groups outside of Israel, and we should have stuck with one of them. We decided to read up on different definitions and present the term with our own explanation as to what we meant when describing the vast majority of the fellowships as evangelical. We still believe that our definition is within the scope of appropriate use of the term. Nonetheless, Kjøde is right to point out that it would have been better to opt for a definition that has been broadly accepted and used in the evangelical world.

Ariel states, “While the movement of Israeli believers in Jesus as a whole demonstrates a remarkable theological uniformity, and the different communities share similar interpretations of the Christian faith, it is evident from the survey that this is not the case when it comes to

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<sup>7</sup> See Keri Warshavsky, *Returning to Their Own Borders: A Social Anthropological Study of Contemporary Messianic Jewish Identity in Israel* (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> *Parashat Hashavuah*: the weekly Torah portion.

<sup>9</sup> *Shema*: The first Hebrew word of the traditional proclamation “Hear oh Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6:4–5).

practice.” It is true that most fellowships are evangelical, but we do not see a remarkable theological uniformity. There is still a lot of diversity in how they relate to different questions. An example of this could be their views on Holy Communion or their perspectives on female leadership.

An example of having different practices but common theology could be the question of *kashrut* (dietary laws). Many observe what they label as “biblical kosher,” but each and every person decides and determines what that means for them, and there is no coherent acceptance of the term and its implications. Others keep some sort of basic *kashrut* at home, but not when visiting others. It seems to us that *halacha* plays no significant role in the broad spectrum of the fellowships. We welcome further research about the observance of the Torah in the Messianic movement.

Vasko comments on foreign short-term missionary work in Israel, stating that “one should not really come to Israel from abroad as an outsider to do mission work with the idea that Jesus could be proclaimed in various ways only in a short time, and then leave the country.” Similar statements are often heard from anti-missionaries, but they are also echoed within certain JBJ communities. Is this not the case in all missionary activity around the globe? How should we then understand the Great Commission? Should evangelism only be done within one’s own ethnic group?

Rösch asks, “What do Messianic-Jewish believers think about Gentile followers of Jesus who, in a humble and sensitive way, proclaim him as the ‘King of the Jews’ before members of the people of Israel?” Certainly, in Israeli society, missionary work is frowned upon, if not considered directly illegal in certain settings. It could be argued from this perspective that faith should be shared from within the Jewish population and not by any Gentiles. On the other hand, many Jewish believers have come to faith during interactions with Christians abroad or with the New Testament. The local fellowships seem divided on the issue of foreign missionary work. Many see it as damaging, as people from abroad do not know enough of the society or the Jewish background and tend to disturb more than help. A few local leaders state it very clearly: “Please, just support us with money and prayers, and leave the rest to us! If you can leave the country also—good!” Others believe that as long as the gospel is proclaimed, it is good. Our survey does not deal with the question of whether or not one should actively support missions or how that should be done. We have only asked if the fellowships are engaged, and if so, how? We found that although many fellowships are involved in relief work, their evangelism strategy mostly involves one-on-one conversations with friends and co-workers and less so organized evangelism efforts. These efforts seem to be left to ministries, rather than being based in the congregations.

Vasko states that Israeli Messianics “[emphasize] Christology as the center of Christianity (i.e., Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, both God and man) and the Bible (The Old and New Testaments in Hebrew) as its sole authority,” and he seems to contrast it with the traditional churches by stating that the Messianic movement has little interest in “ecclesiology, the doctrine of Trinity, or the creeds of the traditional churches, since they were created by the churches and do not arise from Judeo-Hebrew roots and sources.” Thus, it seems that Vasko claims the Messianic movement is more concerned about Christology than church traditions and keeps the focus on this Christology. In our experience, this is not so. Many of the pastors did not have well thought-through language to describe how they view Jesus in relation to the Godhead nor what his death and resurrection mean. All pastors have ideas and have thought about it, but many struggle with finding satisfactory terminology. The traditional churches, on the other hand,

have a clear Christology that does not deny the Jewishness of Jesus. Furthermore, just because JBJs do not usually use terms such as ecclesiology (or Christology, for that matter) does not mean they are unconcerned with these theological issues and do not reflect upon them. On the other hand, we did see well-developed thoughts on eschatology and the place of Israel and Jewish believers in the end times. Sometimes this eschatology can blur their ideas about Christology. The idea that “something has to happen for Jesus to return” is found in many fellowships, but not in all, and it does not really point to any clear or strong Christology. Rather, it reveals a strong focus on the fellowship’s self-understanding and place in the grand scheme of God’s interaction with his people. You can find all different sorts of theology concerning the end times that Rösch asks about (e.g., the millennial reign, amillennialism, the rapture, a third temple, the sacrificial system, or learned skepticism), and there is no consensus among the fellowships other than that the state of Israel is a fulfillment of prophecy and that we are living in the end times.

Rösch claims to know of a congregation in the south of Israel that celebrates Christmas, and he asks how the Christian feasts like Christmas, Pentecost, and Easter are generally perceived. We did ask a few fellowships about the Christian feasts, and our online survey also asks about Christmas. Unfortunately, we cannot give a definite answer, but the general praxis is that they are not celebrated. Instead, the focus is on the Jewish feasts and sometimes in their relation to Jesus. Pesach is celebrated—not Easter. Shavuot is celebrated—not Pentecost. Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot are celebrated, as well as Hanukkah but not Christmas, often with a notion that the Christian holidays obscure their Jewish origin or are even pagan in their origin. Most congregations do not oppose the Christian version of Jewish Holidays (e.g., Easter/Passover and Pentecost/Shavuot) but celebrate the Jewish feasts out of a practical perspective. They live in Israel and therefore follow the Israeli calendar. Some fellowships mark Christmas, but they are a minority.

Rösch continues, asking what is the JBJ community’s understanding of Luke 13:35 (“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”): “The entire people of Israel welcoming Jesus—will this be a consequence of his second coming or a precondition for his return?” It is a very specific question, and many other questions like this could have been asked, but it is not something that is much reflected upon by the local pastors. Although it is an interesting question, no one has made an in-depth study on the interpretation of this particular verse within the JBJ community in Israel. It is closely tied to Rösch’s other question about the two-covenant theology that is popular in certain Western countries. Although we have not asked about that idea in particular, we believe it is safe to say that almost all congregations and fellowships reject two-covenant theology. It seems to us that virtually everybody believes that salvation comes through personal faith in Jesus, and that leaves little or no room for the Jewish people to be saved apart from him.

Rösch also asks another timely question: What would JBJs ask evangelical Christians in the West? We have no way of answering this on behalf of the local movement. However, there are a multitude of online articles and videos posted by a variety of ministries and fellowships that raise questions to Christians around the world. To get a clear picture, these articles and videos need to be gathered and mapped in order to get closer to a satisfactory answer. The task of doing so is readily available for whomever has the time and efforts.

## Final Thoughts

We have no doubt that the Messianic movement will continue to be rooted in Israel. Of course, the danger of being uprooted again is always lurking, but the development for the past twenty years has moved towards greater and greater acceptance in the Israeli society, albeit with a few setbacks from time to time. The local leaders do need to think deeply about what it means to be a Jewish believer who lives in Israeli society and how that connects to the whole of Christendom. But most pastors are too busy with the day-to-day life of their fellowships and the needs of its members to have time to go into these discussions. That said, some are reflecting upon these questions on a very high theological and intellectual level and are beginning to write about such issues.

Rösch wants to know if there is any division between Christians and Messianic believers and if it poses an ecumenical challenge. The short answer is yes to both. Within Israel there are many issues that show a gap between the Arab Christians and the JBJ community, although in some congregations it seems not to be a challenge. In Israel, traditional churches like the Lutheran church are considered to be Arab or foreign, and there is a tremendous difference in approach and understanding of certain parts of the Bible. But then again, the same is true for the Lutheran world in the West too. Some congregations seek fellowship with everybody who confesses Jesus as the Messiah, despite differences in theology and views. One example could be one's view on the charismatics: some do not see a problem with having fellowship despite a difference in theology with charismatics, whereas others do and thus refrain from any fellowship with opposing views on the subject. To call this inter-congregational fellowship "ecumenical" is a bit of a stretch as the Messianic fellowships, almost without exception, are all evangelical. Unity between Messianic fellowships and Christian churches and denominations is a challenge, and divisions occur on a frequent basis across all communities. However, there are forces that try to keep everybody together and will not let theological or practical differences split the communities into even more fractions.

The reality of Jewish believers in Jesus poses a challenge to both the Christian world and the Jewish world. Can we, with respect, still interact and have fellowship if there is a fear of stealing souls from each other? How can such a fellowship develop without marginalizing those who do come to faith? How can the gap between the two faiths be made smaller? We invite more scholars to give constructive criticism and reflect upon the current state and the challenges of Jesus-believing Israelis in the Messianic communities.

# From the Israeli Scene: Reflections on 40 Years of Caspari Ministry

*Knut H. Høyland*

## How It All Started

The Caspari Center celebrated its fortieth anniversary in November 2022—a milestone which gives me an opportunity to look back at four decades of service to and participation in the growing Messianic movement in Israel. I have been privileged to be connected to the Caspari ministry in some way or another during these forty years. I even attended the inauguration of the center back in November 1982 at French Hill—or, at least, I believe so. I say this because, to be quite honest, I have no recollection of the event whatsoever and can only rely on my father's assurances that I must have been there since he was. At the inauguration, local and international guests sang together: "*Ma neeman ata!*"—"Great is thy faithfulness!" Whatever can be said about the history of Caspari, I believe these lines at least hold true.

The story of the Caspari Center, however, goes back not only forty years but actually fifty years. At the general assembly of the Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel (NCMI) in Bergen in 1972, establishing a Christian study center in Jerusalem was spontaneously proposed. To establish ministry work in Jerusalem had been the vision of NCMI's pioneer, Magne Solheim, who served in the country for almost thirty years and who had planted the congregations in Haifa and Tel Aviv that we know as Beit Eliahu and the Immanuel Church. The famous pastor Richard Wurmbrand, who was closely connected to the congregation in Haifa, had often asked the NCMI workers, "Why aren't you in Jerusalem? After all, this is the place from which the good news about Jesus once went out to the world."

Following this proposal in 1972, Magne Sæbø, who was to become the first chairman of the Caspari Center board, was sent to Jerusalem in 1973 to look into the need for a new study center. He concluded that "there are already many Christian study centers in Jerusalem, but there does not seem to be a center with a clear Christian profile that focuses primarily on Jewish studies and Jewish-Christian relations, with a focus on the local Jewish believers." And so, in 1975 the NCMI decided to establish a study center, and seven years later, the Caspari Center was opened on French Hill. By this time, the Caspari Center was already a partnership ministry, involved with Norwegian, Finnish, and German organizations but also with a strong local base through influential leaders such as Baruch Maoz and Menachem Ben Haim. From the very beginning, under the leadership of Ole Christian Kvarme, the main vision was to "train and educate mature and motivated believers for conscious Christian life, for congregational leadership, and for evangelism."

## Times of Growth and Crisis

The center became the first in the land to offer theological training in Hebrew, focusing primarily on the local Messianic movement and all its congregations. This work was started through the TELEM program (תוכנית לימוד משיחית). Study material on books of the Bible and

ministry work were produced in cooperation with HaGefen Publishing, and tutors would travel to teach local groups of students all over Israel. At the same time, the center was open to international students who came to learn the Jewish context of the Bible and to be challenged by local believers to understand the importance of Jewish evangelism and a Jewish presence within the worldwide church.

In the decades that followed under the leadership of Torleif Elgvin, Torkild Masvie, Steve Engstrom, myself, and Elisabeth Levy, the ministry continued to evolve and adapt, always aiming to meet the needs of the local Messianic community and serve a wider body of believers from around the world. Teaching projects such as the Shabbat School Seminars, the *Lev Lesharet* (Heart for Service) leadership training program, various Bible teaching courses, and open lectures have helped educate and equip local believers from all over the country for ministry. Internationally, the missiology courses, the “Discovering Jesus in His Jewish Context” course, and, more recently, the center’s involvement in the “First: Israel” Bible School has opened up the Bible and its Jewish context in a new way for students, pastors, and ministry workers from around the world. Publications ranging from *Raising Children in the Fear of the Lord*, the *Youth Leader Manual*, and a series of children’s activity books to the *Mishkan* journal, *Jewish Believers in Jesus* (in 2 volumes), *Facts and Myths*, and the newly published *Jesus-Believing Israelis* survey have provided knowledge and tools for ministry and valuable insight into the Messianic movement, its history, and its theology.

The center has also been an important meeting place—a place for sharing life stories and faith among people with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds through projects such as the *B’not Yeshua* (The daughters of Jesus) and the Bridgebuilders reconciliation program. Caspari has also been a place for engaging in challenging theological questions at open lectures, the Taboo forum, and more. The Caspari library, which is open to the public, has been a wonderful place to quietly sit and study but also a meeting place for conversation and interaction around questions of history, theology, and faith.

All of this and much more ministry work has been accomplished through times of growth and crisis. Possibly the two most challenging periods were during the Second Intifada and the Covid-19 pandemic. From 2000 to 2002, ten bombs went off within a radius of 300 meters from the Caspari Center on Jaffa Street, putting an effective stop to much of its ministry work. However, these challenging times also opened up new opportunities: in 2002, Lisa Loden was appointed the first Israeli Managing Director and was central in the development of the Shabbat School seminars, leadership training courses, and more. The local programs have since grown and developed under the leadership of Alec Goldberg. During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, new opportunities opened to develop online tools to equip teachers and parents in the midst of lockdowns.

There are always challenges in ministry in Israel. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges—but also, I would suggest, one of the greatest strengths of the Caspari ministry—has been the fact that it is both a local Israeli ministry and an international partnership. At Caspari, both local and international believers have shared a calling to reach the Jewish people with the gospel and contribute to the growth of a vibrant local body of Messianic believers in Israel. In this way, the Caspari ministry gives expression to the unity of the body of Messiah.

## What is the Caspari Center?

So, looking back at forty years of ministry, how can we sum up the essence of the Caspari Center? I would like to suggest that there are four crucial elements to its ministry:

1. Caspari affirms that the academic study and teaching of scripture, history, and theology go hand in hand with the calling to share the gospel and to build up and equip the local body of believers for ministry. This is very much in keeping with the spirit of Carl Paul Caspari, in honor of whom the center was named. As a Jewish believer in Jesus and a renowned scholar, he had a heart for reaching people with the gospel, especially his own people.
2. Caspari is a bridge connecting local believers and believers from all around the world: people who share a love for Yeshua and wish to engage and listen to one another on issues that are vital for our growth as a global body of believers.
3. Caspari is a partnership. There are countless individuals, mission societies, ministries, and congregations, both internationally and locally, that make the work of Caspari possible.
4. Caspari is a movement organization. That is, it is part of a larger movement in Israel. The ministry has grown and developed within and alongside the growth of the Messianic movement in Israel. Caspari's role is not only to document this growth but also to be an active part in bringing it about.

## What Lies Ahead?

At the inauguration of the Caspari Center forty years ago, one of the scripture readings was from Psalm 118:21–24 (NIV):

I will give you thanks, for you answered me;  
you have become my salvation.  
The stone the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes.  
The Lord has done it this very day;  
let us rejoice today and be glad.

Looking back at forty years of ministry, we can “rejoice and be glad.” We can give thanks to the many staff members, board members, volunteers, prayer partners, and supporters who have been part of making the work of Caspari possible. But, most of all, we can give thanks to the one who is our cornerstone: Yeshua, who is ultimately the one who has been faithful to provide for the ministry of Caspari and will continue to do so.

At forty years, it is perhaps natural to ask: Where does the road lead from here? Is Caspari nearing a mid-life crisis, or is it at the start of a long and fruitful journey in ministry? To use a biblical analogy, is it still wandering in the desert, or is it about to enter the promised land?

I suppose only time will tell. However, I do trust that no matter what, our Lord Yeshua has been and will continue to be faithful to this ministry and to his body in this land in the years to come.

*Knut Helge Høyland lived in Haifa as a boy with his family and served as the International Director of the Caspari Center from 2007 to 2013. He is currently working as a pastor in Norway.*



## Brief Book Notes

*Rich Robinson*

Oskar Skarsaune. *Jewish Believers in Jesus: Spain, 300–1300 C.E.* Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 2022.

This significant volume is the second in what was meant to be a projected multivolume work; volume one of *Jewish Believers in Jesus* was published in 2007. There are several things to note. First, unlike its predecessor—a multiauthored collection of essays with an editorial team of two—this is Oskar Skarsaune’s own work and, as he himself says, has neither been formally published nor even put through copyediting. Nevertheless, the author has made it available as a free download at [www.caspari.com](http://www.caspari.com). Second, Skarsaune, while heavily relying at points on main secondary sources along with primary sources, is a thorough and judicious scholar with his own views on things, which makes this volume quite a worthwhile read. He has taught church history at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society for decades. I was, however, surprised to see a reliance on Strack-Billerbeck for rabbinic sources, given that it has been superseded by more recent works due to its lack of context and dating concerns; Instone-Brewer’s work, for instance, might have supplemented this reliance.

Third, the author has brought together a large amount of material, including public medieval disputations and private interchanges as well. Here we move beyond the well-known Barcelona and other disputations into what, for me, was new territory. We thereby get to see medieval polemics and apologetics in a fairly comprehensive and even new way: at one point, Jewish disputants (allegedly) agree that in Isaiah 7:14, *almah* means “a virgin,” though they disagree on other matters. These arguments are given from both Christian and Jewish viewpoints, and Skarsaune assesses the quality of the arguments on both sides, noting key historical turning points, such as the “discovery” of the Talmud by the Christian world and the turn to using rabbinic as well as scriptural material in Christian argumentation. Finally, the volume is, after all, entitled *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, not *Medieval Polemics*, so the backgrounds of Jews who then professed Christian faith—many instrumental in the disputations and private conversations—is evaluated, when possible, concerning their motivations, extent of familiarity with Jewish life, et cetera. Those expecting a book bearing this title to include life stories of faith will be disappointed. Unlike in later times, there is virtually no information available for details of these “conversions,” and so a paucity of evidence must sometimes be put in service of building a larger picture. Personally, I found the material on argumentation and polemics to be helpful as well as interesting in its own right, often shedding light on modern apologetic approaches. I highly recommend this book.

Arjen F. Bakker, René Bloch, Yael Fisch, Paula Fredriksen, and Hindy Najman, eds. *Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism and Anti-Judaism*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

This collection of ten essays originates from a conference held at Oxford and is available as an open source (in other words, free!) PDF at [www.brill.com](http://www.brill.com). The varied essays focus, as the title says, specifically on Protestant biblical scholarship, and there is something here for everyone on the issues of antisemitism and its counterpart, philosemitism. Some concentrate on particular

scholars or scholarly works: **Hermann Lichtenberger** explores the Nazi-era German scholar Karl Georg Kuhn, **Irene Zwiép** talks about the German-language *Jüdisches Lexikon* of the late 1920s, **René Bloch** looks at scholarship on ancient antisemitism, and **Konrad Schmid** explores the idea of *Spätjudentum* or “Late Judaism” (meaning Second Temple Judaism, with no place for a Judaism after that time) within Christian scholarship. Those involved in academic work may benefit more than others from these first four essays. Students of the Bible, laity or scholars, will find much to ponder in two essays that focus on Paul: **Paula Fredricksen** on a Jewish-positive reading of Paul (with some intriguing takes on exegetical issues) and **Matthew V. Novenson** on the history of anti- and philo-Judaism in the field of Pauline studies. **Olivia Stewart Lester** explores the Sibylline Oracles (collected over the long period of 2nd c. BCE–7th c. CE; part of the Pseudepigrapha) as a case study in anti-Judaism; this will perhaps be a niche topic for many. **Jörg Frey** covers broad ground, surveying the course of antisemitism and philosemitism in New Testament studies, which will interest a general readership. He notes that the “new” philosemitism is not without its own problems, and looks at three “scholarly strategies” for handling 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16, the book of Hebrews, and the Gospel of John. **Steve Weitzmann** adds a very human note by spotlighting William Foxwell Albright and his fight against antisemitism at Johns Hopkins University in the mid-twentieth century. Finally, **John Barton** offers stimulating thoughts on the difference between Jewish and Christian approaches to biblical theology, which will be of interest to all concerned with doing theology. Substantial bibliographies follow each essay. Many such works and other references are in German, as befits certain topics and authors. However, each essay is in English and can be read profitably even by those who do not know German (or in the case of the Sibylline Oracles, Greek).

Roger Amos. *Hypocrites or Heroes? The Paradoxical Portrayal of the Pharisees in the New Testament*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015.

Layang Seng Ja. *The Pharisees in Matthew 23 Reconsidered*. Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2018.

Kent L. Yinger. *The Pharisees: Their History, Character, and New Testament Portrait*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022.

The Pharisees are frequent opponents of Jesus in the Gospel narratives, but even more so, they seem to be portrayed largely, if not exclusively, as “hypocrites” or worse. They fare no better in numerous church sermons and Sunday school lessons. Jewish scholars have frequently had occasion to respond to this common picture of Pharisees as narrow-minded, hypocritical religious leaders who hated Jesus. In these three books, we have three representative non-Jews who are also rethinking the reality of the Pharisees vis-à-vis their negative press in the Bible and beyond.

Roger Amos develops his MA dissertation to critique Jewish author Hyam Maccoby’s *Jesus the Pharisee*, among other things. Amos’s thesis is that Jesus’s relationship with the Pharisees changed dramatically from his earlier to his later ministry. As Jesus strove to build his movement with “sinners”—those excluded from Pharisaical ranks—he and the Pharisees grew mutually critical of one another, leading to Jesus’s and the New Testament’s harsh polemical language toward and treatment of the Pharisees. But their relationship did not start that way. Amos is also of the opinion that most references to “the Jews” in John’s Gospel refer to the Pharisees, and he includes three instructive chapters on their history.

Layang Seng Ja focuses specifically on the woes of Matthew 23 from the perspective of an Asian scholar. She begins with a useful review of past scholarship before moving on to the history of the Pharisees and their role in Matthew (in general) and Matthew 23 (in particular). She is concerned with showing that Jesus's attacks on the Pharisees reflect Jesus's own situation, not that of the later church. And yet, Matthew also arranges his Gospel to aid a post-70 AD generation, so she concludes that Matthew 23 aims to encourage Matthew's own community to remain firm in their faith while confronting "Pharisaic-rabbis' authority at Yavneh." This book appears to be a doctoral dissertation: it was published by Langham with minimal editorial oversight, and odd grammatical expressions are found at various points throughout.

Finally, Kent Yinger, in the same vein as Amos, covers extrabiblical history along with the New Testament's portrayal of the Pharisees. Rather than postulate a change in relationship over time, as Amos does, Yinger traces the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees to Jesus's "radical" application of a hermeneutic of lovingkindness that went beyond the Pharisees' approach. The woes of Matthew 23 and other invective reflect the common way in which Jewish opponents spoke of each other. Whether one agrees with Yinger's approach or not, his conclusion offers welcome pointers for preachers and teachers when dealing with the Pharisees in the New Testament.

All three books propose that the Pharisees were popular and well liked, that they actually did attempt to live righteously (as opposed to living one way while teaching another), and that the anti-Pharisaic invective is, among other things, a product of the way Jewish groups addressed one another and not intended to be mined in order to learn what a typical Pharisee might have been like. These books necessarily invite further questions: Can invective be explained simply as "this is how everyone talked" without raising its own set of ethical questions? In context, do the Gospels' critiques of the Pharisees really relate to Yavneh and issues of authority? Are any of the proffered explanations sufficient to explain the apparent discrepancy between the historical Pharisees and their New Testament portrayal? And so on. Amos and Yinger are particularly accessible to the average reader, but read all three if you want to get the pulse of some of the current scholarship on this subject.

Jennifer M. Rosner. *Finding Messiah: A Journey into the Jewishness of the Gospel*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022.

Jennifer Rosner is a Jewish believer in Jesus and Affiliate Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. This book, addressed primarily to a Christian audience, is a quick but comprehensive read, and Rosner serves her audience well with articulate writing. *Finding Messiah* is the personal story of her own journey in faith and life, as well as a call to recover the Jewish underpinnings of the gospel—indeed, the essential role that Jewish people and Judaism play vis-à-vis the Christian faith. Rosner's story is unique—as all personal stories are—and reflects years of struggling with spiritual identity issues and ongoing wrestling with matters related to Jews, the church, and Messianic Jews as the "excluded middle." Her experience of learning from Mark Kinzer, David Rudolph, and others comes through in the contours of her thought and the questions she grapples with. A series of thoughtful questions rounds out the volume. My favorite quote is "Much later, my aunt would remark that a Jew wearing tefillin looks like a ninja." *Finding Messiah* should be on your Messianic Jewish reading list and is sure to stimulate your own thinking.

Charlie Trimm. *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2022.

Along with the Exodus, the conquest of the Land of Canaan is an integral part of the founding story of Israel. Those who are Jewish cannot sidestep the ethical questions that this story raises. In today's questioning climate, one can no longer simply say that the Canaanites were destroyed because they were sinful and would lead Israel astray, as if that put the issue to rest.

Charlie Trimm is Associate Professor and Chair of Old Testament at Biola University. In this compact book, he presents the four options that have been on the table in response to the genocide of the Canaanites—or was it genocide after all? Trimm also talks about genocide studies and ethnic cleansing. He aims not to provide a single answer but to stimulate thinking, and a lot has been adroitly and accessibly compacted into a short space. Anyone who dialogues about Yeshua and the gospel must be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15, ESV), and the question of the Canaanites and biblical violence in general often tops the list. A helpful bibliography provides routes for further study.

André Reis. *Echoes of the Most Holy: The Day of Atonement in the Book of Revelation*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022.

Based on his dissertation, this book by André Reis offers a study of intertextual echoes of and allusions to the Day of Atonement (DA) in Revelation. Before getting to this, he covers the DA in the Old Testament, Second Temple literature, and the New Testament as a whole, before drilling down to selected chapters in the book of Revelation. As it often occurs in intertextual studies, one may question the extent of the echoes and allusions found, but the author builds a cumulative case for viewing Revelation through the lens of the DA that should be taken seriously. Certainly, after reading this book, it is difficult to approach Revelation in the same way as before. The author frequently remarks that the New Testament “reads Jesus back into” the Hebrew Bible. I am not sure he intends to say what that might sound like to some; there may be a more felicitous way of phrasing this. The preface includes an account of the author's personal background, something rare in this kind of work. But it is good to “meet” the person behind the scholar.

Gregory R. Lanier and William A. Ross. *The Septuagint: What It Is and Why It Matters*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.

Why should readers of *Mishkan* care about the Septuagint? For one thing, the New Testament uses mostly the Septuagint (or variations of it) when quoting the Old. For another, in the context of apologetic discussions, it is sometimes said that the Septuagint was reworked by Christians, and so our present texts cannot be used to shed light on the Hebrew Bible. Gregory Lanier and William Ross, both professors at Reformed Theological Seminary, have done a great service in distilling a great deal of material into a compact and readable volume. Part one covers the “What

It Is” portion of the subtitle, while part two deals with “Why Does It Matter?” This second part is where the Greek rubber meets the Hebrew road, so to speak. The final chapter focuses on what kind of authority, if any, the Septuagint possesses—especially given its use in the New Testament. One small oversight is the lack of a definition for the term “recension,” which is used several times, but its meaning may be unclear to lay readers. Overall, it is a most worthwhile book.

Tyler D. Mayfield. *Unto Us a Child Is Born: Isaiah, Advent, and Our Jewish Neighbors*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2020.

Tyler Mayfield, professor of Old Testament at Louisville Seminary, provides us with a book that is very welcome on several fronts. The Advent lectionary is his takeoff point, from which he advocates looking at Isaiah through bifocals: “near vision” for a Christian perspective, and “far vision” as an ethical activity that is done so as to love and not “harm” Jewish people. The first two chapters lay out his framework; the rest explores specific passages.

There is much to appreciate here. Christians are encouraged to not read scripture in a way that devalues the Old Testament or sees it merely as a book simply waiting to be fulfilled and without abiding value. The lectionary tends to utilize Isaiah readings—but without their fuller context—because the New Testament suggests a messianic, eschatological reading. If this is all that congregations learn about Isaiah, it skews the message and the meaning of the prophet. But Mayfield’s remarks could just as well apply to churches that do not use lectionaries but engage in topical preaching (usually centered on a New Testament portion) or expositional preaching (generally from the New Testament)—not to mention being apropos of a certain pastor who not long ago advised Christians to “unhitch” themselves from the Old Testament. Indeed, the church today is greatly underserved in the area of Old Testament studies, including in utilizing it as an ongoing word from God.

Regarding Jewish people, I am thankful that Mayfield calls our attention to supersessionism and anti-Judaism within the church, whether intended or not (the latter more likely in the contemporary scene). His pluralistic approach, however, does not allow for advocacy outside one’s own religious community for the gospel or for certain readings of Isaiah. Each community has its own interpretations, each of which is “valid” (a word which I find to be, for many writers, an undefined and therefore unhelpful term). Respect for and learning from other traditions, even finding things in them to celebrate, should not be pitted against advocating for an overarching truth that embraces all peoples, Jewish and non-Jewish. I am glad that Mayfield does not wish to “harm” Jews through certain readings of scripture. But it is worth remembering that Jesus came to heal, not to harm, and that he first came to his own people of Israel.

Rachel Rojanski. *Yiddish in Israel: A History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.

*Yiddish in Israel* is a meticulously researched book that offers a detailed account of the fortunes of Yiddish language and culture from pre-state days to modern times, though most of its focus lies on the pre-1970 period. (Rachel Rojanski deliberately leaves Haredi Yiddish out of the discussion, as that is a whole separate phenomenon.) In contrast to the usual narrative that the

new nation had policies in place against the use of Yiddish, with the backing of Ben-Gurion, Rojanski argues that it was actually cultural considerations and not legal action that brought pressure to bear on the use of Yiddish. As the story unfolds, we learn that while the fledgling state attempted to “negate the Diaspora,” after some time, Yiddish achieved greater recognition for many reasons and in many ways. Though offering more detail than some might want, even a blow-by-blow account at times, *Yiddish in Israel* offers a unique look into how Israeli society has changed over the decades. I recommend it to anyone interested in modern Israeli history.

John E. Phelan Jr. *Separated Siblings: An Evangelical Understanding of Jews and Judaism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2020.

John Phelan of North Park Theological Seminary provides a lucid and informed picture of Jews and Judaism for the benefit of a Christian readership. Informed by his friendship with rabbis such as Yehiel Poupko—with whom he studied parts of the New Testament—Phelan hopes to educate Christians who are often uninformed or misinformed about Jews and Jewish life. Sixteen chapters review Judaism and Jewish theology as well as Jewish history, and the book includes a chapter each on Jewish responses to Jesus and to Paul. Study questions and suggestions for further reading are included in each chapter. It is not comprehensive—the Jewish life cycle is barely touched on, for instance—but it does paint a sympathetic and warmly appreciative picture of the panoply of Jewish life. This book is for the motivated lay Christian: it is more than a bare-bones introduction. Many Jews can also learn from it.

Lionel J. Windsor. *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism: Christ’s Mission through Israel to the Nations*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017.

This book, by a professor of New Testament and Greek at Australia’s Moore College, is a breath of fresh air. The authors in the series of which it is a part come from a variety of backgrounds, but *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism* is self-consciously identified as an “evangelical” post-supersessionist reading. “Evangelical” emphasizes not only Windsor’s theological stance but also evangelism, for Windsor believes that these two books are “situated within and aris[e] from the apostolic mission to proclaim the gospel of Christ to the nations.”

After a review of common supersessionist readings, he turns to current post-supersessionist readings, interacting with scholars from Kendall Soulen to Mark Kinzer, as well as many others. His evaluations are fair and clearly presented. Windsor then moves on to his own exegesis of selected portions from Ephesians (most of the book) and Colossians (one chapter). He identifies some of his own readings as “possible,” many more as “plausible,” and some as “preferred.” Positively, he shows that Israel has a “key place in the apostolic mission to the nations” and that this theme can fruitfully inform many exegetical readings. Negatively, he demonstrates that readings that interpret Ephesians and Colossians as abolishing circumcision, abolishing the law, and levelling any distinctions between Jews and Gentiles are “over-readings,” defined as readings which “extrapolate from the explicit statements found in the texts to make further conclusions about race, ethnicity, or Jewish practice—conclusions that are not necessary implications of the texts themselves.”

Windsor regards his exegesis throughout as plausible and coherent but makes no overreaching claims. Many exegetical conclusions invite future discussion. For instance, in Ephesians 2:15—frequently taken to refer to a wholesale abolishment of the law—“the issue being addressed is the hostility between Jews and Gentiles that was provoked by *certain official contemporary applications of the law’s commandments concerning Jewish distinction*” (emphasis original). Whether contemporary applications of the law are in Paul’s mind is a stimulating question that requires further exploration. Similarly, Windsor’s identification of the Colossian heresy invites further study. The book closes with a clear summary and a series of practical implications. The average reader should not be put off by the use of Greek (and occasionally, Hebrew), since all such passages are given in English as well. This is a definite must-read.

John G. Gager. *Who Made Early Christianity? The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

John Gager, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Princeton University, has previously written about Paul. This engaging book is based on a series of lectures and covers a smorgasbord of topics from a non-supersessionist vantage point. Gager notes that the academy is entrenched in older supersessionist views but here presents a Torah-affirming Paul who moves within an entirely Jewish world of thought. In this he joins an increasingly vocal minority of scholars, including the “Paul within Judaism” movement. Frequently, Gager lays out the “standard” readings juxtaposed with non-supersessionist alternatives. One key takeaway is that in early church history, despite the leadership’s opposition to anything Jewish, “on the ground” people (meaning Gentile Christians) continued to engage with the Jewish community and Judaism in vital ways. While the elite sought to shore up dividing lines, common people attested to far more porous community boundaries well into the early Middle Ages. Second, there was a surprisingly early (from the 14th c. onward) Jewish “reclamation of Paul” that was only recently recovered in the academy. While many will welcome Gager’s portrait of Paul, some will push back on his view of Luke as a later, supersessionist reaction to the real non-supersessionist history of Christian origins. Inviting discussion is also his view that Paul, as apostle to the Gentiles, preached in synagogues because of the presence of Gentile god-fearers. But did a missional strategy, as expressed in, for example, Romans 1:16, also play a role? Many more topics are treated, including the relationship of Gentiles to synagogues and also the *Toledot Yeshu*. This is a thought-provoking, lively, and necessary read for anyone interested in Paul, Jews, and Judaism.

Bruce Chilton, Anthony Le Donne, and Jacob Neusner, eds. *Soundings in the Religion of Jesus: Perspectives and Methods in Jewish and Christian Scholarship*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012.

Eleven years after its publication, this book remains a valuable collection of twelve essays by Jewish and Christian scholars. The guiding question is how the Jewishness of Jesus can help in Jewish–Christian dialogue. Though this question guides the conclusions of most of the essays, much of the content can stand alone apart from that issue. Of particular interest to me were the first two essays. **Leonard Greenspoon** speaks to the problems of translating proper names in the

New Testament as well as the term *hoi Ioudaioi*, usually rendered as “the Jews.” For the proper names, he takes a look at Willis Barnstone’s *Restored New Testament*, as well as David Stern’s *Jewish New Testament*. On the question of *hoi Ioudaioi*, he is “torn” by the variety of suggestions that have been made, ranging from “the Jewish leaders” to “the Judeans,” to justify keeping *hoi Ioudaioi* intact as a transliterated phrase. Indeed, no solutions seem equally of value in all situations. **Joel Lohr** looks at Matthew 25:31–46 in light of its Jewish eschatological background and concludes that the passage teaches salvation to Gentiles who show mercy to others—that is, who abide by the Noahide laws. Such a reading is not without its problems.

Also of note is **Eyal Regev** on the trial of Jesus: he downplays the claims of messiahship but excels in discussing Jesus, the temple, and the opposition of the Sadducees. The three essays on “Jesus Research before and after German National Socialism” are insightful and much needed. **James D. G. Dunn**, **Amy-Jill Levine**, and **Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner** round out the volume. Levine is her usual stimulating self, arguing against the frequent use of the term “marginal” to describe Jesus, the apostles, poor people, women, et cetera in first century times. Weakest is the late **Michael J. Cook**’s essay, in which he finds ten “anomalies” related to how different groups of Jewish leaders are statistically distributed in the Synoptics; this leads to a rather speculative “solution” via source criticism. But such “anomalies” may be more in the eye of the beholder and/or capable of more straightforward understandings. There are more thought-provoking essays, and the entire book is worthwhile.

Emily Arndt. *Demanding Our Attention: The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011.

You cannot tell from the title, but the focus of Emily Arndt’s book is the *Akedah* (the binding of Isaac), which sparks sermons, discussions, and much spilled ink in Jewish circles each year. This is not a book for those looking for a verse-by-verse unpacking of Genesis 22. Rather, its home is in the world of philosophical and ethical discussion, which will make it a difficult trek for many readers not used to that kind of discourse. In brief, the first part examines the *Akedah* in the writings of three modern ethicists who do not actually confront the biblical text, which for Arndt is quite problematic; the second part looks at three sources that actually do deal with the text: Kierkegaard, Philip the Chancellor, and the rabbinic compilation *Genesis Rabbah*; at the end, Arndt speaks of her own approach to the text, which includes how the very act of reading the *Akedah* leads to insights and discoveries. This will not be an easy book for many, but it goes to show how inescapable the *Akedah* has been for wrestling with ethical thought.

*Rich Robinson is a senior researcher with Jews for Jesus: [rich.robinson@jewsforjesus.org](mailto:rich.robinson@jewsforjesus.org).*