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## Reading Romans, Constructing Paul(s)

### A Conversation between Messianic Jews in Jerusalem and Paul within Judaism Scholars

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READING ROMANS, CONSTRUCTING PAUL(S)



# Reading Romans, Constructing Paul(s)

A Conversation between Messianic Jews in Jerusalem  
and Paul within Judaism Scholars

Jennifer Nyström



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Lund University, Sweden

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on September 24, 2021, at 1:15 PM

*Faculty opponent*

Professor Kathy Ehrensperger

Research Professor, New Testament in Jewish Perspective, Universität Potsdam

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<b>Title and subtitle:</b> Reading Romans, Constructing Paul(s): A Conversation between Messianic Jews in Jerusalem and Paul within Judaism Scholars	
<b>Abstract</b> <p>“Something is going on in Pauline studies,” Paula Fredriksen said of the recent emergence of the “Paul within Judaism” (PWJ) perspective. Almost in parallel, Messianic Judaism has entered the religious scene. One a scholarly and the other a religious community, they both make the same claim: Paul was—and remained—a <i>Jewish</i> believer in Jesus. Hence, both communities propose reading the New Testament from within Judaism, making this study part of the intense, scholarly discussion of reading within-Judaism. Voices from religious, cultural, and scholarly perspectives have raised the general idea that these two communities understand Paul in the same way without being based on textual studies of Paul.</p> <p>By focusing on the <i>locus classicus</i> for both reading communities, Romans 11, this study addresses this idea. It aims at exploring Messianic Jewish understandings of Rom 11 in conversation with scholarly interpretations of the same text from the PWJ perspective. By centering discussion around the concepts of <i>similar</i> and <i>dissimilar</i>, it explores the extent to which Messianic Jews <i>construct</i> Paul and <i>read</i> Rom 11 similarly and dissimilarly to PWJ scholars. Alongside PWJ, older scholarly perspectives on Paul—“Paul outside Judaism” (POJ) and “Paul and Judaism” (PAJ)—are also briefly contrasted with the Messianic Jewish readings, drawing attention to major disparities and occasional parallels.</p> <p>Interdisciplinary in nature, the study merges the fields of New Testament studies with anthropology of Christianity. Its theoretical frameworks are inspired by both: (empirical) reception studies and the so-called “social life of Scripture” approach, the latter offering the analytical categories of biblical/textual ideologies and biblical/textual practices. Among the practices, three hermeneutics (strategies) are identified: “Yeshualogy,” post-supersessionism, and relevance. The Messianic Jewish readings figuring in this study stem from Bible-reading interviews conducted in Jerusalem with eighteen male leaders within the religious community (August 2015, November 2015, February-March 2016, and during the winter of 2019-2020). The participants represent a spectrum of the Israeli movement today, from traditional-Jewish (minority) to evangelical-Jewish (majority) congregations in terms of characteristics, expressions, and relations to Judaism. The interviews are accompanied by participant observation in Messianic Jewish congregations in Jerusalem.</p> <p>The empirical part of this study analyzes the Bible-reading interviews. Following the structure of Rom 11, discussions are divided into three parts: “Identity and Torah” (vv. 1–12), “Relations and Yeshua” (vv. 11–24), and “Time and Land” (vv. 25–36). Throughout, nurtured by Paul’s words, the topic of post-supersessionism is discussed from different angles—important for proposing a Paul within Judaism understanding. As most space is given to the Messianic Jewish readings, the thesis makes a contribution to the field of Messianic Judaism in Israel and its engagement with the Bible.</p> <p>Throughout the study a conversation is maintained with the PWJ perspective: both communities emphasize Paul’s Jewish identity and a humanity consisting of Jews <i>and</i> non-Jews; of a remained ethnic distinctiveness within the unity of Christ. The Messianic Jewish readings differ, however, from PWJ given their strong focus on Yeshualogy and faith, which is more reminiscent of a PAJ perspective. Hence, Messianic Jews are caught between PAJ and PWJ, nonetheless showing more similarities with PWJ.</p> <p>In the empirical readings, the hermeneutics of Yeshualogy and post-supersessionism are constantly negotiated against each other; the latter being the most important ideologically and rhetorically, whereas the first is displayed as most important practically and theologically. This study claims throughout that what is most important for Jesus-believing Jews in Jerusalem, who consider the Bible to be the highest authority in life, is to make the “living Word of God” relevant for them today, ultimately expressed in their having an eschatological identity and hermeneutic of awaiting the return of “Yeshua” to the land of Israel soon, and very soon.</p>	
<b>Key words:</b> Messianic Jews, Messianic Judaism, Paul within Judaism, Paul, Rom 11, Jerusalem, empirical reception studies, social life of Scripture, Bible-reading interviews, textual/biblical ideology, textual/biblical practice, identity, Torah, relations, Yeshua, time, Land, post-supersessionism, Yeshualogy, relevance, eschatology.	
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Signature

Date: August 12, 2021

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**MADE IN SWEDEN** 

בְּרוּךְ הַבָּא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה בְּרַכְּנוּכֶם מִבֵּית יְהוָה  
אֵל יְהוָה וַיָּאָר לָנוּ אֶסְרוּ־חַג בְּעַבְתֵּימָם עַד־קַרְנֹת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ  
אֵלֵי אִתָּהּ וְאוֹדֶךָ אֱלֹהֵי אֲרוֹמָמְךָ  
הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסִדוֹ

*Psalm 118:26–29,  
part of the Hallel prayers in Jewish liturgy*



Our Trinity is the Torah, Yeshua, and the Land

*Yehudit—a Messianic Jewish woman*



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# Preface and Lots of Thanks

“Romance?” The Roman Catholic priest looked at me aghast. “You want *me* to tell you about romance?” “No, no! Romans.” “What can I tell you about romance?” “ROMANS! Paul’s letter, not the love-related thingy.” “Ah, isn’t it the same thing almost?” Well, maybe it is? As far as I know, at least, the writing of this dissertation has been something of a romance. It has had its ups and highs when I have been totally consumed and ecstatic about it. And it has had its downs with despair and some (healthy?) doses of anger and frustration. All in all, it has been an overwhelming (sometimes exhausting) and wonderful journey that now has reached an end. It has been quite an adventure. And to be honest, I still haven’t figured out if there really is a difference in pronunciation between romance and Romans.

I first set foot in the Holy Land in 2012. Over almost a decade, my encounters with and in this place have been like romances in their own way. I was hooked. And no, I can’t explain it without sounding nuts. But I knew that I had to integrate this absolutely crazy and fantastic place into my research. Never in my life had I thought of myself as doing something empirical; I was a historian, a nerd for biblical languages, and quite square in my thinking. Yet, as much as I love the biblical texts and the worlds they came alive in, I realized that what people today do with the biblical texts are as interesting, especially, the intersection between the two: if arguments and conclusions such as those of the Jewish Paul actually reach out and influence the religious readers that hold the texts sacred. “You’re what?” Yes, I admit, I’m flirting with the forbidden: contemporary empirical readers. But isn’t it the forbidden that many times give us the extra thrill? While I, and some with me, sometimes have doubted the possibility of doing such a study: here it is! And a study causing some havoc is better than ignorance...

Writing a dissertation is pretty much an introvert effort. But just as a romance is never a one-person issue, this has been made more pleasant by surrounding people:

To all the participants. First of all, a big thank you to all of you who have given of your time and shared readings and thoughts with me. Without you, it would simply have been impossible. I hope that this study will be an inspiration in your communities and in the Messianic Jewish world at large. תודה רבה

Magnus Zetterholm. I can’t say a big enough THANK YOU. For opening my eyes to the Jewish Paul. For believing in this project from the very start (when no one else did) until the very end. For hours and hours of reading drafts and surviving

my frequently confused thoughts. For all your guidance, support, loyalty, and encouragement to me in this project. For also being a great buddy. I hope this study will make you proud. This crazy project did require someone like you, and it couldn't have been better. We did it! להיים!

Aron Engberg. Thank you for coming in when I needed it the most. Without your probably hundreds of questions, comments, and suggestions, the empirical chapters would not have seen the light and turned out as they did. Thank you for always challenging me, pushing me, and turning my thoughts upside-down, for the better. You deserve a bigger thank you than I can say!

Tobias Hägerland. Thank you for being the one who taught me how to do research. Thank you for being my mentor all those years before my doctoral studies, and later colleague and—more importantly—friend and my most critical reader. There are many more beers that need to be had!

Anders Runesson. Thank you for being the one to point me academically towards Messianic Judaism and your guidance in the beginning of this project, and for many valuable suggestions towards the end. Never stop being such a creative force.

This study has been helped quite a lot by critical remarks and great suggestions in the course of two research seminars at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CTR) at Lund University. In the *New Testament seminar*, I would especially like to thank Prof. Samuel Byrskog, Lukas Hagel, Joel Kuhlin, Ludvig Nyman, my office-mate Maria Stureson, and Magnus Zetterholm. In the *Global Christianities and Interreligious Relations seminar*, a warm thank you especially to Prof. Mika Vähäkangas, Magdalena Dziaczkowska, Aron Engberg, Vera La Mela, Hans Olsson, and Martina Prosén. An extra shout out to Martina for her always thoughtful comments and encouragement. To the latter seminar, I will always remain grateful to you for adopting such a weird creature as a Bible scholar and for patiently teaching me how to think and write as a fieldworker.

A collegial environment is also bigger than the seminar settings. Therefore, a special thank you to the following friends at CTR: Erik Bergman, Olivia Cejvan, Benjamin Ekman aka Br Filip Maria, Karin Hedner Zetterholm, Johanna Gustafsson-Lundberg, Katharina Keim, Daniel Leviathan, Simon Pedersen Schmidt; an extra one to Clara Berg. Writing this without you and (very) long coffee breaks would not have been the same. I'm sorry if I have bored you with long, confused musings about interview methodology within biblical studies, or Messianic Jews, or obscure halakhic things. And to all friends outside academia; thank you for also making my life better.

James S. Bielo. Thank you for taking on the role of the opponent at the final seminar and for a helpful discussion. I am especially grateful that, as an anthropologist, you enthusiastically confirmed this work as “kosher” and made the exegete in me sigh with relief.

This thesis has also benefitted much from valuable remarks, suggestions, and support from those belonging to the two communities this whole thing is about. A

special thank you to Mark Nanos and Paula Fredriksen on the one hand, and to Mark Kinzer and Jennifer Rosner on the other. You have all showed that scholarship is not only about harsh words, but what it really should be: seeking knowledge together.

Faydra Shapiro. Thank you for helping me with the language in the first round. And all the more for being such a great friend since the beginning of this journey. Let's have more bad coffees in Jlm hashing over all things on, and above, earth.

Marie-Louise Karttunen. Without your magic and hitting the chapters into shape, this study would be much more difficult to read. A huge thank you for your efficiency, meticulousness, and patience with deleting yet another small unnecessary word.

The fieldwork and conferences would not have been possible without generous funding from Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse, Lunds missionsällskap, Nathan Söderbloms minnesfond, Stiftelsen Enboms Donationsfond, travel and research grants from the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology, and Stiftelsen Wallenbergstiftelsens fond.

Jerusalem. A large amount of time during these years has been spent in the city, conducting the interviews and fieldwork, but also after; as a place of studying, reading, and writing, writing, writing. It's been home, and a beloved one.

To St James Vicariate; House of Saints Simeon and Anne, and to the priests and the faithful. Thank you for being my spiritual home and for the most beautiful liturgies and music in history. And for improving my Hebrew. And for letting me discover the mystery of אִדּוּרְצִיָּה. You're the best.

To Holy Land Bikers MC Jerusalem, to each one of you. Thank you for saving my sanity by always taking me out on the roads. Thank you for the many miles, the friendships, and all the adventures and parties. You rock. And especially to Big Blue. Thank you for countless rides and awesome, adrenaline-kicking experiences. And everything else. Without you, guys, life in Jlm would have been much less exhilarating and fun. A heartfelt thank you.

To the Swedish Theological Institute. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to lead several long-term international courses, for office space, and for sometimes feeding me. And for the opportunity to teach Jewish-Christian stuff in the lecture room dedicated to Krister Stendahl. A special thanks also to Hebrew University in Jerusalem who made by long stay in Jerusalem possible, and to École Biblique for yet another library and dusty desk.

Abshi I and Abshi II. Without my beloved motorcycles, on curvy roads, crazy gravel, and mud paths; without that freedom, adrenaline, and those breaks, my brain would have been mushier. I'm not sure whether it has made me wiser, but it has definitely added to the fun.

Shilo. Without the greenhouse and cultivation areas, without soil on my hands, the scents of tomatoes, lavender, and grapes, and more odd crops, I would have been hungrier and much less peaceful.

Ovadia, Flodis, Krabaten, and Steve. Thank you for always being up for hugs and cuddles.

Tiffany and Janet. Thank you for providing me with me a safe space with your literary worlds and for your style that always makes me laugh. Sorry for giving up writing this study in the same manner. I owe you.

Mikael and Elisabeth Löwegren. Thank you for sweeping into my life during the last years of editing and Covid-19, to become an extended family. Without you, as priest and psychologist, but more importantly as amazing and crazy friends, this would have been much more boring. Thank you beyond words.

Catharina Hansson. Min bästaste MUPP, UTTER och FROUPLE. Thank you (!) for forcing me not to give up and for not giving up on me (!!!). Thank you (?) for stopping me from creating a zoo by taking care of all the sad animals, whether a giraffe baby, a wombat, or a donkey, yet surviving my thousands of obscure facts about koalas and tapirs. Sorry for always placing my Birkenstocks in your way. Thank you (!) for sharing my quirkiness about all weird things and surviving by silliness and for being the best friend on earth (not only because of daily popcorn). Thank you for being “sisters in life, sisters in Christ.” And most of all, thank you for being you.

Lama attack!

המודי שלי

This doctoral dissertation is defended during Sukkot, which is celebrated to remember God’s sheltering and protection on the way to a wonderful destination—the Holy Land—and as such a very joyous holiday. I cannot think of a better time to celebrate this romance.

# Abbreviations

PAJ	Paul and Judaism
POJ	Paul outside Judaism
PWJ	Paul within Judaism
MJAA	Messianic Jewish Alliance of America
UMJC	Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>AA</i>	<i>American Anthropologist</i>
AB	Anchor Bible
<i>AT</i>	<i>Anthropological Theory</i>
<i>AQ</i>	<i>Anthropological Quarterly</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of The John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
<i>CA</i>	<i>Current Anthropology</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CESIIR	Currents of Encounter: Studies in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
CRINT	Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
CSHJ	Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism
CSIR	Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion
CSRS	Cognitive Science of Religion Series
<i>EC</i>	<i>Early Christianity</i>
ECL	Early Christianity and Its Literature
ES	Emerging Scholars
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HTSTS</i>	<i>HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies</i>
IBHS	Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series

<i>IDB</i>	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JJMJS</i>	<i>Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting</i>
<i>JMJS</i>	<i>Journal of Modern Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JRAI</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Religion and Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>LEC</i>	Library of Early Christianity
<i>MMT</i>	Making of Modern Theology
<i>MTSR</i>	<i>Method and Theory in the Study of Religion</i>
<i>NAR</i>	North American Religions
<i>NovTSup</i>	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
<i>NR</i>	<i>Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions</i>
<i>NTaS</i>	New Testament after Supersessionism
<i>NTL</i>	New Testament Library
<i>PCC</i>	Paul in Critical Contexts
<i>PhilRel</i>	Philosophy and Religion: A Comparative Yearbook
<i>PMJ</i>	<i>Practical Matters Journal</i>
<i>PSPA</i>	Publications of the Society for Psychological Anthropology
<i>PTMS</i>	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
<i>QSR</i>	Qualitative Studies in Religion
<i>R&amp;AC</i>	<i>Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation</i>
<i>RSRR</i>	<i>Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception</i>
<i>RT</i>	Radical Traditions
<i>RTPS</i>	Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Series
<i>S(on)S</i>	Signifying (on) Scriptures
<i>SAQ</i>	<i>South Atlantic Quarterly</i>
<i>SemeiaSt</i>	Semeia Studies
<i>SJHC</i>	Studies in Jewish History and Culture
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>SMJT</i>	Studies in Messianic Jewish Theology
<i>SR</i>	<i>Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses</i>
<i>SRA</i>	Studies of Religion in Africa: Supplements to the Journal of Religion in Africa
<i>STr</i>	Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible
<i>THL</i>	Theory and History of Literature
<i>TSR</i>	Texts and Studies in Religion
<i>WBC</i>	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>WUNT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

# List of Interviews

*All names are pseudonyms.*

Aaron	February 2016
Andrei	August 2015
Aryeh	November 2019
Avraham	November 2019
Chayim	January 2020
Dov	January 2020
Eli	November 2015
Jacob	August 2015
Menachem	November 2015
Michael + Asher	February 2016
Moshe	February 2016
Nahum	March 2016
Natan	November 2015
Shlomo	March 2016
Yitshak	November 2015
Yoel	March 2016
Ze'ev	November 2015



# The Text of Rom 11 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? <sup>3</sup> “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” <sup>4</sup> But what is the divine reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” <sup>5</sup> So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. <sup>6</sup> But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

<sup>7</sup> What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, <sup>8</sup> as it is written,  
“God gave them a sluggish spirit,  
eyes that would not see  
and ears that would not hear,  
down to this very day.”

<sup>9</sup> And David says,  
“Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
<sup>10</sup> let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and keep their backs forever bent.”

<sup>11</sup> So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. <sup>12</sup> Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

<sup>13</sup> Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry <sup>14</sup> in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. <sup>15</sup> For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! <sup>16</sup> If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

<sup>17</sup> But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, <sup>18</sup> do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. <sup>19</sup> You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” <sup>20</sup> That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. <sup>21</sup> For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. <sup>22</sup> Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. <sup>23</sup> And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. <sup>24</sup> For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

<sup>25</sup> So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup> And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

“Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.”

<sup>27</sup> “And this is my covenant with them,  
when I take away their sins.”

<sup>28</sup> As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; <sup>29</sup> for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

<sup>33</sup> O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

<sup>34</sup> “For who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?”

<sup>35</sup> “Or who has given a gift to him,  
to receive a gift in return?”

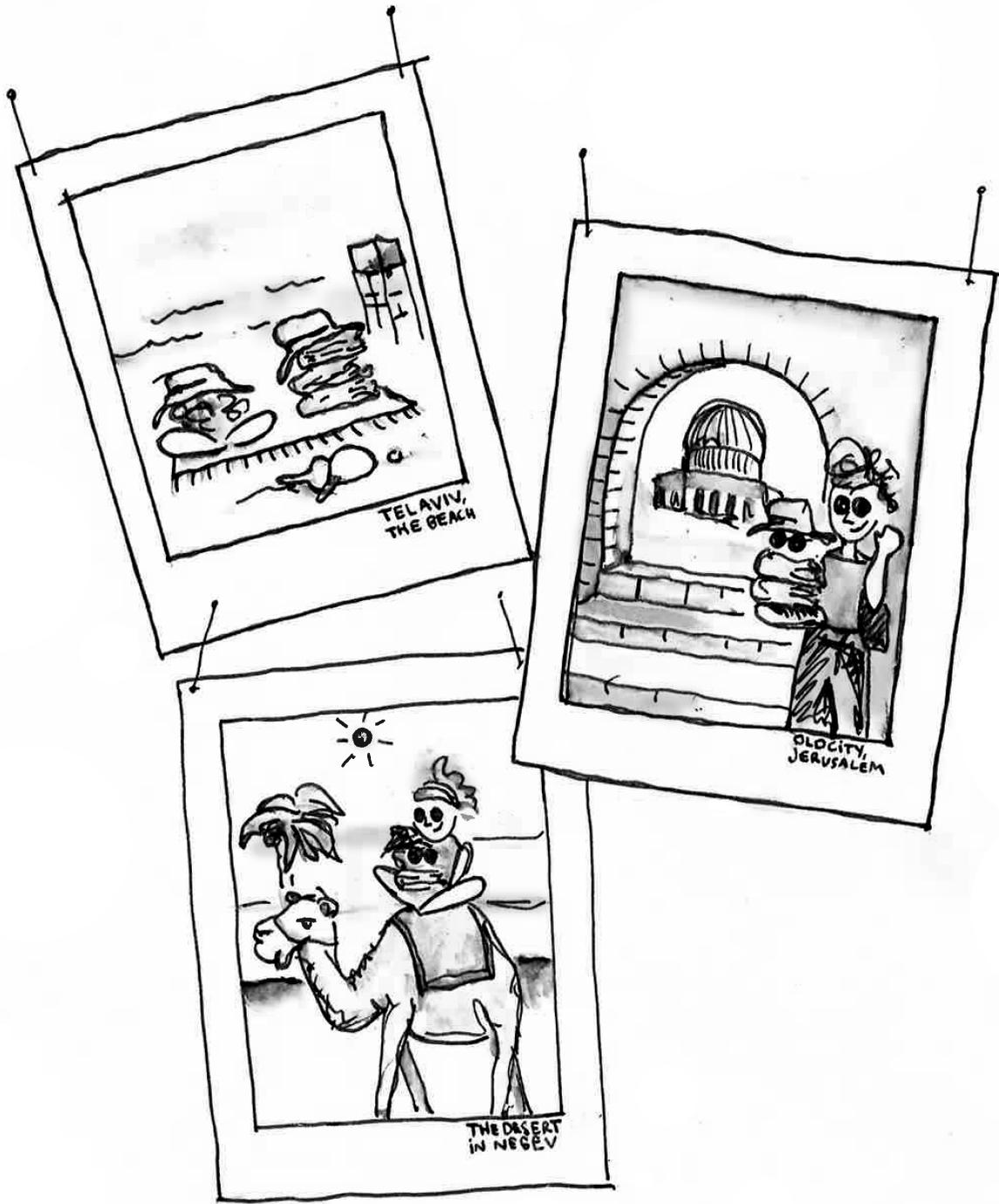
<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever. Amen.

abstract for  
**OUTSIDERS**

A ROOMMATE'S REINTERPRETATION OF A  
ROAMING ROMANCE WITH ROMANS.  
IN PICTURES.

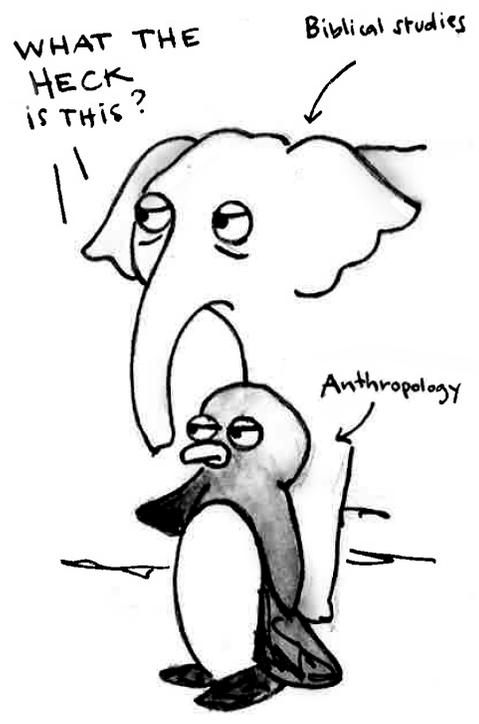
BY CATHARINA HANSSON

"RECEPTION STUDIES\* ARE BIBLICAL STUDIES ON HOLIDAY"! WHILE THIS APPARENTLY WAS HISSED BY SOMEONE WHO THINKS MATZAH IS A CULINARY HIGHLIGHT, I CHOSE TO LISTEN TO THIS THE OTHER WAY AROUND - WHO DOESN'T WANT A LONG HOLIDAY?



\* STUDIES OF HOW PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH THE BIBLE

HOWEVER, RECEPTION STUDIES  
SHOWED TO BE NOTHING  
OF A HOLIDAY.



# THE WORK

- "HOLIDAY!"

SO, WHAT WERE BIBLICAL STUDIES AND I UP TO ON THAT "HOLIDAY"? THE AIM OF THE JOURNEY WAS TO EXPLORE WHETHER MESSIANIC JEWS READ PAUL SIMILARLY TO SCHOLARS FROM THE PAUL-WITHIN-JUDAISM SCHOOL\*.

WHY WOULD THEY?

BECAUSE RUMOR HAD IT.  
I KNEW OF ONE MESSIANIC JEW WHO HAD ASKED A SCHOLAR FOR ADVICE, TRUSTING HIS DISCERNMENT...

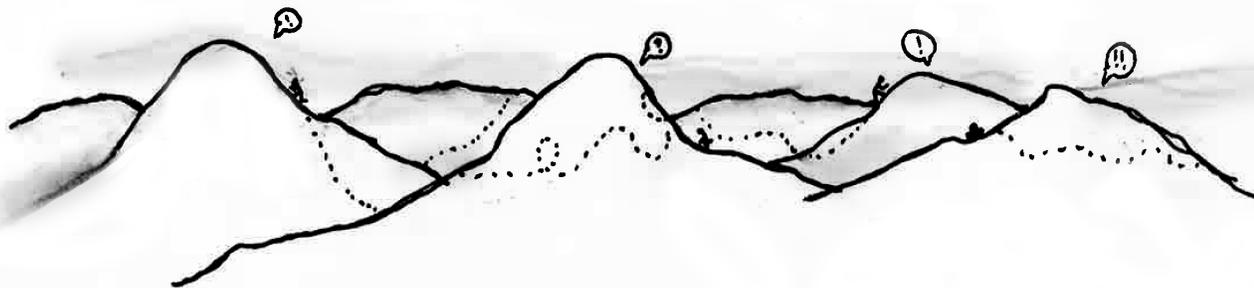


... AND DURING THE FIELDWORK I MET MESSIANIC JEWS WHO TREATED THE SCHOLAR MARK NANOS AS ONE OF THEIR OWN, AND GOT PRETTY AGITATED WHEN I POINTED OUT THAT HE DIDN'T BUY THE JESUS THING.



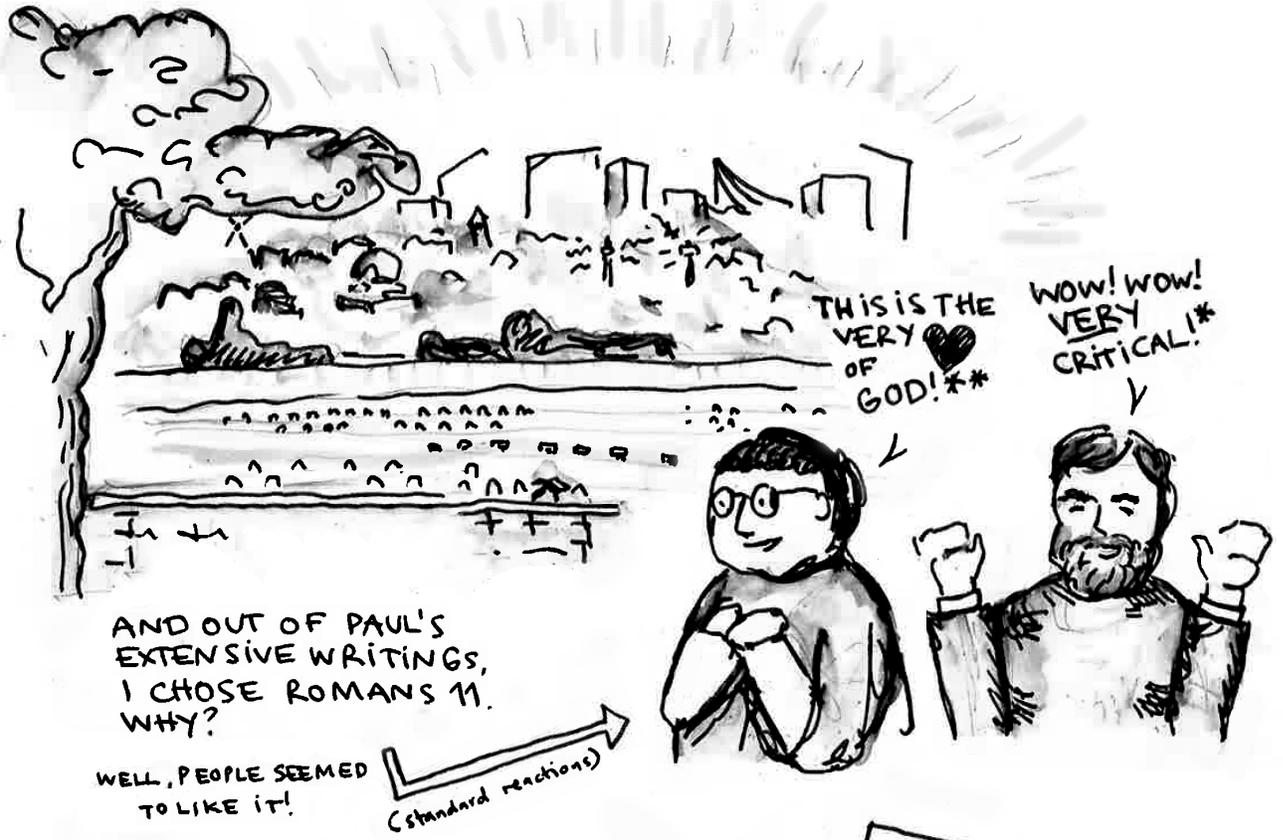
SIMPLY PUT: IT WAS ON THE GRAPEVINE BUT WITHOUT ANY PROOF. SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE.

I CHOSE TO TAKE ON THE TASK THROUGH BIBLE-READING INTERVIEWS. I MET WITH 18 MESSIANIC JEWISH LEADERS FROM DIFFERENT ORGANIZATIONS + CONGREGATIONS IN THE JERUSALEM HILLS.

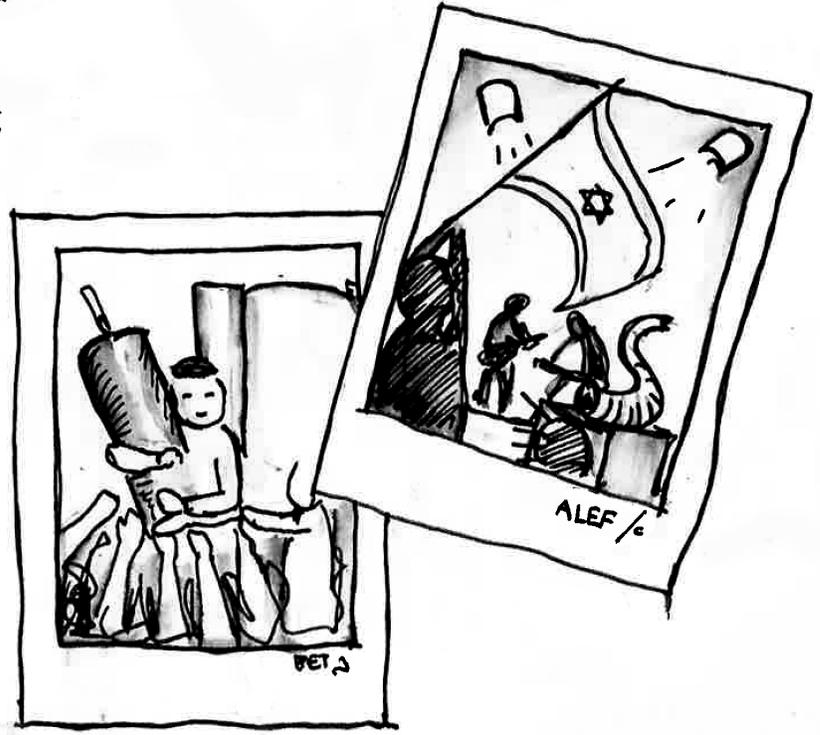


\* Scholars who think Paul remained a Jew after the Jesus event

WHY JERUSALEM THEN? WHAT A QUESTION IS THAT?! BECAUSE IT'S THE BEST CITY ON EARTH OFC! BUT THE HOLY CITY ALSO FUNCTIONS AS A HUB FOR RELIGIOUS CREATIVITY + THINKING. MESSIANIC JUDAISM IS NO EXCEPTION FROM THIS. TOGETHER WITH THE DENSITY AND HETEROGENEITY THIS MADE J'LEM A NATURAL PICK ALSO FROM A SCHOLARLY STANDPOINT.



BETWEEN THE INTERVIEWS I SPENT MUCH TIME IN VARIOUS MESSIANIC JEWISH ENVIRONMENTS, PARTAKING IN SHABBAT SERVICES + PRAYER MEETINGS, SIPPING INSTANT COFFEE, OBSERVING AND HANGING OUT, GETTING TO KNOW THEIR DIFFERENT FLAVORS.



\* ISRAEL, 2015  
 \*\* YITSHAK, 2015

← Some of the people I met

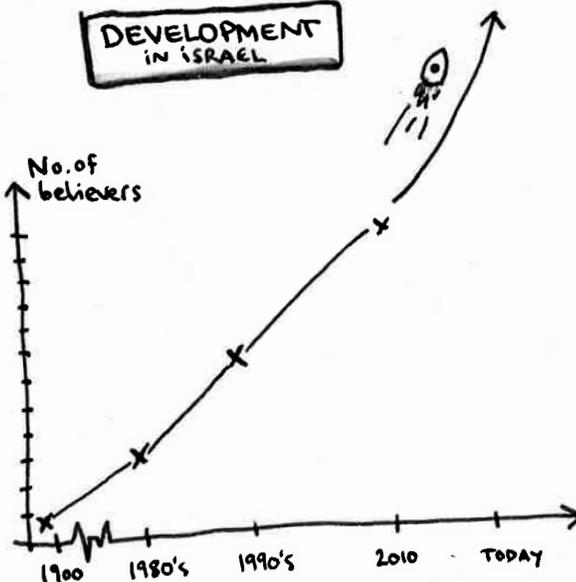
# MESSIANIC JEWES?

MESSIANIC JEWS ARE JEWS WHO BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH. MANY OF THEM LIVE IN ISRAEL.

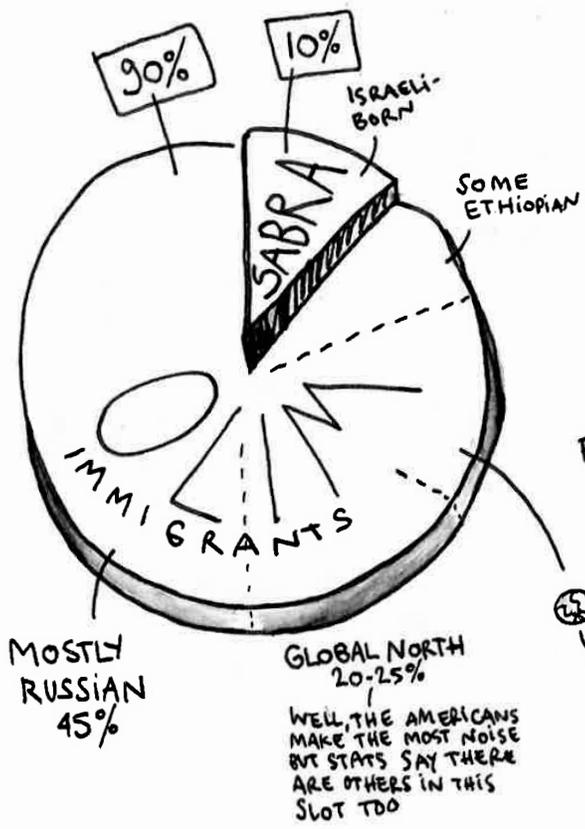
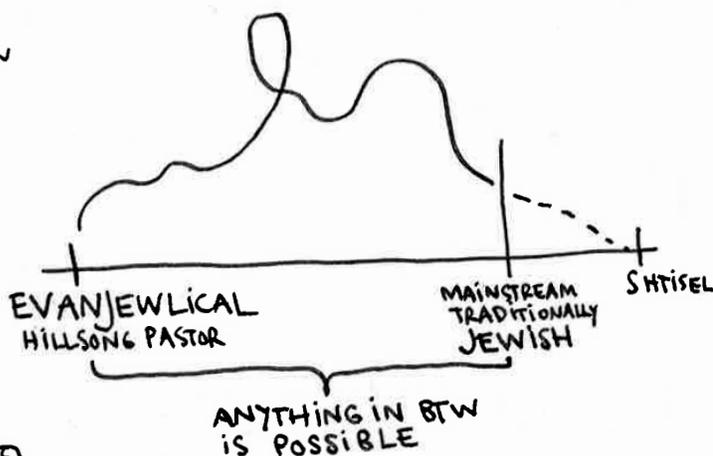
HEY, PAUL!  
WAS ONE!

MJ'S ARE NOTHING NEW, BUT THERE HAS BEEN AN UPSURGE THE PAST DECADES. TO PUT IT MILDLY. THE NUMBERS ARE TRICKY TO COUNT FOR MANY REASONS, BUT ONE ESTIMATE IS THAT THERE ARE 15-20,000 BELIEVERS IN ISRAEL TODAY.

## DEVELOPMENT IN ISRAEL



## MESSIANIC JEWISH EXPRESSIONS



THE REST OF THE WORLD

# HOW TO SPEAK MESSIANIC

ישוע	YESHUA	JESUS
ברית חדשה	HA-BERIT HA-HADASHA	THE NEW TESTAMENT
סעודת אדון	SEUDAT HA-ADON	THE LORD'S SUPPER
דרשה	DRASHA	SERMON
	PAGAN!	CHRISTMAS
	THEY	CHRISTIANS
	RAV SHAUL	PAUL*



\* IN SELECTED CONTEXTS

MESSIANIC JEWS TEND TO PUT MORE EMPHASIS ON THE MESSIANIC PART THAN THE JEW PART, AND DESPITE THAT THEIR THEOLOGY OFTEN IS FAIRLY EVANGELICAL, THEY DISTANCE THEMSELVES FROM HELLENIZED CHRISTIANITY

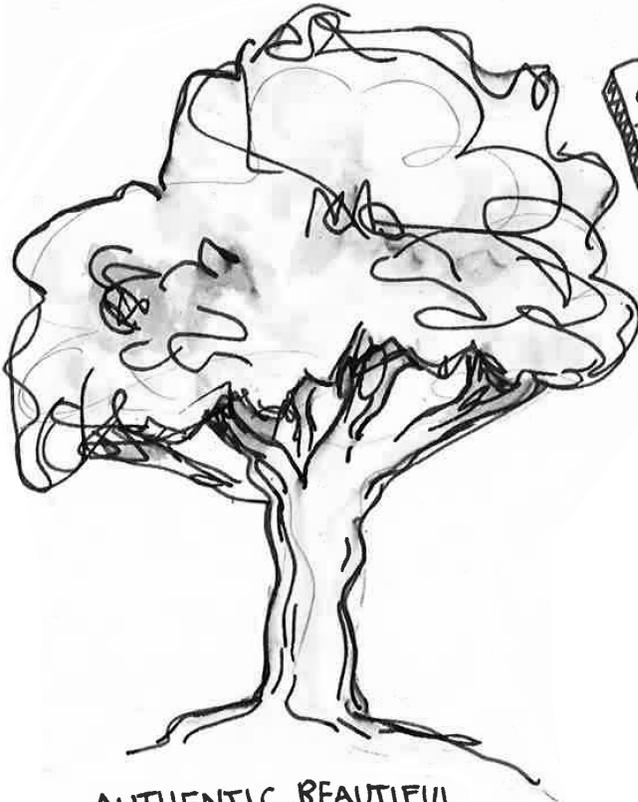


CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS TEND TO BE CONSIDERED ~~REDUNDANT~~ PAGAN. INSTEAD JEWISH HOLIDAYS ARE CELEBRATED IN LIGHT OF

≡ YESHUA ≡



CHRISTIANS HAVE REPLACED THE OLIVE TREE WITH A CHRISTMAS TREE!\*

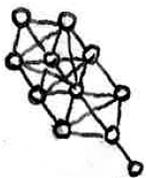


AUTHENTIC, BEAUTIFUL OLIVE TREE



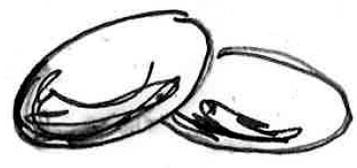
PAGAN OVER-DRESSED PRICKLY STICK

\* AVRAHAM, 2019



JEWISHNESS IS STILL A MAJOR PART OF THEIR IDENTITY, AND RETURNING TO THE ROOTS IS VERY IMPORTANT. BUT WHICH JUDAISM TO RETURN TO?  
IT'S NOT LIKE JUDAISM HAS BEEN ON HOLD SINCE THE DAYS OF THE APOSTLES.

WHEN PEOPLE START TO "OBSERVE" MESSIANIC JUDAISM, IT IS COMMON TO ALSO INCREASE IN LEVEL OF OBSERVED JUDAISM. HOWEVER, VERY FEW OF THE LEADERS WEAR JEWISH RELIGIOUS CLOTHING OR KIPPOT.



MOST OF THEM WEAR CLOTHES WITH MIXED FABRIC AND DRIVE TO THE SERVICE ON SHABBAT (WHICH VERY WELL COULD CONTAIN ELECTRIC GUITARS)

KOSHER IS RELATIVELY EASY TO KEEP UNINTENTIONALLY IN J'LEM AS MOST RESTAURANTS + GROCERIES HAVE A TOLDAT KASHRUT.\* DOV STATED THAT HE KEEPS KOSHER AT THE LEVEL OF NOT EATING PORK, WHEREAS CHAYIM CONSIDERED THE FOOD RESTRICTIONS A CLOSED CHAPTER.



LOOK, THE VISION PETER HAS IN ACTS 10, OF BASICALLY A CHINESE RESTAURANT BUFFET...  
↓  
YOU COULD BBQ ALL YOU WANT IN JERUSALEM!



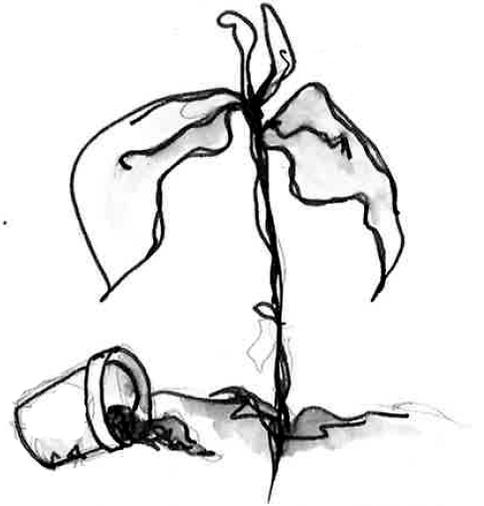
\* Only sell kosher food

CHAYIM, 2020

AS SAID: A MAJOR COMPONENT IN MESSIANIC JEWISH IDENTITY IS REROOTING - IN JUDAISM AND IN THE HOLY LAND.

WITH THAT GOES THAT MJ'S ARE VERY NATIONALISTIC AND PRO-ISRAEL. THEY CELEBRATE NATIONAL HOLIDAYS LIKE YOM YERUSHALAYIM AND YOM HA-ATZMAUT ENTHUSIASTICALLY - IN LIGHT OF YESHUA- AND IT'S A NATURAL THAT THEIR KIDS JOIN THE ARMY.

DESPITE THIS, THEY ARE FROWNED UPON BY SOCIETY AT LARGE, AND THE LAW-OF-RETURN, BY WHICH JEWS ABROAD HAVE THE RIGHT TO MAKE ALIYAH AND MOVE TO ISRAEL ONLY GOES FOR JEWS WHO HAVE NOT CONVERTED TO ANOTHER RELIGION - A MATTER WHERE THE GOVERNMENT AND THE MJ'S DIFFER IN OPINION.



IF THERE IS ONE ISSUE THAT UNITES ALL OTHER JEWS - HAREDI, ORTHODOX, REFORM + WHATNOT - IT'S THE OPINION THAT MESSIANIC JEWS ARE NOT REAL JEWS (WHICH, AGAIN, THE MJ'S COMPLETELY DISAGREE WITH)



IN SUM: THEORETICALLY MESSIANIC JEWS\* TEND TO IDEALIZE THE TORAH, BUT IN PRACTICE THERE IS MORE FOCUS ON (EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN) PURITY OF THE THAN ON (JEWISH) RITUAL PURITY.



\* According to Ken Zelson  
Warsawsky, 2008

SPENDING TIME WITH THE GUYS AND ROM 11,  
SOME THEMES RECURRED MORE FREQUENTLY THAN  
OTHERS. WE'LL HAVE A CLOSER LOOK AT 3 FAVORITES

# 1. THE OLIVE TREE

IN ROM 11, PAUL WRITES ABOUT AN OLIVE TREE WHERE  
SOME NATURAL (JEW-) BRANCHES ARE CUT OFF AND OTHER  
WILD BRANCHES ARE GRAFTED IN. WHILE THE TEXT  
WAS WRITTEN 2000 YEARS AGO, THE MY LEADERS  
READ THEMSELVES RIGHT INTO THE TEXT HERE + NOW,  
AS IT IS GOD'S LIVING WORD. HOWEVER, THEY INTERPRET  
IT DIFFERENTLY.



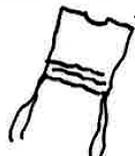
A COMMON READING IS THAT THE OLIVE TREE IS AN IMAGE OF  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWS + CHRISTIANS.

THE GRAFTED IN WILD BRANCHES ARE "REAL" JESUS-BELIEVING GENTILES WHO LOVE YESHUA AND ISRAEL. HOWEVER:



THIS MEANS THAT THEY SEE THEMSELVES AS THE NATURAL BRANCHES IN THE TREE - IT'S THEIR JEWISH TREE - AND THE GENTILES ARE ADOPTED ONTO IT. THEY ARE DEPENDENT ON THE SAP & THE LIFE FROM THE JEWISH TREE.

THE OLIVE TREE IMAGE IS ABOUT HOW CHRISTIANS SHOULD RELATE TO THEIR JEWISH ROOTS. BUT IT IS ALSO ABOUT THEMSELVES. HOW JEWISH SHOULD THEY AS JESUS-BELIEVERS BE? IF THE SAP + THE LIFE COME FROM THE JEWISH ROOTS, HOW INDEPENDENTLY FROM JUDAISM COULD/SHOULD THEY LIVE? AGAIN, THE ANSWERS RANGE ON A BIG SPECTRUM FROM WEARING TSITSITS TO A FULL CHINESE BUFFET.

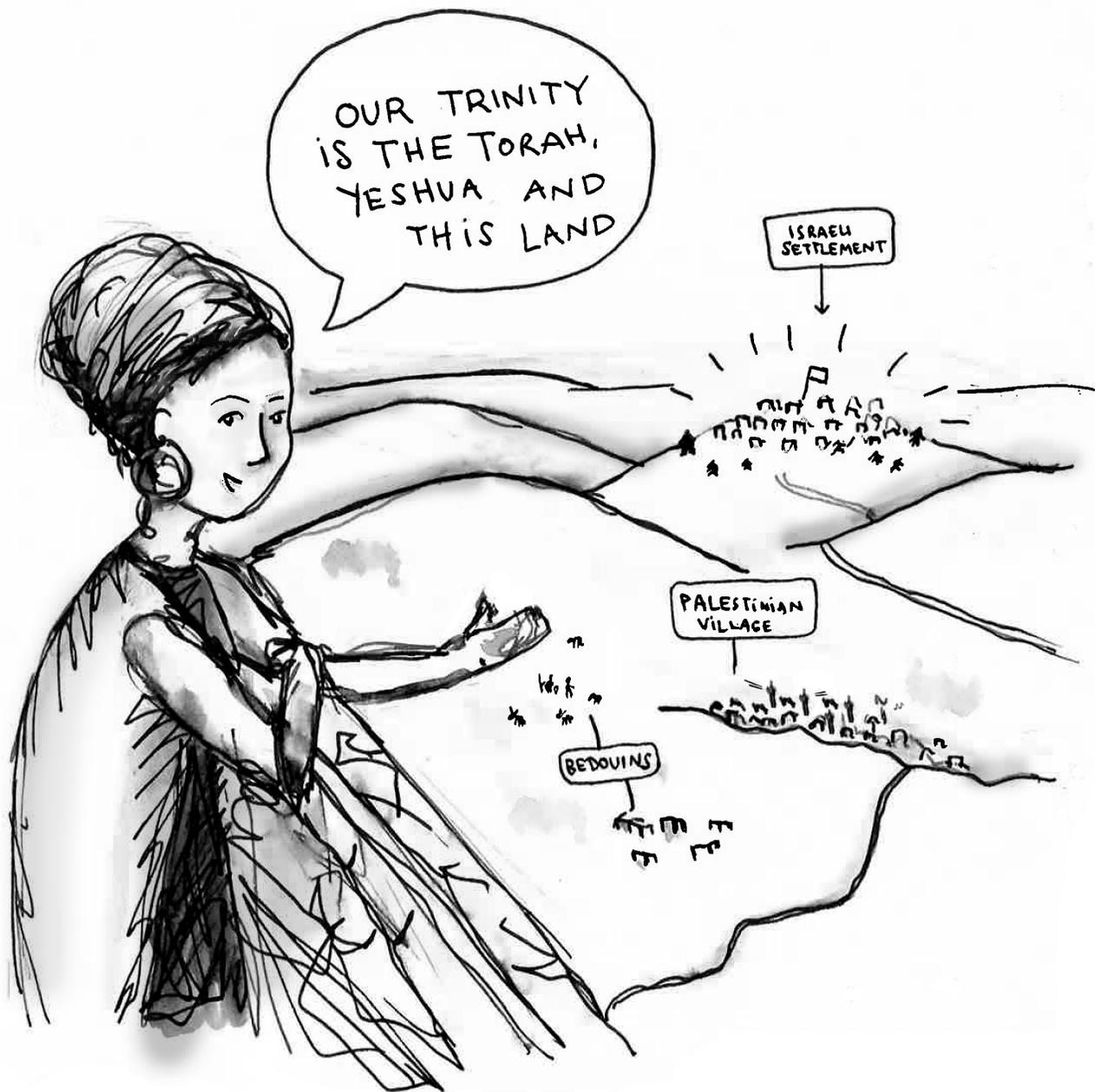


\* GOY = NON-JEW

# 2 TIME+LAND

AS MENTIONED, PAUL SAYS THAT THE GIFTS AND THE CALLING OF GOD ARE IRREVOCABLE. THE MESSIANIC JEWS LOVE THIS! IT PROVES THAT THE JEWS STILL HAVE A COVENANT WITH GOD AND THAT THE JEWS ARE HIS BELOVED PEOPLE.

OR DIFFERENTLY PUT:



BUT WAIT, HOW DID WE END UP HERE?  
ALL I ASKED ABOUT WAS WHAT THE GIFT WAS,  
AND THEN THEY SPOKE LIKE CRAZY ABOUT THE  
LAND. SEE, THIS IS THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SCRIPTURE.

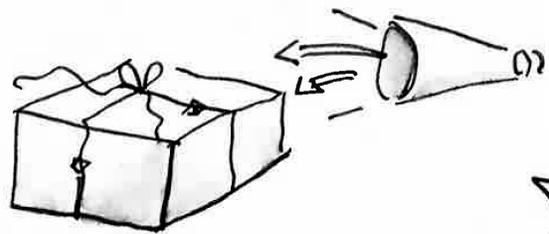
WE'RE BACK  
HOME!

YES, THE LAND!

THE LAND IS  
ISRAEL!

OF COURSE  
IT'S THIS  
LAND!

SO, GIFT = LAND OF ISRAEL  
CALLING = TO THE LAND OF ISRAEL



ISRAEL IS SUPER IMPORTANT, AS TODAY'S  
ISRAEL (MORE OR LESS-BOUNDARYWISE) IS  
THE LAND GOD GAVE THE JEWS THROUGH  
ABRAHAM.

IN 1948 THE STATE OF ISRAEL EMERGED. IN 1967 JERUSALEM  
WAS UNIFIED. THIS IS READ AS PROOF OF THAT

1. GOD IS STILL ON THE JEW'S SIDE
2. THE END TIMES ARE JUST AROUND THE  
CORNER

AND THE MJ'S ARE READY TO MEET AND GREET  
YESHUA WHEN HE RETURNS TO JERUSALEM.  
WHICH IS VERY MUCH CONNECTED TO...

# ALL ISRAEL

will be saved

IT SAYS IN ROM 11. TO THE MESSIANIC JEWISH LEADERS THIS IS PROOF OF THAT GOD HASN'T REJECTED ISRAEL - REGARDLESS OF WHETHER JEWS ACCEPT JESUS AS YESHUA OR NOT, THE JEWISH COVENANT WITH GOD IS STILL GOING STRONG -

## The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable

THIS IS A  
VERSE THAT IS  
UNANIMOUSLY  
LOVED

GOD DOESN'T JUST GIVE GIFTS AND THEN TAKES THEM AWAY - NOT "EVEN" CIRCUMCISION + HALAKHAH. ← JEWISH LAW  
= JEWS SHOULD ADHERE TO THESE ALSO WHEN BELIEVING IN YESHUA, ACCORDING TO SOME MJ LEADERS.

ACCORDING TO THE TEXT ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED AFTER THE FULL NUMBER OF GENTILES HAVE COME IN. WHEN LOOKING AT THE WORLD IT IS CLEAR TO THE LEADERS THAT THIS IS ABOUT TO BE FULFILLED - CHRISTIAN MISSION HAS REACHED MOST OF THE WORLD BY NOW, AND WHEN THAT IS DONE, THE TIDE WILL SHIFT BACK TO ISRAEL BEFORE JESUS RETURNS HERE IN JERUSALEM AGAIN.

THIS IS ANOTHER PROOF OF THAT THE JEWISH COVENANT WITH GOD IS STILL GOING STRONG, AND THE EXISTENCE/ EMERGENCE OF MESSIANIC JUDAISM AND THE FACT THAT THEIR GROWTH CORRELATES WITH THE FORMATION OF A JEWISH NATION STATE AROUND JERUSALEM IS ALSO PROOF OF THAT THE END TIMES HAVE BEGUN.

\* HOW MANY "ALL" MEANS VARIES  
BTW ~1/3 TO 100%.

JESUS WILL SOON RETURN. AND HE WILL RETURN HERE, IN JERUSALEM. IT'S A GREAT HOUR ON GOD'S TIMETABLE - AND WE'RE IN THE MIDST OF IT!  
BECAUSE OF NOTIONS LIKE THIS, MOST OF THE LEADERS ARE INVOLVED IN DIGITAL MISSION, STREET EVANGELIZATION AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN, AND IN THE ENDTIMES ACADEMIC RESEARCH DIDN'T APPEAR TO BE A TOP PRIORITY TO THEM (ALTHOUGH THEY ENJOYED READING THE BIBLE TOGETHER). BUT I WAS VERY WELCOME TO JOIN THE MISSION!





*The End*

FOR ANY FURTHER SPECIFICATIONS  
PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING PAGES.



Part I.

## FRAMEWORKS FOR THE READINGS



# *One.* Messianic Judaism and Paul within Judaism

*It once happened that there was a Messianic Jewish leader in need of advice. Not only was he a Jew believing in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel, he also embraced the Bible as God’s living Word. The person he sought out for this advice would have shocked many. But it was all kept a secret. The chosen advisor was a scholar, a historical-critical “Paul within Judaism” scholar. And on top of that an atheist. The Messianic Jew addressed his problem to the scholar. A question of a practical nature, it touched upon the everlasting questions of identity and relations. Together they discussed the relevant biblical texts penned by Paul; one considered them holy, the other, historical documents. The scholar spoke, the Messianic Jew listened. He took the advice of the scholar and put it into practice in his community. “Vayehi,” and so it was. While opposites in most matters, the texts spoke to them in the same way. Everyone was happy. It so happened that this meeting occurred in our time.<sup>1</sup>*

The story above is a true one. It is about readers, readings, and the Bible, topics with which the current study also engages. It is about conversations between one text and its many readers; of the many ways people interact with and discuss Scripture. It is about how the Bible works. This study explores how readers construct the meanings of the text, but also how the text helps readers to construct their lives.<sup>2</sup> It is ultimately about the creative power that comes forth when readers meet the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting took place during a conference in the United States during the mid-2010s. For the sake of confidentiality, as throughout this work, names are not revealed. I know of this conversation because I am familiar with both people involved. The scholar was the one who told me about this meeting in detail, which spurred my interest in the question from then on.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the titles: Brian Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism*, CSRS (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2004); James S. Bielo, *Words upon the Word: An*

“*Something* is going on in Pauline studies,”<sup>3</sup> Paula Fredriksen stated, referring to the emergence of the so-called Paul within Judaism perspective (hereafter PWJ<sup>4</sup>), an approach committed to (re)constructing Paul as a *Jewish* believer in Jesus. I would hasten to add that *something else* has happened parallel to this: Messianic Judaism, a contemporary movement of Jews who believe in *Yeshua Hamashiah*<sup>5</sup> has entered the scene.<sup>6</sup> As Jesus-believing Jews, they hold both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as sacred, canonized texts—for them, this is the Bible. The story retold above brings the two together in astonishing conversation, which serves as the primary and original motive for conducting this study. A Messianic Jewish leader needed advice on a certain matter. Instead of turning to other religious authorities, Jewish or Christian, he turns to a scholar, a PWJ scholar, which is indeed surprising. Readings of the Bible are central for understanding what is happening. As the scholarly advice was well received and implemented in his Messianic Jewish congregation, this clearly testifies to a deep respect for and acknowledgement of the perspective as being the most enlightened one in terms of understanding Paul. It spurred my fascination for exploring how Messianic Judaism relates to the PWJ perspective.

Are Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars not seemingly unlikely companions? Could it really be that a Bible-loving, Jesus-believing group of Jews find their closest partners and friends in radical, historical, and supposedly secular scholarship? Since the dawn of scholarly study of the Bible, the gap between academia and many faith communities has increasingly widened, at least in the West. This is especially the case when it comes to issues of what the Bible supposedly says and groups who consider the Bible to be the infallible, living Word of God. Nonetheless, the flirtation with the supposedly “forbidden”—when the Messianic Jewish leader seeks religious advice from a scholar—bears witness to something else, something new worth investigating. As such, this present study reflects, ultimately, on the possible similarities between scholarly results and religious convictions.

Specifically, this study explores how Messianic Jews *read* Romans and so *construct* Paul’s identity (*Shaul* as some would say), but also how they construct

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*Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*, QSR (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 175. Emphasis original.

<sup>4</sup> This abbreviation has not until now been used in scholarly literature, only orally. I suggest that the scholarly community adopt this as the customary and smooth way to refer to the perspective.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus the Messiah. Hebrew terms are transliterated according to Society of Biblical Literature’s “General-Purpose Style,” 58 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> Further definitions and discussions of these two communities, Messianic Judaism and Paul within Judaism, are provided later in this chapter.

their own identity and the identity of others in conversation with readings from a PWJ perspective. The story above suggests that Messianic Jews would understand Paul's writings in a way similar to this scholarly paradigm. Is this assumption correct? To find the answer, I focus on how Messianic Jews read a specific text—Rom 11. This text plays a fundamental role for both reading communities, that of Messianic Jews—“it's the very heart of God!”<sup>7</sup>—and PWJ scholars when promoting their agendas and ideologies of a Jewish Paul and Jewish understanding of his letters. As such, Rom 11 deals with questions of *identity*, *relations*, and *time*, all three themes having significance among both communities of readers—the empirical-religious and the scholarly.<sup>8</sup>

While the reception of scholarly readings of Paul stem from written texts, this study falls primarily within the field of empirical reception studies. The Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 are produced through what I have termed “Bible-reading interviews” in Jerusalem. Jerusalem hosts a large number of Messianic Jewish communities, and thus far, no studies have focused solely on this city. The voices are thus from “real life,” constituting a living commentary on Rom 11. Living in Jerusalem, believed to be the center of the world, is considered by Messianic Jews to be something very special, as being part of God's handling of the world and the unraveling of the end times. Romans 11 is part of the discourse that nurtures this perception.

Just as the story above suggested a relationship of affinity between Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars, there are several other indications that support this claim. The following three thematic similarities and connections between the two communities of readers further motivate the study:

First, *from a Messianic Jewish perspective*, there are several reasons that support an affinity with the PWJ perspective and its scholars. Mark D. Nanos, a prominent PWJ scholar, was invited to give the inaugural lecture at the Messianic Jewish Theological Institute's Center for Jewish-Christian Relations in 2010.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, William S. Campbell and Anders Runesson contributed to *Introduction to*

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<sup>7</sup> “Yitshak,” November 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 251. Eisenbaum here describes Rom 9–11 as the *locus classicus* text for most PWJ scholars; Keri Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders: A Social Anthropological Study of Contemporary Messianic Jewish Identity in Israel” (PhD diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008), 101–03; Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 122, 129. Kinzer here, from a Messianic Jewish theologian's perspective, defines Rom 9–11 as “the heart” and “pivotal” to the whole of the letter. The terminologies “empirical-religious” and “scholarly” are further discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer M. Rosner, “Messianic Jews and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 145–55, 152–53.

*Messianic Judaism* on the biblical foundations of Messianic Judaism.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, another scholar who works within this perspective identified Messianic Jews as the “fan club” due to the attraction the work has raised within this movement.<sup>11</sup> A Messianic Jewish study center in Jerusalem,<sup>12</sup> finally, has hosted several lectures on the PWJ perspective and is planning a major conference with multiple scholars as speakers.<sup>13</sup> This clearly indicates that the PWJ perspective is held in high regard among leading Messianic Jews.

Messianic Jewish theologians are, especially in the United States, taking a greater interest in academic biblical studies adhering to the PWJ perspective. David Rudolph, for example, is well-respected and known as a PWJ scholar *and* a Messianic Jewish leader.<sup>14</sup> In another example, Jennifer M. Rosner, a Messianic Jewish theologian, has embraced PWJ scholarship by claiming:

Nanos’s contention that Paul upheld the covenantal requirement of circumcision and Torah observance for Jewish Christ-followers makes his interpretation *a natural ally for Messianic Jewish theology*. Nanos’s work *lends support to Messianic Judaism* by revealing that *Paul himself envisioned and embodied a similar religious identity*, though history subsequently erased both the mandate for and the allowance of a Torah-observant Jewish wing of the Christ-believing community.<sup>15</sup>

Messianic Judaism seems to find in the PWJ perspective a scholarly defense and solid ground for its own identity politics, “a natural ally,” we might say, for being a Jewish *and* Jesus-believing movement. This scholarly approach thus functions as an authenticity marker for them, indicating that they are “onto something,” also in the way Scripture—particularly Paul—is read.<sup>16</sup> Rosner’s argument is based on the

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<sup>10</sup> William S. Campbell, “The Relationship between Israel and the Church,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 196–205; Anders Runesson, “Paul’s Rule in All the *Ekklesiāi*,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 214–23.

<sup>11</sup> Personal conversation, November 2017.

<sup>12</sup> The Bram Center, which is one part of the large Messianic Jewish organization, First Fruits of Zion.

<sup>13</sup> The exact timing for this has not yet been decided, but the hopes are for 2022 or 2023.

<sup>14</sup> David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*, WUNT 304 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Rosner, “Messianic Jews and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 153. My emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Rosner, “Messianic Jews and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 149–53; cf. Carl Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 61–71, 61–62. Nanos tells of how he perceived the Messianic Jewish movement in the 1990s, before the PWJ perspective existed, to be confused about Paul. Struggling with reading Paul, the believers, according to Nanos, thought the by-then dominant perspective(s) on Paul were correct, but did not want them to be, as they are quite disrespectful towards the Torah. with the emergence of the PWJ

shared goal of the two communities of placing Paul fully within his Jewish context, but also on the contemporary interest in reading the Bible in a *post-supersessionist*<sup>17</sup> way. With all these examples, it appears that Messianic Judaism sees an ally, and finds a scholarly defense for its views, in the PWJ perspective. Rudolph, writing about the contributors to *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, states that recent scholarship “demonstrate[s] how post-supersessionist interpretation of the New Testament results in readings of the biblical text that are consistent with Messianic Judaism.”<sup>18</sup> Paul himself and interpretations of his letters play a vital role for Messianic Jews in terms of understanding their own identity, as well as lifestyle (i.e., Torah observance). By reading Paul through a Jewish lens, according to Rosner, Messianic Jews today consider themselves in restored continuity with the first Jesus-believing Jewish community, once again embodying “a similar religious identity” as Paul.<sup>19</sup>

An anecdote helps to further illustrate this relationship. Nahum, one of the Messianic Jewish readers in this study, proclaimed that many Messianic Jews were proud that one of their own, Nanos, was such a prominent scholar. When I corrected him, pointing out that Nanos is not a Messianic Jew, he got quite upset with me. His train of thought went that Nanos really must be one of them, as he read Paul exactly as they did, and one could simply not be able to do that without being an insider.<sup>20</sup>

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perspective, then, a new and much more positive approach to Judaism was presented, to which the Messianic Jews could adhere, thereby supporting their claims with a scholarly basis. (See more in below sections on Pauline scholarship). Personal e-mail correspondence, May 2021.

<sup>17</sup> I here follow Kendall Soulen’s definition (well-known and accepted within the Messianic Jewish world) of the concept of supersessionism: “From Latin *supersedere*: to sit above or be superior to. In general parlance to supersede means to take the place of someone or something, while to be superseded means to be set aside as useless or obsolete in favour of someone or something that is regarded as superior. In recent decades the term ‘supersessionism’ has gained currency among theologians and biblical scholars to refer to the traditional Christian belief that since Christ’s coming the Church has taken the place of the Jewish people as God’s chosen community, and that God’s covenant with the Jews is now over and done. By extension, the term can be used to refer to any interpretation of Christian faith generally or the status of the Church in particular that claims or implies the abrogation or obsolescence of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. Supersessionism is thus substantially equivalent to replacement theology, and the two terms are often used interchangeably.” R. Kendall Soulen, “Supersessionism,” *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* 413–14, 413.

<sup>18</sup> David Rudolph, “Introduction,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willits (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 11–18, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Rosner, “Messianic Jews and Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 149, 153–54; Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism in Antiquity and in the Modern Era,” 35.

<sup>20</sup> “Nahum,” March 2016. A similar issue was also displayed when another interviewee referred to Nanos as a “believer,” clearly using this term to designate a Jew believing in Jesus.

Second, *from an ideological*<sup>21</sup> *perspective*, there is a very important similarity: Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars both criticize the history of Pauline interpretation. They have a common interest, together with many others, to write “theology after Auschwitz.” Throughout history, biblical engagements have constructed a Paul in opposition to Judaism. This Paul has been outside Judaism, even against Judaism, and he has been portrayed as the first true Christian. Influencing Christian theology for centuries, church history bears witness to a dichotomic idea of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Much of Christianity’s (presumed) anti-Jewish theology and rhetoric stem from readings of Romans and Galatians where assumed dichotomies have been stressed between “law” and “grace,” “works” and “faith.”

Therefore, both Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars share the ultimate goal of rereading the New Testament from a Jewish perspective (briefly touched upon above), an ambition to which both are much dedicated. Whether considered the aim or the effect, such readings create a *post-supersessionist* theology and approach to the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> Both communities of readers strongly emphasize that God’s covenant with his people Israel is irrevocable (v. 29<sup>23</sup>). This commitment is, for example, expressed in the ongoing publication of monographs in the new series, “New Testament after Supersessionism” (NTaS), as well as the newly founded “Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology” (SPOSTST),<sup>24</sup> both contexts hosting PWJ scholars and Messianic Jewish theologians among others. The two conversation partners do seem to get along well.

Third, *from a scholarly perspective*, similarities have been noted between Messianic Judaism and the PWJ perspective. Philip La G. Du Toit, for example, has observed parallels between the two communities of readers, something which calls for further studies of this relationship. He writes, “Two specific strands of religious expression that are *interrelated* with these new perspectives on Paul, especially the RNPP [the Radical New Perspective on Paul = PWJ], are Messianic Judaism and

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<sup>21</sup> I define “ideology” with the commonly used definition: “I have used ‘ideology’ to mean an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions and values, not necessarily true or false, which reflects the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history. By ‘interests’ I mean anything that benefits or is thought to benefit a specific collective identity. Because ideologies are modes of consciousness, containing the criteria for interpreting social reality, they help to define as well as to legitimate collective needs and interests. Hence there is a continuous interaction between ideology and material forces of history.” David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revloution, 1770–1823*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>22</sup> For a characterization of this approach, see Joel Willitts, “Conclusion,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 315–19, 317.

<sup>23</sup> When referring to verse(s) within Rom 11, this way of reference is used “(v. x)” as the text of Rom 11 is inserted at the start of this study. When referring to other biblical texts, the full reference is provided such as “(Rom 9:4–5)”.

<sup>24</sup> “Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology,” <https://www.spostst.org>.

Christian Zionism.”<sup>25</sup> Du Toit points to a number of similarities between the three movements. They share, he argues, a positive evaluation of Judaism and Jewish identity regardless of faith in Jesus, the rejection of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism because God’s promises and covenant with Israel are still valid, and a common support for the State of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Leaving aside the issue of Zionism here (to be taken up in Chapter Six), Du Toit’s use of “interrelated” suggests that he proposes a relationship between Messianic Judaism and PWJ scholarship based on their being interconnected, similar, and of comparable inspiration. This may imply that the two communities read the Bible—and Romans specifically—along the same lines.

Finally, one more example that displays the entanglement: *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, second edition (2017) has added a small article on Messianic Judaism.<sup>27</sup> *JANT*, as such, is groundbreaking as it offers a Jewish reading of the Jewish context on each book in the New Testament written by Jewish scholars. Being one representative of the large and growing paradigm of reading the New Testament “within Judaism,”<sup>28</sup> the inclusion of Messianic Judaism is indeed astonishing as a perspective on reading the New Testament within Judaism in contemporary times. It also proves the acceptance and fascination of Messianic Judaism from a scholarly perspective. From about 2015 until the present, the period during which this study was written, both communities—Messianic Judaism and the PWJ perspective—have witnessed growth and maturity, becoming more vibrant, both separately and intertwined, and gaining greater respect from outsiders as parties worth listening to. In the midst of all this, the apostle Paul is present. *Something*—or rather a lot—is indeed going on, to paraphrase Fredriksen (see above), and very much at intense speed. The present study is part of that.

It is obvious that the PWJ perspective is applauded by (some groups of) Messianic Jews. The examples above hint toward a resemblance between Messianic Judaism and the PWJ perspective in understanding Paul. As a scholarly endeavor on the one hand, and a new religious movement on the other, they seem to share interests and connections that bring them together—at least on the surface. But these observations are general and do not involve specific readings and interactions with Paul and his

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<sup>25</sup> Philip La G. Du Toit, “The Radical New Perspective on Paul, Messianic Judaism and their connection to Christian Zionism,” *HTSTS* 73:3 (2017): 1–8, 1. My emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Du Toit, “Radical New Perspective on Paul,” 3–4.

<sup>27</sup> Yaakov Ariel, “Messianic Judaism,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 756–59.

<sup>28</sup> This is true not only with regard to the PWJ perspective; there is a whole school on reading the New Testament within Judaism. For one such example, see Anders Runesson and Daniel M. Gurtner, eds., *Matthew within Judaism: Israel and the Nations in the First Gospel*, ECL 27 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020). Another similar initiative that was born in 2014 is the peer-reviewed *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting (JJMJS)*, available at “JJMJS,” <http://www.jjmjs.org>.

writings. At a closer and more hands-on level of engaging with Scripture, is this assumption still valid? This study addresses precisely this question.

## Aim and Framing

As noted above, and revisited below, Paul and Rom 11 serve as the key focuses both for Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore Messianic Jewish understandings of Rom 11 in conversation with scholarly interpretations from the PWJ perspective. More narrowly, its purpose is to discuss the concepts of *similar* and *dissimilar*: in what ways do Messianic Jews *construct*<sup>29</sup> Paul and *read* Rom 11 in ways that are similar and dissimilar to PWJ scholars?<sup>30</sup> It seeks to nuance the idea that the two reading communities agree with each other. The project examines Messianic Jewish textual ideology and practice with questions of identity, relations, and time that emerge from the text in dialogue with Pauline scholarship. Thus, we might ask: to what extent (and further, how, when, why, and in what ways) do Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 correspond to readings made by PWJ scholars? To answer this question, two sub-questions need to be addressed: first, how do PWJ scholars read Rom 11? And second, how do Messianic Jews do so?

The study brings together the field of reception studies and the “social life of Scripture” approach (see Chapter Three). Merging insights from biblical studies with anthropology of Christianity in a way that benefits this work, it answers the call within academia to pursue more interdisciplinary studies. Since “the turn towards the reader” in the 1970s, both fields have shown an interest in how “real,” living readers “out there” actually interact with the Bible. The intersection between these two disciplines has considerable potential,<sup>31</sup> and it is in the sphere of this innovative fusion that this study takes place. This fusion of disciplines and genres also, necessarily, impacts the style of this study; it is not written in traditional

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<sup>29</sup> I consciously use the term “construct” instead of “reconstruct” as a way to emphasize the creative and ideological process behind reading and grasping the apostle. This I consider is as true for the Messianic Jewish readers reading today as it is for the Pauline scholars who are historically oriented in their constructions of Paul.

<sup>30</sup> Messianic Judaism is, obviously, formed by other influences as well and not only scholarly perspectives on Paul. One such major influence is evangelical Christianity, to which I repeatedly return in the historical overview in Chapter Two and the empirical chapters.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Simon Coleman, “The Social Life of the Bible,” in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicalism*, ed. James S. Bielo, S(ON)S (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 205–12, 207.

exegetical language but inspired by the expression “new wine into fresh wineskins.”<sup>32</sup>

The Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 are created through so-called “Bible-reading interviews,” in which I have interviewed eighteen male Messianic Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The study can therefore be described as an empirical reception study as the readers are empirical-religious readers in the here-and-now. Using interviews is a new method within biblical studies. Simply put, as I have carried out Bible studies in the form of semi-structured interviews, the study is empirical. It is a reception study as I am interested in how Messianic Jews receive and interpret the text, what they believe that the text means. The analyzed interviews (Part II) thus address the second sub-question just mentioned. While this is not an anthropological work as such, I have also conducted participant observation in Messianic Jewish congregations to better understand the context in Jerusalem.

As reception studies have their limitations when it comes to tools for analyzing empirical material, I also rely for this study on insights from anthropology. The “social life of Scripture” is a concept developed by James S. Bielo. Working with evangelical Bible study groups, he has developed traits from reception theory and reader-response theory that better suit anthropologists of Christianity who are working with ethnographies of the Bible. This approach asserts that in the meeting between reader and text an intense conversation takes place, in the space where the reader puts “words upon the Word.”<sup>33</sup> The “social life of Scripture” focuses on the dialectical exchange in which the world is brought into the text in order to make sense of it, and the text is also brought out into the world for it to be grasped. Given the role the Bible plays in the lives of Messianic Jews, this approach is very helpful for analysis and understanding of the negotiations about *identity*, as well as how *relations* to others are perceived, and the world—especially perceptions of *time*—is understood.

As part of the social life of Scripture approach, Bielo elaborates on the concepts of *textual/biblical ideology* and *textual/biblical practice*,<sup>34</sup> both very helpful analytical categories. The concepts of similarity and dissimilarity are perceived from the theoretical angles of ideology and praxis, addressing readings on levels of *how* the text is read, *what* is read, and *why* it is read the way it is. In other words, ideology, hermeneutics, rhetoric, and interpretation are all of interest. For this study I would like to stress the importance of not only *how* people interact with Scripture

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<sup>32</sup> Mark 2:22 NRSV // Matt 9:17 // Luke 5:38. Jesus here, as narrated by the canonical gospels, makes the claim that something new (new wine, or a new sort of study) should not be put into something old (old wineskins, traditional forms) so as to prevent both the old and the new being destroyed.

<sup>33</sup> This is also the title of Bielo’s monograph. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 5–14.

<sup>34</sup> James S. Bielo, “Textual Ideology, Textual Practice: Evangelical Bible Reading in Group Study,” in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, ed. James S. Bielo, S(on)S (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 157–75, 157–72.

but also *what* comes out of the interaction. At the same time, for Messianic Jews, as I will show, reading the text as such is always accompanied by the search for relevance and by applying the text in believers' lives. This textual interaction is highlighted in the social life of Scripture approach.<sup>35</sup> Reading is a social act, both for Messianic Jews in general and also during the reading interviews.

It is important to note that I am trained in biblical studies, not in anthropology, but I am taking insights from another field to enrich my own position. Brian Malley, also working with ethnography and Bible reading, points out that the scripturalists (people) are his focus—that is, what happens around the text—whereas my focus is more on what the *scripturalists* do with *scripture* (text) and the meanings they produce.<sup>36</sup>

The PWJ readings constitute the interpretative framework, answering the first sub-question above. I use the term “interpretative framework” to denote a sort of guide to exploring the Messianic Jewish readings in relation to the scholarly ones. It functions as a kind of “conversation partner” to allow discussions of similarities and dissimilarities with scholarship. The study thus engages with both oral and empirical-religious, as well as written and scholarly texts, where the former are brought into a conversation with the latter to reach the goal of this study. I consider the two groups to constitute two different reading communities (although overlaps exist). Still, I work from the empirical-religious readings to the scholarly ones—not in a comparative two-way direction of “equal value.” That said, I am not interested in tracing (im)possible factual connections: actual, real-life dependence and influence, such as having proof that Messianic Jew X read and adopted the reading of Pauline scholar Y (even though this might well have happened). Rather, I am interested in the (dis)similarities as such in the constructions of Paul and readings of Rom 11 that are produced by both communities.

Next, I discuss Messianic Judaism with special attention to, first, identity construction, and second, the Bible. Both of these sections begin by presenting an insider view of the issues and thereafter focus on earlier studies. This helps to locate the present study and serves to give a glimpse into the movement. I then turn to Pauline scholarship, presenting three major approaches in terms of characteristics and examples of reading Rom 11. This section provides the foundation for the interpretative framework. This is followed by a revisiting of the connection between Messianic Judaism and PWJ and the finding of a pattern for the empirical chapters to come. The chapter ends with an outline of the study as a whole.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Bielo, “Textual Ideology, Textual Practice,” 160.

<sup>36</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 14.

# Messianic Judaism, Identity, and the Bible

The story that began this study presents several important aspects of Messianic Judaism, such as *identity*, the *importance of the Bible*, and, therefore, the centrality of *reading Scripture*. In this section, the study is positioned within emic perspectives and earlier scholarship on these themes.

## Identity and Negotiations: An Emic View and Previous Studies

For the believers themselves, their Jewishness is the point of departure in their identity construction—they are Messianic Jews, *yehudim meshihiim*,<sup>37</sup> Jews who believe in Jesus the Messiah. From an emic perspective, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) envisions Messianic Judaism as:

A movement of Jewish congregations and groups committed to Yeshua [Jesus] the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant.<sup>38</sup>

While this insider definition is generally shared by scholars in the field, Messianic Judaism comes in many shapes and forms in terms of how Jewishness is expressed both in lifestyle and in relation to mainstream Judaism(s). Many Messianic Jews understand themselves as “fulfilled” or “completed” Jews, whereby the Messianic trait is a deepening or continuation of their Jewishness. Their self-identification is as Jews or as Jewish believers, while the designation “Christian” is strongly rejected, as is institutionalized Christianity, as it is considered anti-Jewish, pagan, and Hellenized. Instead, Messianic Jews emphasize the Jewishness of their faith in Jesus, viewing themselves as a restoration and continuation of the first Jesus-believing community. Identity negotiations are discussed throughout this study, but it is worth pointing out even at this stage that, although the believers consider themselves Jesus-believing Jews, generally speaking, Jewish communities do not recognize the group as Jews, and neither do Christians consider them Christians. Being Jews who believe in Jesus has, therefore, given rise to descriptions of Messianic Jews as “both-and” and “in-between,” designations most of them would

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<sup>37</sup> This is more commonly transliterated as “*yehudim meshichim*.”

<sup>38</sup> “Defining Messianic Judaism,” UMJC Theology Committee, <https://www.umjc.org/defining-messianic-judaism>. The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations is one of the two major organizations with which most Messianic Jewish congregations in the United States are affiliated. The other is the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS).

protest. Messianic Jews are not to be described as 50 percent Jewish and 50 percent Christian but rather as 100 percent Jewish and 100 percent Messianic.<sup>39</sup> Most would probably be comfortable with the designation “Jewish believers in Yeshua” who are “members of both the People of Israel and the Body of Jesus the Messiah.”<sup>40</sup>

Most available material on Messianic Jewish theology and life comes from within the movement itself. Devotional material is regularly published by congregations and teaching ministries in the form of newsletters, booklets, Bible teachings, podcasts, and books. Messianic Jewish theologians and leaders such as Richard Harvey, Daniel Juster, Mark S. Kinzer, David Rausch, Jennifer M. Rosner, and David H. Stern,<sup>41</sup> to give a few examples, have published a number of theological books written from an insider perspective on faith and practice. I have found Harvey’s study and Kinzer’s writings to be especially useful for the present study, Harvey’s for spelling out different Messianic Jewish theological positionings on the most important topics and Kinzer’s for his attempt to create a unified theology and his engagement with the Bible.

Messianic Judaism has sparked relatively little academic attention since it emerged in its modern version in the late 1960s and 1970s. This has, naturally, resulted both in gaps in current research and in existing studies becoming out-of-date. The prevalent studies can roughly be divided into two lines of research. The major one focuses on Messianic Jewish *identity construction*, using various *social-scientific and ethnographic methods* to research specific Messianic Jewish groups or congregations, mostly in an American context. The second and smaller category can be described as *historical* studies mostly built upon *written sources* about the development of the movement and of leaders and organizations. There are, it should be said, some overlaps between emic and etic points of discussions.

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<sup>39</sup> David H. Stern, *Messianic Judaism: A Modern Movement with an Ancient Past* (Clarksville: Lederer, 2007), 4.

<sup>40</sup> “Yachad BeYeshua - Our History,” <https://www.yachad-beyeshua.org/our-history>.

<sup>41</sup> To give but a few examples: Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*, SMJT (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009); Daniel Juster, *Jewish Roots: A Foundation of Biblical Theology for Messianic Judaism* (Rockville: Davar Publishing, 1986); Daniel Juster and Keith Intrater, *Israel, the Church, and the Last Days* (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2011); Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*; Mark S. Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015); Mark S. Kinzer, *Israel’s Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011); Mark S. Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen: The Resurrected Messiah, the Jewish People, and the Land of Promise* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018); David A. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology, and Polity*, TSR (New York: Mellen, 1982); Jennifer M. Rosner, *Finding Messiah: A Journey into the Jewishness of the Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming (2022)); Jennifer M. Rosner, *Healing the Schism: Barth, Rosenzweig, and the New Jewish-Christian Encounter*, ES (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016); Stern, *A Modern Movement*; David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville: Lederer, 1992).

To the first group belong works by scholars such as John Dulin (2015), Tamir Erez (2013), Shoshana Feher (1998), Carol Harris-Shapiro (1999), Hillary Kaell (2014, 2016), Julienne G. Lipson (1980, 1990), B. Zvi Sobel (1974), Jeffrey S. Wasserman (2000), and Keri Zelson Warshawsky (2008).<sup>42</sup> The most comprehensive study is that by Harris-Shapiro in which she analyzes in depth the life of an American Messianic Jewish congregation. While similar topics are also found in Dan Cohn-Sherbok's work (see below), Harris-Shapiro discusses issues such as the "Messianic Jewish Self," "Community," "History, Prophecy, and Memory," and "Practices, Rituals, and Life Circles" to examine who they say they are and what they do.

Harris-Shapiro and others emphasize that Messianic Jews are in a constant process of identity negotiations, of carving out a perceived "authentic" identity as Jesus-believing Jews. A recurrent discussion, especially in older studies, is whether Messianic Jews should be considered Jews any longer or not. This echoes the long-standing debate within Judaism concerning who is a Jew. Messianic Judaism blurs the very boundary that has been created throughout the centuries between Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, scholars also engage in analyses of the relationships between Messianic Judaism and Judaism and Christianity in faith and praxis in order to define the movement.

Harris-Shapiro, who, in addition to being a scholar, is also a Reconstructionist rabbi, considers that Messianic Judaism forms a bridge between Judaism and Christianity. She concludes her study, however, by calling Messianic Judaism a "theological transvestite" by which she means that believers are somehow both Jews and Christians and that this is perceived to threaten the Jewish community. Further, their Jewishness in terms of ethnicity is intact, while their abandonment of Jewish praxis [*sic*] ("abandonment of Judaism"), she argues, has turned them into apostates, which excludes them from the Jewish community.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> John Dulin, "Reversing Rupture: Evangelicals' Practice of Jewish Rituals and Processes of Protestant Inclusion," *AQ* 88:3 (2015): 601–34; Tamir Erez, "Mission Not Accomplished: Negotiating Power Relations and Vulnerability among Messianic Jews in Israel," in *Ethnographic Encounters in Israel: Poetics and Ethics of Fieldwork*, ed. Fran Markowitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 40–58; Shoshana Feher, *Passing Over Easter: Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1998); Carol Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journey through Religious Change in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1999); Hillary Kaell, "Born-Again Seeking: Explaining the Gentile Majority in Messianic Judaism," *Religion* 45:1 (2014): 42–65; Hillary Kaell, "Under the Law of God: Mimesis and Mimetic Discipleship among Jewish-Affinity Christians," *JRAI* 22:3 (2016): 496–515; Julienne G. Lipson, *Jews for Jesus: An Anthropological Study* (New York: AMS, 1990); B. Zvi Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974); Jeffrey S. Wasserman, *Messianic Jewish Congregations: Who Sold this Business to the Gentiles?* (New York: University Press of America, 2000); Zelson Warshawsky, "Returning To Their Own Borders."

<sup>43</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 166, 169.

To give a few other examples, Feher concludes that Messianic Jewish identity is perceived as a link between Judaism and Christianity. It is not clear whether she considers adherents to still be Jews or not;<sup>44</sup> however, she continuously refers to them as “converts” that are “bringing home the bacon” thus indicating that she does not consider them Jewish, meanwhile trying to portray them in as Christian a light as possible. Wasserman in his now dated study argues that the (claimed) Jewish identity among Messianic Jews does not contribute to anything particular and that as “converts” to Jesus-belief they therefore should be integrated within the Christian church, although the adoption of some Jewish practices can be seen as reasonable from a missionizing perspective.<sup>45</sup> Sobel, on the other hand, writing his book for Jewish parents of the 1970s whose children have become believers in Jesus, explains the movement on the basis that this is supposedly a passing phase. He goes so far as to call the Messianic Jew “the Jewish anti-Semite,” considering that the forerunner to Messianic Judaism, Hebrew Christianity, “is in no way Jewish” and that the believers are “committed to the *fiction* that they are still Jews.”<sup>46</sup> Sobel therefore portrays Messianic Judaism not only in a negative light, but in a manner that is diametrically opposed to how they identify themselves. In other interpretations, Lipson argues that faith in Jesus can be psychologically good for socially marginalized Jews,<sup>47</sup> while the Reform rabbi Cohn-Sherbok dedicates a part in his monograph to reflect on the claims of the authenticity of Messianic Judaism. Contrary to those mentioned above, he argues that Messianic Judaism should be included in, and considered an acceptable expression of, Judaism. Given the divisions already present in Judaism, and the differing opinions of who can be considered a Jew, he proposes a pluralist model that also embraces Messianic Jews.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the majority of the studies contradict the emic understanding of Jewish identity and practice being, as the Messianic Jewish theologian and intellectual Kinzer expressed it, “intrinsic to and required by their faith in Yeshua.”<sup>49</sup>

The studies mentioned above focus on the identity of Messianic Jews and contribute to a general understanding of the movement. However, the theological and ideological conclusions that many scholars draw regarding “what” Messianic Jews are, and are not, reflect the emotions and provocations that Messianic Judaism has caused in the religious world at large.

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<sup>44</sup> Feher, *Passing Over Easter*, 142; cf. Pauline Kollontai, “Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity,” *JMJS* 3:2 (2004): 195–205, 198.

<sup>45</sup> Wasserman, *Messianic Jewish Congregations*.

<sup>46</sup> Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity*, 83, 97, 103–06. Emphasis original.

<sup>47</sup> Julienne G. Lipson, “Jews for Jesus: An Illustration of Syncretism,” *AQ* 53:2 (1980): 101–10; Lipson, *Jews for Jesus*.

<sup>48</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (London: Cassell, 2000), 209–13.

<sup>49</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 11.

The dissertation by Zelson Warshawsky, entitled “Returning To Their Own Borders: A Social Anthropological Study of Contemporary Messianic Jewish Identity in Israel” (2008), is the most relevant work for the current study as it is one-of-a-kind in terms of how it deals with the situation in Israel. Being an insider herself, in contrast to the scholars above, she aims at understanding identity negotiations among Messianic Jews more deeply. Her ethnography is, like the others, built upon extensive fieldwork and in-depth interviews with leaders as well as laypeople in Messianic Jewish communities all around Israel including Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup> Taking an interest in sociocultural constructions of identity, she discusses how Messianic Jewish identity is formed and caught between secular and religious Judaism on the one hand, and Christian mission and Christian Zionism on the other. Identity is understood as travel through the analytical concepts of routes, roots, and borders, in relation to the land of Israel, the God of Israel, and the surrounding religious milieu.<sup>51</sup> While very helpful in serving as a dialogue partner for this work, her study hardly engages in how Bible readings and specific texts function in negotiating identity even though the approach lurks in the background.<sup>52</sup>

Erez’s autobiographical essay reflects on contested identities and the challenges of studying the movement as a Jew not interested in becoming a believer in Jesus. The people who were part of his field site in Tel Aviv grew increasingly suspicious of him, and the congregation finally asked him to leave. This testifies to the tense relations Messianic Judaism has with surrounding society, particularly in Israel, and their perceived need for safety.<sup>53</sup> The general skepticism toward Messianic Judaism more broadly, and in Jewish society in Israel especially, might explain why no other studies have yet been conducted by an outsider in this region. The current study thereby offers a first deeper glimpse into the movement in Israel by a non-Israeli and non-Jew.

The articles by Dulin and Kaell represent the most recent trend in Messianic Jewish research. Shifting the focus from the Messianic Jews, both address the question of why there is a majority of non-Jews (i.e., Christians) within the Messianic Jewish movement(s). Through in-depth ethnographic studies in the United States, so-called Messianic Gentiles are given voice to present their process of severe identity negotiations and adaptation of Jewish customs and practices. Kaell explains the attraction in terms of mimetic discipleship: philo-Semitism and the discovery of a Jewish Messiah bring Christians to a Jewish milieu to imitate their Messiah and his Jewish followers.<sup>54</sup> Their studies are not ideologically

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<sup>50</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xv–xvi*, 27–29.

<sup>51</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xviii*.

<sup>52</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 101–03.

<sup>53</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished.”

<sup>54</sup> Kaell, “Under the Law of God.”

motivated but purely ethnographic in character. While this study does not deal with Messianic Gentiles as such, they also comprise a prominent group within the Messianic Jewish congregations in Israel that the participants deal with on a regular basis, both theologically and practically, in regard to the relationship Jesus-believing Jews should have with Jesus-believing non-Jews.

Given this background, a continued focus on identity negotiations is reasonable as Messianic Jews are indeed involved in a complex process of finding and defending an “authentic” identity. Identity is a central concept in this study as well, but approached from the perspective of Bible reading.

The second group of studies, with a historical and textual focus, include scholars such as Yaakov Ariel (2000), Cohn-Sherbok (2000), Ruth I. Fleischer (1996), and Gershon Nerel (1966).<sup>55</sup> While the first three analyze the formation of the movement mostly in America, Nerel’s dissertation “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity,” written in Modern Hebrew, is the only comprehensive study to map its historical development in Israel. While none of these studies address Bible reading, they are all important for understanding the growth of Messianic Judaism.

Another publication worth mentioning is the unique quantitative study, *Facts & Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (1999).<sup>56</sup> Published by Caspari Center, a Christian education center in Jerusalem with a special focus on Jewish believers in Jesus, it makes an important contribution to understanding the characteristics of the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel. The publication surveys the known Messianic Jewish communities all over the country and is the only source available that presents statistics on attendees, characteristics in terms of praxes and expressions, and theological positionings. Although the statistics are becoming dated and the revised edition is not yet published, this provides an important backdrop for an overall picture of the situation in Israel and is, therefore, useful for next chapter, which presents the movement in more detail. It does not, however, reflect on issues connected to the Bible or reading practices beyond noticing that preaching and teaching are central in the congregations. The Caspari Center also publishes a weekly newsletter which references current newspaper coverage involving Messianic Judaism.

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<sup>55</sup> Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*; Ruth I. Fleischer, *So Great A Cloud of Witnesses* (United Kingdom: Dr. Ruth I. Fleischer [privately published], 1996); Gershon Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self-Identity” (PhD diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil F. Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (Jerusalem: United Christian Council in Israel/Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 1999).

Finally, *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations* (2013) fills an important gap as the first publication to provide a broad introduction to the movement. As one of the editors, Rudolph, explains, it serves as a “portal” into the movement as several Messianic Jewish experts in the first part “The Messianic Jewish Community” write on a range of themes concerning the identity, life, thinking, and lifestyle of contemporary Messianic Jews.<sup>57</sup> While it serves as a first-level, go-to source for getting to know the movement better, especially helpful for this study are the chapters entitled “Messianic Jews and Scripture”<sup>58</sup> and “Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel.”<sup>59</sup>

## The Bible and Reading: An Emic View and Previous Studies

The Bible is of utmost importance for Messianic Jews both in their identity constructions and life in general. As the UMJC writes of the Bible:

The writings of Tanakh and Brit Hadasha [the New Testament] are divinely inspired and fully trustworthy (true), a gift given by God to His people, provided to impart life and to form, nurture, and guide them in the ways of truth. They are of supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and practice.<sup>60</sup>

The Bible is the core “of supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and practice,” that forms the identity and lives of the believers. In other words, “*the Bible is divinely inspired, infallible, and authoritative.*”<sup>61</sup> These two quotes illustratively depict the biblical ideology among Messianic Jews. The prominence of the Bible is also clearly visible in congregational life, where preaching, teaching, and reading the Bible are central—thus differing from mainstream contemporary denominations of Judaism—and take up much of the communal life. When turning to the vast amount of devotional or theological literature written by insiders, the Bible is always central. Juster, one of the aforementioned major pioneers and theologians within Messianic Judaism, has asked whether there is a biblical foundation for Messianic

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<sup>57</sup> Rudolph, “Introduction,” 11. See also the volume by Knut H. Høyland and Jakob W. Nielsen, eds., *Chosen to Follow: Jewish Believers through History and Today* (Jerusalem: Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 61–71.

<sup>59</sup> Akiva Cohen, “Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 107–15.

<sup>60</sup> “UMJC Statement of Faith,” UMJC Delegates, <https://www.umjc.org/statement-of-faith/>. While different Messianic Jewish organizations formulate their statement on the Bible differently, the core is the same (see more in Chapter Three).

<sup>61</sup> Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 61. Emphasis original.

Judaism, meanwhile claiming that without it Messianic Judaism would have no right to exist.<sup>62</sup> Obviously, he answers with a resounding yes. Reading the Bible through the lens of “Yeshua,” most if not all believers would say, is *the* tool for formulating a unique Messianic Jewish identity, theology, and lifestyle. Messianic Jewish identity is negotiated through processes of *identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading*, a combination that conveys the enormous importance placed on the Bible.

However, when it comes to scholarship on Messianic Judaism and the Bible, there is not much available. None of the previous studies discuss the Bible, Bible reading, or interpretations of the Bible explicitly or in depth. The Bible figures in ethnographic studies as important for Messianic Jews but is never sufficiently addressed. Harris-Shapiro, for example, reports from a Bible study she attended and observes that her research participants repeatedly referred to the Bible, while in her chapter entitled “History, Prophecy, and Memory” she manages to illuminate how the Bible shapes the mindset of Messianic Jews. Writing about the significance of the land of Israel, she illustrates the striving for living a Bible-based life and how the Bible comes alive.<sup>63</sup> Her ethnographic study and others note that Messianic Judaism perceives itself as the true biblical Judaism, that the believers attempt to go back to Jewish biblical roots, and that they are in constant negotiations with Jewish tradition, contemporary Judaism, and Christianity. Zelson Warshawsky’s participants also repeatedly illuminate the importance of the Bible in guiding and forming their thinking and lives. However, she does not explore Bible reading at length, besides stating that they “take a fundamental [*sic*; fundamentalist?] approach to Scripture.”<sup>64</sup>

Hence, while ethnographic studies (sometimes) confirm that the Bible (the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) plays a foundational role for Messianic Jews, no ethnographic studies have yet been conducted that deal with how the Bible actually works in terms of reading processes, strategies, and actual interpretations. This can perhaps be explained by a reluctance among scholars from disciplines practicing ethnography to cross into a biblical or theological realm, just as theologians often avoid stepping into ethnographic enterprises. However, given the authority Messianic Jews accord the Bible, it is my firm conviction that these two fields need to collaborate in order to reach a deeper understanding of lived Messianic Judaism.

A positive development is the abovementioned *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*. Its second part consists of articles that argue for the “biblical

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<sup>62</sup> Juster, *Jewish Roots*, 111; also quoted in Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 249.

<sup>63</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 112–35, esp. p. 128. On this page, she simply states that for Messianic Jews, correctly, “Israeli history brings the Bible to life.”

<sup>64</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 33.

foundations”—the subheading of the anthology—of Messianic Judaism.<sup>65</sup> The articles deal explicitly with questions such as the Jewishness of the New Testament, Paul, and Jewish-Gentile relations in the early Jesus movement that are important for the identity of the movement. As the contributions are written by scholars (mostly New Testament exegetes and systematic theologians with different relations to the Christian world), this supports the idea of a growing interest in Messianic Judaism from an academic perspective and, conversely, how Messianic Jews value scholarly contributions that legitimize the movement on historical and exegetical foundations. The most recent publication on the movement, it most unmistakably argues for and illuminates the importance of the Bible for the life of Messianic Judaism.

Romans 11 is an obvious choice for this study. Paul plays a significant role for the Messianic Jewish movement at large and Rom 11 contains very important themes for contemporary Messianic Judaism as in it Paul deals explicitly with questions of identity and relations between Jesus-believing Jews and Jesus-believing non-Jews. This is confirmed by the many Messianic Jewish teachings and newsletters I have encountered over the years dealing either explicitly or implicitly with Rom 11, while indexes from emic Messianic Jewish theology commonly reference Rom 11 and its single verses. The most impressive of those engaged in discussing this chapter are probably Kinzer, who dedicates several pages of his *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (2005) to discussions of the text,<sup>66</sup> and the other Messianic Jewish theologian, Joseph Shulam, who wrote an early commentary on the whole book of Romans entitled *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (1998).<sup>67</sup> In the abovementioned *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, Rom 11 is the most referenced chapter in the whole New Testament, if one is to judge from the index.<sup>68</sup> Finally, the studies by Harris-Shapiro and Zelson Warshawsky both bring up the importance of the olive tree metaphor in Rom 11 to Messianic Jewish identity construction and for their relations with others.<sup>69</sup> These textual allusions all highlight the special place of Rom 11 in Messianic Jewish thinking, one resonating with its role as a key text in the PWJ perspective.

Summing up the state of research on Messianic Judaism: most studies are centered on issues of identity negotiation, often using ethnographic methods such

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<sup>65</sup> David Rudolph and Joel Willitts, eds., *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), see 157–319. Interestingly, the publication is endorsed on its back cover by scholars such as Nanos and Amy-Jill Levine.

<sup>66</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 122–42.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Shulam, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1998).

<sup>68</sup> Rudolph and Willitts, eds., *Introduction to Messianic Judaism*, 333–34.

<sup>69</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 116; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 101–03.

as interviews and fieldwork. This study stands firmly among these endeavors but moves ahead to take a close look at “the social life of Scripture” and readings of the Bible. The Messianic Jewish theologian Carl Kinbar states that “Messianic Jews grapple with certain issues involved in biblical interpretation that are particularly relevant to Jewish followers of Yeshua.”<sup>70</sup> Then, acknowledging the gap in current research, Kinbar continues with a plea for studies on Messianic Judaism and the Bible,<sup>71</sup> an aspect that has not received the attention it deserves within scholarship. Additionally, no one has yet conducted a study on textual practice among Messianic Jews, either from an exegetical or empirical approach. This study does.

## Scholarship on Paul: *Outside, And, or Within* Judaism

To understand how, when, why, and in what ways Messianic Jews read and construct Paul and how this resembles or differs from practices in the reading community of PWJ scholars, the necessary background must be put in place. This section thus aims at defining the interpretative framework of this study by exploring the characteristics of the perspectives exemplified in a few readings of Rom 11.

Modern Pauline scholarship is, to say the least, a labyrinth; as Magnus Zetterholm observes, “With Pauline studies we are entering a world where almost nothing seems certain any longer.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, we must look at both the PWJ perspective and other major scholarly trajectories. Although the idea “going around” is that Messianic Jews construct Paul and read Rom 11 along similar lines as the PWJ perspective, this might be false. Maybe they rather, or partly, have more in common with other scholarly perspectives on Paul represented and received in various places and degrees in Christian faith communities? Hence, for the sake of nuance, a broader focus is needed that portrays the diverse constructions of Paul within scholarship and the reception of Romans.

In the recent publication, *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views* (2020),<sup>73</sup> three major and two minor perspectives within Pauline scholarship are presented. Of the former, two are usually referred to as either the Lutheran or the Traditional perspective, and the New Perspective on Paul, respectively. In my view, however, there is a need to rename these perspectives, in order to divest them of confessional influences

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<sup>70</sup> Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 61.

<sup>71</sup> Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 70.

<sup>72</sup> Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), x.

<sup>73</sup> Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza, eds., *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

“Lutheran”) and to account for the fact that there is no longer anything that new about the so-called New Perspective on Paul. I suggest we instead use the designations “Paul outside Judaism” (hereafter POJ) and “Paul and Judaism” (hereafter PAJ) as the terminology “outside” together with “and,”—contrasted with the “within”—much better captures what is at stake in the perspectives regarding the construction of Paul’s relation to Judaism. Together with the PWJ perspective—the newest, developed in reaction to the earlier two—all three thrive side by side. This positions PWJ within its cultural context of Pauline scholarship.

While the development and traits of Pauline scholarship have been summarized by most Pauline scholars, the state of affairs is most thoroughly depicted in Zetterholm’s *Approaches to Paul* (2009).<sup>74</sup> More recently, in *Paul Perceived* (2018), Karl Olav Sandnes defines the divisions in Pauline scholarship as circulating around two sets of questions. The first of these is Paul’s relationship to Judaism; identity-wise, “what” was Paul, and how did he view Judaism? The second question concerns Paul’s theology as particular or universal; was his theology the same for Jew and Gentile alike, and how is the relationship between the two depicted? Sandnes sums up that the constructions of Paul have moved from “Founder of Christianity to Apostolic Judaism.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, the concepts of “outside,” “and,” and “within,” and the themes of identity and relations are particularly apt categories. The following expositions of the trajectories are written in close alignment with these sets of questions.

Whereas the perspectives are interdependent, developing in response to each other, the portrayal here is not genealogical but rather thematic, presenting a *few well-established scholars* within each approach.<sup>76</sup> The trajectories are just trajectories, in that the writers share common ideas and convictions, but are not unified in the sense of speaking with one voice. The purpose here is not to go into detail in each approach, but to sketch *essential characteristics and traits* and to give a few examples of ways of reading Rom 11, dedicating the most space, for obvious reasons, to the PWJ perspective. The aim in this part is to create the interpretative framework: to carve out significant themes in the reading of Rom 11 and in constructing Paul(s). In Part II, the scholarly readings are brought in to serve as a conversation partner with the Messianic Jewish readings.

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<sup>74</sup> Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*.

<sup>75</sup> Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul Perceived: An Interactionist Perspective on Paul and the Law*, WUNT 412 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 8–9. See the whole of 8–15 for Sandnes’ concise and well sign-posted history of Pauline research. The quote is the heading used.

<sup>76</sup> In terms of footnotes: when one scholar has repeated an idea in several publications, I usually only refer to a single source.

## Paul Outside Judaism

In this perspective, Paul is placed *outside* Judaism just as Romans is read from outside Judaism. Adolf von Harnack explained that Paul had “delivered the Christian religion from Judaism.”<sup>77</sup> Regardless of their exact formulations, POJ scholars envision Christianity as something better than Judaism. This perspective is one of dichotomies, of stark contrasts.<sup>78</sup>

As this was the earliest and sole scholarly perspective for a long time, with a strong base in Germany, scholarly discussions have been, and still are, heavily influenced by Lutheran theology. The relationship between the two is strong and seemingly interdependent as both emphasize faith and grace against the law. The roots of this scholarly perspective, however, can already be found in the church fathers and the *adversos Iudaeos* tradition.<sup>79</sup> It has been suggested that there is a connection between the ideas on Judaism underlying this perspective and the political climate that culminated in Germany during World War II.<sup>80</sup> While contemporary advocates such as A. Andrew Das<sup>81</sup> and Stephen Westerholm<sup>82</sup> are more cautious in their formulations, they are still clearly working within the realm of a Lutheran discourse.

A fundamental assumption within this perspective is that of Paul’s changed identity, that he has left the “shackles” of Judaism. C. K. Barrett, for instance, refers

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<sup>77</sup> Adolf von Harnack, “What is Christianity?,” in *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height*, ed. and trans. Martin Rumscheidt, MMT (London: Collins, 1989 [1899–1900]), 169–82, 175.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. A. Andrew Das, “The Traditional Protestant Perspective on Paul,” in *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views*, eds. Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 83–106, 83. Das points to three claims typical of this perspective that all are oppositional.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 53–58. The core in this thinking is visible, for instance, in Melito of Sardes’ Easter sermon *Peri Pascha* from the late second century which first presented the term “deicide,” that is, “killing God.” In his preaching, Melito not only accuses the Jews as a people for having killed Jesus—but of having killed God himself. It has also been argued by the historian Jonathan Z. Smith that the connection between Pauline scholarship and Lutheran anti-Judaism also dates back to 16th-century anti-Catholic apologetics, wherein Judaism and Catholicism play a similar role of the “bad Other.” Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, CSHJ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 34, see also 83, 117.

<sup>80</sup> See Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann*, SJHC 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2009); cf. for example Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> In addition to the above mentioned by Das, see also: A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001).

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and his Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

to the “clean break with Judaism” that Paul made.<sup>83</sup> Paul’s own statement about his Jewishness (v. 1) is either ignored or emphasized as something belonging to the past. The so-called Damascus experience (Acts 9) is understood to have radically transformed Paul’s self-perception from being a Pharisaic Jew to become, as they define it, a “Christian.”<sup>84</sup> This break has often been described in terms of Paul’s “conversion,” by Ernst Käsemann and Rudolf Bultmann among others,<sup>85</sup> whereby Paul became the first Christian, or even the founder of Christianity. While his Jewish heritage is acknowledged in some works, such as Martin Hengel’s *The Pre-Christian Paul* (1991),<sup>86</sup> scholars representing this approach are much more interested in the new identity of the Christian Paul. More recently, proponents of this perspective picture Paul as someone who (perhaps) continued to be Jewish ethnically (now without significance), but turned away from everything Jewish in terms of customs and Torah observance. That is, the risen Christ had brought Paul by the grace of God to a place outside of Judaism. These scholars usually identify Paul with the remnant (v. 5), which also is described as “Jewish Christianity,” the elect, where the emphasis is put on everything new and positive in Jesus in contrast to the Jewish “before.” Käsemann elaborates: “the remnant [is] in *sharp antithesis to the people as a whole*.... Hence the motif is set in the context of Paul’s *doctrine of justification*.... The remnant is created by the *election of grace*.”<sup>87</sup>

POJ scholars, accordingly, perceive a sharp contrast, even conflict, between Judaism and Christianity. Ferdinand Christian Baur, the founder of the Tübingen school, proclaimed that Paul “broke through the barriers of Judaism and rose out of the particularism of Judaism into the universal idea of Christianity.”<sup>88</sup> Judaism is perceived as narrow-minded particularism, superseded by Christianity’s universal offering of love and salvation for all humankind—about which early proponents were explicit, although contemporary advocates are more careful in their wording—which relates to several intertwined fundamental assumptions nourished by the anti-Semitic climate of the early and mid-19th century. Christians are perceived as

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<sup>83</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1971), 240.

<sup>84</sup> E.g., Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and his Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 398.

<sup>85</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: Volume One*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (London: SMC, 1952), 188; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 4. The term “Christian” is repeatedly used by scholars adhering to this perspective.

<sup>86</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1991), see esp. x, xiii.

<sup>87</sup> Käsemann, *Romans*, 300. My emphasis.

<sup>88</sup> Ferdinand Christian Baur, *The Church History of the First Three Centuries*, vol. 1, trans. Allan Menzies, 3rd ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1878–1879), 47.

constituting a “third race,” a new peoplehood in which earlier Jewish and Gentile identities no longer exist and (previous) ethnicities do not matter; indeed, Das speaks of what Christ has done for “humans.”<sup>89</sup>

All are one in Jesus, and those in Christ are now Christians. While Paul seems to have discussed relations between Jews and Gentiles on a collective level (peoplehood), the POJ perspective is much more focused on the individual. Paul’s message of salvation in Jesus is for each and every one, that is, it has a universal audience. The central question is, “How can *I* find a gracious God?” Faith and grace, *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, are central maxims both in this perspective and in Lutheran theology, functioning as hermeneutical keys for reading Paul. Thus, the POJ perspective favors Rom 1–8 much more than Rom 9–11 as the first part is perceived as more theological and faith-oriented. In Käsemann’s commentary the latter section is illustratively entitled, “The Righteousness of God and the Problem of Israel (9:1–11:36).”<sup>90</sup> Israel’s lack of faith is a problem. In line with the perspective’s overall ideology, reflected in readings of Rom 11, the focus is foremost on the individual Jew who lacks faith, and not very much on the interaction between Jew and Gentile.

There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles with respect to salvation.... One is saved, whether Jew or Gentile, by believing in Jesus Christ.... Faith, defined throughout the letter as centered on Jesus Christ, is never far from Paul’s mind in Rom 11: verses 20–23 say that Israel will be restored “if they do not persist in unbelief” [v. 23].<sup>91</sup>

Writing on the olive tree metaphor, Das makes clear an assumption within this perspective: Jesus functions as a strong hermeneutical key, accompanied by theological concepts such as justification, election, grace, and salvation, which are made possible *only* in and through Jesus.<sup>92</sup> Käsemann, echoed by others, argued that “it cannot be seriously disputed that salvation history forms the horizon of Pauline theology.... It has rightly been repeatedly noticed that *the apostle’s message of justification is a fighting doctrine, directed against Judaism.*”<sup>93</sup> Righteousness by faith is thus presented in juxtaposition to Judaism as centered around righteousness through works.

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<sup>89</sup> Das, “Traditional Protestant Perspective,” 94, 106.

<sup>90</sup> Käsemann, *Romans*, x, 253–321.

<sup>91</sup> A. Andrew Das, *Paul, the Law and the Covenant* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 104–05; cf. Frank Thielman, *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul’s View of the Law in Galatians and Romans*, NovTSup 61 (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 92–93.

<sup>92</sup> Das, “Traditional Protestant Perspective,” 83–106.

<sup>93</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl, NTL (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 66, 70. My emphasis.

Paul's gospel is thought to free people from the bondage of Judaism, and then, naturally, also from law observance in its entirety. A favored passage in Rom 11 is when Paul mentions grace and works (vv. 5–6), which for this group of scholars further adds to the perceived dichotomies. Since “‘Grace’ and ‘works’ are opposed in 11:6,” Westerholm argues, “because law by its very nature demands ‘deeds’ of its subjects, and thus is *incompatible with ‘grace,’*”<sup>94</sup> righteousness in Jesus is through faith and free from the law. He continues, “The issue (‘works of law’ *versus* ‘faith in Jesus Christ’) permits restatement in terms of a general distinction between ‘works’ and ‘faith.’”<sup>95</sup> Observing the law is a vain task, leading to an intolerable life. Bultmann speaks of a “contrast between Paul and Judaism,” quoting Paul to make a strong argument: “‘For we hold that a man is *justified (rightwised) by faith* apart from works of the law’”<sup>96</sup> (Rom 3:28),<sup>97</sup> and in another monograph he argues, “it [the law] only leads him [man] into death.... The law as the way to salvation has been abrogated.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, POJ scholars perceive the law as a yoke, abolished with Jesus, unable to lead either Jew or Gentile to salvation. Frank Thielman formulates the dichotomy as “from plight to solution”—the Jews cling to the law whereas the Christians cling to Jesus.<sup>99</sup> Judaism and the law on the one hand, and Christianity and faith in Jesus on the other, are totally irreconcilable: one leading to death, the other to life.

From all the dichotomies presented it is quite clear that anti-Jewish elements determine these scholars’ understanding of Paul. The new covenant in Jesus with the doctrine of faith is presented as the antidote, putting all things right between God and humankind, replacing the old with the new. The perspective could therefore be characterized as suggesting a supersessionist theology wherein the Church has replaced ethnic Israel as the true and new Israel, which resonates with most Christianity up until just after World War II. Herman Ridderbos argues that the “church, then, as the people of the New Covenant has taken the place of Israel, and national Israel is nothing other than the empty shell from which the pearl has been

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<sup>94</sup> Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 431. My emphasis. Cf. Das, “Traditional Protestant Perspective,” 98: “The contrast between “works” and “grace”/“faith” is recurrent” writing on Rom 4 where the theme is more deeply developed than in Rom 11. Verse 6 is, however, mentioned later on in the article expressing the same oppositional idea.

<sup>95</sup> Westerholm, *Israel’s Law*, 119. Emphasis original.

<sup>96</sup> Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament: 1*, 279–80. My emphasis. Cf. Das, “Traditional Protestant Perspective.”

<sup>97</sup> “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” (Rom 3:28 NRSV)

<sup>98</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956), 189, 205.

<sup>99</sup> Thielman, *From Plight to Solution*, 115.

removed and which has lost its function in the history of redemption.”<sup>100</sup> Udo Schnelle, to give but one other example, contends:

For Paul the true Israel is identical with those who accept God’s promises and recognize that God’s salvific will reached its goal in Jesus Christ. For every part of Israel that refuses the revelation in Christ the Old Testament promises are no longer valid, because in a theological sense it is not Israel at all.<sup>101</sup>

In line with this, the concept of Israel is used in two different ways, sometimes denoting those Jews who do not believe in Jesus (negatively), and sometimes as a collective term for all those who do believe in Jesus (positively, the “new”). Representing a wide-ranging dichotomous idea within this approach, Joseph Fitzmyer argues that “the OT promises were not made to the ethnic or historical-empirical Israel, those of physical descent or of flesh and blood, but to the Israel of faith.”<sup>102</sup> The Israel of faith is also continuously referred to as the “true Israel,” “the Israel of God,” or the eschatological Israel, denoting those who believe in Jesus—(formerly) both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>103</sup> The gifts and calling (v. 29) have, according to POJ, been replaced by belonging to the spiritualized true Israel, the Church.<sup>104</sup>

Similarly, Das argues that “Paul is working with a *redefinition* of the elect.... The ‘elect’ are those defended by Jesus Christ.”<sup>105</sup> The elect here are synonymous with Jesus-believers. POJ scholars commonly consider those broken off in the olive tree metaphor (vv. 19–20) to be Jews who do not believe in Jesus, as the tree constitutes the elect, the Christians. Most scholars prefer the translation that “you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted *in their place*” (v. 17), which further supports a replacement thinking.<sup>106</sup> Jews are identified with those who are hardened, enemies of God, disobedient, (vv. 25, 28, 31), and all the other negative terminologies that Paul uses in Rom 11.

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<sup>100</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 354–55.

<sup>101</sup> Udo Schnelle, *The Human Condition: Anthropology in the Teachings of Jesus, Paul, and John*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 78.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 559–60.

<sup>103</sup> Das, “Traditional Protestant Perspective,” 93–94; Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 126; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 10; cf. Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 102.

<sup>104</sup> Schnelle, *The Human Condition*, 77–78; Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 126; cf. Das, “Traditional Protestant Perspective,” 91–94, 105–06. Among other things, Das here speaks about the gift of justification given to those who have faith in Jesus.

<sup>105</sup> Das, *Paul*, 96. Emphasis original.

<sup>106</sup> Käsemann, *Romans*, 299, 304; Das, *Paul*, 307, 309.

However, in their reading of the end of Rom 11, POJ scholars commonly believe that in the undefined future “the problem of the Jews” will be solved as they, finally, will be justified by faith in Christ. Israel is indeed rejected now, an undefined “all Israel” (v. 26) will in the end of days come to faith in Jesus, “the Deliverer” (v. 27), and hence become Christians.<sup>107</sup> All in all, Christianity is everything good that Judaism is not; it is the dark “Other” as summarized by a PWJ scholar.<sup>108</sup> Paul is outside Judaism.

## Paul And Judaism

The “and” denotes an ambivalence within this perspective regarding Paul’s relationship to Judaism as he seems to be between Judaism and “Christianity.” It is about Paul *and* Judaism, as well as Romans *and* Judaism. Developed as a reaction to the POJ perspective, this approach strives to place Paul back into his Jewish context, although only to a certain extent as the traditional dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity is still much upheld. Yet, groundbreaking at its inception, this perspective is probably the most adhered to Pauline perspective among scholars today, explicitly or implicitly. While its boundaries are fluid, this short presentation focuses on the core ideas in its effort to redefine Paul in relation to Judaism.

The perspective had its origin with the publication of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977) by E. P. Sanders,<sup>109</sup> which transformed Pauline scholarship and offered a new set of assumptions and perspective on Judaism. Sanders suggested that Judaism was not based on works-righteousness, but on “covenantal nomism,” which today is a well-accepted conclusion. Identifying a pattern of religion, Sanders showed that “how to get in” to a covenantal relationship with God occurred through grace, while “how to stay in” was through keeping the Torah. Thus, “they [Jews] do not earn salvation,”<sup>110</sup> salvation is by grace. The law was perceived as a gift, not a yoke, and observance was a response to remaining in God’s covenant. While changing the scholarly view of Judaism, Sanders did not apply his conclusions to Paul, his summary being “in short, *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is*

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<sup>107</sup> Das, *Paul*, 110–11.

<sup>108</sup> Magnus Zetterholm, “The Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” in *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views*, eds. Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 171–93, 174.

<sup>109</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>110</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 543. Emphasis original. Cf. B. J. Oropeza and Scot McKnight, “Paul in Perspective: An Overview of the Landscape More Than Forty Years after *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,” in *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views*, eds. Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 1–23, 1–6.

*not Christianity.*”<sup>111</sup> Paul’s negativity towards the law was not because Judaism was perceived to be legalistic, but because of Paul’s conviction that God only saves through faith in Jesus—in continuity with the dominant idea from the POJ perspective.<sup>112</sup>

Building on Sanders’s conclusions about Judaism, James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright (among others) have been the primary figures upholding the PAJ perspective, affirming that Paul somewhat (i.e., not fully) sustained his Jewishness, at least ethnically. Since Dunn coined the term “the New Perspective” in a famous article from 1983,<sup>113</sup> it has offered invaluable historical and exegetical work on Paul and Judaism. The opening of Rom 11 (v. 1) is read as Paul’s defense of his continued ethnic identity as a Jew, thus recognizing the anachronism in the idea of Paul becoming a Christian before Christianity existed. The reception is centered on Paul’s perceived identification with the remnant (v. 5) as a proof of God’s faithfulness to his Jewish people—at least partly. Being the remnant, they argue, equals having faith in Jesus.<sup>114</sup> What Wright calls a fulfilled Jewish identity,<sup>115</sup> Dunn prefers to regard as “both Israel and Christian”<sup>116</sup>—the terminology of “Christian” is still alive but in less frequent use. Furthermore, Dunn also argues that Paul opposed those who considered the Jesus movement “an extension of Judaism,” suggesting that Paul rather viewed it as something “much larger and much more universal”—hence not Judaism anymore.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Paul *and* Judaism seems a suitable characterization.

In addition to an emphasis on God’s faithfulness, a major characteristic of this perspective is that Jesus, and faith in Jesus, serves as the hermeneutical key. Similar

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<sup>111</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 552. Emphasis original.

<sup>112</sup> Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 47, 519, 550. See more in Oropeza and McKnight, “Paul in Perspective,” 6–11.

<sup>113</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *BJRL* 65:2 (1983): 95–122.

<sup>114</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, vol. 2 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 101, 328, 528, 915; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 531; Heikki Räisänen, “Paul, God, and Israel: Romans 9–11 in Recent Research,” in *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism*, eds. Jacob Neusner, et al., (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 178–206, 186; Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 292–93, 327; Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 238; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Book II, Parts III and IV*, vol. 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 1038, 1199, 1436. Stowers, it should be noted, has many ideas that overlaps with this perspective (and with the PWJ perspective), but might probably be at unease to be defined as a PAJ scholar.

<sup>115</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1472.

<sup>116</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B (Dallas: Word, 1988), 635.

<sup>117</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” in *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views*, eds. Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 133–45, 135.

to the POJ perspective, Paul and his letters are here understood through the lens of Jesus, his death and resurrection; thus, Dunn concludes that Paul broke with law observance after the Christ event, as keeping the law has no effect on being chosen or not.<sup>118</sup> He argues, “Strictly speaking, the law has no role at that point [after Jesus].”<sup>119</sup> Jesus is the goal, the end of the law; only he can save people—not the law. Readings are therefore strongly Jesus-centered.

Paul’s main problem, according to this perspective, is his conviction that the law separates people: “Paul is not anti-legalistic; he is anti-ethnocentric.”<sup>120</sup> Dunn presents a Paul who is opposed to the “xenophobic strand of Judaism, to which Paul himself had previously belonged.”<sup>121</sup> The law is viewed as a privilege for Israel, serving as a boundary marker indicating that “fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership of God’s true covenant people.”<sup>122</sup> PAJ scholars commonly argue that Paul was against this “national righteousness” as he was trying to discover a way to relate to Gentiles who came to faith in the Messiah of Israel. From this point of view, what Paul attacks in terms of the law is the “boundary markers” such as circumcision, food laws, and purity regulations that apply to the Jewish people. Paul, supposedly, went against this exclusivism by proclaiming that only through Jesus can humankind—Jew and Gentile alike—be justified and saved. In light of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, they do not need to become Jews to be saved. Similarly, according to PAJ scholars, faith in Jesus is thought to bring Jews out of this narrow-mindedness resulting from Jewish identity markers into salvation and a new (Christian) identity where (earlier) ethnicity no longer matter.<sup>123</sup>

Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith should not be understood primarily as an exposition of the individual’s relation to God, but primarily in the context of Paul the Jew wrestling with the question of how Jews and Gentiles stand in relation to each other within the covenant purpose of God now that it has reached its climax in Jesus Christ.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “In Search of Common Ground (2001),” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 279–305, 295.

<sup>119</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 153.

<sup>120</sup> Sandnes, *Paul Perceived*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “Paul: Apostate or Apostle of Israel?,” *ZNW* 89 (1998): 256–71, 261.

<sup>122</sup> N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 6.

<sup>123</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1990), 215–41; Dunn, “New Perspective on Paul,” 139; Oropeza and McKnight, “Paul in Perspective,” 7–10.

<sup>124</sup> Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 202.

Election by grace (vv. 5–6) forms the core of Paul’s teaching of justification.<sup>125</sup> Being righteous and justified, Wright argues, is to be recognized as a believing person and part of God’s covenantal family but is also a process that culminates in the end times.<sup>126</sup> While considerable focus is still placed on the individual within this perspective, it also stretches to embrace the *relationship* between Jew and Gentile, and hence how Gentiles could be included in the Messianic community. To the question of belonging—“How is it that Gentiles can be equally acceptable to God as Jews?”<sup>127</sup>—Jesus is the answer. With this dual focus, the scholars of this perspective do not solely engage with Rom 1–8 but also, to some extent, with Rom 9–11. Again, this perspective makes the point that both Jew and Gentile are justified through faith in Jesus. Questions concerning the membership of Gentiles in the covenant are solved by Jesus’s death and resurrection, which widens and transforms the covenant into a more universalistic one in line with Jewish eschatology. Just as Jews saved through Jesus are not obliged to keep the law, neither are Gentiles.

The PAJ perspective has made a significant effort to understand Paul from a more Jewish context, which has partly been motivated by coming to terms with the anti-Jewish elements within the POJ perspective. Yet PWJ scholars have critiqued the PAJ perspective for being too traditional, and for still looking at Paul and Judaism through Christian eyes. Paul reorients election from a destiny centered on ethnicity and peoplehood to a person, Jesus.<sup>128</sup> Jews and Gentiles are alike in this and ethnic categories no longer matter when united in faith. Both groups are redefined into something new, into a redefined Israel shaped around Jesus. Wright explains Paul’s purpose in Rom 9–11 as “the *fresh* reading of scripture, *rethought* around the Messiah, which has issued in a *fresh* understanding of the hope of Israel ... totally unexpected and totally shaped around the Messiah.”<sup>129</sup> In other words, the PAJ

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<sup>125</sup> See for example Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 633, 639–40, 647–48; Susan Eastman, “Israel and Divine Mercy in Galatians and Romans,” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, eds. Florian Wilk and Ross Wagner, WUNT 257 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 147–70, 162; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 660–61; Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 446–47; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1176, 1224–25; cf. Stowers, *Rereading Romans*, 302; John M. G. Barclay, “Unnerving Grace: Approaching Romans 9–11 from The Wisdom of Solomon,” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, eds. Florian Wilk and Ross Wagner, WUNT 257 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 91–109, 107; Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul: Whence, What, Whither?,” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–88, 46–47, 51–52; Räisänen, “Paul, God, and Israel,” 186; Witherington, *Paul’s Letter*, 265–66.

<sup>126</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 960–61; N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 57.

<sup>127</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 340.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 123.

<sup>129</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1256. My emphasis.

perspective, including their reading of Rom 11, can be said to function with three hermeneutical keys: faith in Jesus, God's faithfulness, and verbs beginning with re- (such as reworked and redefined).

Furthermore, the PAJ perspective inhabits a hermeneutical tension between the elect and the rest in Rom 11 that guides its scholars to the conclusion that the Jewish people is between "belief and apostasy, of rejection and restoration."<sup>130</sup> Dunn argues:

Historic Israel has not been denied or rejected.... It may no longer as such be the Israel of God's call. But that statement can be rephrased: it is not yet as such the Israel of God's call.... *He [Paul] could not simply revert to his earlier pre-Christian position—the Israel of God's call as ethnic Israel identified by its law works. But neither would he resolve the issue by totally redefining 'Israel' simply as those who believe in Christ. 'Israel' could not be so completely cut off from its history and still be 'Israel.'* But it is only now that he evidently felt able to begin to fill out the fuller picture—a continuity through a remnant (11.1–6), Israel's stumbling by divine providence, but with a view to a glorious consummation (11.7–16), *the olive tree of Israel with its message of hope for historic Israel and caution for engrafted Israel* (11.17–24), and the final denouement (11.25–32).<sup>131</sup>

Israel is perceived as two "entities" expressed as the divided "I" of Israel: one (now) missing out (ethnic Israel) and one "already experiencing the eschatological grace in Christ through faith" (Jesus-believing Jews).<sup>132</sup> This hints at a redefinition of Israel. The Christological focus is maintained as the divided Israel is explored more fully in the olive tree metaphor, which, from this perspective, gains most attention in Rom 11. PAJ scholars commonly assert that God is behind a (partial) hardening of Israel to save Gentiles through Jesus<sup>133</sup> and that saved Gentiles make it possible for the rest of Israel to be saved in a two-step plan.<sup>134</sup> Reading the olive tree

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<sup>130</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 521; cf. Ross J. Wagner, "'Not from the Jews Only, But Also from the Gentiles': Mercy to the Nations in Romans 9–11," in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, eds. Florian Wilk and Ross Wagner, WUNT 257 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 417–31, 419.

<sup>131</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 511, 519, cf. 514. My emphasis.

<sup>132</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 522; cf. Dunn, "Paul's Conversion – A Light to Twentieth Century Disputes (1997)," in *The New Perspective on Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 341–59, 469; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1229; Eastman, "Israel and Divine Mercy," 162–63; cf. Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, WUNT 29 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 187; Räisänen, "Paul, God, and Israel," 187, 190.

<sup>133</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 519, 523; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 611, 627; Wagner, "Mercy to the Nations," 425; Witherington, *Paul's Letter*, 267; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1208–09, 1229–30; cf. Stowers, *Rereading Romans*, 312–14.

<sup>134</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 547; Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 549, 916; Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 312; Räisänen, "Paul, God, and Israel," 190;

metaphor, most focus is on the broken off Jewish branches, the problem of unfaith and the possibility of their being grafted in again. Less attention is paid to how they interact with the wild branches—the Gentiles. The tree is generally understood to be the elect of Israel, hence suggesting a redefinition or expansion of the concept as the metaphorical tree also holds Gentiles. As noted above, Dunn and Wright argue for the decisiveness of faith in Jesus, both for getting in and staying in, for Jews as well as Gentiles.<sup>135</sup>

Wright asks what has become of the grafted-in Gentiles identity-wise<sup>136</sup>—a relevant question as they seem to be part of Israel, without becoming the only Israel. There is only one tree, renewed but not new, redefined as all those who believe in Jesus. Hence, Gentiles transform their identity to *share* the identity of (eschatological) Israel. Thus, for PAJ scholars, the concept of Israel itself, the people of God, is reworked and “now radically reconfigured around the Messiah.”<sup>137</sup> Compared to the earlier perspective, there is a terminological shift here that aims to downplay the language of replacement while retaining the basic idea. This idea also runs through the last part of Rom 11, which is more eschatological in nature, with the reference “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) being intertwined with the salvation of Gentiles. At the same time, Israel here is defined in several different ways: as meaning only Jews,<sup>138</sup> some Jews,<sup>139</sup> or as also including Gentiles.<sup>140</sup> In Wright’s own words, “‘all Israel’ in verse 26 must reflect that double existence ... so Paul has redefined it to include (1) Messiah-believing Jews ... and (2) Messiah-believing Gentiles.”<sup>141</sup> Additionally, “the gifts and the calling” (v. 29), for PAJ scholars,

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Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1197, 1229–30; cf. Stowers, *Rereading Romans*, 304, 314–15.

<sup>135</sup> Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 916–17; Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 525; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 615; Wagner, “Mercy to the Nations,” 430; Witherington, *Paul’s Letter*, 245, 252–53, 272; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1212, 1214, 1229–30.

<sup>136</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1214–15.

<sup>137</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1214, my emphasis, cf. 1217–19, 1243, 1449; Dunn, “Did Paul have a Covenant Theology? Reflections on Romans 9.4 and 11.27 (2004),” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 423–439, 436; Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 525–26.

<sup>138</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1175, 1240.

<sup>139</sup> See for example Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 917; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1241; Räisänen, “Paul, God, and Israel,” 182: Räisänen takes it even further by writing that “*The majority of Israel ... have never been elected. ... Because the majority of Israel never belonged to the elect, God’s promise is not affected by the unbelief of empirical Israel.*” Emphasis original.

<sup>140</sup> James D. G. Dunn, “A New Perspective on the New Perspective on Paul,” *EC* 4:2 (2013): 157–82, 169; N. T. Wright, “Romans 9–11 and the ‘New Perspective,’” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, eds. Florian Wilk and Ross Wagner, WUNT 257 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 37–54, 51.

<sup>141</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1244–45; cf. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 528.

proves that God is still faithful to the Jewish people *and* that the Gentiles are also embraced by the gifts and calling as they believe in Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>142</sup>

## Paul Within Judaism

### *Introduction to the Perspective and Its Ideology*

Paul is *within* Judaism. This is not the end-point, the conclusion, but rather the point of departure. There is no conflict between Paul and Judaism. Rather, the preference is to address *Paul's Judaism*. Naturally, then, Paul is read from within Judaism such as Romans within Judaism. The perspective has been described by one of its proponents as a paradigm shift in Pauline studies where everything needs to be approached anew.<sup>143</sup> Old boundaries are torn down and replaced by quite different ones. This approach was therefore tagged in its earliest days as “the radical perspective.”<sup>144</sup> Zetterholm and Fredriksen capture, each in their own ways, the essential convictions of this perspective:

The two most fundamental assumptions underlying the Paul within Judaism perspective [are]: first, Paul's continuing Jewish identity, and second, his focus on non-Jews.<sup>145</sup>

Like the biblical prophets whose words he drew on, [i] Paul expected God's kingdom to contain two human populations: Israel *and* the nations.... Why, then, should Paul, or any other apostle who was [ii] a member of this covenant community [Israel], have ceased to live according to the Law?<sup>146</sup>

Bringing these two descriptions together, this reading community asserts Paul's continued Jewishness and his continued Torah observance. Paul is understood as the pagans' apostle; his mission is directed towards the non-Jews alone. He is

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<sup>142</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 40, 524, 529; Wright, “Romans 9–11,” 51–52; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1254; Stowers, *Rereading Romans*, 132.

<sup>143</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “How Later Contexts Affect Pauline Content, or: Retrospect is the Mother of Anachronism,” in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, eds. Peter J. Tomson and Joshua Schwartz, CRINT 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 17–51, 51.

<sup>144</sup> The term “Paul within Judaism” seems now to have settled in as this perspective's official name. Earlier designations to separate this approach from the New Perspective include “The Radical Perspective,” “the Radical New Perspective,” “Beyond the New Perspective,” and “the Post-New Perspective.” See Mark D. Nanos, “Introduction,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1–29, 1.

<sup>145</sup> Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 176.

<sup>146</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 164–65. Emphasis original.

specifically occupied with the “Gentile problem”<sup>147</sup>—of how Gentiles are to be saved and how they are to relate to the Jews after “the Jesus event”—rather than focused on all of humanity. The PWJ perspective is thus highly attentive to issues of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews, between Israel and the Nations,<sup>148</sup> which are thought of as the two parts of humanity. Krister Stendahl, perhaps the most important forerunner to this perspective, has claimed that Paul’s major concern was the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the Christ community—as Jews and Gentiles—as the Jewish Paul was called, not converted, to become an apostle to the Nations.<sup>149</sup> The distinct ethnic identities are always intact, it is argued, in Paul’s thinking. Romans is therefore considered to have its climax in chapters Rom 9–11 where Paul addresses issues of identity and relations between Israel and the Nations. Additionally, Paul also, it is supposed, lived in a state of eschatological urgency with the end times and messianic age coming soon, and very soon.<sup>150</sup> These essential convictions will be discussed more in depth below.

PWJ is the most recent perspective on Paul. While only a decade or two old,<sup>151</sup> with its official formation at the Society for Biblical Literature’s (SBL) annual meeting in 2010,<sup>152</sup> it has received considerable scholarly attention from both

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<sup>147</sup> This is the title of one of the major works within this perspective, see Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>148</sup> I consciously spell “Nations” with a capital “N,” just as I have chosen the spelling “Gentile” instead of “gentile.” Both versions exist in scholarly literature on Paul, but by using the capital spelling versions, I intend to denote an equal relationship between “Israel and the Nations” and “Jew and Gentile,” an issue further discussed later (see Chapter Five).

<sup>149</sup> Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *HTR* 56:3 (1963): 199–215; Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles, and other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 28. Another influential forerunner but more contemporary has been Runar Thorsteinsson with his idea that Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 11 is in fact a non-Jew who calls himself a Jew and thus acts as a self-styled Jew. This plays into the whole discussion of Jewish-non-Jewish relations and non-Jews as Paul’s primary audience. Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*, ConBNT 40 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003). See also for example: Matthew V. Novenson, “The Self-Styled Jew of Romans 2 and the Actual Jews of Romans 9–11,” in *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, eds. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 133–62.

<sup>150</sup> For yet another summary of the PWJ perspective that also argues for these themes to be keys to interpreting Paul, see Kathy Ehrensperger, “Die ‘Paul within Judaism’-Perspektive: Eine Übersicht,” *EvT* 80:6 (2020): 455–64.

<sup>151</sup> Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 193. The earliest publication, however, long before the perspective as such was formulated and defined, is Mark D. Nanos’s monograph on Romans published in 1996. Also, the writings by Stendahl from the 1960s and 1970s have been much important for the formation for this perspective as well as the works by Nils A. Dahl and Johannes Munck.

<sup>152</sup> In 2010, a so-called “planning session” as a “Consultation” was held at the SBL meeting. Drawing an unexpectedly large crowd of people, nearly 200, it was a considered a success. At the 2012 meeting, Nanos and Zetterholm as chairs (with an additional four scholars in the steering

friends and foes as a result of its radical rereadings. In fact, while not belonging to the group himself, Brant Pitre deems this perspective to represent “one of the most significant developments in Pauline scholarship in recent years.”<sup>153</sup> For the purposes of this study, a PWJ scholar is defined as one who either identifies him or herself as holding to this perspective, and/or one who has been confirmed by other scholars as such. With an inner core who all know each other, share a passion, regularly meet at the SBL sessions, and are the PWJ’s outward faces, many others have joined this perspective over the years through their publications. While the outer boundaries might be a bit blurry in terms of whom to include, some of the most prolific contributors are (in alphabetical order with full names):<sup>154</sup> William S. Campbell, Kathy Ehrensperger, Neil Elliott, Pamela Eisenbaum, Paula Fredriksen, Caroline Johnson Hodge, Mark D. Nanos, Matthew V. Novenson, David Rudolph, Anders Runesson, Matthew Thiessen, J. Brian Tucker, and Magnus Zetterholm.<sup>155</sup> There is, thus, a geographical representation that is strongest in the United States but also substantial in Scandinavia. Moreover, naturally, all those who contributed to the anthology *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context of the Apostle* (2015), which functions as a sort of a manifesto for this perspective on Paul, are advocates of this perspective;<sup>156</sup> more are to come. While the number of publications is increasing, the output is still limited compared to earlier perspectives. Most of these scholars, although not all, have written on Romans as it is of major importance to the perspective, especially chapters 9–11. Two recent publications are worth mentioning in this context: J. Brian Tucker has penned the contribution *Reading Romans after Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity* (2018)<sup>157</sup> and Nanos’s collected essays entitled *Reading Romans within Judaism*

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committee) applied to transform the group to a so-called “unit” which by then went under the name “Paul and Judaism,” later changing name to the present “Paul within Judaism,” which in itself indicates a clear development.

<sup>153</sup> Brant Pitre, “Roman Catholic Perspective Response to Zetterholm,” in *Perspectives on Paul: Five Views*, eds. Scot McKnight and B. J. Oropeza (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 194–200, 194.

<sup>154</sup> Some of these scholars wrote studies that promoted the ideas of a PWJ perspective before the perspective as such was formulated. Some have matured over their careers, moving into this field, while others have started from it. Some of these scholars were also accounted as belonging to the PWJ perspective in the Introduction: Oropeza and McKnight, “Paul in Perspective,” 18–19.

<sup>155</sup> See bibliography.

<sup>156</sup> Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015). For a more recent edited volume also proposing the PWJ perspective, see František Ábel, ed. *Israel and the Nations: Paul’s Gospel in the Context of Jewish Expectation* (Lanham: Lexington/FortressAcademic, 2021).

<sup>157</sup> J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity*, NTA S (Eugene: Cascade, 2018).

(2018).<sup>158</sup> Unless a work has been highly influential, such as Nanos's *Mystery of Romans* (1996),<sup>159</sup> I have primarily engaged with a scholar's most recent publication. Eisenbaum has stated, "What we share, is the same basic orientation toward Paul."<sup>160</sup> Having said that, PWJ is a perspective with shared presuppositions and main characteristics, but one in which scholars also have disagreements. It presents a:

*New reading strategy, a post-supersessionist one.* Such an approach would maintain two key ideas: the irrevocability of God's covenant with the Jewish people and a continuing role for Torah as a demarcator of the Jewish people and their identity.<sup>161</sup>

Several of the PWJ scholars argue that their perspective has a clear agenda and mission for contemporary times: a post-supersessionist reading of Paul.<sup>162</sup> This, within this study's theoretical framework, constitutes part of the *textual ideology* and *textual practice* of the scholars (the concepts are discussed in Chapter Three). This would include an emphasis on Paul's continued Jewishness and on the Jewish people as remaining God's covenantal people even after the Christ event, and *not* being replaced by the Church. While there are scholars who claim to be strictly historically motivated in their textual ideology,<sup>163</sup> several share the ideological agenda that (re)claiming a Jewish Paul contributes to combatting anti-Semitism today. The whole scholarly trend of rereading Jesus and Paul within Judaism has, for example, resulted in the series of monographs entitled "New Testament after Supersessionism." Due to the implicit or explicit contribution of Christian anti-Judaism to the atrocities of the Shoah, many of the scholars contributing to the series claim that neutrality is impossible; earlier Pauline scholarship is criticized as having been highly influenced—and negatively so—by Christian (especially Lutheran)

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<sup>158</sup> Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 2* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018). In the case of references when it comes to Nanos's collected essays, I have consciously chosen not to reference all possible articles in the volume that argue the same thing as most ideas run throughout many of them. I simply refer to one or two where the argument is the clearest.

<sup>159</sup> Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

<sup>160</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 250; cf. Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 176.

<sup>161</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 1. See the whole introduction for a more thorough discussion, 1–27. My emphasis.

<sup>162</sup> The number of references could here be indefinite; see for example Nanos, "Introduction," 1–11; "I suggest that all of these chapters (9–11) can be understood by Christians to reflect generous attitudes toward Jews and Judaism when viewed from the first century perspective of the apostle Paul.;" Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 245.

<sup>163</sup> Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 176; Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, ix–xi.

normative theology.<sup>164</sup> While correct to my mind, PWJ scholars are generally as ideological but in the opposite direction: reading from a PWJ perspective rather creates a pro-Jewish theology, in contrast to an anti-Jewish theology.<sup>165</sup>

From a textual view, Paul's opening question in Rom 11 as to whether God has rejected his people, and the strong rebuttal, "by no means!" (v. 1) constitutes the very premise for PWJ scholars; "Israel's status as chosen by God is an absolutely unshakable fact."<sup>166</sup> The notion of God rejecting his people is a totally foreign idea to scholars belonging to this perspective. The total rejection of any suggestion that God could have rejected his people, although not always commented much upon, therefore forms the basis for the continuing reception of Rom 11.<sup>167</sup>

Furthermore, a Jewish Paul and a post-supersessionist theology are perceived as enhancing and promoting contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. As several of the scholars—Jews, Christians, and atheists, male and female—are themselves engaged in contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue from either a Jewish or a Christian perspective, there is an ideological connection between the perspective and dialogue. Several forewords and acknowledgements personally reflect that modern anti-Semitism and contemporary Jewish-Christian relations were a driving force for the accompanying study, or at least, a positive outcome of it. While examples are numerous,<sup>168</sup> let us stay with Nanos who argues that "changes are in the making for interpreters of Paul's voice, and perhaps nowhere is that more

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<sup>164</sup> E.g., Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 171–76.

<sup>165</sup> It has become increasingly popular within biblical studies to position oneself as a scholar. To be transparent about one's own social situatedness and positionality has actually been the custom in ethnographic research and alike for decades. Therefore, and as I discuss my positionality in relation to Messianic Judaism and the Bible-reading interviews (see Chapter Three), it is appropriate also to position myself in relationship to the scholarly trajectories discussed in this study. I mostly sympathize with the PWJ perspective in its attempts to read Paul fully within Judaism, and claim Paul as remaining fully Torah-observant even after "the Jesus event," in understanding Paul as speaking of humanity as consisting of two parts—Jews and non-Jews—and, finally, Paul's perceived urgency due to imminent arrival of the *eschaton*. However, and this is for me an important question and critique of the PWJ perspective, I do think that Jesus as Israel's Messiah played a more crucial and central role for Paul than the PWJ perspective seems to think (even though, I am well aware, there are different opinions on this). Having said that, I do not consider there to be an intrinsic value for Messianic Jews to read Paul as these scholars do.

<sup>166</sup> John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136; cf. Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 131, 150, 172.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 136.

<sup>168</sup> See for example; Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews*, 211–12; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 245; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 151–53; Kathy Ehrensperger, "Searching Paul," in *Searching Paul: Conversations with the Jewish Apostle to the Nations, Collected Essays.*, ed. Kathy Ehrensperger, WUNT 429 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 3–18, 3–5; cf. Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 176.

evident—and important—than in the area of Jewish-Christian relations.”<sup>169</sup> In fact, his collection of articles, *Reading Romans within Judaism*,<sup>170</sup> has a whole section dedicated to exactly this enterprise, entitled, “A New Exegetical Approach to Romans 9–11 and Christian-Jewish Relations.” This, indeed, is a contemporary ideological concern with using Paul.

While Jewish-Christian relations affirm the “rediscovery” of the Jewish roots of Christianity, contemporary dialogue is built upon the sharp distinction between the two faith systems in their developed forms of rabbinic Judaism and Gentile Christianity. David Novak, a prominent Jewish theologian active in dialogue circles, argues for this strict boundary by claiming, “The ultimate truth claims of Judaism and Christianity are not only different but mutually exclusive.... One cannot live as a Jew and a Christian simultaneously.”<sup>171</sup> Messianic Jews blur this boundary line by being perceived as being both-and—“the dangerous ones in between.”<sup>172</sup>

PWJ scholars seem to have a dual approach to Messianic Jews. Some, largely due to contemporary dialogue, perceive the group with skepticism. One of the scholars referred to them as “those nutty Messianic Jews” and as “crazies” in a personal conversation during a conference.<sup>173</sup> The other strand, probably the majority, rather perceives the group with fascination as their scholarly work is much appreciated<sup>174</sup> and, as mentioned above, more and more settings are coming into existence where these two communities meet and collaborate. Also worth mentioning is the aforementioned Rudolph who is a well-respected PWJ scholar and a Messianic Jew and therefore bridges the two settings. Several PWJ scholars are also actively involved in educational enterprises of common interest in the intersection of Jewish/Christian/Messianic relations.

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<sup>169</sup> Mark D. Nanos, “Introduction,” *Biblical Interpretation* 13:3 (2005): 221–23, 221; cf. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 4.

<sup>170</sup> Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism*.

<sup>171</sup> David Novak, *Talking with Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian*, RT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 6.

<sup>172</sup> John G. Gager, “Jews, Christians and the Dangerous Ones in Between,” in *Interpretation in Religion*, eds. Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein, PhilRel (New York: Brill, 1992), 249–57, 253.

<sup>173</sup> Personal conversation, November 2018.

<sup>174</sup> See, for example, Tucker, whose book on Romans was referred to above. Apart from mentioning and thanking many PWJ colleagues, he thanks Kinzer, and especially Rudolph (both Messianic Jews) by stating in the acknowledgement, “I want to thank Dr David Rudolph particularly since his continued efforts to clarify, revise, substantiate, and reconsider parts of this book have made it much better than it would have been otherwise, though I realize I am responsible for all the shortcomings that remain.” See also Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, XII, p. 245, where he states in his conclusion that “messianic Judaism should be seen as a necessary and needed pattern of life within the contemporary ecclesial context.”

Related to the core ideas of the perspective of a Jewish Paul and a post-supersessionist reading is the focus on the politics of terminology.<sup>175</sup> Terms have been asked to retire, to borrow an expression from Fredriksen,<sup>176</sup> based on the contention that much of the language used in Pauline studies is loaded with (Christian) ideological perspectives that contort historical research into false conclusions. This results in a misleading, degrading picture of Judaism. Thus, to give but a few examples, conversion language, oppositional pairs in a Lutheran sense (i.e., grace versus works), and anachronistic terms such as “church” and “Christianity” during the first century (or centuries) have been deconstructed and abandoned. Despising designations such as “Christian,” alternative terms that are also, it is argued, more historically accurate are used, such as “Jesus-believing Jews” and “non-Jews.” Moreover, scholars adhering to this perspective consider the *context* as, or more, important than the texts themselves: the Jewish context is required to rightly understand Paul’s Jewish texts.<sup>177</sup>

### *Characteristics and Readings: Identity, Relations, and Time*

Paul’s identity and mission are constructed as being “firmly, completely, and comfortably *within* Judaism.”<sup>178</sup> For PWJ scholars, Paul’s Jewish identity inhabits two components: *ethnicity* and *practicality*—*kata sarka* and *kata pneuma*.<sup>179</sup> Here Romans plays a crucial role (v. 1, the use of present tense “am”) in arguing for Paul’s maintained Jewish identity even after he became a Christ-follower, when his belief in the Messiah *added* something to his Jewish identity.<sup>180</sup> Entitling her study,

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<sup>175</sup> Anders Runesson, “The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions on Paul,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 53–77.

<sup>176</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Mandatory Retirement: Ideas in the Study of Christian Origins whose Time has Come To Go,” *SR* 35:2 (2006): 231–46.

<sup>177</sup> Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 172–73.

<sup>178</sup> Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 175. My emphasis. The PWJ perspective has also done some valuable work in discussing what Jewish identity actually implied, as well as the different terminologies used in ancient documents (see above section as well), and translation issues concerning Paul, including whether the Greek term *Ioudaios* should be translated as “Judean” (geographical implication) or “Jew” (ethnonym). For a further discussion on these terminological and identity-related questions, see Matthew V. Novenson, “*Ioudaios*, Pharisee, Zealot,” in *Handbook to the Historical Paul*, eds. Heidi Wendt and Ryan Schellenberg (London: T&T Clark, 2021), forthcoming.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. Pamela Eisenbaum, “Paul, Polemics, and the Problem of Essentialism,” *BibInt* 13:3 (2005): 224–38, esp. 227–28.

<sup>180</sup> See for example Thiessen, *Paul*, 4. By referring to himself as such, Thiessen argues, Paul consciously rejects ideas about an ethnicity-free gospel, or a gospel where Jewish believers are “lifted away and out” from their Jewish identity; cf. Nanos, *Mystery*, 9; William S. Campbell, *The Nations in the Divine Economy: Paul’s Covenantal Hermeneutics and Participation in Christ* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018), 63–64; Tucker, *Reading Romans after*

*Paul Was Not a Christian* (2009), Eisenbaum’s declaration captures what is at core at this perspective’s way of discussing Paul’s identity. Or, put the other way around, “Paul the Judaizer” would be a heading that captures and frames this paradigm. Paul, bottom-line, continued to be a *Jewish Jew for Judaism*—in a Messianic shape. Paul therefore strongly represents a part of the faithful remnant (v. 5), which signifies “an Israel *within* Israel, an elect core *within* the elect nation,”<sup>181</sup> making it impossible for God to have rejected historic Israel.

Fundamental to this perspective is that after the “Christ event” Paul continued to practice Judaism, that is, observe the Torah. Scholars in this approach use the terminology “Torah” to highlight its broad and positive aspects, criticizing the negative connotations that “law” has in previous approaches. Zetterholm has phrased it as “Paul Was Jewish, Thus Torah-Observant.”<sup>182</sup> Constructing a Paul within Judaism, for these scholars, necessarily also implies a Paul who continued to follow the Torah and live a Jewish life.<sup>183</sup> Nothing in how he viewed the Torah has supposedly changed. Torah observance is positively valued; it is an irrevocable, covenantal gift from God to his people Israel. While these scholars are aware of the complexities concerning observance (that it implied different things to different groups),<sup>184</sup> they are convinced that observing Torah *and* believing in the Messiah of Israel were fully compatible, according to Paul. *Jewish* Jesus-followers, according to this perspective, are thus supposed to by Paul to continue to observe the Torah. Indeed, there is no dichotomy between the two, “On the Contrary, We Uphold the Law!”<sup>185</sup> Nanos summarizes this idea well:

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*Supersessionism*, 117–19; “Paul’s belief in Jesus did not make him less Jewish.” Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 8; Eisenbaum, “Problem of Essentialism.”

<sup>181</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 131, see also 174–76. Emphasis original. Tucker here quotes the Messianic Jewish theologian Mark S. Kinzer, which further highlights the connection between Messianic Judaism and PWJ scholars. See Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 124–25. See also, for example, Campbell, *The Nations*, 205–11.

<sup>182</sup> Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 176. The statement serves as a heading.

<sup>183</sup> Similarly, Thiessen formulates it as “according to many Jews, Jewishness consisted of proper descent *and* proper ritual observance.” Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 143. Nanos makes a similar claim when he states that Judaism has two fundamental pillars, acknowledging the election of Israel and being faithful to the Torah. Nanos, *Mystery*, 6; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 4, 13–14, 85–114.

<sup>184</sup> See for example Karin Hedner Zetterholm, “The Question of Assumptions: Torah Observance in the First Century,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 79–103.

<sup>185</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 208–39 (the quote is the heading of the chapter); Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 94–130; the idea of a fully Torah-observant Paul is also the major argument throughout the monograph by David Rudolph.

This study finds the Paul behind the text of Romans to be a practicing Jew—“a good Jew”—albeit a Jew shaped by his conviction in Jesus as Israel’s Christ, who did not break with the essential truths of the Judaism(s) of his day, who was committed to the restoration of his people as his first and foremost responsibility in the tradition of Israel’s Deuteronomic prophets.... He asserted that the Torah was God’s gift to Israel, his covenant people. Jews observe Torah in responses to God’s mercy. It is a privileged obligation.<sup>186</sup>

Paul’s continued Torah observance is built upon a general understanding of faithful Jewishness, together with an emphasis on Pauline letters and Acts (e.g., Acts 21) where Paul outspokenly practices the Torah and defends Jewish customs. PWJ scholars make a conscious hermeneutical choice by privileging Paul’s pro-Jewish and pro-Torah statements to read (seemingly) negative statements in the light of the positive ones.

For PWJ scholars, another important assumption is that non-Jews are the assumed recipients of Paul’s letters, rather than a universal audience (v. 13). As the pagans’ apostle, the fate of Israel (v. 11) nonetheless motivates Paul’s mission.<sup>187</sup> Paul’s writings must be understood from within a Jewish context where the “you” in the text of Romans is referring to non-Jews. Paul’s negative statements about the Torah are directed towards non-Jews who thought that they had to become like Jews to be saved. The Torah belongs to the Jewish people alone. Non-Jews are to relate to God as non-Jews, with respect for their Jewish family, and live a Jewish-informed life as non-Jews as stipulated in the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15).<sup>188</sup> The PWJ perspective does not see Paul as introducing a dichotomy between faith and works (v. 6), as has been asserted by other scholarly perspectives.

Readings are *God-centered*, not Jesus-centered. God is the one who makes Jews and Gentiles righteous through faithfulness.<sup>189</sup> Jesus, his death and resurrection as well as faith in him, on the other hand, has a rather marginal position. Compared to earlier perspectives, Jesus does not function as a hermeneutical key for PWJ

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<sup>186</sup> Nanos, *Mystery*, 9.

<sup>187</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 122, 155–56; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 217; Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 187–93; Mark D. Nanos, “The Letter of Paul to the Romans,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 253–86, 553–54; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 121; Mark D. Nanos, ““Broken Branches”: A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11–24),” in *Reading Romans within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 2*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Eugene: Cascade, 2018), 112–52, 121; Campbell, *The Nations*, 109–12; Ehrensperger, “Die ‘Paul within Judaism’-Perspektive,” 459–61.

<sup>188</sup> Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 147. Admittedly, Thiessen reaches this conclusion in his study on Luke but he himself relate this to a broader picture; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 94–130, esp. 100, 107–09; Nanos, *Mystery*, 369.

<sup>189</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 139.

scholars but rather lurks in the background.<sup>190</sup> At the same time, where Jesus does play a decisive role, according to these scholars, is for the non-Jews. Paul as the pagans' apostle is occupied with the "Gentile problem," also the title of Thiessen's study of how the Nations are to be saved.<sup>191</sup> Paul finds the solution in Jesus, who functions as the way or the instrument to turn the Nations to the God of Israel.<sup>192</sup>

The Nations need Christ. But do the people of Israel? PWJ scholars are divided on this point. Most scholars would say that Christ is needed for the *redemption* of the Jews as well, and that Israel will recognize him as the eschatological Davidic Messiah, but this is not considered an especially prominent topic as the focus in the perspective primarily is on the non-Jews. Eventually, Paul is thought to have believed that one day the Jews would "turn" (not convert) to Christ as well.<sup>193</sup> The turning terminology acknowledges a continued affirmation of Jewish identity in contrast to conversion thinking. However, a small but outspoken minority of scholars, such as Eisenbaum<sup>194</sup> and the within-related John Gager<sup>195</sup> and Lloyd Gaston,<sup>196</sup> argue that Paul proclaimed a dual path to salvation: Torah for the Jews and Jesus for the non-Jews. These ideas, and even more so the lack of a hermeneutical focus on Christ, clearly mark out this perspective in relation to the others.

A fundamental assumption and much discussed topic among PWJ scholars is that Paul was focused on the relationship between Jew and non-Jew and, hence, that ethnic identities remained intact and separate in Christ. While the notion is detested in earlier perspectives, *ethnicity* here is vital to understanding the perspective, and constitutes the very center of Johnson Hodge's monograph *If Sons, Then Heirs* (2007).<sup>197</sup> Discussions are not so much concentrated on individual and personal

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<sup>190</sup> Cf. Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 188.

<sup>191</sup> Thiessen, *Paul*, see esp. 44–46 for a discussion on Gentiles as the prime audience; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 9–11; Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 187; Nanos, *Mystery*, 83; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 18–19, 87.

<sup>192</sup> See for example Nanos, *Mystery*, 9.

<sup>193</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 75–76. This issue is directly addressed in Paula Fredriksen, "'Circumcision is Nothing': A Non-Reformation Reading of the Letters of Paul," in *Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism and Anti-Judaism*, eds. Hindy Najman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2021 (forthcoming)).

<sup>194</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255.

<sup>195</sup> Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 142, 146.

<sup>196</sup> Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), esp. 79, 115, 147–48.

<sup>197</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*.

salvation, but on the collective(s),<sup>198</sup> with Paul picturing Jews and non-Jews as having an interrelated dependence that pushes Rom 11 forward.<sup>199</sup> “Israel *and* the Nations”<sup>200</sup> echoes throughout the readings, and ethnic constructions remain oppositional: Jews remain Jews, and non-Jews remain non-Jews.<sup>201</sup> In contrast to earlier perspectives, “the Jesus event” neither redefines who Israel is nor erases ethnic identities. The Nations do not need to become Jews to be saved by Israel’s Messiah, nor does anyone change identity to become “Christian.” As the covenant was made between the God of Israel and the Jewish people, the question is if and how non-Jews can be made part of this. Nanos, for example, argued that as God is the God of all and not only of the Jews, non-Jews need to remain non-Jews when they come to the God of Israel, an idea further developed by Thiessen in *Contesting Conversion*. Thiessen argues that Paul did not believe that non-Jews could become Jews.<sup>202</sup> Instead, remaining Jews and non-Jews are expressions of their different callings to the God of Israel. Jews are therefore redeemed as Jews, and non-Jews are saved as non-Jews. “Thus, Jews continue to relate to the God of Israel *as* Jews, and non-Jews *as non-Jews*.... They do not become Israel; they remain the ‘from-the-nations-other-than-Israel seed of Abraham.’”<sup>203</sup>

The *adoption* of the gentiles incorporates a new people *into* an already existing kin group. The gentiles become *like sons* in the household, *not to replace* those who are there, but *to share the inheritance* with them. Paul builds upon a tradition that expects gentiles to be reconciled to the God of Israel in the transition to the new age.<sup>204</sup>

Traditional Christian terms are nowhere to be seen; instead, family terminology is dominant. Adoption equals being part of the promises, of the inheritance. Out of this comes a preference for “in-language” such as “in Christ” and “participating in Christ,” to refer to those from the Nations. Non-Jews then, due to the promises made to Abraham and through Jesus as the Messiah, are brought into a (Jewish) covenantal relationship with the God of Israel. In other words, the Nations become *partakers* in Israel’s promises. Non-Jewish Jesus-followers do not become Israel.

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<sup>198</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 252–56; Thiessen, *Paul*, 7; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 3, 13, 24, 150–52.

<sup>199</sup> Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 136.

<sup>200</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 8–31; cf. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 128.

<sup>201</sup> E.g., Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*; Nanos, *Mystery*, 9.

<sup>202</sup> Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*; Nanos, *Mystery*, 9; see also Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255.

<sup>203</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 24, 80.

<sup>204</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 77. My emphasis.

Fredriksen argues that the Nations “join with” Israel.<sup>205</sup> The merciful Jewish God has prepared a way for the Nations to come to the God of Israel through Jesus’s faithfulness. God has never rejected the people of Israel, quite the opposite, and is now offering a way into the covenantal community for the rest of the world—*along with Israel*. Focusing on the importance of ethnicity, Johnson Hodge argues that the non-Jews become part of the people of the God of Israel by being adopted as Abraham’s sons and thus descendants through baptism, a transformation made possible by the work of the Spirit.<sup>206</sup> Most PWJ scholars probably view the matter in a way similar to Tucker, as “one covenant with multiple blessings,”<sup>207</sup> wherein non-Jews have been honored to partake in Jewish covenantal identity. So, rather than suggesting that Jewish Jesus-believers undergo the transformation of becoming “Christians,” non-Jews have this “partaking” of Israel *added* to their non-Jewish identity.<sup>208</sup>

When reading Rom 11, and especially the olive tree metaphor, the general characteristics are reverberated and reflected. Much appreciated by adherents of this perspective, the core of Paul’s thinking is perceived as drawn together in the image: *it is all about the relationship between the two, and about telling the non-Jews that they have not replaced the Jews but are dependent upon them.*<sup>209</sup> The metaphor proclaims Paul’s vision of distinct, intact ethnicities: Jews, whether broken off or still on the tree, are part of God’s people Israel, and the grafted wild olive branches are still wild, that is, non-Jewish even as they are Jesus-believers (v. 17).<sup>210</sup> As partakers they are still possible to distinguish.<sup>211</sup> The tree contains different branches, just as the Jesus-believing community consists of two groups.<sup>212</sup> There is unity within diversity with a continuous turning and inclusion of non-Jews that become Gentiles-in-Christ.<sup>213</sup> “The Turning of the Nations,” also a heading in

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<sup>205</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 75, 151, see also Campbell, *The Nations*, e.g., 273–75, 316; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255–56.

<sup>206</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, esp. 76–77, but the argument runs throughout the whole book; see also Thiessen, *Paul*, 108–15. Abraham as a figure also plays a fundamental role throughout Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*.

<sup>207</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 11–12.

<sup>208</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 151.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. Nanos, *Mystery*, 101–02.

<sup>210</sup> Thiessen, *Paul*, 118, cf. the heading, “Gentiles as Wild Olive Branches.”

<sup>211</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 103–04, 145; Thiessen, *Paul*, 118–22.

<sup>212</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 254–55.

<sup>213</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 177.

<sup>213</sup> Caroline Johnson Hodge, “The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles—but also Not—in Pauline Communities,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 153–73, 169–73; Paula

Fredriksen’s study, involves a denial of other, lower gods,<sup>214</sup> but their having faith in Jesus, and faith as such, is not central in PWJ readings (vv. 17, 20). While it is not always clear to whom the faith refers, Jesus and the Spirit are the tools that join the Nations with Israel and the sign indicating that soon the whole world will be God’s.<sup>215</sup> Concerning the status of the Nations, the perspective makes it clear that they are dependent on the tree to be part of the game, so to speak, with Johnson Hodge concluding in a rather hierarchical manner that “the Jews claim their link to Abraham by birth (and God’s promises) and the gentiles by adoption (and God’s promises).”<sup>216</sup> Thus, PWJ scholars place considerable emphasis on affirming Paul’s warning to the non-Jews against boasting of being superior to the Jews (vv. 18, 20, 25–26).

As argued above, PWJ scholars offer readings of the metaphor that support a mutual dependence between Jews and non-Jews for God’s plan with humankind to evolve. One strategy is the emphasis that only *some* branches (*partiality*) are broken off as a *temporal* status reflecting a divine plan.<sup>217</sup> The Nations are to understand that they are one, not the only, member of God’s family. The ultimate goal and argument among PWJ scholars are that Israel has not been rejected, thus erasing all sorts of supersessionist readings.

The element of time is yet another hermeneutical key for PWJ scholars and their readings of Rom 11. They present a Paul who understands himself to be living in a time of *eschatological urgency*, with the end around the corner. “It’s the End of the World as We Know It.”<sup>218</sup> Failure to acknowledge Paul’s Jewish eschatology—and thereby supposed lack of time—has, it is argued, caused much of the anti-Judaism present in New Testament scholarship.<sup>219</sup> Capturing this major idea, Fredriksen opens her monograph with this and returns to the topic later in her study:

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Fredriksen, “The Question of Worship: Gods, Pagans, and the Redemption of Israel,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 175–201, 187–88; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 151.

<sup>214</sup> Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 187–88.

<sup>215</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 139; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 148, 150–51; Nanos, ““Broken Branches.””

<sup>216</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 146–47, or the whole of 142–49; cf. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 172–73; Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 112.

<sup>217</sup> Mark D. Nanos, ““Broken Branches,”” esp. 126–35; Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 277; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 151, 178–79; Magnus Zetterholm, “Paul and the Missing Messiah,” in *The Messiah: In Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 33–55, 54–55.

<sup>218</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 250–55. The phrase itself is the heading.

<sup>219</sup> Fredriksen, ““Circumcision is Nothing,”” forthcoming.

The Kingdom of God, Paul proclaimed, was at hand. His firm belief that he lived and worked in history's final hour is absolutely foundational, shaping everything else that Paul says and does.... *Now*, he proclaims; *soon*. It is to this question, finally—the drive wheel of this study—that we now turn. Whence Paul's urgency? Why, on its account, does he focus his attention so acutely on gentiles? And what do the gentiles have to do with the redemption of “all Israel” (Rom 11.26)?... The cosmic caesura between Christ's resurrection and his second coming went on and on, one day at a time, inexplicably continuing to continue.... Where is the Kingdom? Why is it late?<sup>220</sup>

Reading Paul's letters as the product of someone who expects the *eschaton* at any moment, it is not a conflict of “who is in and who is out,” but “who is in *now*, and who is destined to be in *soon*.”<sup>221</sup> This process of stages in Rom 11 is emphasized by PWJ scholars. On the one hand, the Gentiles are the problem, but on the other, the development in the text runs from Paul's opening question “Has God rejected his people?” (v. 1) to his exclamation “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26)—from partiality with the remnant to wholeness with all Israel.

PWJ scholars hold that rather than answering the individualistic question, “How can I be saved?” Paul instead responds to the collective, “How will the world be redeemed, and how do I faithfully participate in this redemption?”<sup>222</sup> As one of the prophetic traditions of Israel has long taught, the Nations will be *ingathered* at the end of times. As non-Jews now turn to the God of Israel, the wrapping up of times is at hand. From these eschatological Gentiles, the reconciliation between Jews and non-Jews will come, and is coming forth.<sup>223</sup> This last section of Rom 11 is thus understood to be addressing “the restoration of Israel *and* salvation of the nations,”<sup>224</sup> again displaying an interdependent relationship for the future of both groups (also in vv. 28–32). “Thus God has chosen Israel, God's *first* people, as the means through which to bring in the gentiles, God's new (*additional*) people.... Gentile reconciliation through Christ serves this larger goal [the redemption of Israel].”<sup>225</sup> This is what Paul experienced, PWJ scholars argue.

The end of Rom 11 is something of a summary and conclusion, making earlier statements even clearer, according to the PWJ perspective. Highlighting the intertwined fate of Israel and the Nations, “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” (v. 25) is once again understood with a focus on its temporality and partiality. The

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<sup>220</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, xi, 130, 145, 155. Emphasis original.

<sup>221</sup> Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of the Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of the Empire*, PCC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 115. Emphasis original.

<sup>222</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 252.

<sup>223</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 73–77; Nanos, *Mystery*, 8.

<sup>224</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 277–78. My emphasis.

<sup>225</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 147. My emphasis.

“now” negative situation for Israel will turn into a positive one as they still are “beloved, for the sake of the ancestors” (v. 28) as Israel’s covenantal identity remains unchanged.<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, PWJ scholars emphasize that the stumbling of Israel is God-controlled, used as a tool to enable the non-Jews to join with Israel and become siblings.<sup>227</sup> Paul, it is thought, considered himself working for and living in the stage of the end times when “the full number of the Gentiles has [to] come in” (v. 25).

The salvation of the Gentiles through Jesus is the necessary step for the following stage of “and so all Israel will be saved” (v. 26). Then the Kingdom of God will arrive.<sup>228</sup> PWJ scholars never doubt who Paul thought Israel is: Israel is Israel, no matter what. It is the Jews, the ethnic historic Israel *only* and *always*. Israel is defined through “*genealogy and promise intertwined*.”<sup>229</sup> It is an extremely important point for the perspective that Israel is never redefined or enlarged, there is never a “new” or a “true” Israel consisting of non-Jews, which promotes a post-supersessionist understanding. The perspective is more focused on salvation, or redemption, as a fact in accord with God’s plan, rather than how it will occur. Furthermore, readings within Judaism generally prefer to discuss Israel’s “redemption” (or similar concepts such as “restored,” “protected,” “healed”<sup>230</sup>), rather than (personal) “salvation” in line with the general ideology of the approach. “With all Israel regathered through the message of the messiah, the Kingdom could, finally, come (cf. Rom 11.26).”<sup>231</sup>

Paul’s proclamation that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29) is particularly important for PWJ scholars as this perceived crescendo works as one of the strongest arguments against a supersessionist reading of Paul. Much focus is put on the word “irrevocable” to argue that the covenantal identity of the people of

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<sup>226</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 32.

<sup>227</sup> Nanos, *Mystery*, 292.

<sup>228</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 149–52, 236; Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 199. Kingdom-terminology is much used by Fredriksen in her monograph on Paul. It should, however, be noted that this language is not typically Pauline, but rather reminiscent to what we find in the Gospels.

<sup>229</sup> Campbell, *The Nations*, 230, cf. 231–33. Emphasis original. See also, for example, Nanos, ““The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Romans 11:29): If So, How Can Paul Declare that “Not All Israelites Truly Belong to Israel” (9:6)?,” in *Reading Romans within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 2*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 214–34, 216–18; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 161; Fredriksen, ““Circumcision is Nothing,”” forthcoming; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 12, 32, 63.

<sup>230</sup> Nanos, ““Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable,”” 218; Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 278. The term “restoration” carries, for this approach, especially important references to the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>231</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 105.

Israel as God's people is intact.<sup>232</sup> All Israel will be saved, because God's promises are irrevocable.<sup>233</sup>

To sum up, scholarship has constructed Paul in different ways, with the words “outside,” “and,” and “within” capturing what is at stake in the different perspectives. Pointing out a few important themes for this study, the pendulum in scholarship can be said to have swung between several poles. (i) Paul left Judaism and the law is obsolete *to* Paul stayed within Judaism and continued to observe the Torah. (ii) Israel is (re)defined as those who believe in Jesus *to* it continues to always be only the Jewish people. (iii) The Jew and the Gentile become Christians, the Church, when they are saved by faith in Jesus *to* the ethnic identities of Jews and Gentiles remain intact even when joined together in God's family. (iv) The end times are something distant or not discussed *to* something urgent in the “here and now.” (v) Readings are Jesus-centered *to* God-centered. Viewed from a PWJ perspective, all this leads to an understanding of Romans as going (vi) from a supersessionist reading *to* a post-supersessionist reading where Israel, the Jewish people, is not cast away by God.

## Bringing It Together and Finding a Pattern for the Study

### Identity and Torah, Relations and Yeshua, Time and Land

The Messianic Jewish theologian and PWJ scholar Rudolph writes that “the rumours about him [Paul] are false.”<sup>234</sup> The rumors, to adopt this terminology, are many. The most central rumor for this study is the rumor that Messianic Jews would understand Paul as the PWJ scholars do. Rudolph himself refers to Paul as a Messianic Jew, a Jew who believe in Jesus as the Messiah, which further strengthens this rumor. Rudolph also presents Paul as someone who views the surrounding world and Jewish-non-Jewish relationships in a similar way as proclaimed by the PWJ perspective. This study, again, aims to seek out the validity in this rumor.

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<sup>232</sup> E.g., Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 12, 32, 128–29; Nanos, ““Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable”,” 215; Nanos, *Mystery*, 183; Kathy Ehrensperger, “The Question(s) of Gender: Relocating Paul in Relation to Judaism,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 245–76, 273–74.

<sup>233</sup> Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 195–97.

<sup>234</sup> Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 23.

There are also other rumors going around. The sections on scholarship above present different understandings of Paul and Rom 11. Of these, some scholarly “rumors” about Paul are probably historically accurate, whereas other constructions are just plain wrong. Rudolph refers to false rumors about Paul in the setting of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) where the hot topic is the debated need for Torah observance (more specifically, for non-Jews)—a central question within scholarly approaches to the historical Paul *and* also within the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement.

Three dominant themes are prominent in scholarly constructions of Paul and readings of Rom 11, especially so within the PWJ perspective: *identity*, *relations*, and *time*. In the exposition of Messianic Judaism based on emic voices and previous studies, identity and relationship questions proved to be central as well. These themes together with *time* are also very significant in the Bible-reading interviews. For Messianic Jews, the question of Paul’s identity and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles is much more than solely an academic exercise, albeit important; it is also about who they are, and their relationships with neighboring communities of Jews and Christians. The Bible, perceived as “the living Word of God,” bridges the gap between Paul’s and their own time.

I was standing on a hilltop in the Judean desert with a house group of Messianic Jews when one of the women, Yehudit, enthusiastically exclaimed, “Our Trinity is the *Torah*, *Yeshua*, and the *Land!*”<sup>235</sup> And thus, the structure of the empirical chapters was born. The “trinitarian structure” of the Torah, Yeshua, and the Land are also principal topics in the Bible-reading interviews, which I have paired with the above themes of identity, relations, and time. *Identity and Torah*, *Relations and Yeshua*, and finally *Time and Land* are all outstanding analytical categories for exploring how Messianic Jews relate to the PWJ perspective when it comes to constructing Paul and reading Rom 11.

The thesis is divided into two major parts. Part I “Frameworks for the Readings,” consists of three chapters that each in its own way lays the groundwork for the empirical material. This chapter, Chapter One, has presented the task at hand, namely, to explore Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 in relation to scholarly understandings, especially from the PWJ perspective in terms of similarities and dissimilarities. This chapter has (a) situated the study by noting a relationship between Messianic Judaism and the PWJ perspective; (b) described the what (aim) and how (method and theory) of the study; (c) explored the scholarly field of Messianic Judaism and the Bible; and finally (d) established the interpretative framework of Pauline scholarship, especially that of PWJ, thus answering the first sub-question of the study.

Chapter Two depicts the landscape of Messianic Judaism, paying special attention to issues of identity negotiations. After vignettes from Jerusalem, I explore

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<sup>235</sup> Personal conversation, October 2019. Yehudit is a pseudonym. My emphasis.

the historical development and formation of the movement internationally and in Israel. Thereafter, the diversity, characteristics, and differing expressions of Messianic Judaism are discussed, with the aim of presenting the movement.

Chapter Three discusses methodological and theoretical considerations. Herein I develop my theoretical perspectives of so-called empirical reception studies and the “social life of scriptures” approach—with a particular focus on the analytical concepts “textual ideology” and “textual practice”—in order to work with, and analyze, Bible-reading interviews. Interview methodology is presented, followed by fieldwork description, and reflection on my own positionality.

Part II “The Readings in Context” entails three separate chapters in which the Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 are analyzed. This answers the second sub-question. Throughout these empirical chapters, I maintain a conversation with the reading community of the PWJ scholars to point out similarities and dissimilarities between the readings and constructions of Paul. Each chapter follows the loose structure of beginning with a discussion on how Rom 11 as such is read and understood, and ending with discussions of how the text is made alive and relevant today for the participants.

Chapter Four, “Identity and Torah,” explores how the Messianic Jewish readers engage with the first part of Rom 11 (vv. 1–12). It is divided into three parts: the first discusses the construction of Jewish identity, both that of Paul and their own negotiations as the remnant; the second, how the readers negotiate a defense for a post-supersessionist understanding; the last part examines how they consider Paul relates to the Torah followed by their own relations with Torah observance as Jesus-believing Jews.

Chapter Five, “Relations and Yeshua,” focuses on the middle part of Rom 11 (vv. 11–24). It starts with a discussion of Messianic Jewish rhetoric as it was displayed in the interviews, with the olive tree metaphor as the major text; through this, Messianic Jews construct humanity in two parts, Jews and non-Jews, whose ethnic distinctiveness is maintained even when united in Jesus. The fate of the two is perceived as deeply intertwined, which suggests a post-supersessionist understanding. The chapter ends with a two-part discussion on how the Messianic Jewish readers apply the olive tree metaphor when discussing contemporary relations both to the Christian world and to the Messianic Gentile part of their own community.

Chapter Six, “Time and Land,” examines the Messianic Jewish readings of the last part of Rom 11 (vv. 25–36). Here I especially discuss how the readers construct the eschatological fate of Jews and non-Jews through Paul’s words, and how they experience end-time prophecies, regarded as in the process of being fulfilled. Special attention is also given to their reading of the inclusion of the land of Israel among God’s irrevocable gifts: of conflicting experiences of living in the State of Israel and of the ideological, physical, and spiritual restoration of the land as the ultimate proof of God’s faithfulness. Through the readers’ understanding of Rom

11, this chapter ultimately argues that Messianic Jewish identity is deeply eschatological.

In Chapter Seven, beyond the parts, the study as a whole is brought together in a summary, discussion, and conclusions. I also explore, from different angles, the conversation between the Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars, particularly their similar and dissimilar ways of constructing Paul(s) and readings of Rom 11. In doing so, I attain my aim of filling a major gap in current research. I also evaluate the possibilities and pitfalls of working with empirical reception studies and identify areas for future research. Penultimately, I offer a conclusion to the idea “going around”—that Messianic Jews read and construct Paul much as PWJ scholars do. Following this chapter, I wrap up with a postscript containing more personal reflections on Messianic Judaism and the future.



# *Two.* The Landscape of Messianic Judaism in Israel

## Vignettes from Messianic Jewish Services in Jerusalem

### *Alef:* An Evangelical-Jewish Congregation

“Oh, the blood of Yeshua cleanses us of all impurity!” The song rises up towards the tall ceiling as the Messianic Jewish congregation sings, lifting their hands, praising the risen *Mashiah*<sup>1</sup> that one day, soon, will come back. The *shofar* (ram’s horn), the instrument typically used during Jewish high holidays, is constantly blown, making its significant dull hum. The worship team of about seven people enthusiastically plays different instruments. No, I correct myself, they are worshipping the Lord, pouring out their souls and their hearts’ desire to belong to Yeshua. The lyrics about God’s majestic deeds are intended to open up the heavenly realm. The texts are simple, Yeshua-centered, and clearly biblically themed. I recognize familiar Jewish melodies, paired with what I identify as contemporary evangelical worship songs. The scene is charismatic, and the atmosphere feels “authentic,” if there is such a thing. I realize that the music has had an effect even on me. I notice the use of loudspeakers and make a mental note to ask whether they freely use electricity on Shabbat or have a *shabbes goy* taking care of it.<sup>2</sup>

It is intense, and it is sincere. There are moments during the service when the believers pray out loud, almost shouting their prayers, needs, or thanksgiving to Yeshua. Then there are moments when the congregation sings in tongues, or just stands still in silent devotion, as if surrounded by a holy presence. Many of the gathered seem to be totally consumed by the presence of God. Seeking purity, striving for holiness, *Yeshua Hamashiah* (Jesus the Messiah) is cleansing them

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<sup>1</sup> There are several ways of transliterating the Hebrew word for “Messiah,” including “Maschiach” and “Mashiach.”

<sup>2</sup> Jewish religious law, *halakhah*, prohibits a Jew from using electricity on the Shabbat—turning lights on and off, for example. A *shabbes goy*, or *shabbat goy*, is someone non-Jewish who can perform these acts, *melakha*, on behalf of the observant Jew.

from sin in the blood he shed on the *tslav* (cross). And I think to myself, standing in the back as the loudspeakers pour out the music that fills the whole room, that these guys are really, really convinced. The chilly air is warmed by expectations of Yeshua doing miraculous things as people pray and ask for wonders and healing. For them, this is what life is about, as they tell me after the service, this is where they find their true selves. As I look around, I cannot but have respect for them. I wrap myself in a wool scarf mumbling a prayer for better weather.

The venue for this Messianic Jewish congregation is located in central Jerusalem. The three hours of worship this Shabbat morning are, as always, powerful. Outside, people are walking by, crowds including pilgrims and mostly Jewish Orthodox families on their way to the Kotel (the Western Wall), without knowing that here in this bright building Jews are worshipping Yeshua. Of some 250 people gathered for worship, dozens are visitors, especially from the United States, but most are local Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles, praying, singing, and listening to the “Word of God.” It all happens in Hebrew,<sup>3</sup> but some people around me whisper with each other in American English. Only a few men have donned *kippot*, even fewer women wear a *mitpachat* (the headscarf worn by married religious Jewish women). Most of the gathered, however, do not display any religious clothing at all. Still embracing their Jewish identity in the midst of Jerusalem, they light the Hanukkah candles and pray the traditional Jewish prayers followed by a well-known Israeli Hanukkah song. More striking, however, is when, at the beginning of the service, the whole community proclaims the Shema, the most important part in Jewish prayer services, *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* (“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” Deut 6:4 NRSV) It is so loud as to make the stone walls shake, and it is beautiful. To me, this signals that their hearts are burning with love for their Jewish Yeshua.

Whereas the *tslav* is a recurrent figure in their rhetoric, the only decoration in the room is the huge Israeli flag that hangs beside the altar. The flag is impossible to miss, underscoring that the land of Israel, expressed as the State of Israel, plays a vital role in their theology and also prayers; perhaps even more important is reading the “Word of God,” and living a life formed by the holy texts. Today the *roeh* (“shepherd”) delivers a rather free-style sermon, a message “from the heart of the Lord” as he phrases it, on *Erets Yisrael*—the land of Israel. For one whole hour, the congregation appears spellbound by this sweet, humble man as he guides his sheep through a multitude of Hebrew Bible texts, speaking of the land that the Lord has promised them,

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<sup>3</sup> Songs are transliterated as well as translated into English. Songs, prayers, and other texts are displayed on a large screen in Hebrew and English, and sometimes also in Russian, reflecting the background of the believers. The sermon and spontaneous prayers are simultaneously translated into English through headsets for those who wish it.

starting in Zech 2:10–13,<sup>4</sup> and of the messianic character of Jerusalem. I scribble frantically in my notebook, receiving appreciative nods from people around me who presumably take this as a sign of my deep piety. “The Land is the Lord’s, not theirs,” is the message from the white-haired man. There is a holy marriage between God, the land, and the Jewish people. The land is a gift, an irrevocable gift (cf. v. 29). And it needs to be cared and prayed for. Some prophecies, he exclaims, are already fulfilled with Yeshua, others are to be when he comes back to his city of Jerusalem in glory. In this end-time drama, the sanctified Gentiles will inherit the land together with God’s chosen people, he concludes. But now, still, the land is filled with sin, with impurity, and it needs to be cleansed and sanctified in the blood of Yeshua. People need to turn to the God of Israel, to Yeshua, with open hearts. Listening to this, I hear the familiar echoes of Christian Zionism and Evangelical rhetoric, packaged and presented from a more Jewish perspective.

Having created their own liturgy, the people and the *roeh* together alternately pray, read Scriptures and other devotional texts, and sing, as well as including a preparation and confession of sins for an impressive forty-five minutes. This Messianic Jewish congregation celebrates a *qidush*<sup>5</sup> (the meal of the covenant, lit. “consecration” or “sanctification”). Here and there I notice certain traditional liturgical elements such as the Lord’s Prayer and the sign of peace. Together the believers sing “*Hakos hazot ze habrit hachadasha, bedami hanispach baadchem, ze dami, ze dami, zot aso lezichroni*” (“this cup is the new covenant, in my blood shed for you, this is my blood, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me”<sup>6</sup>). As the believers receive the bread and wine, symbolizing the body and blood of their *Mashiah*, the worship and praise continue. It all ends with a commonly prayed blessing and the customary greeting of “Shabbat shalom!” Just outside of the house of Yeshua the *oneg* (fellowship) continues with refreshments and conversation. It is, for those present, indeed the ideal Shabbat, spent with friends and foremost the *Mashiah* of Israel. I have a few sips of

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<sup>4</sup> “Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord. Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. The Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all people, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.” (Zech 2:10–13 NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> This is more commonly transliterated “kiddush.” *Qidush* is commonly used in the Messianic Jewish world to refer to the Lord’s supper. Originally, however, a *qidush* is the Jewish blessing recited on Shabbat and holidays over a cup of wine or grape juice.

<sup>6</sup> My translation. The most common transliteration. This phrasing is very similar to, and obviously inspired by, the retelling of Jesus’s words in the institution of the Lord’s supper as recorded by Paul in 1 Cor (as well as the gospels’ telling): “and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’” (1 Cor 11:24–25 NRSV)

Israeli instant coffee that tastes as weak as usual, while I hang around a little. An unknown woman confronts me, asking if I really have accepted Yeshua. I leave somewhat exhausted, walking the silent narrow alleys of the Old City back home to my apartment in Musrara, contemplating the service of what is a fascinating mix of traditional Jewish and evangelical Christian elements, however one would define it. For the Jewish believers, some tell me, this place is a Yeshua-centered place where they find their “true” identity, love the land of Israel, and the Word of God.<sup>7</sup>

### *Bet: A Traditional-Jewish Congregation*

Some time later, I find myself outside another Messianic Jewish congregation in one of Jerusalem’s fancier neighborhoods on a Shabbat morning. Not sure what to expect, I have dressed in a floor-length black dress to be on the safe side. A nice, friendly-looking man in Orthodox Jewish garments greets me smilingly with a “Shabbat shalom!” and spends a minute or two talking to me.

As I enter the hall, I am immediately struck by its architecture. It is a synagogue. Yes, and as I am about to experience along with around 150 people, this Messianic Jewish synagogue is, so to speak, a very Jewish-flavored one. The Torah plays a fundamental role. Seats are formed into a semicircle directed towards the big wooden *aron qodesh* (the ark containing the Torah scrolls) which is covered by the *parochet* (the traditional heavy velvet curtain). The *parochet* is embroidered with a lit *menorah* symbolizing Yeshua as the light of the world. In front of the *aron qodesh*, there is a small pulpit and a much larger *bimah* (the platform) from where the prayers are led and readings performed.

I find a seat in a corner where I can watch discreetly. A man a few seats away, apparently a tourist, pulls out an old-fashioned camera but is somewhat harshly rebuked. No picture-taking because it is Shabbat, but even more so because some of the gathered are believers more or less in secret. While the lights are on (probably with the help of a timer), no electronics are used. I look around curiously. Except for a few visitors that are easy for me to spot, most people “look” Jewish. Most men are wearing a *kippah*. Black velvety ones, white ones, knitted ones, huge, embroidered ones. A lot of men are also wearing their *tallit* (the prayer shawl) and *tsitsits* (ritual fringes); many women are wearing a *mitpachat*.

The service begins. The congregation follows, to a large extent, the traditional Jewish Orthodox Shacharit, (the morning prayer), as it is

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<sup>7</sup> This retelling is based upon my own field notes and participant observation during one service in November 2018. I have visited the congregation several times to observe the repeated structure, which makes the account above reliable as a fair representation of the liturgy and style of the congregations.

written in the *Siddur* (the prayer book). I am glad I brought mine and am able to follow quite well thanks to my visits in other synagogues, and to a seven-year-old girl next to me who knows and happily sings everything out loud by heart. I was worried that I would not be allowed to take notes as it is not allowed to write during Shabbat, but I do this discreetly and if anyone notices, they do not tell me to stop. I am struck by what is happening, what my ears hear, and what my eyes see. It is all in Hebrew. Suddenly I recognize the Lord's Prayer.

I turn the pages in the *Siddur*. The prayers and psalms are said and sung. The Shema is proclaimed out loud standing, some covering their eyes. The Amidah<sup>8</sup> prayer follows with the opening Yeshua addition, "Lord, open my lips that my mouth may proclaim the purpose of salvation [sometimes, "the name of Yeshua"]." Then comes the blessing over the children where the fathers wrap the *tallitot* over their heads and partly over their wives, who are standing very close. The Amidah ends with the *qedushah* prayer praising Hashem's<sup>9</sup> holiness. The words are familiar, and I recognize the liturgical melodies led by the cantor. Other melodies sound a bit like national anthems or march music. It is rhythmic, and the men (no women) who are called up to the *bimah* to lead the service use their hands and feet as instruments to create *kavanah* (intention of prayer). It is joyful and spontaneous at the same time. The atmosphere is warm.

The Torah scroll is taken out of the *aron qodesh* and carried around, as is customary. Those gathered respectfully touch it with a corner of their *Siddur* or *tallit*. A rather long section of readings follows, signaling the importance of Scripture and the study of holy texts. Today's *bar mitsvah*<sup>10</sup> boy is called up to start the readings and, luckily, I manage to follow the Hebrew. For those who cannot, a bearded man calls out the references in English. This week's Parashat Hashavua is from the end of Leviticus, followed by the *haftarah* (the reading from the Prophets). The scroll is rolled up and a teenage boy comes up front to read a chapter from a letter in the New Testament. This is one but few elements in the liturgy that reveals that this is a Messianic synagogue.

The *bar mitsvah* boy steps up front again and gives his speech. While in Hebrew, it is simultaneously summarized in English, as is the following sermon. The boy has an appearance of sincerity mixed with humor that makes the congregants burst into laughter and applaud several times. He summarizes what is also my analysis of the synagogue's position on the importance of both listening to and obeying

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<sup>8</sup> The Amidah prayer (the standing prayer), also called "Shemoneh Esrei" (eighteen), is a central prayer in Jewish liturgy that consists of nineteen (originally eighteen) blessings that one prays standing and facing Jerusalem.

<sup>9</sup> This is a typical religious Jewish way of spelling God's name based on interpretations of Deut 12:4 that forbid desecrating, erasing, or destroying God's name. This congregation has adopted this custom to show their at-homeness within a Jewish milieu. Literally, it means "the name."

<sup>10</sup> This is more commonly transliterated as *bar/bat mitsvah*.

Hashem: “for He is making the way of Torah and Yeshua (some people shout “amen!”) real in our lives. I thank Hashem and Yeshua for giving us the Torah and this Land.” Yeshua, the Torah, and the land are all very important for their self-understanding. The believers rejoice, the bright room seems to swell with joy as the sun warms the synagogue.

The rabbi of the synagogue then takes over and gives a *drashah* (sermon) for about thirty minutes. He presents his synagogue as one that has “preserved the foundation of Judaism; the Torah, and the New Testament.” Based on the Torah portion and history, Hashem’s Word has been proven true. “Our” is repeatedly used when referring to things Jewish, things they acclaim as part of their Jewish identity. Hashem is faithful to his covenant with his *am Yisrael* (the people of Israel). He has not forgotten and abandoned his promises to the patriarchs and to King David. He continues that “people only come to Hashem through the blood of Yeshua” and some people affirmingly shout “amen!” He continues that not even Christians have recognized this, instead they have worshiped the idol Jesus on the cross instead of the living Yeshua, but times are finally changing and some are waking up to recognize the true nature of the Jewish Jesus and Israel. Hashem’s promises will be fulfilled, and those in this synagogue are part of His doings in restoring Israel physically and spiritually. They are the lighthouse, guiding people to Zion.

After a few more concluding prayers from the *Siddur*, shot glasses with a sip of red wine and a basket with broken *challah* (a typically Jewish white, braided bread eaten during Shabbat) are passed around. One of the men leading the prayers proclaims “Yeshua likens his body with this bread.” A *qidush* is about to take place. We are invited to partake in and contemplate in a moment of silence Yeshua’s sacrifice for our sins. The leader prays the traditional words from Jesus’s last supper over the bread and wine respectively that are used in eucharist celebrations, but intersects with the traditional Jewish liturgical blessing *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu, Melech Haolam* (“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe”).<sup>11</sup>

After two intense hours in this Messianic Jewish synagogue, followed by some *kosher* snacks and fellowship, I put on my hat and walk out in the heat not knowing what to think or feel. Overwhelmed, I realize after a few minutes that I am both curious and even a bit touched. “This is it,” I hear myself saying. I cannot, for a while, get rid of the feeling that I just have experienced something almost otherworldly.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I have here (and elsewhere) kept the most common way of transliterating “baruch” and “melech”; SBL would have it as “barukh” and “melekh.”

<sup>12</sup> This retelling is based on participant observation and field notes from the Messianic Jewish synagogue, May 2019. The same is true of this congregation as the one above; I have visited it frequently and partaken in its liturgy.

# Messianic Judaism and Identity Negotiations

The vignettes from the congregations *Alef* and *Bet*<sup>13</sup> give a taste of what happens when Messianic Jews come together to—as they would say—praise the risen Messiah of Israel. It is intense. They worship, they pray. They love the land of Israel, and they love the “Word of God.” And they are constantly trying to develop and embody a “true” and “authentic” identity as Jewish believers in “Yeshua” (Jesus<sup>14</sup>). While hidden away, behind doors all over Israel one can find congregations and prayer houses. Messianic Jews have become a noteworthy piece in the mosaic of Jerusalem, and they are here to stay, here in the promised “Holy Land.”

This chapter offers a comprehensive introduction to the phenomenon of Messianic Judaism from historical, sociological, and practical perspectives, together with vignettes from Messianic Jewish services. From where did the Messianic Jewish movement emerge? What is characteristic of Messianic Jewish congregations in Israel? What does their theology look like? How do they live their lives? The chapter also discusses identity negotiations, with the introduction to the movement in the last chapter as backdrop. The struggle of constructing an “authentic” Messianic Jewish identity in Israel has been addressed by Keri Zelson Warshawsky in her “Returning To Their Own Borders: A Social Anthropological Study of Contemporary Messianic Jewish Identity in Israel” (2008),<sup>15</sup> in which she effectively illustrates the many negotiations:

The dominant thread...is the struggle of Messianic Jews to come to terms both *theoretically and practically* with what *it means to be a Jew who believes in Yeshua in light of the sociopolitical development of the concepts of Jew and Jewishness, and the influence of the ideals, values and practice of secular Jewish and Christian Zionists, and the Protestant mission.*<sup>16</sup>

As already noted, Messianic Jews are caught in a both-and situation or in-between things Jewish and things Christian—hence the identification “Messianic Jew”—and believers put different emphases on the word “Messianic” versus “Jew” in their understanding of themselves and their faith in Jesus (see also Part II).<sup>17</sup> Identity

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<sup>13</sup> I have chosen to refer to the congregations this way simply because *Alef* is the first letter and *Bet* the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

<sup>14</sup> In the following, I use etic terminology. An emic terminology is sometimes spelled out with an explanation or translation if I want to explain a certain case or make an argument.<sup>14</sup> Cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xviii*; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders.”

<sup>16</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xviii*. My emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 15.

negotiations are both theoretical and practical. The Messianic Jewish movement is unified in experiencing these struggles, but not unified in how they formulate strategies to deal with this and ways of creating their identity as Jesus-believing Jews. While I agree with Zelson Warshawsky above, labels such as “Jewish” and “Christian” are vague and tricky but nonetheless often used without reflection when Messianic Judaism is analyzed, and believers do the same themselves. To nuance Zelson Warshawsky’s summary, I would say that most negotiations occur between evangelical Christianity on the one hand, and both religious Judaism (especially Orthodox Judaism) and secular Judaism on the other. Therefore, and as explained below, congregations are most suitably captured on the spectrum of “evangelical-Jewish” (such as *Alef*) and “traditional-Jewish” (such as *Bet*). Ultimately, Zelson Warshawsky’s insights seem to correspond well with my own experience in Jerusalem. Messianic Judaism in Israel, and elsewhere, is indeed a complex movement.

This multiplicity of identity negotiations is tackled by Zelson Warshawsky from the perspective of social anthropology and extensive fieldwork among Messianic Jewish leaders and laypeople in Israel. She uses what she calls an analytical road map model to explain how Messianic Jewish identity is negotiated through the concept of travel as routes, roots, and borders.

Identity is approached as travel—routes, roots and borders—by both the subjects and the researcher. Israeli Yeshua-Believing Jews are shown to narrate their identity as a returning [*sic*] to Zion, their tri-fold source and destination. They describe rerouting themselves toward the God of Israel, re-rooting in the land and re-defining the borders of their birthright.<sup>18</sup>

Messianic Jewish identity, then, is described as an area of struggle and fluidity, constantly *en route*: back to the God of Israel, back to the land of Israel, and to a “fulfilled” identity. Thus, “rerouting,” “return,” and “re-rooting” are drawn from emic terminology, describing things from within a Messianic Jewish perspective as both constructing something new *and* a collective memory. By using a language wrapped in nostalgia, age, and perceived authenticity markers, they create their story. The terms using “re-” are thus ideological, telling the story of a lost, forgotten, or ignored but now found identity.

Messianic Jewish identity is narrated as continuity, not as a break or as a conversion as it commonly has been perceived from Jewish and Christian perspectives alike. For Messianic Jews, it is rather understood as a kind of deepening or realization of their true identity when, as Jews, they come to faith in Jesus, which is perceived as a rerouting back to the God of Israel. Zelson Warshawsky illustrates how Messianic Jews are in constant negotiations with already fixed Jewish and

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<sup>18</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” xviii.

Christian borders to establish their own authentic Messianic Jewish subjectivity and autonomy.<sup>19</sup>

Messianic Jews also describe coming to faith as a re-rooting in the land<sup>20</sup> as they find their “true” roots in Israel through their belief in Jesus. Attachment to the land is acquired both from secular Jewish nationalism and Christian Zionism. Defining those roots is also a negotiation of how they should live their lives as Jesus-believing Jews. At the same time, socially speaking, the redefining of borders deals with the Messianic Jewish struggle to find and create their own autonomy as their identity is influenced by (Orthodox) Judaism in general as well as secular Jewish Zionism, together with evangelical and Protestant Christianity, and Christian Zionism for ideals, values, and praxis. Borders are negotiated in order to claim their own right to exist, their birthright.<sup>21</sup> And in all this, the Bible features in the background.

Therefore, a focus should be added, the Bible. As an argument that runs throughout this study, Messianic Jewish identity and identity constructions are impossible to grasp without including the issue of “God’s living Word.” While I agree with Zelson Warshawsky above, and a similar argument propounded by Tamir Erez that Messianic Judaism in Israel is constructed around Judaism, Zionism, and belief in Jesus,<sup>22</sup> without taking the Bible into consideration a deeper understanding is halted. Messianic Jewish identity is lived and thought, and believers are constantly in the process of formulating a more “authentic” identity in relation to these themes. The glimpses into *Alef* and *Bet*, the two Messianic Jewish congregations described above, showed distinctively different ways of being and expressing identity and faith. But they have one thing in common: the focus on the Bible as the “Word of God.” Identity negotiations are thus pursued through *identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading*. This chapter, ultimately, seeks to emphasize the critical importance of including the Bible when Messianic Jewish identity negotiations are discussed.

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<sup>19</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xix*, 201–03.

<sup>20</sup> I use the term “land” consciously to refer to a vaguely defined area. I do not equate this with the State of Israel or any fixed nation-state borders of today or yesterday, and neither do Messianic Jews. It is more used as a theological concept to signify the spiritual importance of a special area that is thought of as having been given to the patriarchs.

<sup>21</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xvii–xviii*.

<sup>22</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43.

# The Formation of Messianic Judaism

## The Pre-History of Messianic Judaism

Believers themselves would argue that Messianic Judaism as such is not new, but rather constitutes a religious movement restored through the will of God in which Jews are re-routing themselves back to the God of Israel by faith in Jesus. There are two parallel yet related genealogies to explain the origin of the Messianic Jewish movement. The first is that of ancient history, preferred from an emic perspective, which understands the first Messianic Jewish community as that formed around the Messiah of Israel, Jesus himself. Today's Messianic Judaism is therefore seen in continuity with this, as an extension of the first Jesus-believing communities routing themselves back to the first Jewish apostles.<sup>23</sup> This narrative is ideological in nature with a clear aim of authenticating the movement on historical grounds.<sup>24</sup> During the first centuries Jewish-“Christian” and Gentile-“Christian” communities existed side by side. Ever since this time, Jewish believers in Jesus have existed in different forms and numbers, from the fifth century usually fully assimilated into Gentile churches, both around the world and probably also in Israel.

The second genealogy is more modern. It explains the development of Messianic Judaism as a result of Christian mission and views it as a new religious movement. The two lineages are present in discourses by both scholars and practitioners. Neither of the genealogies is wrong, *per se*. In the sections below, however, the task is to picture the formation of contemporary Messianic Judaism in light of modern history in order to understand the movement in today's Jerusalem. This part covers the general development of the movement followed by a part focusing on the Messianic Jewish presence in Israel.

Messianic Judaism and Christian missions have had, and still have, an intricate and strong relationship, and also one filled with struggle when it comes to crafting an “authentic” Messianic identity. While it is possible to find Jewish believers in Jesus who emphasized a Jewish identity and lifestyle in various European countries during the second part of the eighteenth century,<sup>25</sup> the pre-history of Messianic

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<sup>23</sup> Kollontai, “Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity,” 196–97; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 42; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 222.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. with Dulin's expression, “grammar of authenticity.” John Dulin, “Messianic Judaism as a Mode of Christian Authenticity: Exploring the Grammar of Authenticity through Ethnography of a Contested Identity,” *Anthropos* 108:1 (2013): 35–51.

<sup>25</sup> Moravian Brethren successfully attempted to restore so-called *Judenkehillen*, that is, Jesus-believing Jews who maintained a Jewish lifestyle and stayed more in contact with the synagogue and organized Jewish religion than regular Protestant church life. Some of these congregations were founded in Germany, England, and Switzerland. Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 25–26.

Judaism primarily stems from evangelical and Protestant missionary activity in America and England from the 1880s.<sup>26</sup> During the twentieth century, Jews in America who came to faith in Jesus started to identify themselves as “Hebrew Christians.”<sup>27</sup> Hebrew Christianity, the predecessor to Messianic Judaism, promoted assimilation into Gentile, Protestant churches; its adherents did not strongly emphasize their Jewish roots and rejected a Torah-observant lifestyle. The Hebrew Christian Union was formed in London in the 1860s, while a similar organization, the Hebrew Christian Alliance, was established in 1915 in the United States.<sup>28</sup> Jewish believers also founded mission societies of their own to bring the gospel to their people, encouraging them to “convert” (from Judaism to Christianity),<sup>29</sup> but with a few attempts also made to maintain a Jewish identity.<sup>30</sup> While numbers are difficult to estimate, the Hebrew Christian movement grew from a small beginning to more than 12,000 around the 1930s. The period between the 1920s and the 1960s saw “significant changes in their [Hebrew Christians’] demography, and the beginnings of a convert community”<sup>31</sup> due to the missions.

Yaakov Ariel argues that there were a number of reasons behind the intense mission work during the twentieth century. Foremost, the work was inspired by dispensationalist theology<sup>32</sup> as formulated in the 1830s by John Darby and his group

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<sup>26</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 79, 83, 190; cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 41–44.

<sup>27</sup> Hebrew Christians of then is not identical to Hebrew Christians today.

<sup>28</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 220; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 22–24.

<sup>29</sup> London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews (1809), the Episcopal Jews’ Chapel Abrahamic Society (1835), the Hebrew Christian Alliance (1867), the Hebrew Christian Prayer Union (1882), the British Hebrew Christian Alliance (1888), the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America (1915), and the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (1925), see Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 26–29; cf. Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 220–21.

<sup>30</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 165. According to Ariel’s estimations regarding Jews converting to an evangelical form of Christianity in America, between the 1880s and 1910s approximately 150 to 200 persons converted each year. Around the turn of the century there were around 4,000 Hebrew Christians, whereas by the 1930s we encounter numbers of more than 12,000 Hebrew Christians.

<sup>32</sup> Dispensationalism is a theological system pertaining to the end times, significantly the division of time and events into certain *dispensations*, i.e., periods during which different eschatological scenarios would occur. Within this theological system one finds the ideas of rapture, tribulation, and so forth. Important in the context here is the emphasis on distinct identities among Jews and non-Jews in the eschatological scenario where the Jews have their own unique role to play. Mission to the Jews was thus clearly inspired by a vision of bringing the end times alive. Furthermore, one integral aspect of this theological thinking was the conviction that the Jews would, either in a believing or unbelieving state, be regathered in the land of Israel (see more in Chapter Six).

of the Plymouth Brethren, and the premillennialism<sup>33</sup> of the late 1800s and early 1900s in the United States. By this time, eschatology had become an important factor in conservative Protestantism and Fundamentalism. Hence, an integral part of the missions' theology was that the Jews as the chosen people were to play a decisive role in the eschatological drama. By helping them to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, they would reach a fulfilled Jewish identity.<sup>34</sup> Coinciding with this was the rise of Jewish nationalism and the restoration of the Hebrew language. Ideas about rebuilding the "Promised Land" were quickly supported by the missions. This ideology among the missionaries to the Jews was further nurtured in 1948 with the establishment of the State of Israel, which was viewed as a prophetic sign of the end times.<sup>35</sup>

While Hebrew Christians for the most part continued to identify as Protestant Christians, the acclamation of a Hebrew Christian identity as such was made possible through sociopolitical changes in both Jewish and Christian self-identity. Since the Enlightenment, belief and ethnicity were generally perceived as separate issues. Secular Jews now argued for an ongoing Jewish identity without the need to be religiously observant. This influenced Hebrew Christians to explore a space where they could be loyal to the Jewish people, while rejecting the religious authority of the Torah. Jesus, instead, was their authority. In this shift, Hebrew Christians and, later on, Messianic Jews, found a legitimate route back to a distinct national Jewish identity.<sup>36</sup>

While Hebrew Christians faced opposition from the Jewish world and sometimes resistance from the Christian world as well, some refused to give up their Jewish identity and lifestyle to be incorporated into a Christian, Gentile world, calling themselves Messianic Jews in protest against the Hebrew Christians' rejection of adopting or maintaining a Jewish lifestyle. In 1910, The Jewish Messianic Movement published "The Messianic Jew," a journal that promoted a Torah-observant life among Jewish believers in Jesus. For them, the divine obligation to continue a Jewish life as believers in Jesus was based on a rereading of New Testament texts and the urge to recreate the first Jesus-believing communities. An emphasis on Jesus's Jewishness gave rise to discussions about conversion to

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<sup>33</sup> Premillennialism (with its counterpart postmillennialism) is one part of the eschatological scenario, often attached to the phrase "premillennial dispensationalism." The concept implies the conviction that Jesus will return to the earth *before* a 1,000-year period of God's Kingdom is established, whereas postmillennialists argue that Jesus will return *after* this period. The idea of millennialism itself comes from an interpretation of Rev 20.

<sup>34</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 10, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 12–13, 81, 140, 143.

<sup>36</sup> Mark S. Kinzer, "Messianic Jews and the Jewish World," in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 126–35, 126–27; Zelson Warshawsky, "Returning To Their Own Borders," 39.

Christianity. They, as Jews, did not want to convert to anything other than their proclaimed goal, namely, routing themselves “back” as Jews to faith in Israel’s Messiah.<sup>37</sup>

## Sociopolitical Changes and a Messianic Jewish Identification

Moving forward in time, Messianic Judaism, as we know it today, emerged as a “mutation” from Hebrew Christianity in the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>38</sup> Messianic Jewish synagogues that emphasized the maintenance of Jewish identity and lifestyle—in contrast to Hebrew Christians—sprang up around the world, and a large number of young Jews who came to faith in Jesus joined these new congregations.<sup>39</sup> Writing from an American perspective, Ariel traces Messianic Jewish origin to American society at the time, where roots, especially Jewish ones, had become attractive as a cultural revolution took place alongside the emergence of several new religious movements. These American believers in Jesus, who also more explicitly routed themselves towards their Jewish ethnicity and practices, adopted the name “Messianic Jews” during the 1970s.<sup>40</sup> The term itself was not a new one, but, rather, had emerged in Israel in the 1940s when missionaries used it to refer to Jews who belonged to evangelical forms of Christianity. Especially in Israel, but also elsewhere, *notsri* (Christian) stirred up too many hostile feelings, whereas *meshihi*<sup>41</sup> (Messianic) more directly, and correctly, emphasized the Messianic aspect of the Jewish believers’ renewed faith in Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

Another important factor in the rise of Messianic Judaism in the United States as well as in Israel was, Ariel argues, the Six-Day War in 1967. Based on Bible readings, such as Rom 11 (especially v. 25), the Israeli victory was met with great excitement and interpreted as the end of the Gentile era according to a dispensationalist chronology. The annexation (or “reunification” in a Zionist discourse), of Jerusalem and thus access to the Jewish and Christian holy sites, together with the occupation/liberation (depending on politics) of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights, further strengthened the connection between Messianic Judaism and Christian Zionism and ideas about the “Promised Land.” Just as 1948 was seen as a prophetic sign, 1967 tied the Messianic Jewish movement even more tightly to Israel and gave rise to new speculations

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<sup>37</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 47–50, 54, 131; Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 27.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Kinzer, “Messianic Jews and the Jewish World,” 127.

<sup>39</sup> Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 30–31.

<sup>40</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 195, 205–06, 220–23.

<sup>41</sup> More commonly transliterated as “meshichi.”

<sup>42</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 155, 222–23.

about the end times (see more in Chapter Six). The Jewish victory boosted Jewish self-perception and confidence in general. It also generated a more positive attitude towards Jews and Judaism from an evangelical perspective, which increased support for a more sovereign identity among Jewish believers. While the ties between evangelical Christianity and Messianic Judaism remain strong even today, these sociopolitical developments resulted in the creation of a more independent Messianic Jewish movement.<sup>43</sup>

## Theological Negotiations over Jewish Self-Identification

This new movement of people who identified themselves as Messianic Jews boldly argued that Jewish identity and belief in Jesus were totally compatible, in contrast to the views of most surrounding Jews and Christians. Actually, it was perceived by the Messianic Jews themselves as the “authentic” Jewish identity. Routing themselves back to a more Jewish identity as Jesus-believers, a recurrent dilemma, however, was to what extent and which form of Judaism they should practice, while combining it with the evangelical theology they espoused. Some groups and congregations chose non-charismatic expression, while others became charismatic in style, thereby attracting, according to Ariel, millions of young Americans during the 1970s and 1980s. Fusing Christian and Jewish elements, Jewish symbols and practices generally became increasingly adopted by Messianic Jewish congregations during the 1970s, but not without negotiation.<sup>44</sup>

Whereas Hebrew Christianity made a sharp distinction between Jewish nationality and Judaism as belief and praxis, Messianic Judaism tore down this wall. Essential identity markers for Messianic Jewish believers, Mark S. Kinzer writes, was a certain degree of Torah observance, such as keeping the Shabbat, the holidays, and (to some extent) the biblical dietary laws (i.e., *kashrut*). “Its reclamation of the Torah provided the justification for its change of name [to Messianic Judaism]: it no longer saw itself as the Jewish nation’s version of Christianity, but instead as the Yeshua-version of Judaism.”<sup>45</sup> The believers thus started to view themselves as primarily Jewish, and no longer part of the Christian body as such. At the same time, they continued to view the Christian Bible as their sole authority, in line with their evangelical heritage.

This had a bifold outcome: Messianic Jews accepted the authority of the Written Torah, but not the Oral Torah. The commandments in the Pentateuch (the Written

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<sup>43</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 198–99, 227, 250–53; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 42.

<sup>44</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 205–06, 240.

<sup>45</sup> Kinzer, “Messianic Jews and the Jewish World,” 127.

Torah) received authoritative status (at least in theory) whereas post-biblical Jewish interpretations (the Oral Torah), as compiled in the Talmud, Mishnah, and the Gemara, did not. Most Messianic Jews still have a suspicion of rabbinic tradition. Evangelical Christians at that time did not, however, consider the Written Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) constitutive on a practical level for the Jewish people anymore, and thus a split arose between them and the Messianic Jews. Moreover, still perceived with skepticism by the mainstream Jewish community, Messianic Judaism retained an inherent distrust of tradition, including Jewish tradition as expressed in rabbinic Judaism. Thus, for most Messianic Jews, “Judaism” was biblical Judaism, not rabbinic Judaism and the Oral Torah, and, as modern Judaism(s) are built upon the latter, tensions arose between contemporary Messianic Judaism and mainstream Judaism. *Bet* in the vignettes represents one exception in its trying to ease this separateness. Nonetheless, the major area of opposition is still whether belief in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel is compatible with being Jewish or not. The Messianic Jewish movement thus placed itself somewhere between mainstream modern Judaism(s) and mainstream Christianity. At the same time, explored more below, traditions from the Oral Torah, or rabbinic Judaism, have also been adopted and shaped in a Messianic Jewish way. Again, Kinzer formulates the internal struggles clearly:

They [the Messianic Jews of the 1970s] disagreed with one another on the value of rabbinic tradition—some finding it of great value, some finding it useful but also problematic, and others rejecting it as dangerous. But they all agreed that Messianic Judaism should not treat Jewish tradition as authoritative—in any sense of the word—for the interpretation and application of the Bible.<sup>46</sup>

Addressing not only the role of the Torah, Kinzer also pinpoints the importance of the Bible—the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Early on, Messianic Jews largely adopted the textual ideology and practice of authority (see Chapters One and Three) from their evangelical Christian origin. One such issue concerned their exclusivist soteriology, thus delineating a clear boundary between themselves and non-Messianic Jews: only through faith in Jesus was one “saved,” regardless of being Jewish or not. This theology, Kinzer rightly notices, also had sociological implications. While Messianic Jews considered themselves Jewish, they still largely adhered to evangelical theology, something acknowledged by the Jewish community who, therefore, still considered them evangelical Christians.<sup>47</sup> That is, Messianic Jews now understood themselves to be more Jewish than earlier self-perceptions, but the movement was, and still is, entangled in both Jewish and Christian self-perceptions and boundaries.

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<sup>46</sup> Kinzer, “Messianic Jews and the Jewish World,” 127–28.

<sup>47</sup> Kinzer, “Messianic Jews and the Jewish World,” 128.

## Creating a Messianic Jewish Identity through Rhetoric and Praxis

Messianic Judaism in the United States built its own subculture during the 1970s and 1980s as it became both more dynamic and more institutionalized. According to Ariel, the movement was by now organized and independent enough to “become something more than being both Jewish and Christian.”<sup>48</sup> Many new congregations were planted, such as the influential Beth Yeshua and Beth Messiah. The renewed interest in Judaism resulted in the compilation of Messianic *Siddurs* (prayer books) and hymns. Jewish rituals such as the *bar/bat mitzvah* became adapted into a Messianic Jewish frame with an added focus on Jesus. Some liturgies and prayers for specific life events are gathered in Dan Cohn-Sherbok’s *Messianic Judaism* (2000).<sup>49</sup> Publications of all kinds (theological, inspirational, apologetic, and evangelistic) came to light along with schools, national conferences, and a youth movement. Messianic Jews shared their conservative social and political views with the evangelical Christian world—often based upon readings of the Bible—and also accepted a moral and gender ideology different from that of the secular culture.<sup>50</sup>

Another important factor in the development of Messianic Judaism was the creation and adoption of a special Messianic Jewish rhetoric originally developed in Israel. Although resembling evangelical Christian vocabulary, key words were clothed in Jewish terminology to suit the specifics of Messianic Judaism better.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps most important in this discourse are the uses of *Yeshua* instead of “Jesus” and *Mashiah* instead of “Messiah.” This stresses Jesus’s Jewish identity, also erasing what Messianic Jews consider pagan influences on Christianity, and creating a bond of continuity between their Jewish Messiah and themselves as Jewish believers. Similarly, other biblical names are preferred in their Hebrew versions.

One of the most important rhetorical inventions was the change of identification from *notsri* (Christian) to *meshihi* (messianic), which naturally emphasized continuity with Jewish identity. It also transformed the perception of faith in Jesus from something strange to something supposedly familiar and biblically oriented. Jewish newcomers to faith in Jesus are conceptualized as “fulfilled” or “complete” Jews, rather than Christians. A striking example can be found in the heading of an article published in the evangelical journal *Christianity Today* from 1974: “More Jewish Than Ever—We’ve Found the Messiah.” They are *maaminim* (believers) and the article refers to *lehagea laemunah* (finding the truth, coming to faith) or *kshenaaseti maamin* (when I became a believer). At the same time, there is a relative fluidity in the terms believers use to describe their own religious identity:

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<sup>48</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 50, 225–27.

<sup>49</sup> Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, 87–166.

<sup>50</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 205–06, 226–29.

<sup>51</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 155.

“Messianic Jews,” “Jews,” “believers,” “Jewish believers in Yeshua,” and so on.<sup>52</sup> The believers, generally, put more emphasis on being “messianic”—that is, having belief in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel—than on the “Jew” part. At the same time, common traditional Christian terms such as “conversion” and “mission,” not to mention “Christian,” are rejected by Messianic Jews as they represent a negative and Hellenized Christianity. Typical of Messianic Jewish vernacular, in other words, is that it does not indicate a change of religion and identity but rather uses expressions that point towards a deepening of one’s faith as Jewish believers in Jesus.

The use of Jewish and Hebrew terms in general is also significant for the movement as a tool with which to distance itself from Hellenized Christianity and to nurture the Jewish connection. Messianic Jewish congregations all over the world tend to have Hebrew names, such as Beth Yeshua (House of Yeshua). The word “church” is intentionally avoided. Israeli Messianic Jewish congregations often prefer the commonly used Hebrew word *qehilah* (congregation or assembly). Congregations that are very Jewish in character, such as *Bet* in the vignette, usually use the designation “synagogue.”

Moreover, Jewish terms are preferred for elements in the services, although they are sometimes reworked in a Messianic way, as the two vignettes showed. The New Testament is simply referred to by its customary Hebrew term *Haberit Hahadashah* (literally “the New Covenant”). The *qidush* recited over the cup of wine (usually) or grape juice on Shabbat or Jewish holidays is one example of a Jewish term adopted and adapted to refer to a Messianic Jewish version of the part in a service where communion is celebrated. The Hebrew term *seudat Haadon* (literally “the Lord’s Supper”) is also used to refer to the Lord’s Supper or to communion, but, for instance, “Mass” is avoided due to its heavy connotations of ritualized, Hellenized tradition and the Roman Catholic Church. As with the Hebrew term for the New Testament, the Hebrew word *drashah* is used for the sermon or preaching within the Messianic Jewish congregation, but it is also the customary word for the same thing in a mainstream Jewish synagogue or for the homily given at a Christian Mass in Hebrew. Hebrew terms in Israel might not seem to be such a big deal, but maintaining them in the United States or elsewhere makes a statement. It has also proven useful and successful for both Messianic Jews and Christian missionaries presenting the gospel to the Jewish community as (Messianic-to-be) Jews felt more at home with Jewish-sounding language.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Aryeh, one of the participants, preferred to refer to himself as a “Jewish messianist,” an expression which for him stressed his Jewishness more than his belief in Jesus as the Messiah, because he thought contemporary Messianic Judaism was much too weakly connected to Judaism.

<sup>53</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 155, 228–29, 236, 272–73; Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” vi; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 45–52; Kollontai, “Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity,” 197; Christine Eidsheim, “Negotiating a Messianic Identity: A Study on the Formation of Messianic Identity through Space, Art, and

From a theoretical perspective, Susan Harding and Peter Stromberg have argued for the importance of learning the religious language in processes of religious transformations and conversions. In her study on Christian fundamentalism, Harding convincingly demonstrates that “Speaking Is Believing”: acquiring the language and rhetoric of a specific religious group is a decisive component of being part of it.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, Stromberg argues that using language and narrating a story are fundamental to self-transformation, and commitment to a new language is a way of performing a new identity.<sup>55</sup> These insights are highly applicable to the Messianic Jewish movement, as crafting their own terminology has been, and still is, an area of struggle and identity construction for them. Language does play a decisive role in formulating who they are, but also serves as means of creating borders excluding the Jewish and Christian worlds. The Messianic Jewish vernacular is therefore sensitive to its surroundings and flexible to change, while the process of formulating precise and convenient terminology is an ongoing task.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, learning the Messianic Jewish vernacular is part of becoming a Messianic Jew, of both rerouting to, and inculturation into, the movement.

## The Organizational Development of Messianic Judaism

From the 1970s to the 1990s many Messianic Jewish congregations were established, especially in the United States but also elsewhere. Despite considering themselves independent religious movements, most were founded with assistance from Christian mission societies.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, Messianic Judaism soon built umbrella organizations that allowed them to formulate their “definition [of Messianic Judaism], vision, and theology [and] ultimately delineate the center and the periphery of the movement.”<sup>58</sup> The Hebrew Christian Alliance of America, while initially opposing Messianic Judaism, changed its name in 1975 to the Messianic

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Language in Modern Israel” (MA thesis, University of Oslo, 2019), 93–98; Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 18–19.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 33–60.

<sup>55</sup> Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*, PSPA 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), see esp. 14–16, 27–30, 55–56; cf. Aron Engberg, *Walking on the Pages of the Word of God: Self, Land, and Text Among Evangelical Volunteers in Jerusalem*, CESIIR 59 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 78–79.

<sup>56</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 52–56; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 155, 272–73.

<sup>57</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 34.

Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA)<sup>59</sup> and is today the largest organization among many other smaller ones.<sup>60</sup> Also based in the United States, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) was established in 1979 with nineteen member congregations followed by the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS, the congregational counterpart to MJAA) founded in 1986 with fifteen communities. The number in 2012, according to David Rudolph, consisted of more than 200, plus an additional 300 congregations that are not formally affiliated with the mentioned organizations.<sup>61</sup> Today, about a decade later, the total number is higher.

An important dividing line between the UMJC and the MJAA/IAMCS, according to Gabriela Karabelnik Reason's study, is that the UMJC more closely relates to the Jewish world whereas the MJAA/IAMCS is closer to the evangelical world. For her, the latter seem most interested in combining Messianic and Jewish expressions, while the UMJC is mostly interested in creating a version of Judaism fully integrated into and accepted by the mainstream Jewish world. She attaches the slogans "follow the movement of the Spirit" to the MJAA/IAMCS, and "be as authentic as possible" to the UMJC. This tension constitutes the main struggle and conflict within the Messianic Jewish world where she pictures modern evangelical Protestantism in one corner and "mainstream American Judaism" in the other.<sup>62</sup> Rudolph has, similarly, described a distinction between the Spirit (MJAA/IAMCS) and the Torah/tradition (MJAA).<sup>63</sup> Additionally, and worth mentioning, are a number of small organizations that portray the diversity and maturity within the Messianic Jewish world. The Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC), for example, consists of ordained rabbis within a more Torah-observant version that offers halachic standards from a Messianic Jewish perspective. Meanwhile, the Helsinki Consultation, founded in 2010, gathers a number of Messianic Jewish theologians and Jewish believers in Jesus from the ecclesial spectrum to search for what it means to be a Jewish believer in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. A similar and broader community is Yachad BeYeshua, founded in 2019 in Texas, that also gathers Jewish believers in Jesus

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<sup>59</sup> Rudolph, "Messianic Judaism," 31–32.

<sup>60</sup> See Mitch Glaser, "Messianic Jewish National Organizations," in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 116–25.

<sup>61</sup> Rudolph, "Messianic Judaism," 30–31; cf. Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 240.

<sup>62</sup> "Competing Trends In Messianic Judaism: The Debate Over Evangelicalism," Gabriela Reason, <https://www.kesherjournal.com/article/competing-trends-in-messianic-judaism-the-debate-over-evangelicalism-2/>; see also Kinzer, "Messianic Jews and the Jewish World," 130–34.

<sup>63</sup> David Rudolph, "Foreword," in *At the Foot of the Mountain: Two Views on Torah and the Spirit*, eds. Joshua M. Lessard and Jennifer M. Rosner (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2021), vii–xxvii.

across Jewish, Messianic Jewish, and different Christian denominations “to explore concrete ways” in which they “may live out their distinctive calling.”<sup>64</sup>

Messianic Judaism consists of a mosaic of influences from a variety of movements. A uniting factor, however, is the deep commitment to, and advocacy for, the State of Israel. Both organizations provide prayers for Israel, encourage *aliyah* (Jewish immigration to Israel), and are engaged in charitable work in Israel, often with representatives on the spot. Messianic Jewish organizations overall also help out with planting congregations, supporting education, and so forth. As Mitch Glaser writes, “They are mostly favorable to modern Zionism and view the State of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.”<sup>65</sup> Israel, as both a physical and metaphorical subject, plays a central role around which Messianic Jewish identity is constructed (see Chapter Six).

The Messianic Jewish movement grew significantly during the 1980s, and continues to grow today, although the current number of adherents is unknown. It should therefore not come as a surprise that Messianic Judaism is diverse when it comes to issues of “religious observance and theological self-definition but also in its demographic makeup.”<sup>66</sup> Today, there are Messianic Jews in the third and fourth generation coming from all forms of Jewish traditions, and also the new phenomenon of so-called Messianic Gentiles, non-Jews who are integrated into the congregations both in the United States and in Israel (see more in Chapter Five). The movement is today both mature and enthusiastic but not without challenges. It is, however, obvious that Messianic Judaism is a creative movement striving for what “feels” like an authentic identity and practices routing it towards faith in the “Yeshua” of Israel.

## The Development of Messianic Judaism in Israel

One major component in Messianic Jewish identity, according to Zelson Warshawsky, is its “re-rooting” in the land of Israel. Living in “the Promised Land” is important for believers as part of their attempt to return to the God of Israel and live “authentically.”<sup>67</sup> Jewish believers in Jesus, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, bought land and attempted, but failed, to establish villages for themselves, motivated by biblical prophecies of taking part in the Jewish restoration of the

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<sup>64</sup> “Yachad BeYeshua - Our History.”

<sup>65</sup> Glaser, “Messianic Jewish National Organizations,” 121, see also 119–20.

<sup>66</sup> Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism,” 34.

<sup>67</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xviii–xxiv*, 59, cf. her eight chapter, 80–136; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 107.

land.<sup>68</sup> To serve as a backdrop to the focus of the current study on Jerusalem, this section focuses on the historical development of Messianic Judaism in the land of Israel and how it took root. While there is naturally some overlap with the general history presented above, here I seek to uncover some of the important figures and events in the development of a Messianic Jewish community in the land of Israel itself.

## Before the Establishment of the State of Israel in 1948

The modern history of Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel starts with Michael Solomon Alexander (1799–1845). Of Jewish descent, he became the first Protestant bishop in Jerusalem, seated in Christ Church, in what today goes under the name of the Old City. As such, he was engaged in mission towards the Jews at the same time as he was supporting and helping the few local Jewish Jesus-believers.<sup>69</sup> Moving forward, during the period between 1917 and 1967, their numbers only ranged from about a dozen up to a couple of hundred. Yet this period of two generations of Messianic Jews, despite the small number, was essential in shaping a collective identity and theology.<sup>70</sup>

Messianic Judaism in Israel is without doubt a history entangled with Protestant mission work. American missionaries, many of them women, had been present in the area since the 1820s, and especially from the 1890s, with the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA).<sup>71</sup> As the Balfour declaration supported the idea of the establishment of a Jewish homeland, Jews started to migrate “back” to “Zion.” At the same time, many Christian missionaries and church ministries arrived as they could spread the gospel freely in the area to the minority of the Jews present in a society whose inhabitants were mostly Muslims. However, the missionaries had a tough time as the newly arrived Jews were usually strong adherents of secular Jewish Zionism and had little, if any, interest in religion, and especially not in Jesus.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xxi. One later but successful attempt is Yad Hashmona, established as a *moshav shitufi* (“common village”) in the 1970s by Finnish missionaries who were soon joined by Messianic Jewish families.

<sup>69</sup> Faydra L. Shapiro, *Christian Zionism: Navigating the Jewish-Christian Border* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 143. Alexander had also been working for *London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews*, which later on and until today is known as the *Church's Ministry Among Jewish People* (CMJ).

<sup>70</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 62–63; Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” ii.

<sup>71</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 34–36, 143.

<sup>72</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 143–44; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 41–42. Ariel mentions a few examples of churches and mission organizations that

The first attempt to establish an independent Messianic Jewish congregation in Jerusalem occurred between 1925 and 1929, led by two Jewish believers, Hyman Jacobs and Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, accompanied by the Norwegian missionary Arne Jonsen. Jonsen wrote a statement of principles claiming that the Jewish believers around him represented a restoration of the New Testament era. Together they argued for the need to observe Jewish customs and holidays originating in the Hebrew Bible, such as circumcision, Sabbath, and Passover. The quest failed, however, as the Chicago Hebrew Mission that supported Jacobs intervened, partially because the mission society considered the congregation to be too Jewish<sup>73</sup>—thus demonstrating that, right from the beginning, in Israel, Jewish believers in Jesus struggled to construct or maintain their Jewish identity at the same time as they struggled with surrounding Christians.

Among other pioneers is Abram Poljak (1900–1963), worth mentioning as he was very active in forming a “united witness” of Messianic Jews in the land of Israel. Poljak authored works that include *The Cross in the Star of David* (1938),<sup>74</sup> the title clearly suggesting a blending of Jewish and Christian characteristics. His later anthology *Der Oelzweig (The Olive Branch)* consists of articles previously published in the periodical “Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde” between 1949 and 1950. Here he argues for a distinct Messianic Jewish identity, partly by referring to Rom 11 and the well-known olive tree metaphor,<sup>75</sup> a focus picked up in this study.

In the decades leading up to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Messianic Jewish believers were integrated into Protestant missionary establishments although some independent Messianic congregations were established in Jerusalem and other main cities such as Jaffa and Haifa. While believers longed for independence from Christianity,<sup>76</sup> most were connected in one way or another to English-speaking congregations or mission organizations that referred to them as “Hebrew Christians.” As Gershon Nerel points out, this caused semantic problems as it indicated that the Jesus-believing Jews had broken with their Jewish identity by becoming assimilated into churches.<sup>77</sup>

The situation was met by opposition from the believers themselves, who felt the need to develop their own unique identity. To give one example, the Hebrew Christian Fellowship of Palestine founded in 1931 used “Messianic Jews” as an

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arrived, such as the Southern Baptists, the Church of God, and the American Board of Missions to the Jews, while already existing ones, such as CMA, enlarged their business.

<sup>73</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” vii–viii; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 107.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” x.

<sup>75</sup> The periodical and a few other writings by Abram Poljak are made available at “Abram Poljak,” [https://vineofdauid.ffoz.org/remnant-repository/abram\\_poljak/](https://vineofdauid.ffoz.org/remnant-repository/abram_poljak/).

<sup>76</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 107; Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” vi.

<sup>77</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” ii–iii.

insider term, but “Hebrew Christian” for surrounding Christians. The usage of “Messianic Jews” served the aim of creating an interdenominational fellowship free from Gentile Christian influence, in keeping with the general tendency to avoid Christian terms and traditional Christian theology. The organization mentioned neither baptism nor the Trinity as practical or theological specifications for membership.<sup>78</sup> The fellowship instead formulated its requirements for membership as faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and “acceptance of the Old and New Testament as the word of God and as the rule for their faith and lives,”<sup>79</sup> further demonstrating the core role that the Bible played from early on in Messianic Jewish identity construction. Believers increasingly sought to connect with their Jewish roots and identity, without agreeing on *how* this should be expressed and practiced.

### After the Establishment of the State of Israel in 1948

The term *yehudim meshihiim*, “Messianic Jews,” came into common use after 1948. This identification enabled the believers to connect both to a modern Jewish nationality *and* to “biblical Judaism,” separating them from rabbinical Judaism upon which all mainstream Judaism is built. It also served in forming a collective memory reaching back to an imagined authentic core shared by the first Jewish disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem, thereby connecting “genealogically.”<sup>80</sup>

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was a watershed moment for the emerging Messianic Jewish movement in the region. While the land itself was considered important, around eighty Jewish believers chose to leave the country in the so-called Operation Mercy, carried out by the Jerusalem Anglican Ecclesiastical Authorities, for a new life in Liverpool as they feared living as Jesus-believing Jews in a Jewish state. This can be viewed as evidence that Messianic Jewish Zionism was not a strong, unified factor in the early days and displays a general fear of Jewish political power. Disunity developed among the few remaining Jewish believers. Most assimilated into regular churches, but a minority continued to emphasize their Jewish identity and integrated themselves into Israeli society as Messianic Jews.<sup>81</sup> This diversity among the Messianic believers is also visible in the various efforts directed towards founding independent fellowships. In 1950, for example, the Union of Messianic Jews was established, just to be replaced in 1954 by the Israeli Messianic Jewish Alliance, which also soon dissolved due to personal and

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<sup>78</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” ix–x. The organization changed name in 1933 to “The Hebrew Christian Alliance of Palestine and the Near East.”

<sup>79</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” ix–x.

<sup>80</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” iii–vii, xxiv.

<sup>81</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xi–xii.

theological disagreements concerning the role of Gentile Christians, together with external pressure from the churches that viewed them as Judaizers.<sup>82</sup>

At the same time as many local Messianic Jews left Israel, there was a mass immigration of Jews, primarily Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe or Jews coming from the Middle East and North Africa. From the West came missionaries inspired by the events of 1948, many of whom viewed the newborn State of Israel as a prophetic fulfillment signaling the end of times; American missionaries in particular played a fundamental role in the growing Messianic Jewish community from that point on. In fact, according to Ariel, the number of missionaries in Israel numbered up to several hundred and Jerusalem was considered the most evangelized city in the world during the 1950s. As the Israeli government maintained the legal practice deployed by the British mandate (from 1923 to 1948), Christians in Israel were still protected under the law of freedom of worship and as such were free to evangelize. The missionaries could work relatively freely, and the work of “planting” congregations flourished during the 1950s and 1960s as a number of Jews in Israel “came to faith in Jesus.”<sup>83</sup>

During this time Hebrew Christians from Europe immigrated to Israel and contributed to a “considerable growth,”<sup>84</sup> or a “massive *aliyah*,”<sup>85</sup> which is to exaggerate it. According to Akiva Cohen, new congregations were primarily established by Eastern European immigrants from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s who tried to maintain their Jewish identity and preferred to be independent rather than merging into established traditional Christian churches.<sup>86</sup> Ariel estimates the number of Messianic Jews to be around 300 in the mid-1960s, compared to a report made by the International Hebrew Christian Alliance from 1964 that claims that the number of Jewish converts to an evangelical faith was only about 160.<sup>87</sup> If the numbers are reliable, only twenty of these announced themselves as Christians in a demographic census conducted by the Israeli government in 1963. While missionaries probably tended to exaggerate the numbers, many Jews kept their faith in Jesus a secret.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xiii; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 108.

<sup>83</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 144–47. “‘Suddenly everybody seems to be ‘called of God’ to go to Jerusalem as a missionary,’” (p. 144) Joseph Cohn wrote when he was director of the American Board of Missions to the Jews.

<sup>84</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 63–64.

<sup>85</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” 17.

<sup>86</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 108.

<sup>87</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 162, 273, cf. Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 12–15.

<sup>88</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 162.

Messianic Jews adopted theological views similar to those found in different Protestant and evangelical circles, including their perspectives regarding Zionism and the land of Israel. For Messianic Jews, living in the State of Israel was considered something special and part of God’s restorative work. The “return of Jews to Zion” and the rising Zionist movement were considered prophetic. Messianic Jewish pioneers such as Moshe Ben-Meir and Ze’ev Kofsman, but also Solomon Ostrovsky and Hayim Haimoff, read biblical texts, such as Jesus’s words in Matt 24:32,<sup>89</sup> as referring to the national restoration of Israel as the Jewish homeland. Their own time was understood as a prophetic time with clear eschatological implications: the ingathering of the Jews and the establishment of the nation state were divine actions before the second coming of Christ and the millennial kingdom. Furthermore, as noted above, Rom 11 (especially v. 25) played an important role for Messianic Jews as they read this verse as having been fulfilled: the end of the Gentile era had arrived and now, they thought, their time as Messianic Jews had arrived and should be manifested, not only in Israel but in the worldwide church.<sup>90</sup> From a biblical point of view, this clearly shows the crucial role of biblical readings in forming not only a theology, but in unifying Messianic Jewish identity on a sociological level.

Another attempt to create a more Jewish Messianic meeting place occurred in 1958 when the “Israeli Messianic Assembly—Jerusalem Assembly”<sup>91</sup> was founded by Kofsman, Eva Kronhaus, and Rachel Grinberg. While the goal was to establish an independent umbrella organization for Messianic Jews, the Assembly came to serve more as a local congregation in Jerusalem. Kofsman had a sincere wish to restore the characteristics of the first-century Jerusalem assembly through contemporary Messianic Judaism. This led him, and the congregation, to abandon traditional, Hellenized Christian doctrines and terminology, instead using New Testament language in Hebrew.<sup>92</sup> Theologically, there was a focus on the crucified and resurrected Messiah, and atonement through his blood; practically, classic Christian language, traditions, and customs were neglected. Instead, they lived and encouraged a Jewish lifestyle, performing circumcision and other rituals, as well as celebrating Jewish feasts and the Shabbat.<sup>93</sup>

Hebrew-speaking worship was to large extent made possible by someone who proved to be important both for the missionary work and the local Jewish believers, namely, the Baptist pastor and New Testament scholar Robert Lindsey. Returning a

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<sup>89</sup> ““From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.” (Matt 24:32 NRSV)

<sup>90</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” iv, xviii–xvv.

<sup>91</sup> This is not the same one as the congregation that is today called “Jerusalem Assembly.”

<sup>92</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xv; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 108.

<sup>93</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xv–xxi.

second time to Jerusalem after World War II and remaining until 1987, he organized his denomination's extensive mission work. Baptists played an important role as missionaries in Israel especially in the 1950s and 1960s when several congregations were established. Over time, Lindsey also functioned as a patron for the Messianic Jews, whose groups often borrowed Baptist worship places for their own services. As Lindsey increasingly adopted charismatic expressions throughout his life, the Baptist congregations in Israel and also the Messianic movements connected to the Baptists likewise became more charismatic.<sup>94</sup> While Lindsey did not exactly base his work on a dispensationalist theology, Jews were considered the chosen people of God and the promises about the land of Israel still valid. Thus, Rom 11, along with other biblical texts, played a significant part in his, and others, motivations in forming a separate and unique Messianic Jewish identity. Based on a general understanding of the New Testament, Lindsey wrote, "A certainty is that a relationship exists between Jewry and God's plan of world salvation. The Jews are a remnant [cf. v. 5] body in spiritual decline who nevertheless remind themselves and the world of God's beginning of redemptive history."<sup>95</sup>

Lindsey's new translation of the New Testament into modern Hebrew came to be important for the growing Messianic Jewish movement. The so-called Delitzsch translation, in Lindsey's mind, was not only old but also archaic in style whereas his translation was supposedly more attractive to contemporary Jews.<sup>96</sup> Lindsey also compiled a dictionary for missionaries that created new words or translated and adapted evangelical Christian terms into Jewish and Hebrew terms that were found more attractive and comprehensible, particularly to young Israelis—terminology that proved very helpful in the following decades as Messianic Jewish believers increased in numbers.<sup>97</sup> The linguistic development was also greatly helped by the general Hebraization of Israeli society. It is quite fascinating that new Hebrew terms were developed by evangelical Christians based upon evangelical theology to separate the believers from Christianity at large, including the evangelical world. It is indeed ironic that this vernacular would draw a boundary between Messianic Jews and the broader Christian world although its core is distinctly Christian.

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<sup>94</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 154–55.

<sup>95</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 154. Quote from Lindsey's writings.

<sup>96</sup> Translated by Franz Delitzsch in the late-nineteenth century, it had been used by missionaries for decades. It was a translation from the New Testament Greek into a Hebrew more reminiscent of biblical than modern Hebrew, making the language, in Lindsey's eyes, stiff and not suitable for the modern context.

<sup>97</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 150, 155. The creation of a Messianic Jewish vernacular and how it helped shape identity was discussed and exemplified above.

## Growth after the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War

Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, as already mentioned, with the (re)unification of Jerusalem, spurred eschatological speculations among both Messianic Jews and evangelical Christians. Even more than in 1948, Messianic Jewish leaders such as Ben-Meir, Kofsmann, Poljak, Ostrovsky, and Haimoff all interpreted the political act of a unified Jerusalem under Jewish rule as a miracle, a divine act ending the Gentile era, again inspired by Rom 11 (especially v. 25, see more in Chapter Six)—among other biblical texts. Ideas that the end times were around the corner flourished in Jerusalem. Jewish believers were expected slowly to take over, at the same time as Antichrist would create chaos. Jerusalem played a crucial role in these speculations as the place from which the returning (Jewish) Messiah would rule the world.<sup>98</sup> Eschatological Zionism went hand in hand with patriotic Zionism, which was also the case for the surrounding Jewish and Christian society at that time. Defending and loving the State of Israel thus became, and still is, an important component of Messianic Jewish identity, and Messianic Jews are “good citizens” who normally serve in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).<sup>99</sup>

A few years later, following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the number of Messianic Jews in Israel grew significantly. The war itself impacted the general Israeli mentality in negative ways, which Ariel explains as follows:

The Israeli elite lost much of its self-confidence, and its faith in Zionism as an all-encompassing ideology, providing hope, meaning, and a sense of purpose, weakened considerably. With the fading away of a central secular national faith and the moral and spiritual vacuum it left, there was plenty of room for alternative faiths to make their way in the Israeli market.<sup>100</sup>

In Ariel's understanding then, the “spiritual vacuum” and a general sense of being “lost” made more Israelis open to Messianic Judaism, alongside other new religious movements or Asian philosophies. Messianic Judaism was no longer perceived as a threat to Jewish survival among the secularists but as one among many new religious movements in Israel. Attitudes changed in Jewish society at large, to the extent that, as noted by Ariel, in a public poll conducted in the late 1980s most Israelis expressed acceptance of their fellow Jewish believers in Jesus. This, combined with large numbers of evangelical groups in Israel, created improved opportunities for missionaries, who changed their strategies from focusing on poor, immigrant

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<sup>98</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xxii; cf. Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 42.

<sup>99</sup> Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xxii–iii. Conscription to the IDF is mandatory for Jewish citizens in Israel where men customarily serve for three years and women for two.

<sup>100</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 272.

neighborhoods to working primarily with Israeli youth and young adults, which proved successful.<sup>101</sup>

As the transformed Israeli society was less hostile towards new religious movements, earlier mission efforts now saw results in increased numbers of new believers. The Messianic terminology also contributed to reaching out successfully. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Messianic Jewish congregations, helped by traditional mission work in the country, played the biggest role in proclaiming the gospel and increasingly took on the role as *the* hub for evangelizing Israeli Jews. The number of Messianic Jewish congregations and similar groupings in Israel grew significantly during these two decades, with the home-based fellowships that were established helping to form a unique Messianic Jewish identity, relatively independent from Gentile church influence. Many of these were *sabras*—Israelis born and raised—who had come to faith in Jesus in Israel. Others were immigrants, from the United States and Ethiopia, but primarily from the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>102</sup> Messianic Judaism in Israel has also helped many intermarried couples (one Jewish and one non-Jewish) from immigrant countries find their place both in Israeli society and in a Jesus-believing community.<sup>103</sup>

While hard and fast numbers of Messianic Jewish adherents are always difficult to come by, there are large differences in estimating the number of believers in Israel during the 1980s and 1990s. According to two sources, as an illustration, the number of Messianic Jews was about 3,000 in the mid-1980s and around 6,000 in the mid-1990s<sup>104</sup> compared to somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000 in the 1980s followed by between 1,500 and 7,000 in the 1990s.<sup>105</sup> In the first calculation the growth is probably more substantial, while the second estimation more clearly displays the difficulties in knowing the exact number of Messianic Jews.

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<sup>101</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 272–73. Ariel writes vaguely that “many” became part of the Messianic Jewish congregations; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 110.

<sup>102</sup> There were several huge waves of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union area. Focusing on the Messianic Jewish part of the story, many Jewish Jesus-believers and also some Christians managed to get Israeli citizenship during these times and planted congregations in Israel. Around the time of the collapse of communism, many Christians were intensely engaged in evangelizing in the area and helping Jewish believers to make *aliyah* to Israel. One such example is the so-called “Operation Jabotinsky,” a Swedish-based organization who have helped—both practically and financially—more than 13,000 Jews move to Israel. These commitments have been heavily influenced by eschatological convictions of “bringing the Jews back home” to hasten the return of Jesus. Consequently, about half of the Messianic Jews in Israel today are from, or have roots in, this area. See more, for example, in Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 282; Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 38–39, 49–52.

<sup>103</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 273–74; Nerel, “Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967),” xxiv.

<sup>104</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 273.

<sup>105</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 65–67.

What is clear, however, is that Israel witnessed a growth in numbers of Messianic Jewish believers. In fact, the estimations given by Caspari Center in their quantitative study *Facts and Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel* (1999) reports that of eighty-one surveyed congregations, fifty-seven of these were established during the 1990s as a result of immigration.<sup>106</sup> While some of these are Jews coming to faith in Israel, most of the immigrants had already embraced faith in Jesus. During the 1980s and onwards, the Messianic Jewish scene in Israel became totally different from a decade earlier.<sup>107</sup> Messianic Judaism in Israel is therefore to a large extent an immigrant movement. Issues connected with Jewish immigration to Israel (*aliyah*) for Messianic Jews as well as contemporary outreach work are discussed later on (see Chapter Six).

Alongside this numeric growth, a stronger Messianic Jewish identity developed at the same time as it took on different flavors, some closer to Judaism and Torah observance (traditional-Jewish like *Bet*), others maintaining expressions, styles, and theology found within evangelical Christianity (evangelical-Jewish like *Alef*). Generally though, they adopted the missionaries' views of "God's living Word" and Zionism, without assimilating into Gentile Christianity,<sup>108</sup> along with the idea of being in the midst of a cosmic drama, prevalent not only in evangelical thought but also in mainstream Jewish theology, especially religious Zionism.<sup>109</sup> All this resulted in a perception of being re-rooted to the God of Israel in "the Promised Land." Meanwhile, Messianic Jews developed a strong feeling of connection and continuation with Jesus's Jewish disciples two thousand years ago.<sup>110</sup> These negotiations, to a large extent, occurred in conversation with the Bible.

## Characteristics of Messianic Judaism in Israel Today

In this section the focus shifts from history to contemporary times. In dialogue with the vignettes above from *Alef* and *Bet*, the purpose is to picture the many faces of Messianic Judaism in Israel, while its place in Israeli society and relationships with Christians and Jews are left until Part II. Both Ariel and the Caspari study identify three dividing lines between the congregations in Israel, namely, (1) language, (2)

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<sup>106</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 50.

<sup>107</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 272–73.

<sup>108</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 164; Nerel, "Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967)," xxiv; Cohen, "Messianic Jews," 109.

<sup>109</sup> In Jewish thinking, the "return to Zion" is meaningful on a cosmic, redemptive level. The formulation of the blessing of the State of Israel displays its relationship to the final redemption.

<sup>110</sup> Nerel, "Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917–1967)," xxiv.

charismatic or non-charismatic, and (3) “Jewishness”—in other words, the extent of their Jewish traditions, Torah observance, Jewish rituals, and closeness to rabbinic Judaism and religious Judaism, both theologically and practically.<sup>111</sup> Based on the Bible-reading interviews for this study, and strengthened by my participant observation in Messianic Jewish congregations, the last factor seems to be the most vital one. The dividing line is, again, whether the believers most emphasize the “Jewish” or the “messianic” part of their identity. The sections herein should illustrate the broad diversity, struggles, and fluidity within Messianic Judaism today, while establishing a firm foundation of who and what Messianic Judaism is as a framework for the coming chapters where the empirical-religious readings of Rom 11 are analyzed.

## Demographics and Language as Identity Markers

The question—who is a Jew?—has been present throughout the history of Judaism. Different streams of Judaism offer different answers. Perhaps the only thing the major denominations within Judaism today agree on is that being Jewish *and* believing in Jesus is incompatible.<sup>112</sup> Messianic Jews, obviously, do not agree; faith in Jesus, they would argue, makes them fully rooted and complete in their Jewish identity. As we saw in the historical review, self-identification as Messianic Jews emerged as a result of distancing themselves from Christianity. Coming to faith is not viewed as a conversion but rather as a return to the God of Israel, it is a process of routing back to one’s Jewishness.<sup>113</sup> This appears in many forms, but it is not unusual that Messianic believers start to (re)discover their Jewishness and become “more Jewish” in terms of practice once they also embrace faith in Jesus. This seems to be the case especially if the believer comes from a secular Jewish background. The Messianic Jewish landscape in Israel is also extremely diverse not only in regard to Jewish practices, but also to issues of language, culture, and identification.

Messianic Jews have also adopted the question of “who is a Jew?”, but turned it into one relating to Messianic Jews, a question of both terminology and practicalities around who to include and not. Additionally, scholars do not always explicitly state

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<sup>111</sup> E.g., Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 274–75; cf. Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 26–27. Zelson Warshawsky also notices the dividing line between charismatic and non-charismatic congregations, with American Messianic Jews in particular introducing charismatic congregations to Israel during the 1990s. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 110–11.

<sup>112</sup> Eliezer Ben-Rafael, “A Paradigm of Jewish Identities,” in *A Quest for Identity: Post War Jewish Biographies*, ed. Yitzhak Kashti (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1996), 187–203, 194; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xii*.

<sup>113</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xii*, 61, 68–69; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 143–46.

whom they have included in their numbers. This ambivalence is reflected in the difficulties of getting reasonably correct statistics. This is important to bear in mind, as both researchers and religious laypeople usually have a “for” or “against” attitude towards Messianic Jews, and thus tend to exaggerate or downplay the numbers. Regardless of perspective, however, adherents to Messianic Judaism are growing in numbers, albeit silently and slowly. Ariel, in contrast, states that Messianic Judaism might be the fastest growing religious movement in Israel today, a statement that, nonetheless, should be viewed with some caution.<sup>114</sup>

The differences and difficulties in defining who counts as a Messianic Jew is related to a number of issues. First, there is the Orthodox Jewish understanding that, at a minimum, a Jew is a person born of a Jewish mother or who converts to Judaism according to Jewish law. Probably fewer than 3,000 Messianic Jews in Israel belong to this category.<sup>115</sup> Second, the State of Israel mobilizes a specific definition of Jewishness for the purposes of the Law of Return, where having at least one Jewish grandparent allows a person to gain citizenship in the Jewish state without naturalization, but excludes those who have “changed religion,” which the State of Israel considers Messianic Jews to have done. Third, there is the question of whether to include underage persons in that definition. Additional factors also affect findings, such as whether the following are included in the statistics or not: (i) only members of a congregations are counted, which gives a much lower number than actual adherents;<sup>116</sup> (ii) self-identifying as a Messianic Jew regardless of ethnic origin; (iii) non-Jewish spouses to Messianic Jews that are part of a Messianic Jewish community; (iv) unknown/secret Jewish believers, sometimes called “Nicodemians,” who fear their surroundings;<sup>117</sup> and finally, (v) Messianic Gentiles.<sup>118</sup>

This clearly shows that even within the Messianic Jewish movement the definition of who to include in the in-group can vary greatly. When the Caspari Center undertook their quantitative research during the 1990s they primarily used questionnaires, but when asking Messianic Jewish leaders about the number of believers many answered, “I don’t know,” giving estimates ranging from 500 up to

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<sup>114</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 275.

<sup>115</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109 incl. n. 20.

<sup>116</sup> There are no official membership records in most of the congregations, even less so in house groups, cf. Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 37–39.

<sup>117</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 24. The expression is inspired by the story in the Gospel of John where a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night to be taught by him. The night reference is usually interpreted to mean that he came in secret and wanted no one to know about his meeting with Jesus.

<sup>118</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 107–09; see also the articles by John Dulin and Hillary Kaell; Dulin, “Reversing Rupture,” 601–34; Kaell, “Born-again seeking,” 42–65.

50,000.<sup>119</sup> The Bible-reading interviews that touched on the topic displayed the same uncertainty.

In an effort to provide a rough figure, one can bring some of the available numbers together and come up with approximately 10,000 Messianic Jewish believers around the year 2010, relying on the “Law of Return” definition and not including underage and Messianic Gentiles.<sup>120</sup> The soon-to-be-published (hopefully autumn 2021) numbers in the updated version of *Facts and Myths* about a decade later estimate there to be about 8,000 adults belonging to Messianic Jewish congregations and a few hundred others that stand outside of a congregational community.<sup>121</sup> In 2019 the Caspari Center estimated the number of congregations to be around 240 in Israel<sup>122</sup> and in the same, to-date unpublished, numbers slightly later in time, 280 congregations and house groups,<sup>123</sup> which is a significant increase on the numbers mentioned above. From my point of view and based on the statistics above, by the beginning of the 2020s it is reasonable to suggest a slightly higher number, given further immigration of Jewish believers, more coming to the faith, and especially the rise of a new generation. My estimate would be around 10,000 to 15,000 Jews confessing faith in Jesus, using the same criteria as above. Regardless of exact numbers, there is without doubt a slow but steady growth, some of which comes from a new generation growing up in Messianic Jewish congregations. While growing numbers are vital for the survival of the movement, also very important is the *phenomenon* of Jewish believers that indicates, to them, that God is acting according to a divine plan.

The majority of congregations and house groups are found in the Jerusalem area, along with the highest diversity of styles, but Messianic Jewish congregations are found all over Israel, although there are only a small number of believers in the Palestinian territories.<sup>124</sup> Other areas with large numbers of believers and congregations are the Tel Aviv area, north around Haifa, and around Tiberias in the northeast; in Tiberias and around Nazareth one finds Messianic Jews worshipping side by side with Arab Christians.

Regarding demographics, *sabras* (native-born Israelis) comprise approximately 10 percent of the Messianic Jewish population in Israel, whereas the remaining 90

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<sup>119</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 58.

<sup>120</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 17–18, 57, 72; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 42; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109–10 incl. n. 20.

<sup>121</sup> E-mail communication with one of its editors, August 2021.

<sup>122</sup> “How Many Messianic Jews in Israel?,” <https://www.caspari.com/2019/10/07/how-many-messianic-jews-in-israel/>.

<sup>123</sup> E-mail communication with one of its editors, August 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 27–28.

percent are *olim* (immigrants) according to one estimate from around 2010.<sup>125</sup> Another assessment, more plausible to my mind, has placed the balance at 20 to 25 percent *sabras* and 75 to 80 percent *olim*.<sup>126</sup> Keeping to the first numbers, about 50 percent of the *olim* are Russians or from the former Soviet Union area. Another 25 percent of these are native English, German, French, or Spanish speakers but with a majority of Americans. Approximately 5 percent are Ethiopians, with the remainder consisting of people from other parts of the world.<sup>127</sup> According to coming numbers from the Caspari Center, only about 5 percent of the Messianic Jewish leaders in Israel are *sabras*.<sup>128</sup> Two further characteristics should be noted: many Messianic Jews in Israel have a “mixed” background, with one Jewish and one Christian parent;<sup>129</sup> second, the massive proportion of immigrants in a movement that strives to create an *Israeli* Messianic Jewish identity is ironic.

Another identity marker but also dividing line within the Messianic Jewish world in Israel is that of spoken language. Both *sabra* and *olim* congregations operate in multiple languages, including English, Russian, and Amharic, alongside Hebrew, while a common understanding is that about half of the congregations are Hebrew-speaking during worship.<sup>130</sup> For example, in the two vignettes above, the services with their songs, sermons, prayers, and so forth are conducted in Hebrew. Yet even in these cases, translation into English is often available, and in some congregations into several different languages. Choosing Hebrew functions both as an internal willingness to be rooted in Hebrew-speaking Israeli society, and as a way to emphasize the Jewishness of the Jesus movement. However, my observations in Jerusalem suggest that many congregations might use Hebrew during the service and use English, Russian, or another language before and after the worship service. This simultaneously displays the different roots and multivocal landscape of Messianic Jewish identities in Israel.

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<sup>125</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109–10 incl. n. 22.

<sup>126</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43. Definition is always a tricky business and the principles for categorizing people in each group are not always clear—for example, whether the child of immigrant parents is considered a *sabra* or not. This is also similar to the new numbers to be published by the Caspari Center; e-mail communication with one of its editors, August 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109–10 incl. n. 22. The large number of Russians is explained by the wave of immigrants during the 1990s, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. During this decade about one million Russians arrived in Israel, which before that had a population of approximately four million, Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 42–43.

<sup>128</sup> E-mail communication with one of its editors, August 2021.

<sup>129</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 70–72.

<sup>130</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 72.

## Congregational Expressions of Jewishness as Identity Markers

This section focuses on rituals and expressions, on *how* a Messianic Jewish identity is expressed and constructed during prayers and worship, with specific attention to the vignettes from congregations *Alef* and *Bet* that introduced this chapter. As the two portraits showed, Judaism and Jewishness are displayed differently. The interviews confirmed this, with several of the readers referring to the Messianic Jewish congregations as “more” or “less” Jewish, on the basis of how the service was composed. Nahum, who leads a synagogue similar to *Bet*, described his place as “very Jewish.”<sup>131</sup> In contrast, Chayim says of the place he pastors, “Jewishness is not a flag we lift up here, [only] Jesus.”<sup>132</sup> As Part II of this study also shows, most identity negotiations occur around the concept of Jewishness—of how “Jewish” one should be in practice. Messianic Judaism in Israel is diverse when it comes to the delicate task of appearing relevant to the surrounding society while still being true to its own convictions, and congregations and house groups have all incorporated different amounts and versions of Jewish traditions and expressions.<sup>133</sup>

As already noted, Messianic Judaism is often perceived as being in-between Judaism and Christianity in terms of theology, expressions, and aesthetics among believers, both in congregational and everyday life settings. As Messianic Judaism is a complex phenomenon, categorizing it on such a two-way spectrum is naturally a simplification, yet illuminating as there is a need to conceptualize and analyze the diversity. While the participants in this study, scholars such as Cohen<sup>134</sup> and Reason,<sup>135</sup> and Messianic Jews themselves contrast “Jewish” and “evangelical” on a spectrum to describe the variety of Messianic Judaism, I think there is need to cultivate this terminology academically. Therefore, to nuance this conceptualization, I suggest using, as mentioned above, the terms “traditional-Jewish” and “evangelical-Jewish.” While not perfect either, I think they better signal what is at stake in different congregations’ expressions and identifications. “Jewish” exists in both designations as there is an emphasis by all believers (to different degrees) on their Jewishness and Jewish identity as Messianic *Jews*, and it is, as

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<sup>131</sup> “Nahum.”; cf. “Michael and Asher,” February 2016.; “Natan,” November 2015.

<sup>132</sup> “Chayim,” January 2020.

<sup>133</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 274; Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 26–29.

<sup>134</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109–10 incl. nn. 18–19. Cohen mentions two different pioneering communities, *Ohalei Rahamim* (“Tents of Mercy”) in Kiryat Yam being “a somewhat Torah-observant community” with “a Jewish ethos in terms of liturgy,” and at the opposite end in theology and expression, *Kehilat Chesed V’Emet* (“Grace and Truth Christian Assembly”) in Rehovot (nowadays in Rishon Le Tziyon), displaying a nondenominational but close to Reformed Baptist tradition but with celebration of the Jewish holidays. The Hebrew transcriptions here are the ones that the congregations usually use.

<sup>135</sup> “Competing Trends,” Reason.

such, an important aspect to highlight. The “traditional” in traditional-Jewish denotes a congregation that is closer to mainstream religious Jewish communities regarding liturgical expressions, aesthetics, and Torah observance, and close to the Jewish community on a sociological level. The “evangelical” in evangelical-Jewish expresses the opposite, namely, a congregation closer to the Christian, or more specifically, evangelical world in terms of these parameters.

When I analyze the vignettes and thus the identity negotiations in play, I use this spectrum of traditional-Jewish and evangelical-Jewish to discuss rituals, expressions, and aesthetics. The Caspari study also used the categories of *liturgical/free* and *synagogue similar/church similar* in their mapping of Messianic Jewish life in Israel.<sup>136</sup> In fact, the forms of worship in Messianic Jewish congregations in Israel range from being almost a copy of an Orthodox Jewish synagogue service to a Protestant Christian service with an evangelical, Pentecostal, or Baptist way of piety and expression. This is not only confirmed by older studies, but my own observations and interviews as well. Some leaders describe themselves as “almost like Orthodox Jewish” in expression, whereas others as “evangelical Messianic Jews,” designations that only further support my suggested terminology above. Most are somewhere in between, partly because mixing elements from both ends is common.

The two vignettes at the beginning of this chapter illustrate this: *Alef* is an evangelical-Jewish congregation, partly free, charismatic, and church-like, whereas *Bet* clearly corresponds to a traditional-Jewish, liturgical, non-charismatic, and synagogue-like congregation. This form of classification has been confirmed and similarly expressed by two Messianic Jews, one a theologian and the other a congregational leader, when discussing the relationship between the *Torah* and the *Spirit*, and their different roles within Messianic Jewish life and theology.<sup>137</sup> It should be highlighted that most congregations in Israel lean towards evangelical Christianity in theology and expressions rather than toward traditional synagogue practice, regardless of branches (Orthodox, Reform, etc.), including a general suspicion of rabbinic Judaism.<sup>138</sup> Yet another rhetorical expression of this different emphasis on Jewishness is that the leader in *Alef* referred to himself as the *roeh* (shepherd), thus avoiding rabbinic terminology, along with a majority of other Israeli leaders, whereas the leader in *Bet* identifies himself with the classic Jewish

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<sup>136</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 39–41.

<sup>137</sup> Joshua M. Lessard and Jennifer M. Rosner, *At the Foot of the Mountain: Two Views on Torah and the Spirit* (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2021).

<sup>138</sup> This is my clear impression from having visited several congregations during fieldwork, as well as before and after it. Daniel Juster, “The American and Israeli Messianic Jewish Movements,” in *Chosen to Follow: Jewish Believers through History and Today*, eds. Knut H. Høyland and Jakob W. Nielsen (Jerusalem: Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 2012), 127–36, 133; Mark S. Kinzer, personal conversation, February 2021.

title *rabbi* (“rabbi” is a much more common term in the American Messianic Jewish movement). Some places are rather difficult to identify as Messianic Jewish, because they so closely resemble an evangelical or Protestant place of worship: one gathers on Friday evenings, for example, and the only typical—however important—expression of Jewish belonging is the lighting of Shabbat candles as part of their service. Using a traditional Jewish blessing, they have added changes to include “Yeshua”: “*Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Haolam, asher qedshanu Bedam Yeshua vtsivano lehiot or Haolam!*” (“Blessed are You Lord, our God King of the universe, who has sanctified us in the blood of Jesus and commanded us to be light of the world”).<sup>139</sup> Few of the more evangelically oriented congregations include the weekly *parashah* (Torah portion) or have their own *sefer Torah* (Torah scroll).<sup>140</sup> While the numbers are uncertain, the Caspari study shows that a majority of the congregations operating during the 1990s did *not* resemble a synagogue either in theology or practice.<sup>141</sup> This is also my clear impression today. However, one should remember that all variations and combinations exist, and there are always people, both insiders and outsiders, who would object to this analytical division.

The first vignette, *Alef*, presents a congregation leaning towards the evangelical-Jewish side of the spectrum with, for example, a well-organized, and thus liturgical, celebration of the Lord’s Supper. There is liturgical structure although some elements, such as the worship, are rather free, spontaneous, and charismatic. At the same time, this specific congregation also has clear Jewish elements, such as the *hanukkiyah* and the singing of the *Shema*. The *Shema* is a very common Jewish identity marker among all Messianic Jewish congregations as it aligns believers in a clear and simple way with the broader Jewish world. There are other congregations much less Jewish in expression and much more church-similar. Choosing *Alef* to figure in this description might seem an odd choice then, but it represents an interesting case where a unique Messianic Jewish identity is expressed through its intermingling of “traditional” Jewish and Christian expressions.

Another central means for creating identity are aesthetics and symbols. Regardless of whether the worship space is most reminiscent of a synagogue or a neutral and austere congregation hall, the congregations have deliberately made their choices to attract possible new believers from either religious or secular Jewish backgrounds.<sup>142</sup> Groups that rent space from churches for legal or financial reasons

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<sup>139</sup> The blessing was written with Hebrew letters, as well as transliterated, and was printed on a card next to the candles so that anyone who was called up for this could lead the blessing whether they knew it by heart or not. Transliteration original. The translation is mine.

<sup>140</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109 incl. n. 16.

<sup>141</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 28–29, 68–69.

<sup>142</sup> Eidsheim, “Negotiating a Messianic Identity,” 60–61.

cannot significantly impact it, whereas those who own the place can decorate it as they prefer; in the latter cases, Christian symbols are usually nowhere to be seen. Indeed, crosses, baptismal fonts, altars, and similar are rare even in those congregations with a more pronounced Christian character. This serves as way to distance themselves from “Hellenized,” institutionalized Christianity that is perceived as “dead in the spirit,” and to emphasize their Jewish identity. Representations of the cross are avoided, primarily due to the anti-Judaism and forced conversions of the past rather than theological reasons. Like evangelicals, Messianic Jews tend to put more emphasis on “the resurrected Messiah of Israel,” than on Jesus’s death. When asking Messianic Jews at *Alef* about the aesthetics of their worship space, they simply answered that material objects should not stand in the way of true and authentic worship of the Messiah. This is reminiscent of what Matthew Engelke refers to as the “fantasy of immediacy,” that is, the evangelical Protestant idea of having “a direct relationship” with God, one free from material trappings.<sup>143</sup> This ideology is picked up in Messianic Jewish congregations, increasingly so the closer they are to a Protestant tradition. Correspondingly, congregations closer to Jewish life and practice seem to have fewer problems with material expressions of piety.

Most congregations’ worship halls do not resemble synagogues in design. A few, however, have Jewish representations such as Shabbat candles, *menorahs*, *shofars*, or Stars of David, while others have none or they are more hidden. Jewish symbols demonstrate the believers’ belonging to a Jewish milieu and to Judaism but are more often used to signify a cultural rather than religious belonging. In *Alef* the worship team blows the *shofar* during each service to proclaim joyfully that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah and to impart eschatological vibes,<sup>144</sup> whereas in mainstream Judaism it is blown in the month of Elul, the time of repentance leading up to the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). The presence and use of some material objects are actively grounded in the Bible, while others belong to later Jewish tradition, such as Shabbat lights. Many congregations put

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<sup>143</sup> Matthew Engelke, “Number and the Imagination of Global Christianity; or, Mediation and Immediacy in the Work of Alain Badiou,” *SAQ* 109:4 (2010): 811–29, 811–12.

<sup>144</sup> In Revelations, there are repeated references to angels blowing a “trumpet,” to announce end-time chaos and judgment. This scenario ends with the messianic era beginning: “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.’” (Rev 11:15 NRSV) Therefore, the usage of the *shofar* carries eschatological implications. Further discussion on Messianic Jewish understandings of the end times are discussed later on (see Chapter Six).

quotes or illustrations from the Bible on the walls for the gathered to contemplate, further confirming the prominent place of the Bible.<sup>145</sup>

In a discussion of space, art, and identity, Christine Eidsheim argues similarly that the division between Christian-oriented versus Jewish-oriented physical elements basically circles around the concepts of *worship/prayer*; I would clarify that “prayer” refers to *reading* traditional Jewish prayers whereas “worship” in a musical way is more free-style and charismatic in a “happy-clappy” way, as in many evangelical congregations.<sup>146</sup> Apart from teaching, worship is a central ritual that takes up both time and physical space in most evangelical-Jewish Messianic Jewish congregations, especially if they are also charismatic in character. This is visible in *Alef*, but also in many other congregations. Worshipping by singing, standing up, playing, and raising hands in the air, or sometimes dancing, are means of praising. The musical setting is often similar to that found in evangelical churches. The lyrics are simple and repetitive, usually taken from the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, and accompanied by traditional Jewish melodies that come together to create a distinct musical style in Messianic Jewish worship.<sup>147</sup> There still remains, however, a need for developing a more vernacular Israeli Messianic style of worship music.<sup>148</sup> Screens are often used to display the songs, while the only book that people might thumb is the Bible. As these congregations usually have a large worship team with singers and instruments, the Caspari study notes that congregations founded in recent decades usually have a stage as the focus,<sup>149</sup> a physical center helping the believers to worship, but also from which to preach the Bible.

By contrast, *Bet* presents a Messianic Jewish synagogue with a strong traditional-Jewish character whose focus is on prayer. The service is built around the customary prayers from the traditional *Koren Siddur* (not customized for Messianic Jews but for mainstream Jewish society)—thus keeping a synagogue liturgy—a feature of which is the repeated emphasis on the land of Israel and the return of the Jews to the land of Israel. There is only a small number of congregations adhering to this style in Israel, but they find pride and an “authentic” identity in (still) praying and living a more Jewish observant lifestyle that is also visible in the greater prevalence of religious Jewish clothing. Distancing themselves from a more common form of

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<sup>145</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 28–29; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109 incl. n. 16; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43; cf. Eidsheim, “Negotiating a Messianic Identity,” 32, 38–39, 49.

<sup>146</sup> Eidsheim, “Negotiating a Messianic Identity,” 78–81.

<sup>147</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 111 incl. n. 25. There is also an annual music conference for producing new worship songs in Hebrew. See also Seth N. Klayman, “Messianic Jewish Worship and Prayer,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 51–60, 51–53.

<sup>148</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 114–15.

<sup>149</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 28–29.

Messianic Judaism, such as in *Alef*, some congregants prefer the identification “Jewish messianists,” which strongly emphasizes their Jewishness and less significantly the Messianic. A few small adjustments are made in the prayers to indicate Messianic identity, such as in the beginning of the *Amidah* prayer when the believers pray, “Lord, open my lips that my mouth may proclaim the purpose of salvation/the name of Yeshua,” and the Lord’s Prayer, but it is non-charismatic and there is no musical accompaniment. Instead, the cantor leads the prayers and creates a rhythm by clapping to promote *kavanah*, the inner directedness of the heart. In terms of ritual, the only typical Christian element is the addition of a very short Lord’s Supper liturgy at the end of the service. Neither Christian nor national symbols or aesthetics are displayed. Instead, typical synagogue attributes, such as the *aron qodesh*, the ark with the Torah scrolls, and the *bimah*, the platform from where the Torah is read, are displayed with their attached rituals and uses. The *bimah* is the physical center from which the prayers and readings are conducted, but also for preaching the Bible.

Another important symbol that is common in both evangelical-Jewish and traditional-Jewish congregations is the Israeli flag, as featured in *Alef*. With this, the believers signal their *national* connection to Judaism, the Jewish people, and the State of Israel. It also serves as a kind of shorthand reminder of promises about “the Holy Land:” those fulfilled and those to be fulfilled. The flag functions emically as a religious and national symbol at the same time although the importance ascribed to the land is also apparent in the extensive preaching on the land that figures in both *Alef* and *Bet*. Furthermore, Messianic Jews often express a call to bless the land according to their reading of Scripture, resulting in many prayers and prayer meetings for the State of Israel.<sup>150</sup>

## Basic Theological Understandings

Both *Alef* and *Bet*, despite their differences in expression and aesthetics, present one important similarity that should not be neglected: the importance of reading “the living Word of God.”<sup>151</sup> The Bible is central both as a text and as an object, something to read, sing, talk about, and let direct one’s life after (see more in Chapters One and Three). In my experience, in those cases where faith statements exist, they always, and this is important for this study, emphasize the sole authority of the Bible. The Bible is of utmost importance, and out of the Bible comes doctrinal convictions and lifestyle—it thus displays an approach characterized as *identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading*. There are, in other words, clear overlaps

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<sup>150</sup> Cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 103.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 109 incl. n. 18.

between Messianic Jews and evangelicals in terms of biblical ideology, based on their Protestant heritage. It should, however, also be noted that many traditional-Jewish congregations ascribe some authority to post-biblical Jewish traditions and literature, something that evangelical-Jewish do not. Most leaders preach with the Bible in hand or in front of them, with no written notes in sight. Eidsheim notes the importance of the stage or the *bimah* together with the *aron qodesh*, for the *drashah* (sermon), which also is very centered on the Bible.<sup>152</sup> The organization of space testifies to the significance of the Bible within Messianic Judaism, regardless of what form the congregation takes. While readings from the Hebrew Bible always take place, readings from *Haberit Hahadashah* (the New Testament) are not necessarily an integral part of every service, but rather figure in the preaching alone.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, as in both examples and many other Messianic Jewish congregations and house groups, the rhetoric usually contains evangelical Christian themes such as Jesus being the only savior and “the infallibility of the Word.” Biblical prophecy is yet another theme of interest, linking the biblical texts and events to the present in a rhetoric of present or future fulfillment, as the biblical ideology is one of the Bible as the “living Word of God.” Another popular theme, as mentioned, in sermons is that of the land of Israel, both textually and in the present, displayed both in *Alef* and *Bet*.

As Messianic *Jews*, the believers place a very strong emphasis on both their Jewish roots and the claim that faith in Jesus is fully compatible with being Jewish, which directs all their theological commitments. The hermeneutical focus on Jewishness, and reading the New Testament from a Jewish perspective, is given high(est) authority. As noted in the historical overview above, the contemporary movement finds legitimate support and a genealogy in the first Jewish Jesus-believing communities, as reported in the New Testament writings, which legitimize the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement with a biblical foundation. Using Hebrew terms is, as noted, one way to stress this ideology.

While all Messianic Jews are rooted in the Bible and in the land of Israel, they remain in search of an “authentic” theological and practical Messianic Jewish identity. According to the Caspari study, however, most congregations lack a written faith statement, and have not dealt with more theologically oriented questions, such as the classic Christian doctrines on the Trinity and Jesus as fully human and fully divine,<sup>154</sup> although Zelson Warshawsky reports on a small number of Messianic Jewish conferences and articles that have started discussing some of these questions.<sup>155</sup> Some believers would condemn these Christian teachings as

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<sup>152</sup> Eidsheim, “Negotiating a Messianic Identity,” 58–59, see also 38–39, 44.

<sup>153</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 40–41.

<sup>154</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 29–34.

<sup>155</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 140.

pagan influences or as merely irrelevant, while others have not (yet) touched upon the issues because of the relatively recent emergence of the movement, or, as one participant put it, “because we people are busy with practical things.”<sup>156</sup>

On a similar note, other theological concerns, if relatable to a perceived Hellenized Christianity or liberal Christian theology, are by some perceived as stepping stones for “getting back to the real thing” of faith and what the Bible “says.” At the same time, some Messianic Jews have simply adopted the theology and faith declaration of their Christian “parent” church or mission organization; one founded by Baptists, for example, tends to retain Baptist teachings. Generally speaking, the doctrines that are pronounced adhere to a typical evangelical Protestant theology in areas of Christology, soteriology, and eschatology, to which Zionist convictions are added. Personal identity transformation is also highlighted as part of living a holy life that witnesses about Jesus.<sup>157</sup> Dual covenant teaching, like “Torah for the Jews, Jesus for the Gentiles,” is vehemently rejected—Jesus alone is the savior of both Jew and non-Jew.<sup>158</sup>

There is one way of determining, Reason argues, whether a Messianic Jewish congregation relates more closely to the evangelical or the Jewish world. Towards the evangelical-Jewish end of the spectrum, there is a primary distinction made between a believer in Jesus and a nonbeliever, whereas at the traditional-Jewish end it is between Jew and Gentile (as in mainstream Judaism).<sup>159</sup> Similarly, another characteristic of Messianic Jewish theology is the importance of a separation between Israel and the Church *now*, and not only in the future (as classic dispensationalism views it),<sup>160</sup> based upon a Messianic Jewish reading of Scripture. This distinctiveness and relations between Jew and non-Jew (see Chapter Five) and time issues (see Chapter Six) are further discussed in Part II in relation to readings of Rom 11.

Focusing on Jewishness and upholding a distinction between Jew and non-Jew, Messianic Jews are united in having a solid focus on promoting a post-supersessionist theology. As already discussed (see Chapter One and also Part II), there is a strong rejection of all forms of replacement theology, in other words, of a theology that argues that God has replaced the Jewish people with the Church. Israel, for them, remains the covenantal people, the historic Israel, of which

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<sup>156</sup> “Andrei,” August 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 28–34; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 88, 143–46; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 44; cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 74; Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*. Harvey discusses different existing theological trends within the Messianic Jewish movement.

<sup>158</sup> “Competing Trends,” Reason.; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 144.

<sup>159</sup> “Competing Trends,” Reason.

<sup>160</sup> “Competing Trends,” Reason.

Messianic Jews are a part as *Jewish* Jesus-believers.<sup>161</sup> Messianic Jews recurrently talk about “the Covenant”—or covenantal fidelity—asserting that God is faithful to the covenant made with the Jewish people. Messianic Jews have created their own historiography, one restoring a “true” faith as beginning with Jesus and his Jewish disciples, which thus serves as the basis for claiming Jewishness as opposed to being perceived as Christians.<sup>162</sup>

One element visible in both *Alef* and *Bet* that is important for all the Messianic Jewish congregations and house groups is the *qidush* (the Lord’s Supper). Both of the congregations that introduced this chapter celebrate communion but in quite distinctive ways: the first example had a rather elaborate liturgy with clear influences from a Protestant Communion service, whereas the more synagogue-reminiscent one performed a simple version towards the end of the service. This demonstrates that not only is there no unified Messianic Jewish teaching and praxis, but that there is also no unified theological explanation of what is performed. Despite this, most congregations celebrate communion either (at least) once a month or connected to Jewish holidays. Most congregations and groups, as with the two vignettes, follow their own “home-made” ritual, often using 1 Cor 11,<sup>163</sup> or the Jewish blessing over wine (the actual *qidush* blessing)<sup>164</sup> as their textual basis, and emphasize the communal, fellowship aspect of the meal.<sup>165</sup>

## Everyday Life

Fellowship, or community, is an important issue for Messianic Jews as both *Alef* and *Bet* showed. Spending time together after the Saturday service and on weekdays for Bible studies or prayer meetings is a central part of Messianic Jewish life that also strengthens friendships and a collective identity.

Perhaps even more important for creating an authentic Messianic *Jewish* identity are the negotiations over Jewish holidays and rituals, which are adopted, transformed, and celebrated in the name of “Yeshua.” Keeping different parts of traditional Jewish rituals and to differing degrees serves as a way to distinguish the

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<sup>161</sup> See definition in Chapter One.

<sup>162</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 142.

<sup>163</sup> “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:23–26 NRSV)

<sup>164</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43.

<sup>165</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 41–42.

movement from mainstream Christianity. One way of justifying this practice is to assert that the Jewish holidays are being restored to their biblical context (usually without rabbinical elaborations), just as Jesus supposedly celebrated the holidays.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, as they live in a Jewish, Israeli society where Jewish religious holidays are also national holidays, it is natural and easy to celebrate them and thus maintain a Jewish identity. Hanukkah in *Alef* was celebrated by lighting that day's candle in the *hanukkiah* and praying a rewritten form of a traditional Jewish prayer. *Bet* showed the incorporation and adaptation of a Jewish *bar/bat mitzvah*, the important Jewish rite of passage where a boy or a girl is called up for the first time to read from the Torah. Both the Hanukkah celebration and the *bar mitzvah* ritual are important elements in contemporary Messianic Judaism that maintain the adherents' sense of Jewish identity. At the same time, they also demonstrate a tension between the use of Judaism as a religious or a cultural tradition, which is a huge issue within the movement. The two rituals mentioned above are not of biblical Jewish origin, but stem from later rabbinic Judaism and the Oral Torah (i.e., the Talmud, the additions to the Written Torah—the Pentateuch). Many, if not most, Messianic Jews in Israel reject this later form of Judaism but are nonetheless in constant negotiations with it as it constitutes the foundation of modern Judaism(s). Here are, thus, two examples where supposedly rejected Jewish traditions are nonetheless taken into account, because they both constitute such vital parts of modern Jewish culture and serve as *national* identification markers.

Parallel to this, criticizing Gentile church culture, traditional Christian feasts and rituals are not celebrated as they are viewed as pagan;<sup>167</sup> very few celebrate Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Those who do so usually have a Russian-Christian background and/or live in a mixed marriage consisting of one Messianic Jewish and one Christian spouse.<sup>168</sup>

Negotiations like these typically function to set up a border against Christianity, while rooting the negotiators more deeply in a Jewish identity and (biblical) Judaism. Zelson Warshawsky asserts that “all” Messianic Jews like to talk about their Shabbat and holiday celebrations, but not about Torah observance in general. This probably testifies to nationalistic identification with the State of Israel rather than identification with the broader religious Jewish society, as the Shabbat “institution” as such shapes Israeli society.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 144; cf. Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 228.

<sup>167</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*; “Competing Trends,” Reason; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 144; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 151–52.

<sup>168</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 27; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43.

<sup>169</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 78.

The Torah's perpetual statutes, everlasting ordinances and covenants which do not directly serve a discourse of nationalistic Messianism, are simply "selected" out, and superseded with one universal new covenant through Yeshua. Family ties and memory then become the only differences between the nationalist Messianic Israeli and his veteran permanent resident Christian Zionist co-worshiper.<sup>170</sup>

Zelson Warshawsky clearly defines Messianic Jewish identity as constantly negotiated between things considered Jewish, on the one hand, and Christian, on the other. But this, to my mind, is a simplification. Rather, most Messianic Jews have their own categories and ways to distinguish themselves and stay away from both rabbinic Judaism and Gentile Christianity. Doing away with practices and doctrines considered superfluous or inauthentic is basically one way to imagine a restored first-century Judaism, a biblical Judaism. In Messianic Jewish discourse, "biblical Judaism" is often conflated with the "first-century Judaism" of Jesus and Paul.

Ironically, however, as just mentioned, Messianic Jews also adhere to post-biblical traditions. Yet, while Torah observance differs within the different streams of Judaism and in Jewish society more broadly, observance is also an arena of constant struggle for Messianic Jews. The degree or amount of Torah observance is one of the most important dividers within the Messianic Jewish community as it clearly denotes how close their identity and theology is perceived to be to religious Judaism versus evangelical Christianity. Herein comes the classic Christian discussion concerning the "works-grace" dichotomy (cf. v. 6, see more in Chapter Four).<sup>171</sup> Many, if not most, Messianic Jews in Israel consider faith and grace, "to be set free in Jesus," to be better and more important than works, which for many translates into practicing (rabbinical) Judaism. This responds to the traditionally presumed dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity—"law versus grace"—where, if using this division, most Messianic Jews in Israel take the position of the Christians.

While Messianic Jewish organizations such as the UMJC and the MJAA argue that many parts of the Torah are also valid and applicable for believers today, a strong majority of the Messianic Jews in Israel do not observe religious Jewish practices such as Shabbat or *kashrut* (dietary laws) in a religious, Orthodox (which is commonly used as the comparison) way.<sup>172</sup> My impression is that Israeli Messianic Jews generally are more skeptical towards a traditional Torah-observant life than Messianic Jews living in America. This is presumably related to the desire to distance themselves from religious, Judaism, perceived as "legalistic," in society at large. This is somewhat ironic as living a life according to the Torah is easier in

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<sup>170</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, "Returning To Their Own Borders," 217–18.

<sup>171</sup> Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 145; Zelson Warshawsky, "Returning To Their Own Borders," 164–67.

<sup>172</sup> "Competing Trends," Reason.

Israel than elsewhere. Most Messianic Jews in Israel, however, have their own pick-and-choose version of what Torah observance means and its application in their life interpreted “in light of Jesus.”<sup>173</sup> These negotiations are explored in more detail later on (see Chapter Four).

Generally speaking, Messianic Judaism is often more spiritualized than ritualistic in the sense of having a deep faith in and relationship with Jesus rather than doing the right things in the right way. While simplistically put, this idea runs through the interviews. For example, the majority of Messianic Jews in Israel seem more focused on moral purity (i.e., “keeping the heart pure”) than on ritual purity,<sup>174</sup> which places them more on the evangelical-Jewish side than on the traditional-Jewish. This is probably due to the historical alignment with Protestant Christianity, which still is strong. While very few Messianic Jews that I have met in Israel live an observant life in line with Orthodox Judaism, the more observant Messianic Jews are usually (but not exclusively) found in more liturgical, synagogue-similar congregations. Torah observance continues to mark a sharp border within the Messianic Jewish community in Israel, but one where the majority asserts that “I am a Jew, but it is much more important that I am a Messianic,” as formulated by one of Zelson Warshawsky’s participants.<sup>175</sup>

## Features of Leadership

The diversity and struggle within the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel are also seen on the level of leadership. While its Israeli leaders regularly gather, Cohen reports growing polarization and conflicts between the evangelical-Jewish-oriented and those that are traditional-Jewish-oriented. It might therefore not come as a surprise that the vision of writing a unified statement of faith has failed. Nonetheless, there are still connections, such as the e-mail network MCLN (Messianic Congregation Leadership Network) for exchanging news and information, together with the National Congregational Leaders Conference,<sup>176</sup> indeed, the Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel works to connect diverse streams of Messianic Jewish believers in Israel via different networks and conferences, and

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<sup>173</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 144, 147–51.

<sup>174</sup> Both moral and ritual purity are basic concepts within Judaism; however, ritual purity distinguishes Judaism from Christianity. In Jewish law, people can be in a state that is either *taharah* (pure) or *tumah* (impure). Becoming impure occurs in the course of a natural way of life, such as through touching someone dead or menstruating, but makes one unsuitable for certain rituals and holy activities. The person thus needs to be purified through immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath). The same thinking applies to material objects.

<sup>175</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 153.

<sup>176</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 111.

especially through Messianic Jewish (worship) music. However, there is no national organization that functions as a unifying umbrella for all the Messianic Jewish congregations and house groups in Israel, a situation that allows for both freedom and diversity, but probably produces disadvantages as well.

The movement in Israel is less focused on education and intellectual enterprises than its counterpart in the United States.<sup>177</sup> From the perspective of the new generation, therefore, one challenge is to educate new leaders with a higher level of both theological and biblical understanding. Today many are educated in Christian colleges if at all, but the leaders, Cohen argues from an insider perspective, need to be better equipped in Messianic Jewish seminaries, such as those in the United States. In Israel today there are several different discipleship and Bible programs for Messianic Jews and also conferences for youth and young adults aiming to strengthen their Messianic Jewish identity. Organizations and ministries work strenuously to publish theological, devotional, and outreach material in Hebrew and English, such as the newsletter *Kehila News*. Another challenge for a more “mature” Messianic Jewish movement is for leaders to connect “a theologically rich Yeshua-centered identity” with a strengthened Israeli-Jewish identity rooted in the national culture.<sup>178</sup>

In terms of gender issues, Messianic Judaism generally adheres to a conservative ideology based on its understanding of the Bible, and especially Paul.<sup>179</sup> Congregations are led by men: one or many pastors or rabbis, or a “shepherd” as in *Alef*, depending on whether they take on an evangelical or Jewish character. Overall, the structure is patriarchal. In Israel today, no women serve as congregational leaders, to my knowledge. They rather serve the communities through music, teaching children, and administrative roles, positions that suit a theological view of women as subordinate to the male head of the congregation and family. Despite this, the wives of the leaders often have many responsibilities on a leadership level, sometimes serving as public figures along with their husbands. Worth noting, however, is that the Caspari survey demonstrated that a surprisingly high number of congregations in theory approved of women in leadership. There are, which is

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<sup>177</sup> Juster, “American and Israeli,” 128–36; Kinzer, Personal conversation, February 2021.

<sup>178</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 110–11, 113–14; cf. Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 143.

<sup>179</sup> The Paul within Judaism scholar Kathy Ehrensperger has profiled herself as the within-scholar with a gender and feminist focus. Her conclusions on reading Paul from within Judaism suggest a construction of the apostle that does not correspond to Messianic Jewish interpretations of the apostle’s views on the role of women. It would be interesting to hear this religious world’s ideas about her arguments. Ehrensperger, “The Question(s) of Gender,” esp. 275–76; see also Kathy Ehrensperger, *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

important to point out, a few pioneering women in Israel in teaching and leadership roles, and the future will probably see more of this.<sup>180</sup>

## Reflections on Messianic Judaism, Identity Negotiations, and the Bible

Messianic Jewish identity is constantly *en route*. If this chapter introducing Messianic Judaism historically and sociologically and the scene in Jerusalem has proven anything, it is this. The believers are caught in a constant struggle, in constant negotiation over who they are, what to believe, and how to live their lives. In the introduction to this chapter, it was noted that Messianic Jewish identity is constructed around the three themes of Judaism, belief, and Zionism. Through these themes, Messianic Jews in Israel are trying to construct their identity and resolve its inherent contradictions as in-between Judaism and evangelical Christianity. While the believers agree with each other on their Jewish identity, as Jesus-believing Jews they show great creativity and thus wide diversity in how this identity should be expressed. Ironically, their very Jewishness seems to be the major area of conflict and intense negotiation. Harris-Shapiro has called Messianic Judaism a “theological transvestite,” describing the tension as “this love-hate relationship with Jewishness does seem to appear and reappear as a pattern of discourse. The struggle to affirm Jewishness and yet separate from Jewishness ranges over the whole life experience of the Messianic Jew,”<sup>181</sup> possibly because of the constant negotiation to put more emphasis on the “messianic” part than the “Jewish” in their identity. There is, in the midst of these negotiations, a longing to develop an independent identity as Messianic Jews in Israel more deeply: “we are our own body.... We need to be authentic.”<sup>182</sup>

Throughout the presentation of Messianic Judaism, one element, the Bible, has been lying rather quietly and constantly just beneath the surface and begging for further attention. Reading the Bible, from my point of view, serves as the inner core in constructing a Messianic Jewish reading. It shapes the routes, the roots, and the borders (to pick up Zelson Warshawsky’s key themes once again); it helps navigates

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<sup>180</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 35–36; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 25, 230–32; Rachel Wolf, “Messianic Judaism and Women,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 98–106; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 282–83.

<sup>181</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 61, 166.

<sup>182</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 129.

between things Jewish and Christian and directs the expressions, beliefs, and convictions of the believers. To understand Messianic Jewish identity negotiations more completely, one must recognize how Messianic Jews read the Bible. While approached earlier as identity-as-travel,<sup>183</sup> I approach it as *identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading*. Reading and using “the Word of God” for Messianic Jews plays a significant role both in their private lives as believers and for the community at large. As such, it is about the “social life of Scripture.” The next chapter therefore elaborates on theoretical and methodological considerations for working with Messianic Jews and the Bible in Jerusalem. As Messianic Jews return to faith and the land, it is time to turn to the Bible.

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<sup>183</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” e.g., *xviii*.

# Three. Interviews, Reception Studies, and Social Life of Scripture

“Reception studies are biblical studies on holiday.”<sup>1</sup> While this was originally hissed by someone opposing the inclusion of this field in biblical studies, I choose to hear it the other way around. Who does not want a long holiday? Working with living, “real” readers, far away from a rainy home, called me; so I packed my bags and travelled to Jerusalem. However, reception studies proved to be nothing like a holiday. Actually, Fran Markowitz, editor of *Ethnographic Encounters in Israel: Poetics and Ethics of Fieldwork* (2013), has argued that Jerusalem is beyond complex, with an “edginess” due to its many religions, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and so forth.<sup>2</sup> It was tiresome, messy, and chaotic but nonetheless fantastic. When the interviews were done, I actually moved back to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> The “holiday” became home. In retrospect, I can admit that this was a “falling in love with the inner other,”<sup>4</sup> with the city, its peoples, and its cultures—the scene of Jerusalem.

People, living people with hearts that beat, read the Bible (or other religious texts) all the time. But what is actually happening when someone reads a text? How did I conduct “Bible-reading interviews” with Messianic Jews in Jerusalem? This chapter situates the study within its theoretical and methodological frameworks with a foremost focus on the readings of the Messianic Jewish research participants. As my approach is new and innovative, located at the intersection of two disciplines which usually have nothing to do with each other, I have aimed here at being detailed in order to be transparent. In an attempt to conceptualize the theoretical

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Gillingham, “Biblical Studies on Holiday?: A Personal View of Reception History,” in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, eds. Emma England and William John Lyons, STr 6 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 17–30, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Fran Markowitz, “Introduction: Edgy Ethnography in a Little Big Place,” in *Ethnographic Encounters in Israel: Poetics and Ethics of Fieldwork*, ed. Fran Markowitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 1–20, 1–17.

<sup>3</sup> I moved back to Jerusalem in October 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The expression is taken from an article title. See Faydra L. Shapiro, “Autobiography and Ethnography: Falling in Love with the Inner Other,” *MTSR* 15:2 (2003): 187–202, esp. 187–88, 200–01.

setting, I largely rely on insights from two different fields that work with the Bible: biblical studies and reception studies on the one hand, and anthropology of the Bible and the so-called “social life of Scripture” approach on the other. As an interdisciplinary study, I value and consider it fair to the disciplines to address and adopt insights from both. The interaction between reader and text in context are addressed from different perspectives, as anthropological insights contribute with analytical tools to *empirical* reception studies of the Bible. Having discussed these theoretical considerations, I turn to methodological discussions to outline how the “Bible-reading interviews,” which constitute the most important primary data for this study, were created to explore the Messianic Jewish readings. With this term, I suggest a special form of interview which combines the classic interview and a Bible study, which I discuss in greater depth in this methodological section, along with what I have done with them and other issues related to the fieldwork in Jerusalem. Some autobiographical notes where I reflect upon my positionality and how I have navigated questions raised about my identity during the interviews are also included. But first, something about the readers, why Rom 11, and why Jerusalem. Ultimately, this chapter sheds light on aspects of *identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading*.

## On the Readers and Text(s)

Two communities of readers exist in this study: “empirical-religious readers” and “scholarly readers.” Two types of text also exist herein: oral and written ones, similar to oral and written discourses, which are texts inspired from the primary text, Rom 11. This requires some explanation.

“Empirical-religious” readers is my own concept, coined to designate readers of biblical texts that are placed “out there,” outside of academia. They are “religious” readers, as they engage with Rom 11 from the perspective of believers in this as a holy text; therefore, they have a different set of *game rules* for reading texts than the scholars. The term “empirical” emphasizes that their readings are collected through empirical methods such as Bible-reading interviews and is used to denote a link to *empirical reception studies*. As empirical-religious readers, or *participants*, the Messianic Jews in this study read Rom 11 within their own religious, cultural,

and political context,<sup>5</sup> to produce oral texts, speech that is turned from sound to letters in the acts of interviewing and transcribing for academic investigation.

The “scholarly” readers, in contrast, are academics: professionally trained exegetes on Paul, especially Paul within Judaism (PWJ) scholars, who produce written texts. They are, of course, also empirical in the sense that they are (or have been) alive, but their readings in this study are primarily of a historical and scholarly nature. Their historical readings function as the interpretative framework (see Chapter One) for the empirical-religious ones, thus constituting a one-way correspondence (Messianic Jewish towards the PWJ ones), in accordance with the aim of this study and also because of the empirical nature of the project which suggests more space be given to the interviews. However, as for showing awareness, the scholarly readers are also culturally situated, which the ideology discussion (again, see Chapter One) displayed, although this study uses their historical, scholarly texts as the conversation partners.<sup>6</sup>

*Empirical-religious readers.* The eighteen Messianic Jewish readers in this study are all *leaders* within the Messianic Jewish community; most of them serve as the head (i.e., pastor, rabbi, servant, shepherd) of a congregation, while a few work for Messianic Jewish organizations in teaching positions. They are also all male,<sup>7</sup> aged from around forty to around seventy (see list of participants at the beginning of the study). I used several criteria simultaneously for choosing the participants: they self-identify as Messianic Jews and they are Jewish according to the State of Israel’s definition of who is a Jew.<sup>8</sup> I specifically sought out participants who were either *sabras* (native Israelis) or *olim* (immigrants) that have been living in Israel for no less than five years. They should be very familiar with Israel and call it their home, not only on a spiritual but also on a practical basis. The *olim* in this study originally come from either the United States or European countries, mostly the former Soviet Union region. They serve in congregations that use Hebrew, or a mix of Hebrew

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fernando F. Segovia, “Cultural Criticism: Expanding the Scope of Biblical Criticism,” in *The Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key*, eds. Roland Boer and Fernando F. Segovia, SemeiaSt 66 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 307–36, 321; Sarojini Nadar, “Power, Ideology and Interpretation/s: Womanist and Literary Perspectives on the Book of Esther as Resources for Gender-Social Transformation” (PhD diss., University of Natal Pietermaritzburg, 2003), 9–10; Eric Repphun et al., “Beyond Christianity, the Bible, and the Text: Urgent Tasks and New Orientations for Reception History,” *RSRR* 1:1 (2011): 1–11, 8.

<sup>6</sup> As interesting as this is, it stretches beyond the limits of this present study. Therefore, later I define an area of further research within this realm, that of studying the contemporary ideological commitments of PWJ scholars (see Chapter Seven).

<sup>7</sup> Having only male participants was a natural consequence of my focus on leaders as there are no female congregational heads (see more in Chapter Two).

<sup>8</sup> This means having at least one Jewish grandparent. However, as has been discussed in the previous chapters, even though the leaders qualify under this criteria, the State of Israel do not consider them Jewish any longer because of their faith in Jesus.

and English, as their language of devotion.<sup>9</sup> In other words, they represent an Israeli and a “Western-Israelified” perspective. I have deliberately excluded leaders in solely Russian-speaking congregations and those that are Amharic-speaking (Ethiopian), given the large cultural differences.<sup>10</sup> Importantly also, in order to get a fair representation, the leaders come from a broad spectrum of different Messianic Jewish expressions, some from a more traditional-Jewish position and a few more from an evangelical-Jewish perspective and everything in between. These important distinctions within Messianic Judaism were discussed in the previous chapter. The different cultural and religious affiliations naturally affect their engagement with the Bible; a reader belonging to a Torah-observant branch, for example, naturally reads as part of this community and voices from that social context play a subtle, or overt, part in his reading act.

I was interested in leaders given their authority to preach in congregations. As authoritative figures, they are in the position to teach and influence their congregations about the “correct” way to read the Bible and practice their belief. As “men in power,” I assumed, correctly, they would also be secure and convinced in their understanding of Paul, as well as having an interest in sharing their confident readings of Paul with a scholar in order to make their ideas heard. The fact that they are considered the experts—“religious professionals” or “elite interviewees”<sup>11</sup>—further strengthened my interest, given the broader aim of this study in terms of Pauline scholarship. Almost all the interviewed leaders have theological training, some just a little, others a few years.<sup>12</sup> A strong majority have their training in Christian or Messianic Jewish education centers and, being from the West, they generally represent a well-educated part of the Messianic Jewish world.<sup>13</sup> With leadership and expert positions within the religious community, they are also more

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<sup>9</sup> Most from the former Soviet Union gather and worship in Russian, but not all.

<sup>10</sup> Zelson Warshawsky states that these two cultural groups are in need of more research, which I endorse. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 229–30.

<sup>11</sup> Elites are defined as persons in position of power. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 147, cf. Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (London: SAGE, 2009), 165–69.

<sup>12</sup> Having said that, while this study did not focus on their education and training as such, I have not been able to display significant and meaningful differences in their readings that can be derived from their training. However, those more familiar with the mainstream Jewish context did sometimes use language that someone educated within a fully evangelical context would not use.

<sup>13</sup> Yet Messianic Jewish theological education is much more well-developed in the United States than elsewhere, and American Messianic Judaism is generally more intellectual there than in the Israeli setting (see more in Chapter Two).

likely to either be influenced (or not) by biblical scholarship.<sup>14</sup> From another perspective, there are no empirically conducted studies that focus solely on Messianic Jewish leaders (see discussion in Chapter One). Additionally, as we will see below, empirically conducted works within biblical studies thus far have been dedicated to “ordinary” readers and their engagement with the Bible. Focusing on individual interviews and one specific text (and a theological letter) is, as far as I know, something new.

In this study, I use the appellation, “the Messianic Jewish readers,” to signify the specific group of Messianic Jews that I have interviewed. Other synonymous terms that appear in the study are “the empirical-religious readers,” “the scripturalist(s)” (a term borrowed from Brian Malley<sup>15</sup>), and “the participant(s).” Parallel and congruent to this, “the scholarly readers” designate “the PWJ scholars”—in other words, those who adhere to this scholarly perspective. Sometimes I also refer to them as the “within-perspective/scholars.” Where another perspective is referenced, it is always spelled out clearly. Finally, I use the term “both reading communities” or similar, which then refers to the empirical-religious and the scholarly readers as a collective.

*Biblical text.* There are manifold reasons for choosing Rom 11 as the text of focus for this study. One participant perceived Rom 11 as “the very heart of God,”<sup>16</sup> while another exclaimed, “Romans 11... Wow, wow! Very critical.”<sup>17</sup> Rom 11 and its themes also recurred frequently in visits to Messianic Jewish services during fieldwork and in a brief survey of devotional literature, discussed in connection with promoting a Messianic Jewish identity and worldview. The text addresses several aspects of *identity* (Jewish Jesus-believers) and *relations* (between Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Jesus, and Jews and Jesus-believing Jews), as well as issues of *time* (perceptions of different “periods” and the end times). I wanted to engage with an important and meaningful text for them containing topics relevant to Messianic Judaism, to understand more clearly how they read it and what they do with it.<sup>18</sup> Paul and his writings, apparently, play a more fundamental role for Messianic Jewish identity and discourse than, for example, the author of the Johannine letters. Obviously, however, Messianic Jews also read and engage with other biblical texts

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<sup>14</sup> A reasonable question would be whether laypeople would have produced different readings. Messianic Jews in general are committed Bible readers, but one difference, I think, would be that leaders are more convinced of and secure in their understandings.

<sup>15</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 14. The term “scripturalists” is derived from “Scripture” and is as such supposed to carry a religious connotation of reading Scripture as “sacred” writings.

<sup>16</sup> “Yitshak.”

<sup>17</sup> “Israel,” November 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 101–03; Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 122, 129. See further discussion under the headline “The Bible and Reading: An Emic View and Previous Studies” (Chapter One).

that impact their identity construction, belief, and practice. In the beginning of this work, I considered reading the whole section of Rom 9–11 with the participants as this is, both academically and theologically, viewed as one coherent part. While this would have had some benefits, I quickly realized during my pre-field readings with other religious leaders that this amount of text was just way too much to cover, both reading and timewise, as I wanted a close reading of the chosen text. Additionally, Rom (9–)11 has been described as the *locus classicus* text for the PWJ perspective, which, therefore, further motivated this choice (see more in Chapter One).<sup>19</sup>

## On Jerusalem as a Field Site

Jerusalem was selected as the physical field site given its importance for Messianic Judaism. The city, and the land of Israel overall, plays a fundamental role in Messianic Jewish theology both as symbol and place. Mark S. Kinzer, one of the major Messianic Jewish theologians, argues in *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen* (2018) for an understanding of the importance of Jerusalem as parallel to the Jesus events, based on his reading of Luke–Acts.<sup>20</sup> On a more general theological level, Messianic Jews are often connected to evangelical Christianity and Christian Zionism, in which Jerusalem as a physical place plays a major role in eschatological speculations based on readings of the Bible. The Messianic Jewish readers do not only picture Jerusalem as the center of the world; for them, being “rooted in Zion” makes them partakers in a divine plan about the end times (see Chapters Two and Six).

Jerusalem, as the social context and, therefore, very important to the social life of Scripture framework, hosts many (different) Messianic Jewish congregations and believers. This, combined with the absence of previous studies focusing only on Messianic Judaism in Jerusalem, makes the city a highly relevant location for the study.<sup>21</sup> On a more personal note, Jerusalem was especially suitable as I was familiar with the city as I had spent a couple of months living there in the past and had visited an additional three times. I had a basic knowledge of modern Hebrew that could take me around the city and assist during a religious service. More importantly, I knew of some Messianic Jewish congregations that served as my starting point.

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<sup>19</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 251. Eisenbaum here describes Rom 9–11 as the *locus classicus* text for most PWJ scholars.

<sup>20</sup> Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*.

<sup>21</sup> Given the differences between the American and the Israeli Messianic Jewish scenes (see Chapter Two), the results would probably have played out differently if the study were conducted in such a different cultural milieu as in the United States, or in the former Soviet Union for that matter.

As the contributions in Markowitz's volume suggest, Jerusalem is a "little big place."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, it is a complex, exhausting, and edgy place. But it is also a beautiful mosaic. Israelis and Palestinians. Israeli Arabs. Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Religious people side by side with non-religious. Other religious minorities. Immigrants and natives. Right-wing and left-wing. Tourists, pilgrims, and visitors from all over the world. *Ashkenazi*, *sephardi*, *mizrahi*, and Reform, Conservative, (all forms of) Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. Within all religious affiliations, Jewish as well as others, there are layers upon layers of identities and practices. Space is constantly negotiated, both between and sometimes almost on top of each other, without those involved ever necessarily meeting. Jerusalem as a city is in a process of radicalization where clashes, such as those between religious and secular groups, sometimes escalate. For example, the regular demonstrations by ultra-Orthodox men and boys on Shabbat afternoons<sup>23</sup> are sometimes disrupted by young women from a Shabbat-opening gay café reacting in their own hilarious way: by stripping down to bras and even flashing their breasts to rattle the men and claim their own right to the city.

Perhaps more so than in other places, people classify others by appearance and how they talk about things and each other, that is, the politics of language, religious, and political orientation. As a fieldworker in Jerusalem, as well as elsewhere, a general knowledge about the socio-political and cultural situations is required. While a "little big place," I do not think that Israel/Palestine should be perceived as something "extra different." While everyone comes to the field with stereotypes and convictions about right and wrong, these should influence the way the research is conducted as little as possible.<sup>24</sup> This is not an easy agenda, but something I tried to follow. At the same time, it is a reflexive process whereby the research area, place, and participants influence one as a researcher, and vice versa.

While the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict permeates the air for everyone, life (mostly) goes on as usual on the streets. However, the "usual" and what it looks like depends a great deal on who you are and where you live in the city. During this

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<sup>22</sup> Markowitz, "Introduction: Edgy Ethnography," 1–17.

<sup>23</sup> Shabbat is Judaism's day of rest, starting at sunset on Friday and lasting until sunset on Saturday. It is a day when Israeli society mostly shuts down in terms of public transport, shops, etc. For religious, observant Jews no work should be done (including using electricity and thus buying coffee at a café) and the day should be dedicated to rest, prayer, the synagogue, and the family. In Jerusalem the ultra-Orthodox communities have a custom of repeatedly demonstrating on Saturday afternoons by walking in large numbers (sometimes hundreds) and shouting on some of the larger roads adjacent to their neighbors, such as Mea Shearim, to block traffic and protest against others' desecration of Shabbat. Often, the demonstrations become chaotic and the police need to act to disrupt those gathered.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 9–10. He here offers a critique of those scholars who approach Jerusalem and Israel/Palestine as something other, something fundamentally different from other places.

study Israel experienced a period of socio-political tension that came to be called the “knife intifada,” with Jews being stabbed in public locations, primarily by inhabitants of the West Bank. Tensions were exacerbated by US President Trump’s moving the United States Embassy to Jerusalem to proclaim the city as Israel’s capital, together with riots in and around Gaza. In the course of this research, I have heard the noise of guns and rockets, seen the blood of victims, and fled from demonstrations to avoid being crushed or trapped in violence. Yet this is somehow “regular life,” on one level. Research in this kind of tense environment naturally provoked questions of why I was doing what I was doing. Does it really matter? In the midst of this, however, Messianic Jewish media, along with other Israeli and Arab media, analyzed the situations by way of direct and indirect references to the Bible, prophecies, promises, and “what God says.” So, clearly it does matter.

## Reception Studies:

### From the Perspective of Biblical Studies

#### Basic Ideas about Understanding

The biblical studies’ contribution to the theoretical framework I employ comes from the field of reception studies. As a field within biblical studies, *reception history*, as it is usually referred to,<sup>25</sup> has grown so dramatically in the past decade(s) as to almost constitute a paradigm shift,<sup>26</sup> taking the scholar out of traditional exegesis into unknown realms of interdisciplinary nature. Reception has to do with *receiving*, how a text such as one from the Bible is received into another, or new, object or expression—phrased differently, reception studies attends to the “afterlives of the

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<sup>25</sup> There is a general confusion when it comes to terms within the field, which are similar and sometimes slightly overlapping. I follow Paul Parris, who considers reception theory to be the umbrella under which concepts such as *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (reception history, or the history of reception) and *Rezeptionsästhetik* (the aesthetic of reception) are gathered. David Paul Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics*, PTMS (Eugene: Pickwick, 2009), 188; cf. Mark Knight, “*Wirkungsgeschichte*, Reception History, Reception Theory,” *JSNT* 33:2 (2010): 137–46, 137–39; Nancy Klancher, “A Genealogy for Reception History,” *BibInt* 21:1 (2013): 99–129, 100.

<sup>26</sup> Jauss himself, the man who identified the field of reception theory, thought of this approach to reading and hermeneutics as a paradigm shift. In biblical studies, however, as the term reception is used today, it signals more of a paradigm shift in terms of the field of research and conceptualization than a strict theoretical one, even though the two are connected. See Parris, *Reception Theory*, 186–87.

Bible.”<sup>27</sup> But it is, to my mind, not only about receiving but also about *re-making* and *textual engagement*: it is about transformation, reaction, and use. It is about re-readings. Reception studies, as a field, shows no boundary in terms of what one can explore: biblical figures, expressions, stories, art, music, or film to give a few examples, and theological and popular literature. The scholarly interest in the reception of the Bible is widely recognized in publications of all sorts, including journals, handbooks, and monographs.<sup>28</sup> Today, the field of the reception is characterized by *historical* perspectives on the Bible *in other objects*. This study, in contrast, offers a new contribution with its focus on the Bible *among subjects*, showing that reception can also be *contemporary* and *empirical*.<sup>29</sup>

Here, reception theory is used as the wider theoretical framework to examine the nature of a text, a reader, and how meaning is constructed. It thus provides tools for reflecting on what happens when a reader receives and makes sense of a text. For the sake of clarity, I consider both the scholarly readings *and* those of the empirical-religious readers in this study to be expressions of reception. This has allowed me to present the *similarities* and *dissimilarities* between the two towards the end of the study. On a terminological note, I use “reception” and “reading” synonymously to refer to how a text is received within the scholarly and the empirical-religious spheres. For now, I want to spell out how I view reading and the meaning-making process as it is relevant for this study. This theoretical approach is also fully compatible with my methodological claims regarding Bible-reading interviews, as I further demonstrate below.

With the turn to the reader within literary criticism and cultural hermeneutics, reception theory sprang forth as one response during the 1960s and 1970s. The basic question that this approach addresses is “how is understanding possible?”<sup>30</sup> Originating in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1900–2002) philosophical hermeneutics, particularly in *Truth and Method* (1960), reception theory was further developed

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<sup>27</sup> Repphun et al., “Beyond Christianity,” 4.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview of the field of old and new reception studies, see Klancher, “Genealogy,” 107–29; Timothy Beal, “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” *BibInt* 19:4/5 (2011): 357–72, 359–60. For a few other examples, the following are worth mentioning: *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR)*, *The Oxford Handbook of Reception History of the Bible*, the Blackwell Bible Commentary Series, and journals such as *Biblical Interpretation*, *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception*, *Biblical Reception*, *Postscripts*, and *Relegere*. There is also a Centre for Reception History of the Bible at Oxford University. Two recent publications are also worth mentioning here, Robert Evans, *Reception History, Tradition and Biblical Interpretation: Gadamer and Jauss in Current Practice*, STr 4 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014); Emma England and William John Lyons, eds., *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, STr 6 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Repphun et al., “Beyond Christianity,” 5; Knight, “*Wirkungsgeschichte*,” 138.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2004 [1975]), xxvii.

and nuanced by his student Hans Robert Jauss (1921–1997). The reader of a text, it is thought, takes on an essential role as *co-creator* of a text’s meaning. Historical objectivism is challenged<sup>31</sup> in asserting that the text itself does not possess an inherent, complete meaning but rather a partial, and as yet an unfinished one. At the same time, neither is the reader the sole creator of meaning, as is asserted in reader-response theory. A text does not have *one* but *many* meanings, made possible by the reader’s situatedness in time and context, yet cannot mean anything and everything: there are limits within the text itself.<sup>32</sup> Reception theory functions within this dialectic. Both text and reader—and the dialogical relationship between the two—are necessary components, Jauss argued, in the creation of meaning.<sup>33</sup>

Understanding is also created through a dialogue between past and present. When it comes to texts, Gadamer argued for a model of understanding wherein the historically situated reader comes to a historically situated text, each of which constitutes a so-called *horizon* that guides and limits the reading. In the gap and strangeness between the two, a dialogue, a “logic of question and answer,”<sup>34</sup> to use Gadamer’s term, can take place. In the Bible-reading interviews, in seeking to understand the meaning of Rom 11, a similar question and answer process occurs, which allows me to explore what Jauss describes as “the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning ... embedded in a work and actualized in the stages of its historical reception.”<sup>35</sup> A fusion, or mediation, of the horizons between past and present, text and reader, follows, and an understanding appears (*Horizontverschmelzung*).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, ed. Hans Robert Jauss, trans. Timothy Bahti, THL 2 (Sussex: Harvester, 1982), 3–45, 20–45; cf. Parris, *Reception Theory*, 126–47.

<sup>32</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” esp. 18–36; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 277–78; cf. Knight, “*Wirkungsgeschichte*,” 138, 144; Parris, *Reception Theory*, 101, 140, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 15. Jauss argues that “The relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject—through the interaction of author and public.” See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295–96; Beal, “Reception History and Beyond,” 361.

<sup>34</sup> See chapter in Parris, *Reception Theory*, 32–64. Parris’s quotes Gadamer who argues that: Gadamer wrote that “The logic of question and answer proved itself a dialectic of question and answer in which question and answer are constantly exchanged and are dissolved in the movement of understanding,” p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 30. For a thorough discussion on the logic of question and answer, see Parris, *Reception Theory*, 187–93.

<sup>36</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxxiv, 301–05; Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, trans. Michael Hays, THL 68 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xi, 224: “Question and answer can provide access to the otherness of the past”; see also Jonathan Roberts, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the*

Jauss developed a model of “three levels of reading” whereby the text’s whole meaning was supposedly explored and shaped. The first level is *perception* (aesthetic, pre-reflective, and participatory); the second is *interpretation* (a critical analysis of the units of a text, similar to exegesis); and the third level is *application* (both historic and contemporary, i.e., for the [presumed] original audience and for the readers today). Jauss spoke of the levels as a “triadic unity” for understanding, although it is not apparent whether he thinks of them as artificial or succeeding each other in how they work in the reading process.<sup>37</sup> The understanding of a text is dependent on the social location of the reader, whose “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*) shapes his or her level of perception. In my view, even though these insights clarify the aspects required for understanding a text’s reception, they do not provide a detailed methodological scheme for analysis.

One way of doing a reception study is to look into the questions of with *what*, *how* and *why* readers read and engage with the text the way they do. It is both a simple and illuminative strategy to discuss what happens in the meeting between a specific text and the reader; while not formulated so plainly before, these questions direct many studies. What is even more rarely articulated, however, is what is *not* there. The part(s) of a text with which the reader does *not* engage, is/are also important for understanding the reception of a text. Issues in a text that are avoided, ignored, or overlooked can tell us as much as those that are chosen and preferred. Therefore, the reception of Rom 11, both within scholarship and in the Messianic Jewish interviews, are guided by, and discussed around, these questions.

## Diachronic Studies, History, and Scholarly Reception

Most studies within the field of reception in biblical studies are focused on *reception history*, as they are interested in how a particular biblical text (or biblical something) has been understood in the past. The tradition of this is not surprising as Jauss perceived it as his mission to reintegrate literary history into literary studies, which he regarded as fundamental for interpreting texts,<sup>38</sup> together with the fact that biblical studies is primarily a historical discipline. Related to this, Jauss has argued for *diachronic* analyses of how a text, textual figure, expression, or similar has been

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*Bible*, eds. Michael Lieb, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–93, 4; Anthony C. Thiselton, “Reception Theory, H. R. Jauss and the Formative Power of Scripture,” *SJT* 65:3 (2012): 289–308, 290 incl. n. 3, 293; Rachel Nicholls, *Walking on the Water: Reading Mt. 14:22–33 in the Light of its Wirkungsgeschichte*, *BibInt* 90 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3–9; Evans, *Reception History*, 5, 8; Parris, *Reception Theory*, 110–13; Beal, “Reception History and Beyond,” 362.

<sup>37</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 139–40, see whole article 139–85; Thiselton, “Reception Theory,” 299–300; Evans, *Reception History*, 12–13; Parris, *Reception Theory*, 156–66.

<sup>38</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 3–45.

understood over a certain period of time.<sup>39</sup> While he preferred the term *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (“reception history”), this is closely connected to the well-known Gadamerian concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which is translated into an array of versions including “the impact of a text,” “history-of-influence,” “effective history,” and “the history of effects.”<sup>40</sup> *Wirkungsgeschichte* can be characterized as telling the story of how a text has been understood and received through history and thus shapes our current efforts at understanding it.<sup>41</sup> Tradition shapes our historical understanding. This influence, in line with reception theory, is considered dialogical: the text has an influence on readers, and readers influence the understanding of the text.<sup>42</sup> What influence, or “effects,” in history has the text had? Reception theory thus looks into the *history* of reception over a well-defined period of time, which, to my mind, should include both interpretation and use of a text. This corresponds to the idea of the fluidity of a text’s meaning and the creative power of the reader as a diachronic perspective traces changes in the interpretation and use of a text through time.

While reception theory focuses foremost on the reader, for Gadamer and Jauss the text itself bears some meaning constituted by the horizon of the text, that is, the question the text addressed in its original setting. The text was originally written for a purpose, for a special audience, and within a certain context. As Gadamer suggested, “we can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer.”<sup>43</sup> In contrast to reader-response theory and how some reception studies also proceed, re-creating this historical horizon through historical-critical examination is one fundamental aspect of doing a reception study.<sup>44</sup>

This challenge of re-creating the historical setting is the primary part of the scholarly reception history of Rom 11—of what Paul intended to say with his letter. But this project is itself diachronic and dynamic, existing not in a vacuum but rather in a chain (diachrony) of reception over modern exegetical history, (see second major part in Chapter One), displayed in its focus on Pauline scholarship and especially on the PWJ perspective.

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<sup>39</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 37; Thiselton, “Reception Theory,” 295, 297–98; cf. for noting the historical, developmental focus within reception studies, i.e., reception history; Beal, “Reception History and Beyond,” 359–60; Parris, *Reception Theory*, 142–45, esp. 143.

<sup>40</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 299–06; cf. Parris, *Reception Theory*, 118; Knight, “*Wirkungsgeschichte*,” 141; Klancher, “Genealogy,” 100; Thiselton, “Reception Theory,” 291; Beal, “Reception History and Beyond,” 362.

<sup>41</sup> Knight, “*Wirkungsgeschichte*,” 137–38, Evans, *Reception History*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 15; Thiselton, “Reception Theory,” 290–91.

<sup>43</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 363.

<sup>44</sup> Parris, *Reception Theory*, 11; Evans, *Reception History*, 24; cf. Nicholls, *Walking on the Water*, 26.

## Synchronic Studies, Contemporaneity, and Empirical Reception

Is reception history the same as *reception studies*? In my view, it is not. I rather consider it to be a major subfield, as not all reception studies are historical. Many are, but not all. Jauss added the principle of *synchronic* analysis of reception, namely, how a text's meaning is formed in a distinct time and context.<sup>45</sup> This gives rise to the possibility of also conducting *contemporary* reception studies, in the “now” (which, however, is history tomorrow). The Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 analyzed here constitute an example of such a reception as they are created and gathered in a special place over a limited period. The field of reception studies often falls into the trap of being solely descriptive and lacking a comparative, explanatory function; however, Jauss argued for the forgotten idea of “cross-sections,” to find point(s) where diachronic and synchronic reception of the same text correlate (i.e., similarities) into the same understanding.<sup>46</sup> In this study, I explore the possible “cross-section” between Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars in their constructions of Paul and readings of Rom 11 (see more in Chapter One).

When launching the reception-focused journal *Relegere*, the editors stated in the introductory piece “Beyond Christianity, the Bible, and the Text” that an urgent task for reception studies was, and still is, a reconsideration of who the readers are.

Reception history, therefore, needs to expand its purview from implied, model, and ideal readers, and from minute textual analysis, towards the far messier matter of the lives and practices of *actual readers* situated in specific material frameworks. This may come as a challenge to some of us trained and incubated in the traditional skills of philological analysis, because it requires us to step out of our highly specialised comfort zones and into the *sociological*, the historical, the economic, and the political, albeit without letting go of the skills and tools that shaped our critical praxis in the first place. This means expanding our scholarly toolkits, becoming more interested in “the unpredictable meanderings of ‘real’ readers” and...the various forms of social analysis, need to open up their horizons and address themselves in addition to the *materiality, fleshliness, and social dimensions of reception*.<sup>47</sup>

This is, for me, a clear and loud call for taking reception studies to the next level, as *empirical reception studies*. Called real-time receptions by James Crossley,<sup>48</sup> this then would imply studies, such as this one, of how “actual,” “real,” or “empirical” readers “out there” read, receive, interact with, and apply biblical text to their lives

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<sup>45</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 36–39.

<sup>46</sup> Jauss, “Literary History,” 36–41. He argues that “historicity of literature comes to light at the intersections of diachrony and synchrony,” p. 37; Parris, *Reception Theory*, 142–46.

<sup>47</sup> Repphun et al., Galbraith, Sweetman and Harding, “Beyond Christianity,” 8. My emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> James G. Crossley, “Brexit Barrow: Real-Time Receptions of the Bible during a Summer of Political Chaos,” *RSRR* 6:1 (2016): 19–60, esp. 19–24.

today in a broad manner. It has a contemporary character dealing with the materiality and fleshliness of living readers in a sociological setting, a field of considerable potential for biblical studies, theology, anthropology, and many other disciplines. A related desire has been expressed by Timothy Beal who wishes to see a field of reception studies turning from a hermeneutical and historical focus towards material-aesthetic and anthropological dimensions of reception, from “interpreting scripture via culture to interpreting culture, especially religious culture, via its production of scripture.”<sup>49</sup> It is about the reception of texts not in other objects, but *in or amongst subjects*. In terms of theoretical considerations, I cannot see any obstacles for widening reception studies to include empirical studies as well. Insights from the social life of Scripture approach, which I discuss below, can be fruitfully taken into account.

Defining this study as an *empirical reception study*, I acknowledge the theoretical insights from reception theory concerning text, reader, and the production of understanding. The term “empirical” refers to studies that are conducted about living people through fieldwork methodologies. While the designation “empirical reception study” has been used before, for example by Robert Holub from a literary perspective,<sup>50</sup> it has not been used in the way I propose, working with empirical-religious readers and empirical methods.

Doing reception studies empirically is messy and complex. If the scholarly reception in this study has a clear historical focus on what the text supposedly *meant*, the contemporary, empirical reception is broader: what the text *means*.<sup>51</sup> It definitely has traces of a historical focus but it is also much more entangled in all areas of the three levels of reading (perception, interpretation, and application). The reception of Rom 11 among Messianic Jews does not solely focus on *what* and *how*, but also on *why* it is read this way. The situatedness of the readers directs the readings, hence the preceding chapter on the scene of Messianic Judaism in Jerusalem. It is not possible to write empirical reception studies by only referring to participant x as saying y about verse z in Rom 11. It requires more. As Part II portrays, the empirical reception of a text needs to be positioned and discussed in its social, cultural, and religious context to have the potential to be entirely understood—to the extent possible.

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<sup>49</sup> Beal, “Reception History and Beyond,” quote from abstract p. 357, see also 360.

<sup>50</sup> Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1984), 134–46. Holub here speaks of “actual responses” to texts (not biblical ones) gathered by surveys and other statistical sources. The main point here, however, is that Holub does not use the term to refer to ethnographic methods such as interviews.

<sup>51</sup> Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” *IDB* (1962): 1:418–32, esp. 418–20. Stendahl is worth mentioning here, not only because he has been very influential for PWJ scholars, but because he was the one making this distinction most famously in the setting of biblical studies.

One reason for this is that, according to reception theory, understanding as such is also created when a text is *applied* to the life of the reader. This is closely connected to Jauss's idea of the socially formative power of literature.<sup>52</sup> A text has meaning potential that is realized in the act of actualization and appropriating, namely, when the text is experienced as speaking directly to the reader as the horizons are merged together.<sup>53</sup> Or, in Gadamer's words, "we have come to see that understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, part of the interpretative process is when the text is allowed to have *Wirkung* ("effect") upon the reader. One, among many examples, as Part II shows, is how Messianic Jews today identify themselves with the concept of the remnant in Rom 11 (see more in Chapter Four).

Contextual Bible Study (CBS) has been working with empirical methods and readers for a couple of decades. Loosely related to reception studies, it is more of a method, primarily developed by Gerald O. West and colleagues in the Southern Hemisphere. CBS are usually conducted among *groups of "ordinary" readers* with *facilitators* with a clear *agenda* of the reading session in line with what is called the "See-Judge-Act" model. The researcher/facilitator has a recognized role in creating a reading that he or she finds helpful for the ordinary readers in question. Inspired by liberation and postcolonial theories and theology, the approach takes the contextual situation of the reader and the socially formative power of the Bible seriously in order to help equip people for better lives through reading and applying the stories to their own lives.<sup>55</sup> A related field of research is also the cross-cultural

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<sup>52</sup> Thiselton, "Reception Theory," 291, 295; Jauss, "Literary History," 40; Parris, *Reception Theory*, 122, 145–47.

<sup>53</sup> Thiselton, "Reception Theory," 294.

<sup>54</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306–07. Jauss phrases it similarly: "The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectation of his lived praxis...and thereby also has an effect on his social behavior." Jauss, "Literary History," 39.

<sup>55</sup> For a few examples, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, LEC 7 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989); Gerald O. West, "Contextuality," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 399–413; Gerald O. West, "Interrogating the Comparative Paradigm in African Biblical Scholarship," in *African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue: In Quest of a Shared Meaning*, eds. Hans de Wit and Gerald O. West, SRA 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 37–64; Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Sarojini Nadar, "Beyond the 'Ordinary Reader' and the 'Invisible Intellectual: Pushing the Boundaries of Contextual Bible Study Discourses,'" in *The Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key*, eds. Roland Boer and Fernando F. Segovia, SemeiaSt 66 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 13–27; Nadar, "Power, Ideology and Interpretation/s,,"; Justin Ukpong, "Incultural Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation," in *The Bible in World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics*, eds. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 17–32; "Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual," The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development & Research,

reading perspective initiated by Hans de Wit under the name, “empirical hermeneutics.”<sup>56</sup> The most recent decade has also, finally, witnessed empirical studies with insights from CBS taking place in a Western context. Tiffany Webster’s study of British coalminers and their reading of Genesis, for example, illustrates one approach that she defines as “biblical ethnography.”<sup>57</sup> Another, in the field of interreligious studies, is Anne Hege Grung’s study *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings*.<sup>58</sup> While all of them are important contributions to the field as such, I leave them aside because of methodological differences as they are working with groups and have clear agendas to introduce change.

## From Reception Theory to Social Life of Scripture

This study is located within the area of reception studies, which provides solid ground both within biblical studies as a discipline, but also within theoretical discussions, on the meaning-making process as such. Reception studies is easy to adhere to, but harder to use as it offers a diffuse framework. While I have argued for the inclusion of empirical(-religious) readers’ reception within the field, the field suffers from shortages in the analytical experience of dealing with such a research process from start until finished product. Therefore, and in line with this study’s interdisciplinary nature, it is time to turn to anthropology of the Bible and especially the social life of Scripture approach. The latter is also, at its core, about reception, as it deals with how biblical texts are received among empirical, flesh-and-blood readers and listeners. It complements my theoretical approach by offering more nuanced tools, gained from empirical methods and fieldwork, for analyzing reception. Anthropology offers experience with empirical material that biblical studies so far is lacking. There are, undeniably, overlaps between the two theoretical approaches but I consider this rather to confirm the strength and accuracy of the discipline’s way of handling readers and readings. Combining the two approaches

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[http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Ujamaa\\_CBS\\_bible\\_study\\_Manual\\_part\\_1\\_2.sflb.a.shx](http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Ujamaa_CBS_bible_study_Manual_part_1_2.sflb.a.shx).

<sup>56</sup> Hans de Wit, *Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture*, IBHS 1 (Nappanee: Evangel, 2012); Hans de Wit et al., eds., *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Nappanee: Evangel, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Tiffany Webster, “When the Bible Meets the Black Stuff: A Contextual Bible Study Experiment” (PhD diss., The University of Sheffield, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Anne Hege Grung, “Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the *Hadith*” (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2010).

builds a necessary bridge between cultural anthropology and literary studies, as Jonathan Boyarin notes in the introduction to *The Ethnography of Reading* (1993).<sup>59</sup>

## The Social Life of Scripture:

### From the Perspective of Anthropology

The anthropological contribution to this work comes from the so-called “social life of Scripture” approach. As a term coined by James S. Bielo in *Words upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (2009),<sup>60</sup> the approach was further defined and expanded in the Bielo-edited volume, *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism* (2009).<sup>61</sup> This approach suggests that “Scripture” takes on a social life when read and engaged with. The approach addresses with what, why, and how readers engage with the Bible the way they do. Why do readers read the way they do? Why the specific words upon the Word?

After the abovementioned turn towards the reader and the seminal essays that followed by Joel Robbins and others,<sup>62</sup> anthropologists of Christianity have gained an interest in how people interact with the Bible and the role the Bible plays in identity, culture, and society. While Christians generally consider the Bible to be “the Word of God,” most studies on scripturalism have been conducted among conservative, charismatic, and fundamentalist forms of Christianity. Simon Coleman has effectively captured what is at stake in the reading process in his expression, “Words: From Narrative to Embodiment,” whereby he argues that “Bible-loving” Christians both internalize and dramatize (“living in and living out”) the Bible in their lives.<sup>63</sup> Especially prominent have been studies engaging in Bible

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Boyarin, “Introduction,” in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1–9, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*.

<sup>61</sup> James S. Bielo, ed. *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, S(on)S (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> Joel Robbins, “God is Nothing but Talk: Modernity, Language, and Prayer in a Papua New Guinea Society,” *AA* 103:4 (2001): 901–12, 910–10.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*, CSIR 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117–42. Internalization concerns a process of self-inscription, to narrate oneself, as a believer, into the biblical text, and to incorporate biblical language into one’s vocabulary. Following that, answering to the concept of dramatization, is that of acting out, living, the Bible both verbally through preaching and witnessing but also through embodying the Bible in behavior and acts, 117–18.

use and linguistics such as in the now classic work, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (2000), by Susan Harding.<sup>64</sup> Studies within this field of ethnography of reading,<sup>65</sup> or of the Bible especially, contribute to this study as they have faced both theoretical and methodological questions of working empirically with living: real readers who interact with, read, and use the Bible in specific cultural settings. Today, anthropologists have studied Bible interaction and orality in several specific settings such as Bible study groups, preaching, and witnessing,<sup>66</sup> in addition to contributions which have employed the social life of Scripture approach.<sup>67</sup> However, none of these studies focuses directly on engagement with one text and one reader at a time as does this study in the form of interviews. Discussing Messianic Judaism in light of studies on evangelicalism is fruitful, not least given their historical entanglement and theological commonalities (and differences!) to these forms of evangelical Christianity (see Chapter Two). The development of the social life of Scripture approach helps us to creatively think about “how the Bible works” among Messianic Jews in Jerusalem.

## Textual Ideology and Textual Practice

Anthropologists interested in the Bible rely on the concept of *biblicism*,<sup>68</sup> which is an attempt at “theorizing a practice”<sup>69</sup> of people adding words upon “the Word.” Coleman has described this field’s contribution as “from the Bible to Biblicism,”<sup>70</sup> which emphasizes the human side of textual interaction such as the *use* of texts in culture and society;<sup>71</sup> thus, it is more about *scripturalists* (people) than about *scripture* (text).<sup>72</sup> While biblicism discusses the interaction between text and reader, it examines in greater detail the ideas and practices around the Bible, that is, the

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<sup>64</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*.

<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Boyarin, ed. *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Vincent Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench* (New York: New Press, 2000); Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, esp. 33–60; for a number of other related studies, see Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> See the different articles in: Bielo, ed. *Social Life of Scriptures*.

<sup>68</sup> This concept should not be confused with the noun “biblicist.”

<sup>69</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Coleman, “Social Life of the Bible,” 206–10.

<sup>71</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 2, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 14.

interaction between reading and context<sup>73</sup>—the social life of Scripture. Therefore, it should not be perceived so much a literary as an anthropological phenomenon as it discusses the human side of ideas and practices surrounding the Bible.<sup>74</sup> Writing about an evangelical Bible study group, Bielo defines Biblicism as having two sides:

The structure of this Biblicism is found in the link between the presuppositions held about scripture (*textual ideology*) and the various interpretive procedures used to take it up (*textual practice*). The LCMS Men [one of his fieldwork sites] have very clear notions about the *Bible's authority, relevance, and textuality*; and they rely on them to organize their reading.<sup>75</sup>

To understand biblicism, how humans read and interact with the Bible, both *textual ideology* (ideas about the text) and the *textual practice* (activities to make sense of the text) of reading need to be considered. The concept of “textual” is interchangeably used in this study with “biblical” in the context of, for instance, “biblical ideology” and “biblical practice.” In my understanding of Bielo, meaning-making takes place in the interaction between the two. Relying on insights from reception theory, reading is considered a constructivist process through which the text comes to “have” “content” or “meaning.” Constructed by the reader, this “meaning” is both situational and contextual.<sup>76</sup> In Malley’s cognitively oriented ethnographic study, *How the Bible Works* (2004), he similarly distinguishes between “the principle of biblical authority” and “the practice of biblical authority,” where the latter foremost has to do with how Bible reading impacts beliefs and then action.<sup>77</sup> It should be highlighted, perhaps more than has been done yet, that the division between different concepts within the social life of Scripture approach is artificial and not as clear-cut as it may seem; in fact, the act of reading is blurry.

Bielo identifies three ethnographic findings belonging in the category of “textual practice”—namely, *authority, relevance, and textuality*—also valuable for the fieldwork undertaken for this study.<sup>78</sup> While “authority” has much to do with practice, I would suggest that it has just as much to do with the ideology attributed to the text. “Textuality,” whether the Bible is seen as a unified, coherent book (or not) which resolves tensions, however, falls into both the categories of textual

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<sup>73</sup> Coleman, “Social Life of the Bible,” 206.

<sup>74</sup> Brian Malley, “Understanding the Bible’s Influence,” in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, ed. James S. Bielo, S(on)S (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 194–204, 194–96.

<sup>75</sup> Bielo, “Textual Ideology, Textual Practice,” 174. My emphasis.

<sup>76</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 8–10.

<sup>77</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 144.

<sup>78</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 52, see also the whole section 52–67; Bielo, “Textual Ideology, Textual Practice,” 162–73.

ideology and textual practice, as I see it. Textuality is the strategy of reading wherein readers interpret, for example, “Scripture through Scripture” (i.e., intertextuality).<sup>79</sup> The authority ascribed to the Bible necessarily impacts the textuality and relevance of the text. While I still find Bielo’s concepts useful for thinking about biblicism, we must remember that the concepts are flexible and not categorical. In line with Bielo, I consider textual practice and ideology to be in a dialectical relationship, informing each other over time.<sup>80</sup>

Bielo develops the two sides of biblicism (textual ideology and textual practice) into four concepts to further sharpen the analysis of readers’ textual engagement. He defines them as *Biblical Ideologies*, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, *Biblical Rhetorics*, and *the Bible as Artifact*.<sup>81</sup> Leaving aside “the Bible as artifact” here, which analyzes the materiality of the Bible, the other concepts are very useful for this study. Below, therefore, I explore these three concepts and how it is possible to relate them to Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11.

Bringing all the different concepts together in a few words of clarification, “textual/biblical ideology,” including the aspect of “authority,” relates to—but is not exactly the same as—the concepts of “perception” and “horizon” within reception theory. The levels of “interpretation” and “application,” on the other hand, fall into the category of “textual practice,” which is a broad concept that I consider to incorporate the aspects of both “biblical hermeneutics” and “biblical rhetoric.” It is, however, not clear if Bielo himself thinks of it this way. The aspects above on “relevance” and “textuality” should primarily be seen as part of “biblical hermeneutics,” which is further addressed below. Taken all together, this approach of biblicism and the social life of Scripture are tools for understanding and discussing aspects of *why*, *how*, and *what* people read and in uses of the Bible. As Bielo argues, “Biblicism is, then, both a descriptive and an explanatory effort. It is an effort that begins with empirical investigation, but always pushes further to demonstrate the cultural significance that infuses the social life of these scriptures.”<sup>82</sup>

## Biblical Ideologies

Biblical ideologies, or textual ideologies, are the ideologies ascribed to the Bible as such. How is the Bible viewed? What role does it play for the readers? Another

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 63–67; Bielo, “Textual Ideology, Textual Practice,” 170–73. Bielo links textuality closer to authority than I do.

<sup>80</sup> Bielo, “Textual Ideology, Textual Practice,” 171.

<sup>81</sup> Bielo, “Introduction: Encountering Biblicism,” 5–7.

<sup>82</sup> Bielo, “Encountering Biblicism,” 2.

related question has to do with the authority ascribed to the Bible. What are the readers' expectations of the Bible? Or, as phrased by Bielo, "a fundamental task is to explore the presuppositions that Christians nurture about the nature, organization, content, and purpose of the Bible as a text."<sup>83</sup> The ideologies structure and direct the reading, functioning in a similar way as genres to create different expectations. Moreover, the textual ideologies present are largely collectively and socially shared and shaped by culture, theology, and history. A single reader therefore does not have to "reinvent the wheel" in how s/he is supposed to read, but is rather influenced and formed by his/her group of belonging in a kind of imitation process. Continuous reading, both alone but especially together, nurtures the "community of practice" and the reading culture in an interdependent manner.<sup>84</sup>

For Messianic Jews, as I have shown in the previous chapters, the Bible is of utmost importance. While previous scholarship does not directly address issues of biblical ideology and practice, direct and indirect references to them both fill the pages in discussions about Messianic Jewish identity, history, and practice. The best way, therefore, to start thinking about biblical ideology (or, ideologies) is to turn to emic descriptions about the Bible, in other words, how Messianic Jews themselves speak about the Bible.<sup>85</sup> Below are two quotes (also referred to in Chapter One) taken from the "Statement of Faith" from the two major, American, Messianic Jewish umbrella organizations. The first comes from The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC), the second one from the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA).<sup>86</sup>

The writings of Tanakh and Brit Hadasha are *divinely inspired and fully trustworthy (true)*, a *gift* given by God to His people, provided to *impart life and to form, nurture, and guide* them in the *ways of truth*. They are of *supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and practice*.<sup>87</sup>

That the BIBLE, consisting of the Tenach (Old Covenant/Testament) and the later writings commonly known as the B'rit Hadasha (New Testament/Covenant), is the *only infallible and authoritative word of God*. We recognize its *divine inspiration*, and *accept its teachings as our final authority in all matters of faith and practice* (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Proverbs 3:1–6; Psalm 119:89, 105; Isaiah 48:12–16; Romans 8:14–17; II Timothy 2:15, 3:16–17).<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Bielo, "Encountering Biblicism," 5.

<sup>84</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 49–53.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 128.

<sup>86</sup> These two major organizations have been discussed earlier on (see Chapter Two).

<sup>87</sup> "UMJC Statement of Faith," Delegates. My emphasis.

<sup>88</sup> "Statement of Faith," MJAA, <https://mjaa.org/statement-of-faith-2/>. My emphasis.

What do they tell us about biblical ideology? First, the statements are largely similar, but they also show some differences. “Tanakh” and the New Testament are both considered part of the canon, thus sharing the same canon as Protestant churches that do not include the Hebrew Bible apocrypha. Both UMJC and MJAA agree that the Bible is of “divine inspiration,” a characteristic that sets it apart from other texts. In combination, then, the Bible’s textuality is perceived as one that is harmonious and unified, as God is behind all of it. Both organizations have the same formulation of the Bible as the “final authority in all matters of faith and practice,” similar to the Lausanne declaration,<sup>89</sup> which is interesting, not only from a theological point of view, but from the perspective of how Messianic Jews supposedly should live. According to this statement, therefore, later traditions and dogmas are not to be observed if they add to, or especially contradict, something the Bible says. This is congruent with (as displayed in Chapter Two), the correlation between Messianic Judaism and the Protestant history and tradition of *sola scriptura*. As has been touched on already, and will be explored further in the chapters to come, the expressions of Messianic Jewish life are many. Whereas the UMCJ describes the Bible as “fully trustworthy (true), a gift,” the MJAA formulates it as the “only infallible and authoritative word of God.” Although similar, I understand the MJAA’s formulation to be closer to that of evangelical Christianity, particularly given the word “infallible” which echoes of expressions of Christianity.<sup>90</sup> In the case of the MJAA the paragraph about “Scripture” is placed ahead of the rest of the statement, thus proclaiming the immense importance assigned to the Bible. The Bible itself is used as an interpretative framework for the rest of the faith proclamations, with biblical references adjusted to the statements, for instance, in the quote from the MJAA above: everything comes out of the Bible.

Viewing the Bible as “the Word of God” ascribes to it the deepest authority possible. A well-known fact in anthropological studies, Harding has shown how fundamentalist Christians that regard the Bible as authoritative do not simply believe, but “know,” that the Bible is true and that God is speaking the truth to them.<sup>91</sup> Following their shared statement, the UMJC and the MJAA assert that the Bible is the “final authority in all matters of faith and practice,” a belief which shapes their convictions that Jesus is the Messiah, while their negotiations over Torah observance derive from the Bible. The Bible is considered authoritative, guiding, and relevant to all aspects of life, the sole source in which Messianic Jews

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<sup>89</sup> The Lausanne Declaration, or Lausanne Covenant, which emerged from the First Lausanne Congress in 1974, is the evangelical world’s declaration of faith and, as such, it unites evangelicals from all around the world. On the authoritative role of Scripture, it reads as “the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” Its structure is similar to those available in the Messianic Jewish world. “The Lausanne Covenant,” <https://lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant#cov>.

<sup>90</sup> “Competing Trends,” Reason.

<sup>91</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 272.

should *believe*, and with which they should *live (act)* in accordance. The act of reading is also an act of listening to God’s voice. Inserting “the Word of God” into their lives and culture today is also a way of embodying God’s will in order to live in a divine way. “The Word,” so to speak, is above and upon them as listeners, a higher authority to which they answer. “Words: From Narrative to Embodiment,” mentioned above, is a description suitable not only for charismatic Christianity but Messianic Jews as well.<sup>92</sup> Summing up the ideology concerning Scripture, to explain why so much effort is put into studying and reading Scripture, Carl Kinbar argues that the Bible is viewed among Messianic Jews as “*divinely inspired, infallible, and authoritative.*”<sup>93</sup>

## Biblical Hermeneutics: Yeshualogy, Post-Supersessionism, and Relevance

Biblical hermeneutics discusses “the variety of strategies” that readers deploy to read and interpret the Bible. What interpretive keys and styles are used to understand the text? This aspect addresses preferred and rejected strategies, and how choice impacts interpretation. Biblical hermeneutics also analyzes the connection between hermeneutics and everyday life, including ritual practice on the one hand, and hermeneutics and ideologies on the other.<sup>94</sup>

The term “hermeneutics” is a vague and confusing one, especially within biblical studies. Together with Bielo and Malley, I do not consider hermeneutics to refer to the *theory* of interpretation, but to the *process* of interpretation, meaning the strategies involved, which corresponds to ideas within reception theory in the tradition of Gadamer and Jauss.<sup>95</sup> Hermeneutics is thus part of *textual practice*, whereas I use the term “interpretation” to refer to actual ideas about what the text says. Without losing contact with social life and culture, this aspect is more closely aligned with the text itself and the reading process, than the ideological aspects discussed above. Reading practices, Malley argues, are shaped by cultural practices, that is, the community’s rules of ideology and identity governing how a text “should” be explained and made sense of.<sup>96</sup> I view hermeneutics as the instrument that creates readings and meaning-making, where interpretation is one outcome and application another.

Apart from its pronounced ideas about the authority of the Bible, the Messianic Jewish movement does not provide unified official teaching on “appropriate” and

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<sup>92</sup> Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 117–42.

<sup>93</sup> Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 61. Emphasis original (quoted also in Chapter One).

<sup>94</sup> Bielo, “Encountering Biblicism,” 5–6.

<sup>95</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 74.

<sup>96</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73–74.

“non-appropriate” ways of interpreting the Bible. Kinbar exemplifies this by referring to two Messianic Jewish theologians and their approach to how Scripture should be understood. The first, Juster, despite acknowledging that everything is not easy to grasp, writes that “the basic thrusts of much biblical teaching is available to the average reader who is seeking the truth with the help of the Holy Spirit. This is called *the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture*.”<sup>97</sup> Juster, in line with the history of Protestantism, basically says that any reader open to God can understand the Bible, an argument that illuminates a biblical ideology without saying anything explicit about hermeneutical strategies. It is, in my view, a naïve way of viewing what happens when a reader interacts with Scripture, although it effectively captures how readers within more “literalist-reading” cultures perceive “interpretation” (see section below on literalism). Put otherwise, it displays a hermeneutic of “we read and listen,” the others “interpret.”

On the other hand, Kinzer, the second example, argues that the Bible must be read in contexts of interpretative traditions. He claims that:

In a Messianic Jewish context, tradition represents the understanding of Scripture preserved through the generations among the communities—Jewish and Christian—within which Scripture itself has been preserved. If we are connected to these communities, then we are also heirs of their traditions.<sup>98</sup>

While still not explicit, Kinzer makes an important observation and argument that reading always occurs within a specific set of culture(s). In the case of Messianic Judaism, those would be both Judaism(s) and Christianity(ies). In *How the Bible Works*, Malley argues similarly that the fundamentalist Christians that he investigated, despite claiming the opposite, had an “interpretative tradition,” a belief tradition that formed their way of reading.<sup>99</sup> As Kinbar rightly points out, the dividing line between Juster and Kinzer, for example, concerns the role of “tradition”—including Christian dogma and Jewish rabbinics—and how it should be taken into account in the meeting with the text. For Kinzer, this can guide the reading, whereas Juster observed that “only biblical teaching is fully binding, whereas other authorities might be followed because we perceive wise application or respect community practices.”<sup>100</sup> Based on the different strands of Messianic

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<sup>97</sup> Daniel C. Juster, “Biblical Authority,” in *Voices of Messianic Judaism: Confronting Critical Issues Facing a Maturing Movement*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Clarksville: Lederer, 2001), 37–42, 40; also quoted in Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 61.

<sup>98</sup> Mark S. Kinzer, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *Voices of Messianic Judaism: Confronting Critical Issues Facing a Maturing Movement*, ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Clarksville: Lederer, 2001), 44–49, 44; Also quoted in Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 62 incl. n. 4.

<sup>99</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73.

<sup>100</sup> Juster, “Biblical Authority,” 39; also quoted in Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 62–63 n. 8.

Judaism present in Jerusalem (see the whole discussion in Chapter Two), I think it is plausible to think that a majority of Messianic Jews take a position similar to that of Juster's, which is more reminiscent of an evangelical one than a rabbinic. The empirical chapters in Part II shed light on this issue.

Malley distinguishes between the concepts of "interpretative tradition" and "hermeneutic tradition," defining the latter as "a socially transmitted set of methods for reading the Bible"<sup>101</sup> upon which the community agrees. He argues that the fundamentalist Christians of his field case lack a hermeneutic tradition. Yet perhaps the division between the two should not be that so sharp; I consider interpretative tradition to answer to "what the text means" and hermeneutic tradition to display "how the text means what it means," and the two necessarily are intertwined to a large extent.

In the case of Messianic Jewish hermeneutics, I can identify three intertwined textual practices and reading strategies: "*Yeshualogy*," *post-supersessionism*, and *relevance*. Both Bielo and Malley have contended that those who assign high authority to the Bible are constantly engaged in the very important process of making Bible-reading *relevant* to them as readers. Seeking relevance also seems to be a core concern for Messianic Jews, as expressed in the view that biblical ideology forms all aspects of life and practice. The following reflections are primarily based on reading Messianic Jewish devotional material and the reading interviews, issues further elaborated in Part II.

First, the Bible, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, is read through a lens of "*Yeshualogy*," a term that I have coined.<sup>102</sup> As Jesus-believing Jews, it is important that they legitimize their faith in the Messiah through this reading strategy; Jesus is discovered not only in biblical prophecies, but in *all* biblical texts. Thus, with an applicative and figural reading, Jesus as the Messiah of Israel is always there when a text is read by a Messianic Jew; without Jesus texts cannot be understood "correctly," Messianic Jews would argue. Rom 11 is a prime example of the latter, just as in Christian traditions, as the text is understood by the Messianic Jews to speak about (faith in) Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no proper understanding of the text; the textuality they strive for is only a "coherent and theologically sound narrative" around and through Jesus.<sup>103</sup> As "*Yeshualogy*" also serves as a form of

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<sup>101</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73.

<sup>102</sup> I have invented this term with inspiration from the term "Christology," which contains the Greek word "Christos." As Messianic Jews generally avoid theology and terminology with associated with Hellenistic Christianity, transforming the term into "*Yeshualogy*" much better serves the ideology of the movement as it clearly pinpoints the Jewish and Hebrew roots and ideology of the movement.

<sup>103</sup> Kinbar, "Messianic Jews and Scripture," 63.

textuality to bind the Bible together, tensions that might appear in the reading are solved in creative ways in light of Jesus, or his words and deeds.<sup>104</sup>

A second textual practice that characterizes Messianic Jewish readings (as well as those of the PWJ scholars) is that of a post-supersessionist hermeneutics: in other words, readings that defend the claim that God has not cast away his people Israel—a discussion central in Rom 11. This practice affirms that “Israel-talk” concerns the Messianic Jewish readers and the Jewish people at large, not the church, and thus it goes against the traditional Christian way of reading the Bible. In its simplest form, “Israel” is always taken to refer to ethnic, historical Israel—the Jewish people—instead of a reworked concept of Israel to refer to all those (Jews and non-Jews) who believe in Jesus. These two strategies are decisive for maintaining and supporting a Messianic Jewish identity.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in line with this, Messianic Jews are keen on reading and interpreting the Bible with Jewish eyes that acknowledge not only its Jewish roots, but the Jewishness of the Jesus movement more broadly. For them, the Bible is not primarily a Christian text, but a Jewish one. Messianic Jews share this hermeneutic with evangelical Christians and Christian Zionists, but hold to it even more strongly.<sup>106</sup> Malley argues for the importance to the believers of having a biblical basis for one’s belief,<sup>107</sup> and, as emphasized (see Chapters One and Two), Messianic Jews today see themselves as living in a now restored continuation of the biblical story, thus embodying biblical text(uality).

The final biblical practice that directs Messianic Jews in their readings of the Bible is that of *relevance*. While Yeshualogy and post-supersessionism are hermeneutical strategies of a theological character, this strategy—more concrete in nature—is much highlighted within the social life of Scripture approach, with echoes from reception theory’s emphasis on application and the socially formative power of literature to understand a text. Inheriting the quest for relevance in reading the Bible from the evangelical tradition, this reading strategy works in a broad sense as a practice in which readers strive to connect the Bible to today’s circumstances, both on a personal and societal level. The relevancy reading practice is the one most discussed by scholars of the anthropology of Christianity and, as Bielo asserts, “the most pervasive form of reading is that of application.”<sup>108</sup> The strategy has to do with how the reader makes the text relevant and alive, supporting and guiding and

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<sup>104</sup> Cf. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 64.

<sup>105</sup> Kinbar, “Messianic Jews and Scripture,” 63–65.

<sup>106</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 182–84.

<sup>107</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 120.

<sup>108</sup> James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 71, cf. 60; Jon Bialecki, “The Bones Restored to Life: Dialogue and Dissemination in the Vineyard’s Dialectic of Text and Presence,” in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, ed. James S. Bielo, S(ON)S (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 136–56, 159–61; Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 74, 158.

pushing the reader to action in his or her life. Bielo therefore argues that the essential task of the scholar is “[to] understand how readers align themselves in specific types of relationship with biblical texts”;<sup>109</sup> in other words, to seek the “why” of certain relevance-making readings. As the Bible is perceived to be “the living Word of God,” readers and listeners are obliged to live what Malley refers to as “biblical lives,”<sup>110</sup> morally, ideological, and politically. For Messianic Jews, one such “outcome” is how the olive tree metaphor in Rom 11 is discussed and read as speaking about contemporary Jews and Christians (see more in Chapter Five). Moreover, Rom 11 contains several diffuse “time markers” for the unraveling of God’s plan for humanity that Messianic Jews, and many Christians, interpret as applicable to today’s reality (see Chapters Four to Six). Malley has rightly defined speculations concerning this textual practice, such as how biblical prophecy is handled, as part of the quest for relevance.<sup>111</sup> This quest can create seemingly ad hoc interpretations and linkages between the text and the context of the readers whereby a text can take on different meanings at different times due to the cultural and personal settings.<sup>112</sup> Basically, the readers ask themselves the question—“What is God telling *me* in this text, in this part of His Living Word?”—and then answer it themselves. And so, the texts take on a social life.

## Biblical Rhetorics

Biblical rhetoric<sup>113</sup> explores how biblical texts, images, characters, narratives, and the like are used to construct identities both of the individual and of the group. How is the Bible used as a resource to argue in support of different opinions, ideas, or actions? This aspect of textual practices is the most important for promoting agency. What biblical texts are used and how are they used—or specifically not used—to promote specific actions? Biblical rhetorics also discusses the conversations in which the biblical text are deployed: theological, moral, emotional, relational, and so forth. Here a close analysis of the reception of the biblical texts, whether in oral

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<sup>109</sup> James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 60; Bialecki, “Bones Restored to Life,” 151. For an extended discussion, see Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 105–08.

<sup>110</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 1, cf. 125; Malley, “Understanding the Bible’s Influence,” 203.

<sup>111</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 74, 105–08, 153–54.

<sup>112</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 111–12.

<sup>113</sup> Bielo uses the term in the plural, speaking of this textual practice as “rhetorics.” Whereas he uses it as a broader term than I do in this study, I have chosen to refer to this in the following as “rhetoric,” a more common term in English.

or written format, plays a fundamental role in understanding the rhetoric, and thus how the text is interpreted and used.<sup>114</sup>

One aspect of biblical rhetoric is that of discourse, which I simply define as “language-in-use,” following Bielo.<sup>115</sup> It is about how communication shapes identity. Based on the close attention anthropologists have paid to the “language ideology” displayed by believers, they have argued since the 1960s that it is possible to analyze culture and meaning-making processes through language. In fact, studies on language use and language ideology have been very fruitful within anthropology of Christianity, such as those on American evangelicalism.<sup>116</sup> Through the use of texts and the language used to explain them, identity performance takes shape. Analysis of spoken discourse, Bielo argues, makes it possible to understand the social life of Scripture, and from that can follow deeper insights about a religious grouping (what Bielo defines as an “institution”<sup>117</sup>), such as Messianic Judaism. Webb Keane argues that speaking the religious language is part of the religious formation,<sup>118</sup> while Harding dedicates a chapter to what she calls “speaking is believing,” built around the basic idea that “coming to faith” necessarily includes adopting and expressing a new language that results in beliefs, thoughts, and behavior.<sup>119</sup>

Just as studies on evangelical Christianity have argued for the importance of analyzing language in order to understand the culture,<sup>120</sup> the same is true for Messianic Judaism. Exemplifying this, the previous chapter displayed how the development of a specific Messianic Jewish vernacular was fundamental for shaping a distinct identity. Learning the language is part of becoming an insider, a believer—and of “performing insiderness.” Reading, and reading “in the right way,” is also an essential component of being an insider. Therefore, a close analysis of the rhetoric deployed in the interviews is necessary for understanding how the participants actually read, interpret, and use Rom 11. What words are used, and why, when they speak about this biblical text? How is the grammar structured? How is language deployed to explain something specific in the text, and to connect it to today? In other words, biblical rhetoric deals with rhetorical analyses of “the words

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<sup>114</sup> Bielo, “Encountering Biblicism,” 6.

<sup>115</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 14–15.

<sup>116</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 25–26; Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, esp. 33–60; Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*; Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation*; cf. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 14–16.

<sup>117</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 10–12.

<sup>118</sup> Webb Keane, “Language and Religion,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Alessandro Duranti (London: Blackwell, 2004), 431–48.

<sup>119</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 33–60.

<sup>120</sup> For multiple references, see Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 15.

upon the Word.” As already noted, and discussed further in Part II, the image of the olive tree is an important text for Messianic Jews through which they locate their own identity and place in God’s creation as “the natural branches” (v. 21). This image is a foundational narrative for their ability to explain the relationship between Jesus-believing Jews and Gentiles, both theologically and practically. A Messianic Jewish identity and culture are formed in the Bible through hermeneutics and rhetoric. While focusing on one text naturally limits understanding of the larger frame of how textual practice works within Messianic Judaism as a culture and institution, on the positive side it allows for deeper analyses. The narrow focus on one important text gives a glimpse into a deeper understanding of the movement as the text takes on an active social life; consequently, many stories about a Messianic Jewish life can be told through the lens of Rom 11, as explored in future chapters.

## The Question of Literalism

Are Messianic Jews literalists? Scholarly studies on conservative Christians’ engagement with the Bible have been very interested in the topic of literalism (see Aron Engberg, Vincent Crapanzano, Harding, and Malley).<sup>121</sup> The question is also motivated by what has so far been explored in terms of Messianic Jews’ textual ideology and practices. For the sake of clarity, I consider literalism to cover the two aspects of biblicism. Given the multivocality within the Messianic Jewish movement, even when it comes to issues of the Bible, the answer to whether Messianic Jews are literalists or not would be both “yes” and “no.”<sup>122</sup> Yet, given what we saw above in the Messianic Jewish statements of faith, the Bible is considered the absolute authority in all matters: true, infallible, “a Living Word,” and so forth, designations that all point towards a “literalist” understanding.

The MJAA describes its own position as “accepting only a literal view of Scripture and prophecy,” whereas the UMJC (in line with Kinzer above) rather promotes an understanding partly placed within the framework of Christian and Jewish (i.e., Torah-centered) interpretative tradition.<sup>123</sup> While some educated Messianic Jewish theologians might have a more sophisticated understanding of the reading process, Kinzer points out, “Many Messianic Jews consider the message of the Bible as clear and indisputable, a fact independent of external interpretation. The individual who reads the text with faith and an open heart will understand what it

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<sup>121</sup> E.g. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, esp. 15–18, 152–56; see also surrounding references to Crapanzano, Harding, and Malley.

<sup>122</sup> Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden, *Through My Enemy’s Eyes: Envisioning Reconciliation in Israel-Palestine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 127.

<sup>123</sup> Fleischer, *So Great A Cloud of Witnesses*, 106.

says.”<sup>124</sup> Lisa Loden, an Israeli Messianic Jewish theologian, confirms that “the majority of Israeli Messianic Jews hold to a literal, or plain sense, hermeneutic. The Scriptures, particularly those related to Israel, are to be understood literally.”<sup>125</sup> While I agree with Loden that this is often the case, she displays some of the different hermeneutic strategies at play when Messianic Jews read the Bible, as I discuss below.

Malley has commented that literalism should not be taken literally.<sup>126</sup> What does it imply to be a literalist? To take the text based on “what it says” is a common enough idea; “Israel” in the Bible, for example, always means “Israel” (unclearly defined as the people, the land, or the nation state) for Messianic Jews.<sup>127</sup> Another characteristic of literalists has been their ostensible opposition towards “interpretation”—viewed as unnecessary, liberal, and something that separates them from “the Word of God” which they should instead “receive”<sup>128</sup>—as well as their dismissal of allegorical and spiritual readings unless the text itself invites it (such as the olive tree metaphor in Rom 11).<sup>129</sup> This self-understanding echoes throughout the Bible-reading interviews: the participants are simply telling me what they think God says. But so-called literalist, or “plain” readings, rather, seem to be creative readings.<sup>130</sup> I deem it correct to consider literalism to be as much an *identity marker* (as in, “we care about the Bible, you don’t!”) than a hermeneutical description. The problems around literalism have been well captured by Harding when she observes, “the interpretive tradition is literalist in the sense that it presumes the Bible to be true and literally God’s Word, but the interpretive practices themselves are not simply literalist.”<sup>131</sup> Similarly, just as anthropologists have claimed that literalist Christians in fact are not literalists per se, I view Messianic Jews in the same way. Instead, what we see is a great creativity in how the Bible is approached, read, used, and applied—making the Bible a “living Word”—wherein rhetoric plays a

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<sup>124</sup> Kinzer, “Scripture and Tradition,” 29.

<sup>125</sup> Munayer and Loden, *Through My Enemy’s Eyes*, 129–30; cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 15.

<sup>126</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 101.

<sup>127</sup> This way of speaking was repeatedly used in the interviews.

<sup>128</sup> Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 127.

<sup>129</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 100.

<sup>130</sup> E.g., Bielo has conducted fieldwork among self-ascribed “creationists” who, by reading the creation story (stories) in Genesis, have built and produced a “creationist theme park.” James S. Bielo, “Literally Creative: Intertextual Gaps and Artistic Agency,” in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as the Political*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 2015), 20–33.

<sup>131</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 28.

fundamental role, to suit the needs of a Messianic Jewish identity and lifestyle “in the land,” in Israel.<sup>132</sup>

Summing up, *biblical ideology* constitutes everything that the reader brings with him or her to the meeting with the text, including presuppositions and expectations. It is similar to the idea of the reader’s “horizon” in reception theory. The reader’s ideology shapes the reading process and understanding as such. *Biblical hermeneutics* consists of those strategies and practices the reader employs to make sense of the text in focus. In this study, this is manifested through Yeshualogy, post-supersessionism, and relevance. *Biblical rhetoric* is also part of the textual engagement but with a specific focus on the discourses and vernacular of the reader. “Interpretation” can be understood as a combination of these two aspects of textual practice. I also use the term “interpretation” in the narrow sense of what the text or a word supposedly says: “x means y.” The questions of *what*, *how*, and *why* cannot be directly connected to a single aspect within the social life of Scriptures, but rather all of them. While this conclusion is not helpful in terms of creating a structure, it once again emphasizes the messiness and complexities of dealing with empirical-religious readers’ reception of the Bible. Reading the Bible is not a simple task, but understanding the readings of others’ is even more difficult. This section has sought to examine some of the tools used for analyzing the coming Messianic Jewish readings. But now, over to something about the work with the participants and the oral texts they produce.

## Bible-Reading Interviews

### How and When I Created the Empirical Receptions

First, a note on terminology: “Bible-reading interviews” is a term coined by me to denote a certain kind of interview that focuses on the Bible and Bible readings. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, it can be described as a combination of an interview and a Bible study. Simply put, the interview focuses on how the participant, the empirical-religious reader, understands a certain text from the Bible, thus creating the empirical reception. In other words, the interviews as method address *how* the material was formed, the Messianic Jewish readings answering the *what* question concerning the participants’ reading of Rom 11. Thus, the material is created by me in dialogue with the participants; the one-on-one readings in this setting do not represent a naturally occurring context, but an interactional frame in

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 118; Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 94; Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 15–18.

which the readings come into being in a co-constructing process between the participant, the text, and me as interviewer. Given that interviews and fieldwork are uncommon in biblical studies, I have chosen to be descriptively detailed in the following presentation of my methods for obtaining and analyzing the data to illuminate the actual process as much as possible.

All in all, I have interviewed eighteen Messianic Jewish leaders,<sup>133</sup> all male,<sup>134</sup> serving in Jerusalem or surrounding areas, the so-called greater Jerusalem area.<sup>135</sup> The criteria for choosing the readers were more fully developed at the beginning of this chapter. I started out with one gatekeeper, the person who facilitates the researcher's access to the field, a man I had met earlier both in Sweden and in Jerusalem. Using the snowball method, I made contact with other leaders in town through the gatekeeper. Simultaneously, I also visited a number of congregations and sent out e-mails to relevant leaders asking for an interview. Most responded favorably, while a few did not reply or declined to be interviewed, citing a busy schedule. I aimed for a representative sample that answered to the diversity within the Messianic Jewish landscape in Israel. Before each interview, I informed the participant about the aims of the study, and that I was especially interested in how they read Rom 11. They were assured that they would be anonymized in any written or oral communication of results, and that I would record the interview. Thus, informed consent was obtained in all cases.<sup>136</sup>

Most Bible-reading interviews took place over the course of four months (August 2015, November 2015, and February-March 2016). Four additional interviews took place during the winter of 2019 and 2020 before I started writing the empirical chapters, as I had managed to get in touch with some other important leaders in Jerusalem. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to three hours and took place in a setting chosen by the participant to make them comfortable—this means that I have conducted interviews in all kinds of settings, from small cozy offices to huge, elegant ones, from cafés to private homes. Before we started, I repeated the information they had received when I first contacted them and allowed time for

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<sup>133</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann discuss the question of how many participants one needs for a qualitative study. The answer they put forth is “around 15 +/- 10.” My number of participants is therefore within the customary scope. Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 113.

<sup>134</sup> This was a conscious choice as I wanted to focus on people in positions of leadership. As I have made clear (see Chapter Two), only men are congregational leaders. Only a few women are engaged in teaching and/or co-pastoring congregations with their husbands. Even in such cases, it is the man who has the dominant role for the congregation.

<sup>135</sup> While this area includes also East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank, I have interviewed leaders in West Jerusalem and in Israel proper.

<sup>136</sup> D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2012), 132–34; David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2001), 270–71; Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 70–72.

questions and further explanations on my side. The interviews were conducted in English, sometimes with some Hebrew when they required it. I used a bilingual English (NASB)-Modern Hebrew Bible (the Bible Society's translation) and with an added leaf sheet of the NRSV translation (as this is the customary use within academic biblical studies). The readers were encouraged to use an English or Hebrew one as well but were allowed to use one in their first language if they preferred, as long as we used English as the main language between us. Talking about the Bible and "what God is saying" is part of their daily life and mission and they freely and happily "thumped their Bibles" and read from them, even though many knew (parts of) Rom 11 by heart.

Choosing to use interviews as the qualitative method for creating the readings seemed the most suitable option as I wanted to understand how Messianic Jewish leaders engaged with the chosen text. I was not so much interested in official writings on the topics, if existing, but rather their own personal thoughts and readings. Individual interviews were therefore the most suitable tool as they had no audience to answer to, to influence, or be influenced by. At the same time, I will never know how similarly or differently these leaders might engage with this text in the context of their congregations, although I have no reason to suspect different understandings. One leader with whom I had been in contact, however, brought a colleague to his interview because, he told me, they both wanted to participate and say their share. Given that both of them spoke on a fairly equal basis and it was one of my longest interviews, timewise, I have considered this a group interview with two participants in the statistics. Another leader brought his secretary—not to contribute to the interview but rather, I understood, as a chaperone, so that he did not meet an unfamiliar woman alone, without supervision.

Reading Rom 11 has been the focus of the interviews for which I adopted a *semi-structured* model, which, as the name denotes, is neither totally structured nor fully flexible and open. Karen O'Reilly explains that "a semi-structured interview will contain elements of both styles [structured and unstructured] in order to explore ideas with the participants but also to get fixed responses for some criteria."<sup>137</sup> The researcher remains in control of the interview and the direction it takes, but also incorporates a measure of freedom to see where the participant takes it. The focus on the text gave the interview an external framework and structure. I did not use regular prepared questions, instead I formed a thematic interview guide with areas taken from the text that I wanted at least some comments on, such as, "Who is Israel?"; "Paul's identity"; "Who's the remnant?"; "All Israel will be saved" (v. 26), and so forth. When inserting a comment, I tried to do so using open-ended questions,<sup>138</sup> such as, "How do you understand the remnant?" These topics were all

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<sup>137</sup> Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 120; cf. Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 156–58.

<sup>138</sup> O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 122–23.

taken from Rom 11 but also corresponded to themes discussed in Pauline scholarship, and mostly the participants addressed them without prompting. Primarily, the guide worked as a checklist for me.

When asked whether they should read it from beginning to end or thematically, I asked them to proceed in the way that they perceived as most suitable. Most participants chose to start from verse one and continue until the end. While it differed a bit from interview to interview, either the reader or I—sometimes both—read the text out loud, section by section, with comments in between. Usually only a few verses, or just a word or two, were read before the participant wanted to pause and add his explanation. The reading was loosely structured. The leader was encouraged and asked to simply read and interpret, explaining the text in his own terms. What is Paul saying? What is the meaning? How do they make sense of the text? Instructions were deliberately loose.

One reason for this was that I also wanted to see how they interacted with the text and how they approached it. In order to study the reception of the text amongst readers, as well as their biblical ideology and practice, it was important for me to administer and direct their reading as little as possible; one might say that I trusted the text to do its work in a dialectic with the reader. Or, as the leaders would have put it, I trusted that the Word of God would speak to them as the Spirit wanted. I did, however, interact, thereby becoming part of the creative and created reading process when the participant strayed too far from the task (such as starting to talk about his last vacation) and steering him back to the text, often with a direct, open question. In retrospect, a fruitful course would have been to push the reader when he seemingly struggled with making sense of the text as those moments are probably highly informative. The one-on-one setting of the interviews would readily promote a safe space for the experts to struggle with the text—which sometimes happened (discussed in Part II). A more direct and engaged participation by the researcher could also be possible, with the awareness that one would then take a larger role in the co-creative process of reception than I chose to do.

Reading the Bible with Messianic Jews quickly turned out not to be only a Bible-reading interview, but also yielded many personal narratives. Engaging with the “living Word of God” also meant their telling me about themselves and how the Bible was, and is, alive in their lives. Coming back to the above discussion of hermeneutics, this clearly shows the strategy of making the Bible reading *relevant* and of *application*. The participants become “alive” in the meeting with the text around which they are trying to form a divine life. Often, the interviews unearthed personal stories about coming to faith, family, living in Israel, and the local political situation. This all goes back to the inherent biblical ideology and the fact that all the readers are preachers, which gave the interviews—despite the unnatural one-on-one reading-interview setting—a strong tone of proclaiming a message wherein I was the sole listener. While the interviews were a constructed setting, the social—and

private—lives of the readers are thoroughly permeated by the Bible, which made their engagement with it seem natural and “fluent.”

After the interviews I immediately recorded reflections and thoughts in my field diary. Keeping a field diary, which is common and encouraged in ethnographic methodology, fills a briefing role and offers a place for tentative analysis. This was supplemented by notes on the behavior, body language, and emotions displayed by the participants during the interviews.<sup>139</sup>

## What I Did with the Empirical Receptions

The interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim by me. I also noted emotional displays, laughter, silence, and changes in the participant’s voice. Direct citations, or plain reading from the text, have been marked in the transcriptions with italics. The total amount of recorded material from interviews is around forty hours.<sup>140</sup> Transcriptions were coded using the software program NVivo. Coding, the tool used by researchers to analyze their empirical material, is a “cut-and-paste” enterprise described as “the process of *grouping together themes and categories that you have accumulated in the field*,”<sup>141</sup> while open coding is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data.”<sup>142</sup> The goal of coding is to find patterns around which, in a later stage, one can form a structure for the study.<sup>143</sup> While I do not think that analysis can take place strictly with inductive grounded theory—that is, without the influence of theory—I aimed to keep the first round of coding as close to the transcriptions as possible, choosing to conduct “thematic coding” based on how participants had read the text. In doing so, I focused on the different aspects of textual practice, such as “interpretation of meaning” or content (“interpretation”),<sup>144</sup> which resulted in several “boxes”

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<sup>139</sup> See Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw, eds., *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Roger Sanjek, “A Vocabulary for Fieldnotes,” in *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 92–121; O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 104–05.

<sup>140</sup> Transcribing might appear a simple task, something “that you just do,” as I have been told by people who never have tried it themselves. In fact, it is both extremely time-consuming and takes a lot of energy as you need to get every word correct. I transcribed the interviews one by one, and then listened to the interview once more with the transcript in front of me. A recorded interview with good sound quality that lasted for, say, an hour can easily take a work day to transcribe.

<sup>141</sup> Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 43. Emphasis original.

<sup>142</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park: SAGE, 1990), 61.

<sup>143</sup> Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 306–12.

<sup>144</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 201–05; Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 123–24; Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 318–27.

containing different themes discussed by the participants when they read the text.<sup>145</sup> Meanwhile, a focus on biblical hermeneutics, if in an overall way, was a guide. Content analysis, or categorization, made it easy to see what was given the most and least attention in Rom 11, and how this had been done. One sentence or part of the transcript often received more than one code, or “node” as NVivo calls it.

As a second phase of the coding, now more inspired by my frameworks of reception theory and the social life of Scripture and its different concepts, I coded issues related to how the readers approached the text and their ideology, the hermeneutical strategies on display, and when and how they turned the text into their lives today, thus applying it to contemporary discussions. Part of this phase also had a focus on language. Interpretation necessarily also deals with rhetoric. This is much emphasized within biblical studies in general, and also within the social life of Scripture approach (“biblical rhetoric”), but surprisingly, much less so in reception studies. From an ethnographic perspective, interviewing is a linguistic interaction, the outcome is an oral text transformed into a written text, and different forms of language analyses have been very common. Here the researcher looks at “characteristic uses of language in an interview, the use of grammar and linguistic forms,”<sup>146</sup> rhetoric in other words. Doing such detailed analyses of the interviews has also illuminated the textual practice among my readers, and helped relate the interview’s oral texts to the scholarly, written texts. The three clusters of themes that form the structure of the empirical chapters in Part II—namely, *Identity and Torah*, *Relations and Yeshua*, and *Time and Land*—appeared during coding, a time-consuming and very important analytical process.

The project has been accepted by the Swedish Organization for Ethical Probation (“Etikprövningsmyndigheten,” or more specifically, by their branch “Etikprövningsnämnden in Lund”). Following its guidelines, and those of ethnography more broadly,<sup>147</sup> the participants in the study are anonymous; the names used are pseudonyms given by me which bear no resemblance to their real names, apart from being common in Israeli society today and partly reflecting the cultural background of the leaders. As the Messianic Jewish world is small, and given the vulnerable status of Messianic Judaism in Israel, I have done my utmost to make it impossible to identify the participants by not giving away too much personal detail when I refer to or quote them. Other details that might function as identification have also been changed. This has been important given the vulnerable situation of Messianic Jews in Israel.

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<sup>145</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 197.

<sup>146</sup> O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*; Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 219–20.

<sup>147</sup> See for example Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 72–73.

## Faith, Gender, and Powerplays: Notes on Reflexivity

“Are you one of us, or not?” In every meeting following the first introductions and hand shaking, this question showed up in one form or another. Was I friend or foe? This question has clear validity. I am, at the same time, both an insider and an outsider.

Beginning with the publication of Paul Rabinow’s *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977)<sup>148</sup> and Talal Asad’s *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973),<sup>149</sup> followed by the reflexive turn during the 1980s,<sup>150</sup> the role of the researcher has become an integral part of discussing how one obtains and makes sense of empirical data. Since then, researchers have been aware that their presence in the field impacts the study and that their data collection therefore never can be totally “objective,” an insight that is also correct when one speaks about studying the social life of Scripture; this does not, however, mean that empirical research lacks valid methodology or analysis. In this section I shed light on a few power issues that have been important in the interviews, specifically concerning faith, gender, and profession. While I have been interested in the interaction between reader and text, my presence as a third party has inevitably been part of a co-constructive setting of the reading interviews.

Unsurprisingly, placing me in the religious landscape has prompted the readers’ most important and acute question to me. I am neither Jewish nor a Messianic Jew, I told them when asked, but a Gentile Christian with a curiosity and openness to learn about them and their understanding of the Bible. This attitude made many participants talkative. I believe that, as participants, they deserve honesty both because of the time they give me, but also for ethical research reasons. Tamir Erez, for example, who researched a Messianic Jewish community in Tel Aviv, describes the difficulties of being a Jew but not a Messianic Jew. His lack of faith in Jesus made him an outsider—while mine made me something of an insider—and he was constantly subjected to witnessing and attempts to turn him into “one of them.” When his research subjects realized that they had failed, they simply asked him to leave.<sup>151</sup> The well-known and respected monographs by Harding and Crapanzano, neither of whom shared the convictions of the people they researched, also record the common phenomenon of conversion attempts on the ethnographer.<sup>152</sup> At the same time, I am not “one of them,” like Keri Zelson Warshawsky who researched

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<sup>148</sup> Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

<sup>149</sup> Talal Asad, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 1973).

<sup>150</sup> For a brief discussion, see O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 212–28.

<sup>151</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished.”

<sup>152</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*; Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*.

her own community as a Messianic Jew, with concomitant contacts, insights, and opinions.<sup>153</sup> Being positioned as an openly self-defined Christian who studies other Christians has long been taboo, considered not to produce “good” research. This subject position is not a problem, provided one is able to distance oneself from the research subjects. This conviction has been clearly advocated by, for example, Brian Howell,<sup>154</sup> who has argued that a Christian can produce deeply nuanced narratives thanks to their insider insights, and by Malley, who has a background in fundamentalist Christianity similar to the one he studies.<sup>155</sup>

Being a Christian was, as I knew, not a sufficient answer for the Messianic Jewish leaders. “Christian” and “Christianity” are not terminologies that go down well within this community and, furthermore, are terms that are vague and loaded with different meanings depending on context.<sup>156</sup> Was I a “true” Christian or a “Christian” who had got everything wrong? Was I a liberal? A perceived “real” Christian, for them, is someone who loves the Bible as God’s “true Word,” is convinced that Jesus is the only way to God, affirms the Jewish roots of Christianity, and supports the State of Israel. Another issue that arose sometimes was whether I understood God’s miraculous act of restoring the Messianic Jewish movement. I handled these questions as quickly as possible. I briefly referred to my early 20s when I was literally “on board and on stage” for one of Sweden’s major revival movements within so-called traditional and conservative, Bible-based Christianity with charismatic expressions. Besides academic biblical studies at a secular university (which the Messianic Jews did not always appreciate), I usually mentioned that my immersion in and knowledge of Jewish roots, as well as my first encounter with Messianic Judaism, was through this movement. Conversing with me, the leaders also realized that I could speak “evangelical” fluently, which I did when I found it suitable and helpful. This information served to place me as someone on their side, making me unthreatening, and perhaps even “kosher,” so to speak. In some interviews, I helped the readers by bringing up these credentials myself to “break the ice.” I am convinced that this greatly helped in getting access and encouraging participants to speak more freely about their understandings of the text. Knowing that I would “understand” them, unlike most who look upon them with skepticism or worse, definitely made the interviews much more open and genuine as the participants did not feel the need to defend themselves but could be right-on-spot.

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<sup>153</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 33–34.

<sup>154</sup> Brian M. Howell, “The Repugnant Cultural Other Speaks Back: Christian Identity as Ethnographic ‘Standpoint’,” *AT* 7:4 (2007): 371–91.

<sup>155</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 34–36.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 33–40; Howell, “Repugnant Cultural Other,” 381.

However, since the participants did not ask, I did not feel the need to tell them that I had consciously separated myself from the kind of Christianity where the approach to the Bible is one of “read what it says, believe what it says, and it will become as it says.” I did not mention that I regularly went to the local Hebrew-speaking Catholic congregation (without being Catholic), as I knew, and the interviews confirm, that there is great aversion to Catholicism among Messianic Jews. No doubt had I spilled this piece of information I would have been met with more skepticism and the interviews might have turned out differently.

Gender was another matter that influenced the interviews and how I was perceived. While I knew of the vast amount of literature spent on discussing gender issues, often in connection to sex,<sup>157</sup> I went into the field somewhat naïvely failing to reflect on the issue of my being a young, unmarried woman interacting with older, powerful men. I was used to being the only woman in various settings, so it did not bother me at all. At the same time, with the conservative gender ideology prevalent within the Messianic Jewish world in mind, I was always careful to dress modestly so as not to provoke anybody. In the field, however, things sometimes got more complicated or bizarre. While almost all the participants received me with a warm welcome and were very cordial and open, it was obvious that some felt awkward being alone in the room with me. Some were surprised I was doing such a study, as they apparently thought of it as man’s work, while others were happy about it.

A few of the participants were interested in whether my presumed husband had allowed me to meet with them and conduct the study. Others wondered aloud why I was not married at my age. Another recurrent display of their biblical ideology and gender ideology in general was manifest in questions or comments about woman’s submission to men. Those who asked about this believed that women’s submission to male authority was an obvious biblical principle and it, obviously, served as a way to test my sympathy as a researcher for their position: Did I agree? Did I object? Again, thanks to my background and general knowledge of both Messianic Judaism and conservative Christianity, I kept my composure, even if annoyed. My lack of outright feminist response apparently served as sufficient reason for them to accept me. The only time I reacted and disagreed was when one participant claimed that I would become a “complete” woman once I got married and had children.

Yet another and unexpected problem that I encountered concerned my profession, where the “power asymmetries” of the situation were clearly displayed.<sup>158</sup> The participants had been given both written and verbal information about my study, but still some did not really understand why I wanted to meet with them. My interest in studying Messianic Jewish interpretations of the Bible, particularly *their* way of reading, seemed to be beyond some to grasp. When this occurred, I simply asked

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<sup>157</sup> See for example Tony Larry Whitehead and Mary Ellen Conaway, eds., *Self, Sex, and Gender in Cross-Cultural Fieldwork* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

<sup>158</sup> Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*, 33–34.

them to read and explain Rom 11, “think of it as a Bible study.” Another concern that confused some of the participants was my role in this specific situation. Surely, should not I as someone with more education than they, tell them how I read Rom 11, and so teach them? Why would I be interested in them? It was a complex situation of “who’s the pro?”<sup>159</sup> This thread, I realize, contradicts the gender issues mentioned above, yet both sometimes played out with the same persons. Because it was important that I did not influence their reading with my own, I usually responded with something very general and encouraged them to continue with their own reading. If asked during the reading interview whether I agreed or not, I chose the same strategy; I was supportive and encouraging of their continuing to tell *me*, not the other way around. At the same time, as leading men, they are used to telling other people what is right and wrong and what “the Word of God” says.

Bielo discusses similar questions in his reflections on evangelical Bible study groups where he encountered similar questions of, “Are you a Christian, and which kind?” and, “Are you an academic?”<sup>160</sup> Without doubt, I also inhabited a multitude of identities (most prominently that of a scholar, a Christian, and a woman) that were, and are, flexible and fluid in nature when I entered the field. While I emphasized my academic identity, my readers cared more about my religious identity, which was the aspect that most helped me in our meetings. I inhabited what Thomas Tweed has called a “translocative position” in that I constantly moved between the role of insider and outsider,<sup>161</sup> or inhabited both at the same time, but in different ways, which has served to benefit the study in a productive way. Bielo formulates comparable experiences, noting that “while I was most certainly ‘among them,’ and most thought me to be ‘with them,’ I was not always ‘one of them.’”<sup>162</sup> While I am still certainly not one of them and never will be, as I am not Jewish, I was perceived as being on the “good” side. As to why I chose to study a group from whose ideology I have distanced myself, I have found that academic study can lead to a (renewed) deeper respect for and greater fascination with Messianic Jews—without, hopefully, losing the critical, analytical eye.

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<sup>159</sup> Cf. the short discussion of “the *knower and the known*,” Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 39. Emphasis original. Cf. Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 167–68.

<sup>160</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 41.

<sup>161</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, “On Moving Across: Translocative Religion and the Interpreter’s Position,” *JAAR* 70:2 (2002): 253–77.

<sup>162</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 41.

## Getting to Know the Field More Deeply

I decided early on that the Bible-reading interviews were to constitute the main material and methodology for the study. But to gain a more in-depth understanding of Messianic Judaism, I added an element of participant observation, drawing, once again, on ethnographic methods. The best locales for this were the public congregational religious services as the Bible is here read, taught, and used as a central object. During the fieldwork itself and in the following years in Jerusalem, I have spent at least one Friday or Shabbat (Saturday) a month in a Messianic Jewish service. The vignettes (see Chapter Two) are the product of this. The time in Jerusalem also enabled me to converse and socialize a lot with Messianic Jewish believers, even making friends with some. Ultimately, this immersion in Messianic Judaism has, I hope, served to make my understanding more nuanced.

I have frequented around ten congregations (out of around forty) on a regular basis, focusing mostly on the bigger ones as they were initially more accessible. They consciously represent a broad spectrum within the movement from the more traditional-Jewish end, to the more—and most often—evangelical-Jewish. I am familiar with them in the sense that I easily can partake in and follow the structure of the different services without hesitation or being surprised by elements. While not committing myself to one specific place, I recognize familiar faces belonging to the congregations and discern visitors, as well as being recognized by some.

What does it mean to be a participant observer? How have I handled the role during the Messianic Jewish services? As the designation suggests, it simply refers to being both a participant and an observer at the same time. Much discussed in literature on methodology, the researcher needs to find a balance between the two, being (or appearing) to be an insider and the same time maintaining an outsider eye that continuously analyzes what is going on in the surroundings.<sup>163</sup> Fieldwork is, as Raymond Madden has phrased it, a “whole-of-body experience.”<sup>164</sup> During the services I have adopted an approach of open interest, and positively embraced what was happening. I have always chosen a seat among the worshippers towards the back where I have been able to observe both what is happening at the front, such as the music team, the leaders, special rituals, and the like, but also the gathered believers. For the people around me, I have probably appeared as one of them, in attendance for the religious service. I stand up when people stand, I sit when people sit. But I have not adopted any of the common charismatic bodily expressions such as the raising of hands. I have gazed with interest at the screen or the books of lyrics and written prayers, trying to memorize and analyze, sometimes humming along. One trait that, if noted, would place me as an obvious outsider has been my decision

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<sup>163</sup> O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 96–112.

<sup>164</sup> Raymond Madden, *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography* (London: SAGE, 2010), 19.

not to support any congregation financially during the passing around of boxes for support.

I chose to adopt this approach of “observer-as-participant”<sup>165</sup> for three reasons. First, a researcher who self-presents strictly as an observer would disturb and create unease among participants and would be perceived as threatening, especially given the controversial and vulnerable position of Messianic Judaism in Israel. I did not want to be misunderstood as a critical journalist or, worse, as representing an anti-Messianic movement. Second, perhaps less likely, appearing strictly as an observer could suggest to participants that I was a Jew curious about their faith, a situation I wanted to avoid for several reasons. Finally, studying a faith is nurtured by participating with one’s body and tongue as much as feels comfortable without, I think, participating to such an extent that one’s ability to observe critically is pushed aside. Whenever someone asked about me, I answered honestly that I was not a Messianic Jewish believer but an interested Christian who was also studying the movement.

People sitting next to me have, I imagine, understood me as a pious believer scribbling sermon notes and what “the Lord puts on my heart” in my little notebook. But a closer look would reveal a field diary with both descriptive and analytical notes from the structure of the service; what, when, and how things are done; people’s behavior and appearances; lyrics, the room, and other details. As photography is forbidden in most if not all Messianic Jewish congregations, primarily due to the privacy of the believers (rather than Shabbat restrictions), I have relied upon my descriptive notes. I usually filled several pages with observations from a single service that I deemed interesting and beneficial for more deeply understanding Messianic Judaism.<sup>166</sup>

Post-worship fellowship offered an additional field for participant observation. I did not encounter a single congregation that did not invite everyone for fellowship after the service. It can be a quick standing cup of coffee in the same room as the service, or it can be a simple Israeli lunch with pita bread, hummus, and cookies. It can last for ten minutes, or it can last for hours. Either way, this fellowship is almost as important as the service: first hearing “the Word,” then discussing it. Sometimes these coffee-chats were followed by something more, such as invitations to homes, lunches, and similar.

Sometimes, however, the participant observation caused problems. At the beginning of my time in Jerusalem, one of the recently interviewed leaders invited me to a private prayer meeting. I went as a researcher, but it soon turned out that he had invited me as a believer. For two straight hours a small gathering of people

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<sup>165</sup> Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 223. Building on roles of participation developed earlier, he names four alternatives: the complete participant, the participant-as-observer, the observer-as-participant, and the complete observer.

<sup>166</sup> O’Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 101–04; Flick, *Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 296–98.

stood close to each other in a circle and literally screamed out prayers, waving their arms forcefully, stomping their feet in proclamation. People took turns to “shout to the Lord” for “protection of the State of Israel, for the rise of more Jewish believers, and against the Satanic forces of Islam.”<sup>167</sup> While I admitted to myself that I felt unease at both the style and the politicized content, the situation got really weird when the participant suddenly turned to me. “You’re quiet. What’s wrong? Now *you* lead the last proclamation to Yeshua. Open your heart and scream out again our prayer needs.” For a few long seconds, I did not know what to do. And those seconds were enough for them to judge me as being “not one of them.” I tried to avoid it but was further urged until at last I mumbled a prayer—probably a rather lame one in their eyes. It was obvious that I had gotten myself into an awkward situation. After the meeting a lady confronted me, saying, “Something strange happened,” and accusing me of destroying God’s presence. I shrugged my shoulders, eager to get away. I made half an apology and said my goodbyes to the man who had invited me. I did not receive a second invitation.

In addition to participant observation, I have also read Messianic Jewish insider texts to get to know the movement better. These have been books of different sorts, YouTube clips, websites, and so on. Over the course of several years, I have received and read newsletters from a range of Messianic Jewish ministries and organizations, such as *Kehila News Israel*, *First Fruits of Zion – eDrash*, *Tikkun Global*, alongside Caspari’s newsletter and the more theologically oriented journals, *Keshet* and *Mishkan*. While I have not used this material as such in the analysis, it has functioned as a way to get to know the movement better, to keep up-to-date with what is going on, and access commentaries on both political matters and more devotional and spiritual material, such as Bible reflections.

## A Note on Writing

Coming to an end of Part I “Frameworks for the Readings,” some words of guidance as preparation for Part II, “The Readings in Context,” are in order. We are about to turn to the Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 in conversation with PWJ scholars. The outline of the upcoming three empirical chapters, “Identity and Torah,” “Relation and Yeshua,” and “Time and Land” has already been explored (see Chapter One), so there is no need to repeat that here. Combining two fields usually far estranged from each other—biblical studies and anthropology of the Bible—is not only a challenge theoretically and methodologically speaking. It is also tricky in terms of the writing itself—but new wine should be put in new wineskins, not old

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<sup>167</sup> This, and the following quotes from this anecdote, were noted in my field diary, August 2015.

ones, as the saying goes. Both disciplines have their customs for what constitutes a well-written study, both in terms of structure and linguistic styles, which, I have realized, are often in conflict with each other. I am trained in biblical studies, not in anthropology—something the readers of this study have probably already realized—and this study would probably “sound” very different if written by a trained ethnographer or similar. Nevertheless, I hope that both disciplines, both audiences, can benefit from it. Furthermore, it contains many “levels”: mine, the Messianic Jewish readers, the scholarly readers, Paul in Rom 11, and finally that of other literature on relevant topics. There are an infinite number of possibilities for creating confusion and unreadable masses of text. In an attempt to avoid this, the empirical part is written from the perspective of the Messianic Jewish readers: of how *they* read Rom 11. Stylistically, therefore, almost all major (block) quotes are from the interviews, whereas I have aimed at quoting Rom 11 in short sections in the running texts and mostly merely referencing secondary literature in the footnotes. I have also aimed to be transparent about who is speaking, whether one of the Messianic Jews, or a PWJ scholar, and also to use the concepts of *similar* and *dissimilar* recurrently. In sum, what comes next is a living Bible commentary that explores the *identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading* of Rom 11 by Messianic Jews in Jerusalem.

Part II.

THE READINGS IN CONTEXT



## *Four.* Identity and Torah

Now, since Paul is appealing to Israel's chosenness on the basis of the remnant principle, this means that from the time of the apostles and their writings until today, there has always been a faithful remnant of Jewish believers in Yeshua. Always! And that's comforting to us.... It's unfortunate that some people use, or misuse, his words to argue *for* replacement theology when he actually is writing *against* replacement theology.... Another important thing is that Paul is still very active in his Jewish identity, expression of worship, connection with the Torah; he still goes to the temple, to the synagogue. The Bible says, "as was his practice."

*Yoel*, March 2016

Yoel's reflection illustrates the importance of Scripture for understanding Messianic Jewish identity construction. An intense, middle-aged man who loves the Bible and his Savior "Yeshua," Yoel leads a big evangelical-Jewish congregation—much like Alef, who was portrayed in the vignettes (see Chapter Two)—which is also charismatic, its services conducted in Hebrew with some Jewish elements. As we sit in his office, Yoel radiates a life dedicated to the gospel. Specifically, he points to the concept of a "faithful remnant of Jewish believers in Yeshua" that is "comforting to us" in terms of chosenness and God's faithfulness. Yoel's exclamation shows the importance of examining Bible readings to understand Messianic Jewish identity negotiations more deeply.

This chapter explores how the Messianic Jewish readers in Jerusalem engage with the opening of Rom 11 (vv. 1–12) to negotiate their identity. What comes out of their reading, and how? Throughout the chapter, there is also a continuous conversation with Paul within Judaism (PWJ) understandings of the same text, highlighting similarities and dissimilarities between the readings of the two communities. The chapter begins with the participants reflecting upon both Paul's identity and their own as they inscribe themselves into the text and so bring it alive today. Their readings then provoke discussions of Israel's status linked to questions of supersessionism and how Rom 11's description of Jews as "hardened" and "stumbling" should be understood. Finally, Torah observance is discussed: how the

empirical-religious readers construct Paul's observance and their own as a central issue for understanding Messianic Jewish identity. Ultimately, this chapter focuses on *intra-Jewish* matters, on how the Messianic Jewish participants interact with the text.

## Sharing a Jewish Remnant Identity with Paul

### Constructing, or Confirming, Paul's Jewish Identity

For centuries Paul's identity has been a matter of controversy in religious and scholarly settings. Labels given to Paul vary a great deal, depending on whether he is considered (still) Jewish or (the first) Christian after attaining his conviction of Jesus being the Messiah of Israel. As the latter view has long been customary in churches and Pauline scholarship, this matters. For Messianic Jews, it is simple (and yet not): Paul remains Jewish. Yoel, quoted above, describes Paul and the other apostles as part of the "faithful remnant of Jewish believers." Two words here are particularly important: "remnant" and "Jewish." In this section, I address the question of how the Messianic Jewish leaders read and construct, or rather confirm, Paul's *Jewishness* in their interaction with Rom 11.

Paul opens the text by stating, "I myself am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin" (v. 1). For the Messianic Jewish readers this is a very important sentence. They read it in a "plain"<sup>1</sup> way: Paul says that he is an Israelite, thus he is Jewish. A plain textual practice seemingly confirms the validity of the written letter but is also a starting point for further meaning-making on the part of the readers: confirming Paul's Jewishness allows this text to be used for their own purposes. The guidelines in reception theory (see Chapter Three) for judging the importance of a text—for judging what is (to be) read (important) and what is not (unimportant)—can here lead to false ideas. As the participants spend proportionately little time with this verse, it could lead to the conclusion that Paul's identity, whether considered Jewish or not, does not matter for these Messianic Jewish readers. However, insights from the social life of Scripture approach can help provide a more balanced view.

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<sup>1</sup> A "plain reading" is in fact never plain or literal. The concept was established within a scholarly discourse on fundamentalists and is also used as an emic term to distance one's reading practice from "liberal" interpretations. Putting forth a "plain reading" is thus an identifier of the group in question. "Literalism" should rather be taken as an interpretative tradition (see more in Chapter Three). For a more detailed discussion and several references, see Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 153–56.

As Messianic Jews, they are driven by a longing, and engaged in constant negotiations, to (re)construct a Jewish version of faith in Jesus as it was during the first century. One fundamental conviction that forms the textual ideology and practice among both the Messianic Jewish readers and the PWJ scholars is the idea of the New Testament being a thoroughly Jewish text—of reading within Judaism.<sup>2</sup> This at least partly (con)forms with the Jewish identity of the participants; as one of them, Jacob, expressed it, the New Testament is “by Jews, about Jews, for Jews.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, Jesus and Paul’s Jewish identities are not debated; rather, it is a point of departure for both the empirical-religious and the scholarly readers, perceived as an unarguable premise (cf. v. 1), thus implying that a familiarity with the readers’ textual ideology is essential to proper understanding of their reception of a text.

Thus, by reading Paul’s opening verse “plainly,” participants construct Paul’s Jewish identity and, as noted, they in fact barely engaged with it; instead, they simply read it and made it a truth—“it is what it says.” As already argued (see Chapter Three), the Messianic Jewish readers inhabit a supposedly textual ideology of literalism and of Jewishness, partly inherited from their evangelical history, which serves as a boundary with both liberal Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, and also confirms their Jewishness through the Bible. However, while the participants believe they have a literalist practice, this study shows that this is not so. As has been, and will continue to be, repeatedly pointed out about (evangelical) Bible reading, *all* textual engagement necessarily involves some hermeneutical activity,<sup>4</sup> examples of which occur throughout this study. In regard to Paul’s identity, the scripturalists unproblematically define being “an Israelite” as being “Jewish” without any discussion of what Jewishness implies, and without taking into consideration the development of Judaism from the time of Paul until the present—the question of what constitutes Jewishness is still a matter of diverse opinion.

It is appropriate to investigate the textual practice that the empirical-religious readers use to confirm Paul’s Jewish identity. Scriptural proof for their ideology is important to them, and many of the participants claim that “Paul says very clearly that he’s an Israelite, he says very clearly that he’s a descendent from Abraham. So it’s very clear. I mean, he never changes his mind of who he is.”<sup>5</sup> Yoel, Dov, Andrei, and others echo the same idea, pointing to the apostle’s own words, “I myself *am* an Israelite” (v. 1). The “am” in its present tense confirms that Paul still thought of himself as Jewish. Dov phrases it in this way: “Paul is emphasizing the fact that ‘I *am* Jewish.’ This is really important, really important, and ‘I’m telling you that I

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. “Nahum.” See also Chapter One.

<sup>3</sup> “Jacob,” August 2015.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> “Jacob.”

acknowledge that this is who I *am*.”<sup>6</sup> Many readers make the similar rhetorical argument: Paul’s words—“my own brothers/fellows,”<sup>7</sup> “my people,”<sup>8</sup> and “my flesh”<sup>9</sup> (v. 13)—refer to the Jewish people.

Other scriptural arguments are frequently used to confirm Paul’s Jewish identity, especially where Paul writes that he would be willing to die for his own people, understood as the Jewish people (Rom 9:3<sup>10</sup>).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Nahum, Ze’ev, and Avraham are but a few examples of readers who confirm Paul’s continued Jewishness by referring to the fact that wherever Paul went during his mission travels, as described in Acts, he first visited the synagogues to preach to the Jews, and only then the Gentiles, as “his heart was always on the Jews.”<sup>12</sup> Their reading displays an element of the textuality of the Bible—that of telling “one story” through the reading practice of interpreting “Scripture through Scripture”—and also points towards an ideology of literalism of the Bible, to the understanding that it tells “how it exactly was, and still is.”

Two other arguments are also used to claim Paul’s identification with Judaism. Jacob, for instance, uses a traditional Jewish argument and referred to *halakhah*, Jewish religious law. In his view (and according to Jewish tradition), Jewishness is when you are “born a Jew, you remain a Jew whatever you do. You will never escape from the fact of actually being Jewish.”<sup>13</sup> Other readers such as Yoel and Nahum defend Paul’s continued Jewishness, based on Rom 11, against the Christian tradition that speaks of Paul as being a Christian convert: “He is not a Christian now, he’s still a Jew who believes in [the] Messiah.”<sup>14</sup> No one uses the rhetoric of “Christian” to speak of Paul or themselves. Instead, they strongly oppose this term (see also Chapter Two). Having this perspective and distancing themselves from the Christian tradition is common for Messianic Jews, but probably also explicitly spelled out because they know me to be Christian. For them, constructing Paul as a Christian convert is entirely against the Bible, and a flawed change by the Church. Bottom-line, for them, is that Paul remained a (Messianic) Jew.

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<sup>6</sup> “Dov,” January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> “Yoel,” March 2016.; “Dov.”

<sup>8</sup> “Moshe,” February 2016.; “Nahum.”

<sup>9</sup> “Yitshak.”; “Nahum.”

<sup>10</sup> “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.” (Rom 9:3 NRSV)

<sup>11</sup> “Nahum.”; “Ze’ev,” November 2015.; “Eli,” November 2015.

<sup>12</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>13</sup> “Jacob.”

<sup>14</sup> “Ze’ev.”

The PWJ perspective has the same focus when constructing Paul’s Jewish identity. Like the empirical-religious readers, the scholars rather simplistically fuse Paul’s mentioning of his being an Israelite with being Jewish, as “just confirming” what Paul says. They also find scriptural proof for their conviction in Paul’s opening of Rom 11 (v. 1), as they argue that Paul continued to view himself as fully a member of the people of Israel even after becoming a Christ-follower. He remained a “good Jew,” with his conviction of Jesus’s being the Messiah added to his Jewish belonging.<sup>15</sup> Paul’s identity and mission is constructed as being “firmly, completely, and comfortably within Judaism.”<sup>16</sup> This has the (rhetorical) consequence that PWJ scholars also strongly reject labelling Paul as a “Christian” or applying other terms used in more traditional Pauline scholarship (especially in the Paul outside Judaism [POJ] perspective), such as his “converting” from Judaism to Christianity.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, both the PWJ scholars and the Messianic Jewish readers who participated in this study strongly argue for Paul’s continued Jewish identity—he was a Jewish Jew for Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

When the PWJ scholars speak of Paul’s Jewish identity as constituted by both ethnicity and praxis, and the Messianic Jewish readers confirm Paul’s continued Jewishness, what do they actually mean? Modern Judaism, in contrast to Second Temple Judaism, defines Jewishness both in terms of ethnicity (peoplehood) and religion (faith, conviction, and practice). Participants avoid speaking of Paul as “religious,” probably because the term “a religious Jew” in their social surroundings is closely connected to modern-day Orthodox Jews, with whom they do not want to associate Paul. Paul, simply, still belongs to the Jewish people, “his people,” as a Messianic Jew. Yet no readers explicitly apply these concepts to Paul except Andrei:

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Thiessen, *Paul*, 4, 40–41. By referring to himself as such, Thiessen argues, Paul consciously rejects ideas about an ethnicity-free gospel, or a gospel where Jewish believers are “lifted away and out” from their Jewish identity; cf. Nanos, *Mystery*, 9; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 117–19; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 252–55; Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 175–93; Campbell, *The Nations*, 63–64.

<sup>16</sup> Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 175.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 4. See Chapter One, section “Paul Outside Judaism”; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 188; Käsemann, *Romans*, 4. The term “Christian” is repeatedly used by scholars adhering to this perspective.

<sup>18</sup> The expression “a Jewish Jew for Judaism” has been used in a contemporary context of a Jewish scholar teaching evangelicals. Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 2.

He's definitely identifying himself as a Jew ethnically and in every sense, but I see a transformation that took place in his life, it's the shift of gravity center of his identity from the Torah to Yeshua. Yeshua is part of Israel, and Yeshua is the Messiah for him, [so] he has not left Judaism.<sup>19</sup>

As far as I understand this reflection, and considering the other interviews, Paul's identity as a Jew is never questioned—neither ethnically nor religiously (practically). Paul is still Jewish “in every sense,” Andrei explains, adding a “but”: “but I see a transformation.” The core of his identity is perceived to have changed, shifting its “gravity center” to Jesus, but in a personal-relational way rather than being viewed as ethnic-religious belonging. Yet, as Jesus is himself part of Israel, neither Paul nor the Messianic Jewish readers have left Judaism. While Mark D. Nanos, as one example of a PWJ scholar, states that Paul was “a Jew shaped by his conviction in Jesus as Israel's Christ,”<sup>20</sup> thus confirming a change in his identity, the within-scholars usually emphasize Paul's continued Jewish identity more than they focus on Jesus. Arguing for a change of core, as Andrei does above, is a hermeneutic of Yeshualogy more characteristic of the Paul and Judaism (PAJ) perspective's focus on Jesus rather than the PWJ tendency toward God-centered readings.

## Being the Remnant

Early in my fieldwork I met Yitshak, a charismatic man, filled with both love and sorrow for his Jewish people because, in his view, they do not know “Yeshua.” As we sit on a rooftop eating pita bread and feta cheese rolled in *za'atar*, a typical Middle Eastern spice blend, we discuss the identity and unique role of Messianic Jewish believers in Israel. Overlooking the busy streets, Yitshak exclaims passionately, “We're the remnant, the believers in Yeshua!”<sup>21</sup> The more we speak, the more obvious it becomes to me that he truly identifies himself with the biblical concept of the remnant. This section explores how this process of *identity-through-reading* occurs among the Messianic Jewish readers.

“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (v. 5), Paul argues in the beginning of Rom 11. This mention of a remnant also here “in this present time” spurs a great deal of textual practice and engagement among the Messianic Jewish readers, with Ze'ev, for example, emphasizing that the remnant concept is “a very, *very* important subject.”<sup>22</sup> Much time is spent elaborating on what Paul

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<sup>19</sup> “Andrei.” This idea was also expressed by “Menachem,” November 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Nanos, *Mystery*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> “Yitshak.”

<sup>22</sup> “Ze'ev.” My emphasis.

meant here. While Paul’s Jewishness, as discussed above, is read in a “plain” way, this verse yielded many applicable and creative readings such as Yitshak’s above. In fact, all the empirical-religious readers, more or less explicitly consider themselves to be part of the remnant. The image, in fact, serves as strong scriptural proof for their existence and significance.

So, what constitutes the remnant? PWJ scholars propose two different understandings, but both deem Paul to have considered himself to be part of this remnant. As the apostle writes Romans, the concept of the remnant serves as “proof” of Paul’s exclamation, “by no means!” (v. 1) to the opening question of whether God has rejected his people, the Jews (v. 1). The majority position (as also in the other Pauline perspectives) claims that Paul understands the remnant to be the Jews who have embraced Jesus as the Messiah of Israel (v. 5).<sup>23</sup> J. Brian Tucker—who quotes Messianic Jewish theologian Mark S. Kinzer, thereby displaying a two-way influence between the reading communities—defines Paul’s use of the remnant as signifying “an Israel *within* Israel, an elect core *within* the elect nation.”<sup>24</sup> The minority position, proposed by Pamela Eisenbaum, views Paul’s remnant concept as comprising two groups; Jews still faithful to the God of Israel without confessing Jesus as the Messiah *and* those Jews who do. Her remnant understanding, therefore, is not reinterpreted in light of Jesus but rather expanded.<sup>25</sup>

The remnant, according to the Messianic Jewish readers, consists of Jewish believers in Jesus, which would lead them unequivocally to reject the minority understanding among within-scholars. Sharing the understanding of the majority position, they emphasize the role of Jesus much more strongly, expressing the same idea in several ways: “ethnic Jews, believers in Yeshua, the Messiah,”<sup>26</sup> “a remnant [that] does believe in Yeshua,”<sup>27</sup> and “Jewish believers.”<sup>28</sup> Clearly the remnant serves as a strong biblical concept with which the empirical-religious readers identify, and this position probably also represents the Messianic Jewish movement at large.<sup>29</sup> It is, as Yoel says (see above), comforting to them, as the faithful remnant

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<sup>23</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 142; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 71, 150; Campbell, *The Nations*, 205–05.

<sup>24</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 131, see also 174–76.

<sup>25</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 254; cf. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 137. Gager here also refers to Gaston’s similar ideas. Gager and Gaston do not belong to this Pauline approach as such but are clearly related.

<sup>26</sup> “Andrei.”

<sup>27</sup> “Avraham,” November 2019.

<sup>28</sup> “Yoel.”; “Nahum.”

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 124–25, 131; “Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant (Helsinki Consultation, 2011),” Mark S. Kinzer, [https://www.messianicstudies.com/uploads/1/3/3/3/13335212/kinzer\\_messianic\\_jewish\\_comm](https://www.messianicstudies.com/uploads/1/3/3/3/13335212/kinzer_messianic_jewish_comm)

both in Elijah's time and today is rather small in number. Yet there is hope in the remnant and in Rom 11 itself, a promise that one day the remnant will be much bigger; as time unfolds, the remnant will finally be very large, for "there is a national salvation coming"<sup>30</sup> and "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26) (aspects of time as textual practice are explored in greater detail below and further in Chapter Six).

Paul in Rom 11 retells a story from the Hebrew Bible about how the prophet Elijah pleads to God in a presumably lonely and difficult situation filled with idolatry; in it, Paul identifies both himself and Elijah with a "remnant" (vv. 2–5, cf. 1 Kgs 19). From a scholarly perspective, identification with scriptural themes or persons is a well-known practice in readers' engagement with sacred texts. In Rom 11, Paul, Elijah, the remnant, and a seemingly hopeless situation are among plausible identification possibilities for the scripturalists. Erich Auerbach posits a figural interpretation as a reading strategy whereby the reader connects two events or persons in an interdependent manner, in which the second actor involves or fulfills the first part. In other words, this is a textual practice largely formed by the application and process of relevance-making. In this case, identifying oneself as part of the biblical concept of the remnant constitutes a practical continuation of this divine plan.<sup>31</sup> The textual practice of application (what Auerbach calls "figural") works in several steps for the Messianic Jewish readers. As they see it, Paul's reference to the remnant in Rom 11 confirms the question of God's faithfulness throughout the ages. Without exception, they as readers identify themselves with that remnant, *and* they consider Paul to be part of the remnant, *and* they understand Elijah to be part of the remnant—thus connecting them all. Likewise, when Paul says that he is an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, contemporary Messianic Jews identify with this description. One example serves to represent the participants' general approach:

In other words, it looks like it's over with Israel. That's what Elijah is saying. But what does the Divine response say to him? What does God say to him when he says these things? "I have reserved for myself 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal" [v. 4]. In other words, God is saying, "I have a remnant, and all the remnant who is representative of the people of Israel, they have not worshipped this god called Baal.

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unity\_helsinki\_2011.pdf., 15–16, 24–25. Kinzer here describes the Jewish Christ-believers as "the priestly remnant."

<sup>30</sup> "Avraham."; cf. "Chayim." This perspective is also present among PWJ scholars, see Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 160; Neil Elliott, "The Question of Politics: Paul as a Diaspora Jew under Roman Rule," in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 203–432, 23; Terence L. Donaldson, "Paul within Judaism: A Critical Evaluation from a "New Perspective" Perspective," in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, eds. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 277–301, 289.

<sup>31</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 555. Also quoted in Dulin, "Messianic Judaism," 38.

They've remained faithful to me [God]." And so Paul is comparing the time of Elijah to the present time, the time where he is living and experiencing what seems to be something like what Elijah experienced. "Even so then at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" [v. 5]. So he is comparing, he's saying there's a remnant just as there was a remnant in the time of Elijah. [There were] 7,000 in the time of Elijah who actually were representative of the whole nation.

*That's how it is today also; there is a faithful remnant according to the election of grace and the election of grace is that God is gracious and he chooses whomever he wants to choose. And, according to the grace, the election of grace, God has reserved for himself even at this time a remnant who believes in Yeshua and who are walking or following the Lamb [Jesus].*<sup>32</sup>

Much is at stake in this lengthy quote by Avraham. The most important textual practice that occurs here is the application or comparison of Elijah's and Paul's times to today. Looking back in history, in scriptural history, the contemporary movement aligns itself with both the prophet and the apostle. Just as Paul writes, "so too at the present time," referring to his own time, Avraham applies this concept of time to his own time, to today, saying, "That's how it is today also ... even at this time." In his study of conservative Christians, Simon Coleman has argued that an ideology of literalism is a process of "embodying and 'living out' the text in a self-reinforcing process of spiritual authentication."<sup>33</sup> A "literal" reading is creative.<sup>34</sup> This is exactly what is at stake when Messianic Jews interact with the concept of the remnant: it is a spiritual authentication. The time of Elijah and the time of Paul collapse into the time of today. Historical and contextual differences are erased.<sup>35</sup> The "Israelites" of the text become the same as "Jews" today. This is typical of a literal ideology transformed into a creative textual practice. Embodying the remnant today, believers inscribe themselves into the biblical story while attempting to live out the Bible in the present. Not only are they thereby in continuity with Paul, but also with Elijah, which strengthens believers in their belonging to the people of Israel. By reading the text like Avraham, they make it relevant today, as the "Word of God" speaks to them and the whole Messianic Jewish movement. They themselves are now the "remnant who believe[s] in Yeshua and who are walking or following the Lamb."

The textual practice of application and identification is not unique to Messianic Jews. While Coleman rightly notices that this practice of embodiment is an integral part of an ideology of literalism, this phenomenon has also been identified

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<sup>32</sup> "Avraham." My emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 118.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., for a deeper discussion on what this might take form, see Bielo, "Literally Creative."

<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon has been called "the expansive present." See Naomi Haynes, "The Expansive Present: A New Model of Christian Time," *CA* 61:1 (2020): 57–76, 57–65.

elsewhere. Hans Frei, in his *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), argues that “figural interpretation” was the common way of reading the Bible in pre-modern times.<sup>36</sup> More recently, scholars such as Susan Harding have focused on the textual practice of making connections to everyday life among groups of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.<sup>37</sup> Brian Malley has contended that an ideology of literalism is directed by a “search for relevance,” which thus enables identification with—or figural embodiment of—a biblical concept, just as the Messianic Jewish readers in this study identify with Paul’s remnant. Other studies have discussed examples of identification with a biblical person: Aron Engberg writes about one of his evangelical participants in Jerusalem “becoming Ruth” when she identifies herself with this biblical character,<sup>38</sup> while Sean Durbin shows how Christian Zionists are “becoming Esthers.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in her study on Messianic Jews, Carol Harris-Shapiro notes how biblical figures become important as a means of identification and how they close, or bridge, the time gap and are made present in the believers’ lives.<sup>40</sup> This is not only a reading practice as such, but serves as a guide to living a biblically-inspired life for Messianic Jews, who view the Bible as the ultimate authority in life (see Chapter Three). Can we thus consider Messianic Jews to identify with Paul? Are they “Pauls,” so to speak?

Paul is, as we saw above, constructed by the Messianic Jewish readers (and confirmed by his own words) as a Jesus-believing Jew, just like they are. So, in that sense, one should say yes. From the scripturalists’ reading, there is without doubt a degree of identification with Paul, although none of the participants said so explicitly. As I demonstrate further below, in terms of Torah observance there is (some) mimesis to how they construct Paul’s relationship to the Torah; when it comes to Paul’s “functions,” however, two readers raise complementary views shared by many Messianic Jews. Chayim mentions Paul’s mission to spread the gospel:

Can you imagine what would have happened to the world if there were one hundred Pauls? So if God chooses one to be like Paul and that [the current Christian world] is the outcome? Wooooow! It is in your and my interest to make more Pauls!<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>37</sup> E.g., Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 54–57; Bialecki, “Bones Restored to Life.”

<sup>38</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 105–07.

<sup>39</sup> Sean Durbin, ““For Such a Time as This”: Reading (and Becoming) Esther with Christians United for Israel,” *RSRR* 2:1 (2012): 65–90, esp. 79–90.

<sup>40</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> “Chayim.”

Being (like) Paul involves spreading the gospel about the Messiah, something they as believers all attempt. Aryeh brings up the topic of being “Pauls” from another angle: “Unlike Rav Shaul who is focused on the Gentiles, I’m focused on Jews,”<sup>42</sup> he says and laughs. This is an important difference, as Messianic Jews today, at least theoretically, take on the role of apostles to the Jews. This is viewed as a development of divine history and time unfolding, a topic discussed more deeply later on (see Chapter Six). If anything, Messianic Jews today can be seen as *updated*, rather than better “Pauls.”

The Messianic Jewish readers, however, identify themselves clearly and explicitly with Paul’s notion of the remnant. Recall Yitshak’s “We’re the remnant, the believers in Yeshua!” Negotiating their identity on the basis of a concept rather than a person (Paul) provides Messianic Jews with both solid ground and flexibility. Being the remnant supplies credibility for their Jewish identity both backward in history and forward into the future—and especially towards the Church—all displayed in a divine plan of which they are part, as “chosen by grace.”<sup>43</sup>

### *The Redefined Remnant*

The concept of the remnant is not an unfamiliar one within Jewish and Christian traditions.<sup>44</sup> It also figures in the Hebrew Bible as a designator for Jews *faithful to God*,<sup>45</sup> which Messianic Jews think is exemplified by Elijah in his time. However, as already noted, the Messianic Jewish readers today claim that they, just like Paul, constitute the remnant as *Jesus-believing Jews*. Paul himself in Rom 11 plausibly redefined the remnant, a redefinition which the Messianic Jewish readers continue to uphold. Here an interesting rhetorical, or interpretative, gap occurs. The Messianic Jewish readers redefine the identity of the remnant, shifting from Jews faithful to God to Jesus-believing Jews, thereby excluding Jews who are not Jesus-believers. The transformed identity of the remnant occurs, from their point of view, with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul does not mention Jesus at all in this chapter, therefore, this rereading rather emerges out of contemporary Messianic Jewish striving for identification and legitimization in accord with the Bible, as well as their general understanding of Paul. Ultimately, this stresses a hermeneutic of

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<sup>42</sup> “Aryeh,” November 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Campbell, *The Nations*, 205. Campbell, as a spokesperson for the PWJ perspective, argues that without the remnant, if Israel as a whole were rejected, the promises would not be available for the non-Jews who are joining with Israel through the remnant, so the Nations partaking are dependent on God’s not having cast away Israel.

<sup>44</sup> Within the Jewish tradition in the *Shomer Yisrael* poem, as part of the penitential service usually said twice a day after the morning and afternoon *Amidah*, one pleads to God for the sake of Israel: “protect the remnant of Israel.... Protect the remnant of a nation that is one;... protect the remnant of a holy people.”

<sup>45</sup> E.g., Gen 45:7, 2 Kgs 19:30–31, Isa 10–11.

Yeshualogy, which nonetheless is hardly surprising as they are Jewish believers in “Yeshua.”

How did the Messianic Jews handle this redefinition of the remnant? A redefinition of such an important biblical concept easily leads in the direction of supposed replacement thinking, which Messianic Jews also strongly reject (see below). Given that Paul invokes the concept of the remnant in a context of defending God as still being faithful to the Jewish people, one can wonder how this interpretative dilemma is handled. One way is simply to avoid the issue, either by ignoring or not recognizing it. When I ask during Avraham whether the concept of the remnant actually had *changed* after Jesus, he responds, “Well, yes, it has changed, it’s changed to a certain extent.”<sup>46</sup> In an attempt to explain this, he refers to the large number of Gentile believers. However, his argument is not clear, and seen in the perspective of the entire interview, he does not suggest that Gentile believers in Jesus are also part of the remnant. Through the cross event, he acknowledges the important redefinition of the remnant from Jews faithful to God to Jews having faith in Jesus, but he is also keen to avoid the implications of this approach.

For the participants, one strategy for handling the issue above is to address the question of who and what Israel is. Asher, who works with Michael in a leading position in a Messianic Jewish teaching ministry, struggles to make sense of this:

You know, earlier Paul says, “not all Israel are Israel” [Rom 9:6<sup>47</sup>], you know,... so his [Paul’s] point about the remnant is that the covenant belongs to those who [think]. *This is tricky!* Because sometimes people run too far with it. *On the one hand, the true ultimate heirs are the remnant, the faithful remnant. On the other hand, the remnant has this leavening or sanctifying effect on Israel as a whole [cf. v. 16]....* This is to go into the rabbit hole a little bit, which I probably shouldn’t do, but in Judaism there are two streams of thought that run parallel in the Talmud ... that are never reconciled in rabbinic thought. One is this notion that the covenant is *on the one hand corporate and national*, you know, the idea that God made a covenant with Israel and it is irrevocable and unconditional and all those things. *On the other hand*, you have other texts that think of the covenant as *conditional*. *On the one hand*, I as an *individual* must keep the Torah in order to live a life pleasing to God. I as an *individual* must acknowledge the Messiah in order to be saved, is that true? Absolutely!<sup>48</sup>

Here, Asher does what surprisingly few readers have done in interviews: he places the text within a Jewish interpretative tradition by referring to the Talmud. In doing

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<sup>46</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>47</sup> “It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel.” (Rom 9:6 NRSV)

<sup>48</sup> “Michael and Asher.” My emphasis. “Michael and Asher.”

so, he tries to explain Paul's "doubleness" by referring to it as a general (and confusing) idea within the wider Jewish world. The recurrent "on the one hand ... on the other hand" underlines the constant negotiations in which Asher, and several of the empirical-religious readers, are involved. Attempting to solve tensions inherent in their interpretations of Rom 11, he only ends up with this "both and" dialectic. The tensions of a redefined remnant (Yeshualogy) and a denial of supersessionism (post-supersessionism) are never really fully resolved among the leaders when we come to this part of Rom 11 during the reading interviews. The dialectic is both a negotiation of collective versus individual, and a question of the status of those of Israel who are not part of the remnant. "This is tricky!" he exclaims, showing some exceptional humility towards "what the Bible says." But it is in this tension that Messianic Judaism exists, one of trying to craft an independent identity. It is filled with negotiations, as Messianic Jews "need" to oppose all ideas about God having replaced his chosen people, the Jews—"sometimes people run too far with it." At the same time, they need to find a legitimate role for their own presumed and privileged identity as the remnant. This in-between position is, as Asher exclaims, tricky for them.

"On the one hand ... on the other hand," Asher elaborates, "the true, ultimate heirs are the remnant, the faithful remnant." For him, they as Messianic Jews, are the "true," or the "real," heirs of the covenant God made with the people of Israel. As believers who "acknowledge the Messiah," they are saved. "Absolutely!" Here Messianic textual practice comes in to defend their belief in Jesus, which underscores its role as the most important hermeneutical key. There is repeated focus on the need for personal salvation, as is also common in more evangelical circles.<sup>49</sup> Asher's rhetoric connects faith in Jesus to being the true, ultimate heir of the Jewish covenant(s). The remnant is still (believing) Israel, which functions as a shield against a classic Christian replacement theology: in other words, "on the other hand," Asher interprets Paul as saying that the remnant has a function for un-believing Israel, a "leavening or sanctifying effect on Israel as a whole." The covenant, "corporate and national," is still in effect thanks to the existence of the remnant. While Asher does not really resolve the tensions he identifies, he acknowledges one important dilemma for Messianic Jews in the Jewish-Christian landscape, namely, the struggle between the individual and the collective.

Natan offers a similar interpretation to solve the question of the relation of the remnant to Israel as a whole by referring to "two train lines, if you would like, within Israel ... there is a dialectic between believing and un-believing Israel."<sup>50</sup> Belief in this context has, unsurprisingly, to do with Jesus. In other words, he conceptualizes the tension, the "two train lines" with the redefined the remnant as an Israel within

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<sup>49</sup> E.g., Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 66.

<sup>50</sup> "Natan."

Israel. Assuring the still-Jewish identity of the remnant, the idea of “an Israel within Israel” adequately summarizes the Messianic Jewish readers’ understanding, even when not expressed so explicitly.<sup>51</sup>

In her ethnographic study of Messianic Jews in the United States, Harris-Shapiro has noted the same themes as just discussed. One of her participants defined the movement as the “remnant people.” The remnant identity is perceived as a dilemma and a paradox. It captures the idea of being unique as the “truest Jews” yet still part of the whole Jewish people. Just as Messianic Jews hold to the idea of themselves as the remnant with a mediating role of making Jews holy, the “remnant” concept is visible also in mainstream Judaism, and many synagogues have taken names such as “the remnant of Israel.” By identifying with the remnant as *Jews*, she argues, Messianic Jews can assert loyalty to the Jewish people. This is, however, a textual practice that works for them as believers to claim belonging, but it is obviously not a scriptural argument that works the other way around: mainstream Jewish society does not accept Messianic Jews as Jews.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast, the participants in this study prefer to speak about the *function* of the remnant—their function, which provides them with significance. According to Avraham, it is to be the “representative of the people of God” just as the prophet Elijah was a “representative for the whole nation.”<sup>53</sup> The remnant represents the faithful who are holding together and maintaining the covenant that God has given the Jewish people as a whole. This small group will keep the covenant alive while the larger group has strayed from God.<sup>54</sup> Nahum uses the metaphor of “containers”<sup>55</sup> to illustrate this—the remnant concentrates and preserves the chosenness on behalf of all, keeping it intact; without the remnant that God has chosen by grace, the covenant with its gifts and promises would not be valid and alive anymore. The core function of the remnant of Israel, or “the first fruits” (v. 16), is to represent and sanctify the whole of Israel, in Messianic Jewish as well as the PWJ perspective’s thinking.<sup>56</sup> Michael and Asher agree with this idea, explaining that, as the remnant, they are “mediating [covenantal validity] on a certain level for unbelieving Israel.”<sup>57</sup> Paul writes that the remnant was chosen by grace (v. 5), but, as they explain to me, “grace was not for the sake of the remnant; [rather] this remnant was chosen for the

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<sup>51</sup> The same expression is used by Kinzer. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 124.

<sup>52</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 104–05.

<sup>53</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>54</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>55</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 125; William S. Campbell, “‘A Remnant of Them Will Be Saved’ (Rom 9:27): Understanding Paul’s Conception of the Faithfulness of God to Israel,” *JJMJS* 2 (2015): 79–101, 79, 82, 87, 99–100.

<sup>57</sup> “Michael and Asher.”

sake of Israel, meaning, this remnant is there to keep Israel, to have the effect of making Israel holy and righteous before God as a whole.”<sup>58</sup> Without the remnant, God would destroy the world.<sup>59</sup> For Messianic Jews, this is their role now, but the situation will be different in the future; emerging from their reading of Rom 11, now they represent an Israel within Israel, ensuring that ultimately “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26, see Chapter Six).

### *A True and Fulfilled Identity?*

Identity can be captured with different terminologies. The remnant, when referring to Jews who believe in Jesus, has “the Jesus factor,” as its essential defining criteria. Asher, introduced above, describes the remnant as the “true ultimate heirs.” It is not a stretch to think of Messianic Jews as inhabiting the identity of being more, or “better,” than un-believing Jews. Stern, a pioneer within Messianic Jewish theology, suggests that “completed” and “fulfilled” are suitable rhetorical descriptions of Messianic Jews.<sup>60</sup> Negotiating their identity as practicing “true Judaism” sets Messianic Jews apart from mainstream Judaism as a separate group (see also Chapter Two).<sup>61</sup>

Consequently, a recurrent theme but one less explicitly discussed given the sensitivity, other Jews who do not believe in Jesus are still considered Jews but practicing an incomplete or unfulfilled kind of Judaism, without being rejected. As the “elect” remnant is redefined to refer to Messianic Jews, so the “rest” (v. 7) becomes non-Jesus-believing Jews. Consequently, all Jews who do not believe in Jesus, whether secular or religious, would be placed within the category of “the rest,” those whom Elijah laments, according to Paul (vv. 3–4). Chayim went so far as to apply the mention of Baal worshippers (v. 4) to today’s Jews.<sup>62</sup>

Using the terminology of “true,” Eli defines the idea of a true Israel in a contemporary way as “true Israel is a Jewish person that has embraced Jesus as his Messiah.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, but in more futuristic terms, Avraham observes, “those who come to faith in the national salvation, that will be Israel at that time. That will be

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<sup>58</sup> “Michael and Asher.”

<sup>59</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>60</sup> Stern, *A Modern Movement*, 29; cf. the scholarly publication of Simon Dein, “Becoming a Fulfilled Jew: An Ethnographic Study Of A British Messianic Jewish Congregation,” *NR* 12:3 (2009): 77–101. See also below discussion and references.

<sup>61</sup> The expression “true Judaism” is used both as an emic and etic term. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 17, 108.

<sup>62</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>63</sup> “Eli.”

true Israel.”<sup>64</sup> I am actually quite surprised by this rhetoric as the true-terminology is heavily loaded with connotations resembling replacement theology’s “true Israel” (see the POJ part in Chapter One)—Israel versus the true Israel, that is the Church—and consequently something the participants would strongly reject due to their own Jewish identity. While Avraham speaks about the coming spiritual restoration (see Chapter Six), the current remnant is a prolepsis of the coming, bigger “true Israel” of Jewish believers in Jesus. Because “true” bears these connotations of something being replaced, and of something better, this is a rhetoric avoided by PWJ scholars.

While this study focuses on engagement with the Bible, it might be that this rhetoric of “true Jews” should not primarily be understood within a scriptural framework, as one of the major convictions held by the Messianic Jews is that they as believers ensure that Israel at large is not rejected. A sociological explanation is also fruitful. As is common with new religious movements, Messianic Jews have a rhetorical need to distance and distinguish the group from other religious groupings, in this case Judaism and Christianity. Such groups often self-identify with terminology that functions as a border marker against society.<sup>65</sup> It captures an attitude of “we have something that they don’t have,” as does the notion of constituting the remnant, thus possessing a special divine mission. In this process, however, identifying with Paul’s use of the remnant also provides Messianic Jews with a scriptural rationale.

Self-identification as the remnant and as “true Jews” is closely associated with a language of being “fulfilled.” This label has been applied in scholarly circles at least since Harris-Shapiro defined the Messianic Jewish self as the “completed Jew,” immediately adding that Messianic Jewish identity is “always a work in progress.”<sup>66</sup> The participants, however, uniformly reject the notion that because of their belief in Jesus they are fulfilled or completed Jews, despite Stern’s self-identifications above. Avraham summarizes his view by arguing that defining a Jew who believes in Jesus as fulfilled is “a very, very limited, limited point of view,” trying to avoid falling into any traps of sounding better. He then tells me, in convinced tones:

They [scholars and Christians] don’t see it in a bigger context than that.... They don’t see it in terms of something much, much bigger, which has to do ultimately with the unity of the church, the bride of Christ being made ready, the second coming of the

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<sup>64</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>65</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 222–23, 242.

<sup>66</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 84. Harris-Shapiro also entitles a section in her study “The Incomplete Jew,” 52–56, where she discusses how her participants talk about their lives before they came to faith in Jesus. Furthermore, she points out that Messianic Jews readily argue that “true Judaism is Messianic Judaism,” 108; cf. Dein, “Becoming a Fulfilled Jew;” Kollontai, “Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity,” 197; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” xxviii. Both Dein and Kollontai speak of the identity as “fulfilled,” whereas Zelson Warshawsky describes Messianic Jewish identity as “complete” in her dedication.

Lord, and the Kingdom of God. Finally, finally [it's] coming into its fullness upon the earth, which was God's intention from the very beginning when he created this world. They don't see it within that [broader] context.<sup>67</sup>

For Avraham, Jews coming to faith in Jesus is of the utmost importance, as he views it in a wider context of the whole biblical drama leading toward the return of Jesus. What happens at an individual level has far-reaching consequences for “the bride of Christ being made ready ... and the Kingdom of God.” Appealing to eschatological realities resolves, for the believers, current theological tensions among the people of Israel. This is, noticeably, also the futuristic perspective of Paul and the early Jesus movement according to PWJ scholars (discussed in Chapter Six). When I ask Avraham what happens—beyond becoming part of the remnant—when a Jew comes to faith in the Messiah, he prefers a picture of transfiguration, a transformation from a caterpillar to a butterfly—from something that is “pre-stage” to the stage where it is really meant to be, nonetheless implying fulfillment.

There is a reluctance among the participants to define themselves as true, fulfilled Jews. This is likely due to the interview setting, and of our both being aware of historical sensitivities like supersessionist rhetoric. In private, among their own, the situation would probably be somewhat different and more affirming. As I have shown above, the terminology of a “true” and “fulfilled” figure is a way for them to speak of their Messianic Jewish identity in contrast with other, unbelieving Jews. The Messianic Jewish readers clearly argue that faith in Jesus makes them the remnant, saves them, and transforms their identity according to God's plan. They have something that the others do not, namely, Jesus. From an etic point of view, therefore, thinking of Messianic Jewish self-understanding as fulfilled is not incorrect.

### *The Remnant as a More Inclusive Concept*

There is, however, one exception among the Messianic Jewish readers in terms of understanding the identity of the remnant: Aryeh. Belonging to one of the most traditional-Jewish congregations, similar to *Bet*, he meets me wearing a *kippah* and *tsitsit* (the only participant who wore this religious Jewish garb), in addition to sporting a long beard. He tells me that he prefers to think of himself as a “Jewish messianist,” a designation that locates Jewish expressions and traditions within the framework of a Messiah faith. Messianic Judaism, he thinks, has lost its Jewish links in favor of what he regards as a Jesus-obsessed evangelicalism. As we speak, he conceptualizes the remnant differently from the other participants:

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<sup>67</sup> “Avraham.”

Well, my point was not to identify two groups [as such], but to identify that there was more than one group [Jesus-believing Jews]. I tried to illustrate that by using the same analogy as Rav Shaul [Rabbi Paul] did, which is those who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Okay? We're talking about a remnant of the faithful, a remnant who count as a faithful remnant *long* before any consideration of Rav Yeshua exists.... The point is that the concept is *still valid* so there are people [Jews] who are faithful to Hashem [lit. "the name," a Jewish term that refers to God].... Anyway, it was my point to identify the fact that it is not just believers of Rav Yeshua who are the faithful remnant. They are *a part* of a faithful remnant.... You may be Jewish and part of the remnant, but not yet a believer [in Jesus].<sup>68</sup>

Aryeh's reading maintains the Jewish concept of the remnant as consisting of Jews faithful to God, which for him means observing the Torah, and to this he *adds*—instead of *changing*—the category Jesus-believing Jews. This reading is the one that corresponds most closely to the minority perspective proposed by the within-scholar Eisenbaum (see above). The non-faithful, the “rest,” according to Aryeh, are thus Jews who are not faithful to God. Aryeh also rejects fulfillment rhetoric because he thinks it represents an insecurity or defensiveness among Jewish believers. For him, faith in Jesus does not make believers superior to other Jews, who then would be classified as unfulfilled.<sup>69</sup>

Having discussed how Jewish identity is constructed, with belief in Jesus setting them apart *somehow*, there is no more suitable topic to turn to than that of replacement theology.

## The Rejection of Supersessionism

### God is Still Faithful to His Jewish People

“Has God rejected his people? By no means!... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (vv. 1–2). Paul's opening in Rom 11 captures the central premise of supersessionism or replacement theology.<sup>70</sup> Has God replaced his people—the Jews—with a new people, the Church, with the coming of Jesus? Paul's resounding “no” is one that both Messianic Judaism and PWJ have made their own—a similarity noted when situating this study (see Chapter One). Promoting a

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<sup>68</sup> “Aryeh.” My emphasis. Another reader, Natan, showed familiarity with this idea, but rejected it.

<sup>69</sup> “Aryeh.”

<sup>70</sup> I use the terms synonymously herein. For a more thorough examination of concepts used in this discussion, and slight differences in meaning and definitions, see Terence L. Donaldson, “Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition,” *JMJS*, 3 (2016): 1–32.

post-supersessionist reading of Paul is so central to both reading communities and, with Rom 11 a core text for this claim, this textual practice and the topic of post-supersessionism permeates the whole reception of Rom 11 and thus also this study: *what* (this chapter), *how* (Chapter Five), and *why* (Chapter Six). The background to this emphasis is the proclamation, disseminated since the early centuries, that the Church has taken the place of the Jewish people, a theological conviction also prevalent in much Pauline scholarship (especially the POJ perspective, see Chapter One).<sup>71</sup> After the Holocaust, churches, beginning with the Roman Catholic Church and joined by Pauline scholarship, admitted their indirect responsibility for the atrocity. Attempting to come to terms with anti-Judaism, a process of rereading the New Testament as if from within Judaism began.<sup>72</sup> Both Messianic Judaism and the PWJ perspective are part of this cultural—and historically correct—endeavor. The rejection of supersessionism, theologically but also—and very strongly so—ideologically and rhetorically, plays a fundamental role in how both the Messianic Jewish readers and the PWJ scholars understand Rom 11.

This subsection starts by exploring how Paul's opening and the topic of supersessionism as such is discussed in the Bible-reading interviews,<sup>73</sup> moving on, in the next, to how the topic is negotiated as it is challenged. Based on Rom 11, both

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<sup>71</sup> See Chapter One. One scholarly example of this, however, is the following: "church, then, as the people of the New Covenant has taken the place of Israel," Ridderbos, *Paul*, 354–55. To give one example of this from a church tradition: the *adversos Iudaeos* tradition among the early church fathers has been quite influential. Irenaeus, for instance, wrote that "[F]or inasmuch as the former [the Jews] have rejected the Son of God, and cast Him out of the vineyard when they slew Him, God has justly rejected them, and given to the Gentiles outside the vineyard the fruits of its cultivation," quoted in Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 6. [*Haer.* 36.2.]

<sup>72</sup> I am here primarily thinking of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the publication *Nostra Aetate*, in which Rom 11 figured in order to offer a new, post-supersessionist reading of the New Testament. It should also, however, be mentioned that before this occasion, in 1947, the International Council of Jews and Christians (ICCJ) had already published a statement titled, "The Ten Points of Seelisberg," wherein Christians and Jews offered a peaceful way forward after the atrocities, and discussed how Christianity could be presented in less anti-Jewish terms which recognized its Jewish roots. Both the PAJ perspective and the PWJ perspective are expressions of this from the point of view of Pauline scholarship. The same has been done in the area of Jesus and Gospel studies expressed through the different "quests" for the historical Jesus.

<sup>73</sup> Here it might be useful to recall the definition of supersessionism given earlier (see Chapter One): "From Latin *supersedere*: to sit above or be superior to. In general parlance to supersede means to take the place of someone or something, while to be superseded means to be set aside as useless or obsolete in favour of someone or something that is regarded as superior. In recent decades the term 'supersessionism' has gained currency among theologians and biblical scholars to refer to the traditional Christian belief that since Christ's coming the Church has taken the place of the Jewish people as God's chosen community, and that God's covenant with the Jews is now over and done. By extension, the term can be used to refer to any interpretation of Christian faith generally or the status of the Church in particular that claims or implies the abrogation or obsolescence of God's covenant with the Jewish people. Supersessionism is thus substantially equivalent to replacement theology, and the two terms are often used interchangeably." Soulen, "Supersessionism," 413.

reading communities offer their understandings of what replacement theology is, with other established definitions echoing in the background. In the words of PWJ scholar Tucker, who also sees this as the mission for the scholarly perspective:

[The PWJ perspective offers] a new reading strategy, a post-supersessionist one. Such an approach would maintain two key ideas: the irrevocability of God's covenant with the Jewish people and a continuing role for Torah as a demarcator of the Jewish people and their identity.<sup>74</sup>

In the group interview with Michael and Asher, Asher offers the following observation:

To me the very first starting place is: what is supersessionism, what is replacement theology, who are the people of God? The people of God remain the Jewish people. The people of God remain the Jewish people! Through the Messiah, God is serving and affirming that the Jewish people are his people because of the promises that he [God] made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>75</sup>

There are similarities yet also dissimilarities in how the topic here is approached. Both parties denounce the claim that God replaced the Jewish people with a new people, thus offering a “plain” and confirming reading of Paul in a literalist sense. “His” people—a fundamental conviction upon which both agree—are the Jewish people only. The covenant God has made with Israel remains, it is still valid, it has not been abrogated in favor of the Church. A central idea in post-supersessionism is that the categories of “Israel” and “the Church” remain intact, which they do for both communities in their affirmations of the Jewish people. Paul’s exclamation “by no means” is made their own “truth.” The notion of God’s rejecting the Jewish people is absolutely foreign to both PWJ scholars and the Messianic Jewish readers.<sup>76</sup> “Israel’s status as chosen by God is an absolutely unshakable fact.”<sup>77</sup> The rejection of replacement theology is their *raison d’être*; both communities almost ontologically rely on this conviction as the foundational belief that directs everything else and questioning its validity would shake their reason to exist. Although not always commented on, this Paul-based conviction forms the very

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<sup>74</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 1. See the whole introduction for a more thorough discussion, 1–27.

<sup>75</sup> “Michael and Asher.”; cf. “Yoel.”; “Ze’ev.”

<sup>76</sup> This is one of the main ideas within this perspective. E.g., Ehrensperger, *Mutually Encouraged*, 151; cf. Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 18. Taking a patrilineal reading of sons as heirs, God, according to Johnson Hodge, (not Jesus!) has fathered Israel, and thus he cannot reject “whom he foreknew” (v. 2). Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 114.

<sup>77</sup> Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 136; cf. Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 131, 150, 172.

foundation for the continuing reception of Rom 11 among PWJ scholars.<sup>78</sup> From congregation to congregation throughout my participant observation, the message that “the people of God remain the Jewish people” has been a constant, consistent message linking the different communities to each other. Crucial to their textual practice with Rom 11 more broadly, Asher emphasizes this in the extract above by repeating it, adding more power to the reiteration.

There is one important dissimilarity in the two definitions offered, however. On the one hand, PWJ scholars mention the Torah, which is of major importance for this perspective in promoting a post-supersessionist reading of Paul. In contrast, the Messianic Jewish readers, as exemplified above, explicitly add “Messiah,” Jesus, into the equation. Discussed throughout this chapter, the Torah and Jesus, as well as the importance attributed to them, continue to create tensions both within and between the reading communities in the context of post-supersessionism. The difference is a Yeshualogy: for Michael and Asher the people of Israel are *not* rejected *because of* the Messiah.

The application of labels of different sorts to the participants is not the interesting matter here, but, rather, how the topic is negotiated and handled; however, it is worth briefly exploring the designations in a scholarly context. In a much-discussed article within both the exegetical, systematic theological, and the religious worlds,<sup>79</sup> the Jewish theologian David Novak has discussed the topics of so-called “hard” and “soft” (or, minimal) supersessionism.<sup>80</sup> Hard supersessionism, in his usage, refers to belief that the Church has replaced Israel as God’s people, whereas soft supersessionism would be to acknowledge that, with the coming Jesus, “something” new is added to the covenant between God and Israel, without replacing Israel’s covenant. The category of Israel, so to speak, still exists and is valid. Soft, he proposes, also has a theocentric, eschatological horizon, one where Jews might turn to Christ (cf. v. 29). The category of soft supersessionism is a wide one, including language such as “fulfillment,” hence including most of Christianity in it (if not the hard category). In Novak’s thinking, a soft supersessionism is much preferred over a hard. While Novak opposes the idea that one can be a Jesus-believing Jew, his categories are helpful as a backdrop to analyses of the Messianic Jewish readings.

For the Messianic Jewish participants, reading Paul in a post-supersessionist way is to a large extent ideological: “*Beshum panim!* Over my dead body!”<sup>81</sup> Chayim

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<sup>78</sup> It has been expressed similarly as “[T]he unveiling of this riposte occupies the remainder of the chapter, with a basket full of surprises.” Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 136.

<sup>79</sup> During the spring 2021, the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology (SPOSTST) organized a webinar about this article together with the author. Both interesting and illuminating in this context is that most of the questions raised concerned Messianic Jews in relation to the topic of post-supersessionism.

<sup>80</sup> David Novak, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft,” *First Things* Feb 2019:290 (2019): 27–31.

<sup>81</sup> “Chayim.”

exclaims regarding the question of rejection. For them, as Jewish believers, it is a question about *their identity*. Whereas the interviews display the understanding that the Jewish people as a whole are not superseded, Paul's words were more frequently applied to them as Messianic Jews. "I'm Jewish, so we are not rejected!" Andrei exclaims,<sup>82</sup> just as Paul argues for the same in the text by indicating himself (v. 1). None, however, brought their faith in Jesus into this discussion in order to uphold their argument of a post-supersessionist reading, although the question of whether they, as *Jesus-believing* Jews, are not rejected is a relevant one; obviously the category of hard supersessionism is rejected, but what about the soft one? The Messianic Jewish world uses its adherents, their existence, as "proof" that God has not rejected his first chosen people collectively, and thus simultaneously as a means to defend their individual Jewish identity. As with the remnant (see discussion above), the participants inscribe themselves in the text that alongside Elijah and Paul they are not rejected. Noticeably, as with Andrei above, the argument is made from within the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah. Taking an overall perspective on the interviews, the scripturalists remarkably often just read in a literalist way Paul's statements (vv. 1, 11) that God has not rejected his people. "It is what it says," Asher protests, "it's [incomprehensible] to me sometimes to see how people can read this any different way,"<sup>83</sup> thus vocalizing all the readers' response to traditional readings within the Church. Further establishing their identity as Jewish believers in Jesus, a post-supersessionist reading serves rhetorically as a boundary marker also against Christian traditions.

The biblical ideology among the Messianic Jewish readers that God has not rejected his people Israel is strongly supported by a literalist and applicative textual practice of Rom 11 in a way that cannot be over-emphasized. Yet, as Asher phrases it from above, "*through the Messiah*, God is serving and affirming that the Jewish people are his people," repeats the idea of representation seen in the discussion of the remnant. However, it also creates tensions between a post-supersessionist and Yeshualogy hermeneutic, with the former perhaps serving as a stronger ideology and the latter as a stronger practice. This is addressed below.

Reading a text in terms of empirical reception studies and the social life of Scripture approach leads to all kinds of sidetracks, associations, and applications that separates the practice from traditional exegesis, and yet the digressions are as much part of the reception of the text as more focused interpretations. Thus, when participants read the verse, "Has God rejected his people? By no means!" (v. 1) it

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<sup>82</sup> "Andrei." This can be compared with how Campbell, a PWJ scholar, has argued that the remnant of Jesus-believing Jews sanctifies the whole of Israel and thus makes it impossible to claim that Israel is rejected, writing, "it [the remnant] preserves the identity of the whole people," Campbell, "Remnant," 99, cf. 82.

<sup>83</sup> "Michael and Asher."; cf. "Yoel." Yoel expresses a similar idea in the introductory quote to this chapter.

stirred up all kinds of thoughts, which is not surprising given the importance of this theme for Messianic Judaism:

It's a very important subject, especially now since the Messianic movement has grown to present some kind of a bridge in a certain sense between Israel and the Church of the Nations.... We believe that Yeshua is the promised Messiah of Israel. So that's, that's our testimony to our own people. And to the Church. There's a lot that went wrong in terms of what we call supersessionism. And a lot was lost to the Church as a result of that total break with Israel. And so, as I was saying, we are a bridge.<sup>84</sup>

The existence of the Messianic Jewish movement, Avraham argues with his bridge metaphor, can function for both Judaism and Christianity as proof that God has not rejected Israel, and so work as a bridge, a mediator, between the two. For Israel, they can be a witness that one can be a Jew *and* believe in Jesus. Yet the bridge function in his thinking is stronger and more realistic when directed towards the Church. Usually, he says, people (Christians) are not familiar with what Paul says in Rom 11 about the rejection of the people of Israel being false. His task is to make people understand “God’s Word” correctly. For Avraham and most (if not all) Messianic Jews, the restoration of the Church, fixing “that total break with Israel” in a spiritual manner, can only occur when the Church acknowledges the Messianic Jewish part, returns to her Jewish roots, and rejects teachings about the Church replacing Israel. Messianic Judaism can thus, he reasons, work as the bridge which brings the Church “back home.” Avraham also considers himself a bridge in a practical way as he recurrently preaches the “correct” understandings in churches as well as being involved in Christian ecumenical work, unusual for Messianic Jews.

Like much historical scholarship that seeks explanations for the background to Paul’s writing in the opening of Rom 11, some of the Messianic Jewish readers briefly contextualize Paul’s question (“the historical horizon” in reception theory terminology). Paul, they assert, needed to correct replacement thinking that had taken hold in the Roman community as Gentile believers became much larger in numbers than Jewish believers.<sup>85</sup> “The experience that he [Paul] has and the young Church has, is that the Jewish people are in opposition to the message of Jesus.”<sup>86</sup> Avraham explains that, due to this situation, the Gentile Church developed a replacement theology, as they thought that God had abandoned the Jewish people in favor of a new people from the Nations.

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<sup>84</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>85</sup> E.g., Nanos, *Mystery*, 9; Elliott, *Arrogance of the Nations*, e.g., 15. For empirical-religious readers, see “Michael and Asher.”; “Aryeh.”

<sup>86</sup> “Avraham.”

This, of course, in Avraham's and the other participants' views, is completely wrong—in other words, hard supersessionism is strongly rebuked—yet Avraham's confession, “We believe that Yeshua is the promised Messiah of Israel,” seems to fall into the category of soft supersessionism if one is to use Novak's terminology. One needs to remember, however, that Novak's categories are built upon two other categories, those of Judaism and Christianity, and not Messianic Judaism. As Jews believing in Jesus, do they fall outside of these categories, or are the hard/soft categories still applicable but with different rhetorical and theological borders? This is addressed below.

## The Status of the Hardened of Israel

While the Messianic Jewish readers strongly argue that God has not cast away his people, Paul repeatedly mentions that Israel is “failing,” “hardened” (vv. 7, 25), and “stumbling” (vv. 9, 11–12, the last two verses, also discussed in the next chapter). Paul speaks in seemingly harsh, negative tones about Israel (esp. vv. 7–10), describing their eyes as darkened in a loss of visual sight (vv. 8, 10). Who constitutes this Israel? All the Messianic Jewish readers interpret the verses to mean that Paul was speaking about two groups: “the elect” (the remnant) and “the rest” (the hardened) (v. 7) *within* the people of Israel. On a parallel note, it is worth noticing that the participants *always* interpret Paul's concept of Israel as the Jewish people. Israel is never redefined by the readers in terms of classic, or hard, supersessionism, as having changed to denote the Church or Christians, or to denote an expanded Israel of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. Such readings, Dov points out, are what the Gentile Church has done for 2,000 years as part of her supersessionist theology.<sup>87</sup> The view of the two other groups as constituting an “Israel within Israel” (also a prevalent understanding in the PWJ perspective) is a noteworthy rhetorical argument made by the participants that suggests a post-supersessionist reading *and* maintained Jewish identity, *yet* marks them out as something distinct. The “rest” is understood (by all save Aryeh) as those of Israel who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah. In their rhetoric they are hardened but not rejected, although this classification echoes the classic supersessionist classification. The “rest” is a concept applied both to those in Paul's own time about whom he speaks, but also, in contemporary times, to the overwhelming majority of Jews not part of the Messianic Jewish body. So, how do the participants handle this problematic (at least at first glance) statement, if God has indeed not rejected Israel?

The participants use a number of textual practices and strategies to deal with this interpretative dilemma. First—and sometimes overlapping with those that follow—silence is a frequent response in most interviews to those parts of Paul's words

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<sup>87</sup> “Dov.”

perceived as threatening to the scripturalists' post-supersessionist hermeneutics. Andrei and about half of the other participants quickly read these passages and move on in the text, actively ignoring them. This silence is interesting, especially when viewed from their literalist ideology, and speaks of things problematic for them. According to reception theory, sections lacking in engagement could be viewed as not important, although this is probably a faulty premise here, given the terms used in, and for them the apparent tones of, replacement theology. The silence rather bears witness to perceived difficulties in making sense of certain statements. These struggles and negotiations illuminate how they view the Bible as final authority: a proclaimed "literal" ideology clashes with their hermeneutic of post-supersessionism. In retrospect, this is one occasion when I should have taken a more co-creative role in the interviews, pushing the participants with follow-up questions towards a closer textual engagement to shed further light on current tensions within the Messianic Jewish world.

The other strategies involve a greater engagement with making sense of Paul's negative statements regarding Israel. In the second, the Messianic Jewish readers explained the hardening as "God's doing."<sup>88</sup> By assigning responsibility to God for the hardening, God is the one who has "allowed" or "even caused" the majority of Israel to acquire this status, and is, therefore, not considered a problem among the Messianic Jewish readers. God is God. A recurring strategy in literalist circles when encountering textual "problems," referring to God is a way of rejecting, or emancipating readers from, interpretative responsibility. The hardening of "the rest" is read as part of a divine plan, which Paul explains in the continuation of Rom 11, which the scripturalists trust God to handle. They acknowledge that "those scriptures can be misused and say that God simply rejected them,"<sup>89</sup> or claim that "he [Paul] brings these texts that sound anti-Semitic, but they are not, they are from the Torah."<sup>90</sup> They view it the other way around, though, reading them in a way that affirms God's responsibility for the plan of the hardening and its solution (see continued discussion in Chapters Five and Six). On the other hand, framing it, as Jacob and others did, as "a mystery," still suggests that they do not really know how to handle it. Paul's mentioning of the mystery (v. 25) provides them with a scriptural means of escape in the sense that they are not supposed to understand everything. Hiding behind their framing of it as a mystery is, however, ironic, as Paul explicitly says the opposite here: namely, "I want you to *understand* this mystery" (v. 25).

Third, while most of these Messianic Jewish readers emphasize that God is the one behind the hardening, there is a simultaneously held understanding wherein the

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<sup>88</sup> "Aryeh."; cf. "Jacob."

<sup>89</sup> "Avraham."; cf. "Yoel." "You'll see some replacement theology people really get that wrong and they use these verses and say, 'oh, you see, it doesn't matter if you're born Jewish or not Jewish, we're all the same.'"

<sup>90</sup> "Nahum."

agency rather lies with the people of Israel. Rom 11 itself inhabits both perspectives, as Ze'ev notes: "There is the side that Israel is responsible for, and then there's God's side of the story."<sup>91</sup> For him, this doubleness is expected as he thinks of paradoxes as typical of Jewish interpretation. Avraham, however, more explicitly suggests Israel as responsible for its hardening:

"Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened." [v. 7]. So what is Israel seeking? Israel is seeking the Messianic kingdom. Israel did not believe in the Messiah, they *rejected* Jesus as being the Messiah, ... Israel has not obtained what it seeks by *rejecting* the Messiah ... [Israel is] basically *rejecting* what it is seeking, because everything Israel seeks is connected to the Messiah and to the kingdom, but the elect has obtained it and the rest were hardened [cf. v. 7]. So the elect is the remnant. They have obtained what Israel is seeking because it's very, very clear that the basic gospel message was that with Messiah, the Kingdom of God comes.<sup>92</sup>

Avraham here offers an explanation as to *why* Israel is hardened: rejecting the Messiah. To him, this serves as a good theological explanation of Paul's rhetoric. God may not have rejected Israel, but the people of Israel have rejected Jesus. Phrasing it this way, he rhetorically saves God from any responsibility for Israel's unbelief, yet this reversal has also been used in supersessionist thinking. Avraham once again displays a hermeneutic of Yeshualogy: inserting "Messiah" as an explanatory force is shared with the other scripturalists. Using the same terminology of rejection but with a different agent, the responsibility attached to Israel—those Jews who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah—is quite harsh, but not commented upon by Avraham. Their "failure," in his thinking, becomes the "rejection," a terminology with harsher connotations. To make two comparisons, Dov argues, "It's saying that God sent Yeshua, and the people as a whole did not accept Yeshua as their accepted Messiah.... Stumbling [means] not accepting Yeshua."<sup>93</sup> Yoel argues that the reason for being hardened is that Israel has been arrogant due to its chosenness as God's people and that this blindness makes it impossible for them to see (Jesus) properly.<sup>94</sup> Avraham's reasoning above addresses

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<sup>91</sup> "Ze'ev." See also Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 126–28.

<sup>92</sup> "Avraham." My emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> "Dov." Chayim argues similarly that the rest were hardened because they created their own way of supposed righteousness, namely, rabbinic Judaism, which "is based on other things than faith in Jesus." "Chayim."

<sup>94</sup> "Yoel." Ze'ev framed this thought from another perspective by arguing that the Jews became hardened "through our sin, hardened through Judaism that speaks very negatively about Jesus, and hardened through a horrific history of [living] amongst the Gentiles where Jews have been persecuted in the name of Christ." While not elaborating on it any further, he argues that, due to the behavior of Christians to Jews, the Church has caused a blindness among the Jews which prevents them from recognizing Jesus. "Ze'ev."

*why* and *how*—or the consequence—of this, which is that they are missing out on the Messianic Kingdom, yet his thinking, with its strong Yeshualogy, does nothing to explain whether and how this is compatible with a post-supersessionist reading. Rather, he (re)enforces the boundary between the messianic and the non-messianic (hardened) Israel by placing a strong rhetorical focus on “Yeshua” and Yeshualogy as the explanatory force for the hardening; this moves the focus and agency from God as the one rejecting, but is not the outcome similar? Applying Novak’s terminology, this seems to be—at least—an expression of a soft supersessionism.

In preparation for the next strategy, it is worth mentioning an interesting example provided by Nahum. He approaches these verses in a different way than the other empirical-religious readers. As the only leader in this study with rabbinical ordination, and extensive training in Jewish literature, he applies rabbinical hermeneutical principles to understand Paul’s declaration. As should be clear, this strategy rarely occurs in the interviews as the leaders are usually trained, if at all, in various Christian evangelical settings. This makes their interaction with the Bible, unsurprisingly, similar to that in evangelical circles, creating an interesting tension, as the scripturalists are keen to emphasize their Jewishness. Adjusting his *kippah*, Nahum basically reaches the same conclusions as his fellow readers, but through another methodology:

*Nahum:* He’s [Paul is] doing a very interesting Talmudic experiment here. How do I know? Verse 7 starts with a preposition, “what then?” In Aramaic, it’s the word “dilma.” If I now pull out [from his book shelves] a book about Talmudic technical, the technique of reading the Talmud “what then” starts what is called a false proposition, a false proposal. “What then” is like “what shall we say?” Shall we say that God gave them a spirit of slumber, eyes not to see and ears not to hear [cf. v. 8]?... He’s raising a proposal he’s going to knock down.

*Me:* As he does in verse 11?

*Nahum:* Yeah, yes!... Paul’s proposal is not a reality. “Have they stumbled so as to fall?” [v. 11] Certainly not! And not get up? Certainly not!<sup>95</sup>

Here an important rhetorical distinction plays out: Nahum does not oppose the idea of *stumbling*. But, he strongly opposes the idea of *fallen*, in the sense of a decisive and final fall, by using Paul’s own words of rejection—“certainly not!” To fall, the readers understand, is synonymous with being rejected and replaced, while stumbling is a much lighter form. Several of the participants also draw the parallel here of how the people of Israel constantly go astray in the Hebrew Bible, never to be rejected by God, and constantly coming back. This textual practice, therefore, is

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<sup>95</sup> “Nahum.”

one way for the readers to embrace Paul's negative descriptions and at the same time oppose a hard supersessionism.

A fourth strategy, thereby, to try to promote a post-supersessionist reading of the hardened and stumbling of Israel is to argue for this status being *temporal* and *partial*. Picking up on Paul's own idea in Rom 11, the majority of the Messianic Jewish readers use this textual practice; the hardening is neither complete nor final among the people of Israel. How did this argument go? Aryeh, Jacob, Ze'ev, and Asher exemplify readers who notice this, based on a later verse by Paul in Rom 11: "a hardening has come upon part of Israel" (v. 25). The hardening, they say, is "only partial rather than complete,"<sup>96</sup> and "in verse 1 through 10, he [Paul] makes the point that Israel's hardening is only partial,"<sup>97</sup> while later acknowledging that this refers to most of the people of Israel. Framing Messianic Jews as the remnant (see earlier discussion) also serves as proof of this partiality; their existence represents the whole of Israel and is a guarantee that God has not rejected his people. The partiality is thus thought of in *collective* terms: a part of the people of Israel is hardened—not rejected—but not each individual Jew. They, as *Jesus*-believing Jews, are understood as the only ones not hardened but saved. Because the empirical-religious readers read the whole of Rom 11 from this perspective, it effectively renders the event of God's hardening of Israel less harsh, and demonstrates how they generally deploy a textual practice of focusing on specific words and themes that help them view Israel in a positive, non-rejected light.

The Messianic Jewish readers further strengthen their argument by focusing on the temporal aspect. As Asher observed, "I had a memorizing outline when I was a student of Romans.... And the third point was, you know, it's not permanent. There's a future restoration."<sup>98</sup> All the scripturalists appreciate Paul's continuation wherein, after the seemingly negative statements about Israel's status, he repeats and underlines his arguments from the opening: "So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means!" (v. 11). Chayim responds in a similar way as Nahum to Paul's conviction, noting, "Because they rejected the truth [about the Messiah], he [God] gave them this *partial* hardening. Now the question is, *is this partial blindness forever?* Is their failure irreparable? Really, this is the question. So, *the answer is no. No!*"<sup>99</sup> Note again the textual practice of stressing both the partiality and the temporality regarding the whole of Israel. The hardening, however, is, as touched upon above, understood metaphorically to refer to the consequences of not believing in Jesus. Many of the Messianic Jewish readers reformulate the question into something like, "Did Israel stumble by rejecting the Messiah so that it will

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<sup>96</sup> "Aryeh."

<sup>97</sup> "Michael and Asher."

<sup>98</sup> "Michael and Asher."

<sup>99</sup> "Chayim." My emphasis.

permanently fall?”<sup>100</sup> The answer to that is, again, “by no means,” with emphasis. The Messianic Jewish readers pick up here on Paul’s rhetorical question of a permanent fall—“Is their failure irreparable?” What is at stake here is not only that the Messiah is the reason for the situation, but that the stumbling or the fall is inserted into the question of whether this status is *permanent*, with a strong rejection immediately following.

Paul’s rhetoric of stumbling and hardening can serve as yet another scriptural means of escape for the Messianic Jewish readers. They can hold on to these concepts as a scriptural “diagnosis” of what happens to Jews who do not believe in Jesus, yet use these softer concepts as standing above—and against—the idea of God replacing the Jews (cf. v. 1). Whereas often used in Christian supersessionist theology as final, for the participants the concepts are rather temporal, and as such they are neither equal to, nor of the same gravity, as “rejection,” as this is understood as a definitive status. Thus, Paul’s terminology offers a middle way in the present between the two notions.

This strategy of rhetorically emphasizing partiality and temporality is ultimately made possible through an eschatological hermeneutic. The participants “solve” the “current” problems of Israel’s hardening and stumbling by referring to future events, ultimately reading the whole of Rom 11 from this perspective (see further discussion in Chapter Six). This is also a scriptural escape route of high interpretative value which allows them to argue for a post-supersessionist reading: one day in the future, God will, they are convinced, show all Israel that he has not rejected his people (cf. v. 29). For them as readers, this is enough; it is comforting. While the category of Israel here remains intact until the eschatological end, it is a reading nonetheless dependent on Jesus. From the perspective of scholarly definitions—apart from Novak’s notion of soft supersessionism as including eschatological salvation—this one has been categorized as “ambiguous” in regard to (post-)supersessionism.<sup>101</sup>

To bring in the conversation partner here, it is enough to say that the PWJ scholars, in their effort to create a post-supersessionist reading of Rom 11, are engaged in parallel textual practices concerning Israel’s status. Within this reading community, the concepts of “hardening” and “stumbling” are also framed within the hermeneutic and rhetoric as *temporal* and *partial* and viewed in an eschatological framework.<sup>102</sup> Nanos offers rhetorical arguments against replacement thinking by suggesting the alternative translations of the Greek as: the Jews have “‘lagged’

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<sup>100</sup> Cf. “Avraham.”

<sup>101</sup> Campbell, “Remnant,” 29–32.

<sup>102</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 103, 141; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 80, 139, 150; Elliott, “Question of Politics,” 224; Nanos, ““Broken Branches,”” 114–21, 135; also Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 254; Thiessen, *Paul*, 45, 119; Zetterholm, “Missing Messiah,” 54–55.

*behind*” instead of “‘fallen’ *down*,”<sup>103</sup> and they “missed a step” instead of “‘stumbled.”<sup>104</sup> This strategy does not appear among the empirical-religious readers in this study.

The above four strategies are different ways of handling Paul’s statement about Israel being hardened, with the last being the strongest post-supersessionist reading—theologically, ideologically, and rhetorically. Shifting focus from this framework, which incorporates the collective, to the individual—a doubleness in which the Messianic Jews operate—takes the discussion one step further. Chayim addresses this topic most explicitly: the relationship between the hermeneutics of post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy, a core tension in Messianic Jewish thinking as both constitute core convictions whose incompatibility seems difficult, if not impossible, to solve satisfactorily. As such, it highlights the main negotiation in which they as believers live. Although this might vary between different strands of the movement, the relationship between being hardened and being saved are acutely present in the thinking of several participants, such as Avraham (above) and Chayim (below). For them, Yeshualogy transcends Jewishness and, hence, also a post-supersessionist hermeneutic. It seems reasonable that among Messianic Jews adhering to a more evangelical-Jewish Messianic Judaism, Yeshualogy is the primary core, whereas more traditional-Jewish Messianic Judaism might put more credence in the post-supersessionist hermeneutic. If this holds true, the participants in this study who are most keen to emphasize Jesus would also have the greatest theological difficulties in not falling into supersessionist thinking. Messianic Jews, while emphasizing their Jewishness, are distinct because of their faith in Jesus. Almost the first thing Chayim tells me when we meet is how he views his identity as a Messianic Jew:

Listen. Don’t misunderstand me. But when it comes to what you prefer you can only choose one. It’s Christ. You can take my identity [as a Jew and as an Israeli], you can take my whatever, you can take anything on earth. Okay? One thing you cannot take out from me is my Jesus. Okay? This is my concern.<sup>105</sup>

Pastoring an evangelical-flavored congregation, he describes himself as the black sheep amongst the other leaders. While Jewish, he proclaims that “Jewishness is not a flag that we lift up here [in the congregation].”<sup>106</sup> He continues to explain that he does not fight Jewishness, but only promotes Christ. This is also noticeable in his

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<sup>103</sup> Nanos, “The Translation of Romans 11 since the Shoah: What’s Different? What’s Not? What Could Be?,” in *Reading Romans within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 2*, ed. by Mark D. Nanos (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 200–13, 206.

<sup>104</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 275.

<sup>105</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>106</sup> “Chayim.”

sarcastic rhetoric: “But after Jesus came and so on, to come and say that you can be saved in the synagogue?”<sup>107</sup> He here seems to address explicitly and loudly what silenced those participants mentioned above. It is clear that for Chayim—as for the others—one can only be saved through faith in Jesus: the Mosaic covenant has no salvific power whatsoever. As seen above, he also clearly shares a hermeneutic of Yeshualogy, whereby the concept of the remnant has changed with the coming of Jesus to apply to Jews with faith in Jesus, and they alone. While identifying himself with the remnant, as do the other empirical-religious readers, he is not very interested in emphasizing this theme but rather prefers to focus on the Jews who do not believe in Jesus. Not only does he apply Paul’s statement about being a Baal worshipper to them, as discussed above, he also compares them to “a person who says he’s married to a woman, but doesn’t know the name of his wife. Happy marriage!” he exclaims and chuckles. Frequently during our meeting, he returns to the topic of hell, with what sounds like a certain sadness and heaviness of heart.

Do you know how many Jews are in hell? You know that Jews are also in hell? So it means that Jewishness is not an immunity against hell. So find another solution! Jesus!... There are those of Israel who are Jews who will go to hell. I’m not happy saying it, but this is what the text says.... There is the nation, the nation of Israel, okay. And they are the physical descendants of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac. Absolutely so. But, you take the same, say, five million who are holding the same idea that we are out of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But only half a million are saved. Who are going to end up with God? The half million. Okay! And what will be of the other 4.5 million? As sad as it is, they will not be with God for eternity. And since there are not seven other options, the other option is in hell. This is what it is.<sup>108</sup>

Chayim is the only one of the Messianic Jewish readers who explicitly raises the topic of hell. His reference to the Bible (“this is what the text says”), exclaimed when we read what Paul says about the remnant, chosen by grace, is interesting because nowhere does Paul mention the idea of a hell. Instead, Chayim’s view of the textuality of the Bible as *one* book, with proclamations by Jesus in the Gospels about separating the sheep from the goats and similar parables (Matt 25), along with a general theological conviction, makes him “see” this “truth” also in Paul’s writings.

The rhetoric of hell is yet another way of expressing what already has been discussed: the identity of hardened Israel. For Chayim, the world is divided into the saved (Jesus-believing persons) and the non-saved (not believing in Jesus), or hardened. For him, then, the non-saved of Israel and the Nations are automatically consigned to hell. As he speaks a language typical of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians (see also Chapter Two), this rhetoric might not be shared by all the

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<sup>107</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>108</sup> “Chayim.”

participants in this study. Yet the theological and ideological thinking behind this terminology, that of an exclusivist soteriology—only through Jesus can one be saved—is present in all the interviews (except perhaps Aryeh’s<sup>109</sup>).<sup>110</sup> Again, this captures one of the major negotiations within Messianic Judaism: the collective of the Jewish people is not rejected, but on an individual level they need Jesus to be saved. In other words, there is a clash between the hermeneutic of post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy that is not easy to reconcile. This dialectic or tension also illustrates the complex positioning with regard to both the Jewish and the Christian surrounding world. Yet, as the interviews indicate, Yeshualogy is prioritized.

A few examples may further clarify this. While the eschatological perspective and its emphasis on partiality and temporality holds together the textual practice of post-supersessionism, this is formed and made decisive on the basis of Yeshualogy: “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) *by faith in Jesus* (see further discussion in Chapter Six). This is what Novak referred to as the soft supersessionism that automatically results from Jesus being seen as fulfilling “something.”<sup>111</sup> Shifting the time perspective, in the “now,” the hardened are not rejected due to the remnant’s faith in Jesus. It seems that the centrality of Jesus makes it theologically difficult to escape the consequences of the hardened Israel as *temporarily* rejected; however, in the participants’ rhetoric they prefer to speak of hardened Israel as temporarily “set aside,” giving place to others in God’s plan—promoting softer terms to avoid replacement thinking.<sup>112</sup> Still, the tension remains here in relation to Chayim’s exclamation that Jews go to hell, which serves as an example of the complex position of a number of Messianic Jews. Inasmuch as the Messianic Jewish readers promote a post-supersessionist theology, it is very much a rhetorical enterprise. The emphasis on a post-supersessionist hermeneutic, as far as I see it, is also not only a theological statement but has as much to do with identity; it supports *their*

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<sup>109</sup> Aryeh, who offered a more inclusive definition of the remnant, might be an exception to this. As the participant most fully immersed in regular Jewish life and thinking, he constantly spoke about “redemption” instead of “salvation,” and did not give a clear answer to my question about whether Jews can be redeemed or saved without Jesus.

<sup>110</sup> In their Statement of Faith, the MJAA (Messianic Jewish Alliance of America) proclaim, “We believe in the resurrection of both the redeemed and the lost: the former to everlasting life and the latter to eternal separation from God, a state of everlasting punishment (Job 14:14; 19:25–27; Daniel 12:2–3; John 3:36; 11:25–26; Revelation 20:5–6; 10–15; 21:7–8).” “Statement of Faith,” MJAA. IAMCS shares exactly the same formulation. “IAMCS Belief,” <https://iamcs.org/about-us/belief>. The UMJC does not have an explicit statement about this.

<sup>111</sup> Novak, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft,” 29–30.

<sup>112</sup> In Soulen’s definition of supersessionism quoted above, “set aside as useless” is one way of expressing supersessionism. However, while the Messianic Jewish readers probably would agree that the hardened are set aside temporarily, they do not consider this state useless, but rather the opposite: God is *using* their “set-asideness.”

Jewishness as distinguished from Christianity and posits that Jewish identity and faith in Jesus are fully compatible—as believers in “Yeshua.” As Jewish believers, they would argue, they are “Jews with a true Judaism”—they are fulfilled as believers in the fullest truth of Judaism, in which other Jews will join one day.

This far, this chapter has explored how Jewish identity and a post-supersessionist ideology is negotiated in readings of Rom 11. Closely related to these intertwined topics are questions of the Torah to which it now is time to turn.

## Negotiating Torah Observance

The Torah, which presents an excellent illustration of the social life of Scripture, is part of the Messianic Jewish “trinity”—as Yehudit, a Messianic Jewish woman exclaims, stressing its importance for their faith and identity.<sup>113</sup> Paul writes, “but if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (v. 6). The Torah, or “the law,” does not appear explicitly in Rom 11, but in the empirical-religious readings it is nonetheless present through the process of interpretation and application. This section explores the presence of the Torah in the Messianic Jewish readings as a theme central both for issues of (Jewish) identity and a (post-)supersessionist theology.

If [the existence of the saved remnant] is because they’re good and they’ve done something, it’s no longer grace, because grace is the free gift of God. Otherwise, work is no longer work; in other words, he’s [Paul] saying, “Works, you know, God does not save you because of works.” But if it is of works,... He’s saying, “That is not true.”<sup>114</sup>

Avraham’s reaction, filled with emotion, to Paul’s words highlights the importance of the “how” of salvation, which, together with all the participants, he understands this verse to address. Only through grace, God’s free gift, can it occur, a focus that constitutes the foundation for God’s faithfulness to his people Israel and instrument for not replacing them.<sup>115</sup> The emphasis on salvation through grace echoes throughout Pauline scholarship, although more so in the older perspectives than in PWJ scholarship (see Chapter One). Certainly, Avraham and his fellows are convinced: “God does not save you because of works.”

This Pauline verse offers a fine example of how biblical rhetoric functions in the reading. The uncommonly and abstractly used word (“works”) in the Bible is linked

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<sup>113</sup> Personal conversation, October 2019.

<sup>114</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>115</sup> Cf. “Natan.”

to more common and practical terminology (“law”). “Works” thus equals following and carrying out the law, that is, observing—or doing the deeds prescribed by (a limited understanding of the concept)—the Torah. Given the Protestant heritage of Messianic Judaism, some readers not surprisingly seem to feel a bit uneasy discussing these concepts, almost trying to avoid them. Yet—reflecting the social life of Scripture—while understandings of Torah observance are complex, it is central to carving out an “authentic” and “unique” identity, both within the movement and in contrast to Jewish and Christian traditions; therefore, most readers seem to feel obliged to give their view on the topic.

The Torah is important to claims of remaining Jewish; speaking of it positively and as credible confirms belonging in the Jewish world. But most readers are hesitant to embrace it *too* strongly as this risks making it appear as important as Jesus—courting accusations of religious Judaism—*and* may present the believers as legalistic, as focusing as much on “works” as salvation through grace. Yet the Torah needs to be valued positively as having legitimacy so as to promote a post-supersessionist reading wherein it has not been superseded, thus serving as a boundary marker against (traditional) Christian teachings. This section illustrates the (occasional) difference between how the Torah is talked about *ideologically* and how it is *practiced*, concluding that a textual practice of Yeshualogy is seemingly the goal for the majority of the Messianic Jewish readers.

In the following, the participants’ constructions of Paul’s and their own Torah observance—the biblical and the contemporary discourses—are explored separately for the sake of clarity, although deeply intertwined.

## Paul and the Torah

The Torah and Paul’s Torah observance are central to discussions of Paul’s Jewish identity in Pauline scholarship. Messianic Jews respond positively to Paul’s (ethnic) Jewish identity (see above), but what about Paul’s *practice* of a Jewish lifestyle after embracing Jesus as Israel’s Messiah? In the interviews, two approaches are visible. The majority considers Paul remained Torah-observant but with modifications, while the minority views him as fully Torah-observant without changes; none argue that he abolished the Torah or that the Torah as such is finished or obsolete (like the POJ perspective).

Jacob and Avraham adhere to the majority position. For them, the most natural result of the “cross event” itself and Paul’s conviction of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah necessarily leads to modifications in Torah observance.

He [Paul] kept the Torah for sure, but he definitely did it from the standpoint of what was *accomplished on the cross*. So he’s very clear about this as well. So he doesn’t interpret the Torah isolated from the fact of what Yeshua did on the cross. And also

again, according to the *halakhah*, the rabbis say when the Messiah comes *the Torah changes*.... Eternally. So this takes us actually to *a whole new reality*.... There's a major change, of course, but ... when he's accused by fellow Jews that he teaches against Moses, against the Torah, he says NO!<sup>116</sup>

The Torah is good and it's holy. There's no question about it. *But* he's [Paul] speaking to the old creation. Now, Paul believes that we are in Christ.... We are baptized into the death of Christ and the old nature has been crucified with Christ. And when we come out of the water, we are in Christ, in the *new* creation. So the *new* creation is not married to the Torah of Sinai.... But nevertheless, the things of the Torah are still valid.... Basically, that's Paul's understanding. And so, he is not doing away with the Torah, he's just saying, we are just saying, we live it out in a *new* way. That's what he's saying. We live it out in a *new* way. It's no longer the covenant of Sinai, it is now the *new* covenant.... So we are a *new* reality and a *new* reality has to live out its relationship to God differently than in the Sinai reality.<sup>117</sup>

Arguing from within Judaism to legitimize their views, the key word in both Jacob's and Avraham's stories is "new." The new reality, the new creation, a new way, and the new covenant are all (biblical) expressions framing the same idea. This rhetoric implies changes ("in a different way") in how the Torah is interpreted and practiced. While neither reader addresses the question of what is different on a practical level, what comes across is a *conceptual idea* of change: Paul does not view the Torah as he used to. While the term "new" readily suggests a contrast with what was before, meaning the Torah, the Messianic Jewish readers are keen to point out that "the Torah is good and it's holy ... still valid." Paul still kept the Torah, "in light of what the Lord did,"<sup>118</sup> and encouraged his fellow Jesus-believing Jews to do the same.

Jesus is the reason for this "new"-ness, according to how they, as Jesus-believers, construct Paul's understanding: the death, the cross, and the resurrection of Israel's Messiah have changed the course of history for the Jewish people. Here, Jesus once again functions as a hermeneutical key, with Yeshualogy binding the biblical together as a textuality. Although not specifically mentioned by Jacob and Avraham, Jesus is ever-present as an interpretative lens for their reality and, thus, practice; with the coming of Jesus, existence is divided into the old and the new. Dov, rather more critical of the Torah in general, goes so far as to say, "Jesus *fulfilled* what was a shadow [the Torah]."<sup>119</sup> Profoundly accentuating the concept of fulfillment, Chayim thinks of Jesus as the new high priest with a new offering, whereby no more offerings as prescribed in the Torah are necessary. Only Jesus can provide

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<sup>116</sup> "Jacob." My emphasis.

<sup>117</sup> "Avraham." My emphasis.

<sup>118</sup> "Jacob."

<sup>119</sup> "Chayim." Emphasis original.

atonement, deeds cannot,<sup>120</sup> meaning that the Torah needs to be interpreted in light of the cross, for they as believers, “are in Christ.” As Andrei elucidates:

*Andrei:* He [Paul] has not left Judaism, you know, because he’s still within Judaism. But he now defines Judaism in terms of his relationship to the Jewish Messiah and not the Jewish law, which is not to say that the Law is irrelevant for him now, no. But it’s not the center of gravity, that’s how I see it.

*Me:* But do you think that Paul still kept the Torah after becoming a believer?

*Andrei:* I think he did, because in the book of Acts you see him keeping the Torah. Now,... how serious was his intention?... Where he might have been looser is the food laws because [of] his mission to the Gentiles.... But otherwise he was a faithful Jew as much as he could [be], I think.<sup>121</sup>

While the PWJ perspective would argue for little or no change in the role of the Torah since “the Jesus event,” the ideas presented by these readers resemble approaches to the Torah by PAJ scholars, with Paul putting Jesus at the “center of gravity” (instead of the Torah).<sup>122</sup> Or, to use the terminology of N. T. Wright, the Torah is “rethought” around the Messiah.<sup>123</sup> The Messiah has not replaced the Torah, but rather made it less important, while the Bible, here Acts, is used to fill the gaps in Paul’s observance. The concept of Judaism, as they perceive it, has changed, much like the remnant. As Menachem notes, Paul’s mission as apostle to the Gentiles generates flexibility: “If I can win somebody to Christ, I will eat pork. If this offends somebody else, I will not eat pork [cf. 1 Cor 9:19–23].”<sup>124</sup>

“Paul was the greatest Judaizer of all!”<sup>125</sup> Thus Messianic Jewish leader Nahum proclaims Paul’s remaining fully Torah-observant, meaning Nahum adheres to the second approach to Paul’s observance. Paul’s conviction of Jesus as the Messiah has not diminished the importance of the Torah, but rather the opposite, yet the readers do not engage in discussions about what continued Torah observance would imply practically; rather, their main concern is that Paul is thought to have *not changed* his lifestyle. “He didn’t stop being an active Jew because of the Messiah.”<sup>126</sup> Jesus matters, but his offering does not change the fact that Paul—and other believing Jews—are still supposed to follow the Torah. The Torah is a sign of

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<sup>120</sup> “Jacob.”

<sup>121</sup> “Andrei.”

<sup>122</sup> “Strictly speaking, the law has no role at that point [after Jesus].” Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 153.

<sup>123</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1256.

<sup>124</sup> “Menachem.”

<sup>125</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>126</sup> “Yoel.”

their covenant regardless of Jesus, as a gracious, divine gift for “spiritual nourishment.”<sup>127</sup>

Many Messianic Jews who advocate Paul’s continued “complete” Torah observance argue this based on the Bible as a unified story, if not a singular text, by also using Acts.<sup>128</sup>

“I [Paul] have *in no way* committed an offense against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor.” [Acts 25:8 NRSV] So, is he telling the truth or is he lying? If he’s telling the truth, yes, it means he ate kosher, it means he honors the Sabbath, it means he kept the holidays, it means he prayed like all the other Jews, and acted like all the other Jews. And continued to do so. Look at Acts: “Three days later he [Paul] called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, he said to them, ‘Brothers, though I had done nothing against *our people* or the customs of *our ancestors*, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans’” [Acts 28:17 NRSV]. Again, he said that he had done nothing against his people, or the customs of our fathers. He didn’t only keep the Written Torah *but also the Oral Torah*.<sup>129</sup>

Indeed, Nahum also understands Paul to have remained a fully observant Jew: for the Paul who appears in the story above from Acts, nothing has changed. This understanding of Paul is based on a rather literal reading of the text as “telling the truth,” without deeper discussion of different forms of Judaism. Furthermore, both perspectives among the empirical-religious readers favor texts that affirm the Torah, and no reader raised the issue of texts with a negative reception history. Rather, several Messianic Jews repeatedly stressed that the Paul in Acts is not a Paul against the Jews, the Torah, or Jewish tradition.<sup>130</sup> Instead, Paul “stayed connected,” an active Jew believing in Jesus as the Messiah: “Paul is not only Jewish, he is very Jewish.”<sup>131</sup> Strongly emphasizing Paul’s continued commitment to Jewish practices, Nahum makes the interesting addition in the extract above that Paul also kept the “Oral Torah,” mostly associated with later rabbinical Judaism and contemporary religious Judaism.<sup>132</sup> By adding this, Nahum wants to *really* emphasize Paul’s continued commitment to Jewish practices.

The Messianic Jewish readers also mention Paul’s mission trips. As Nahum observes, “We read in Acts and Paul’s epistles that he went to the synagogue every

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<sup>127</sup> “Aryeh.”

<sup>128</sup> I.e., “Nahum.”; “Yoel.”

<sup>129</sup> “Nahum.” My emphasis.

<sup>130</sup> “Nahum.”; “Aryeh.”

<sup>131</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>132</sup> Some form of both Written and Oral Torah was obviously around in Paul’s time, but I use the term “Oral Torah” to refer to it in its traditional meaning as it is comprised in rabbinical literature.

Shabbat. He was welcomed as a teacher of the Torah. It was first when he started preaching Jesus as the Messiah that he was banished and had to leave for another synagogue.”<sup>133</sup> During the interviews, several retell the story of when Paul returns to Jerusalem and James and the other leaders tell him it is rumored he no longer observes the Torah (Acts 21).<sup>134</sup> One Messianic Jewish reader, Yoel, highlights Paul’s observance by paraphrasing the narrative: “‘Can you [Paul] please go and prove this to be false?’ And he goes back to the temple, he does the ritual washing, he does the sacrifices, he shaves his hair, he takes a Nazarene vow [Acts 21:26<sup>135</sup>]. All the things the Torah says, he still does. So that’s good.”<sup>136</sup> Acts, written by an unknown author who tells the story of Paul, is given higher authority than Paul’s own letters when it comes to his understanding of the Torah. Displaying the textuality of the Bible as telling one single coherent story, Acts provides “hands-on” and practical arguments for Paul’s Torah observance, thereby supporting a post-supersessionist reading.

It’s a *totally different* Paul [from that of the Christian Paul]. When you look at the Paul from the Book of Acts, you look at the Paul whom Paul himself speaks about. Also in Romans. It’s not a Paul who hates the Jews. It’s not a Paul who’s against the Jews. It’s not a Paul who’s against the Torah.... *He is not against the Jewish tradition!*<sup>137</sup>

Nahum gesticulates fiercely when he explains to me “how it is,” his voice becoming rather upset and agitated as he contrasts what he considers to be the correct understanding of “Rav Shaul” to the faulty understandings in Christian traditions. Understanding Paul as still “completely” Torah-observant, for Nahum, thereby reading him from a Jewish perspective, separates and rescues him from the “lies” of Christianity, which have kidnapped Paul and turned him into a Christian anti-Semite. Because the Bible describes Paul as Jewish, Messianic Jewish readers argue, the churches are liars. They (re)claim Jewishness as their correct identity by creating a kind of anti-Christianity, attempting to counteract what they perceive Christianity to have done over the centuries; indeed, their discourse on this seems to be as ideological as theological, given their conviction that the Bible is pro-Jewish and pro-Israel. Nahum’s final exclamation on Jewish tradition is a typical rhetoric that strongly emphasizes Paul’s Jewishness, one that transcends the biblical into the

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<sup>133</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>134</sup> The whole section is about Paul’s positive relationship to the Torah (Acts 21:17–26).

<sup>135</sup> “Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them.” (Acts 21:26 NRSV)

<sup>136</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>137</sup> “Nahum.” My emphasis.

rabbinical. Also worth noting is that none of the empirical-religious readers address Paul's seemingly negative proclamations regarding the Torah.

When bringing empirical-religious and PWJ readings on Paul's Torah observance into conversation, both similarities and dissimilarities arise. As with the participants, a foundational belief of PWJ is that Paul continued to practice Judaism.<sup>138</sup> While aware of the complexities of observance and that it means different things to different groups,<sup>139</sup> these scholars are convinced that practicing the Torah *and* belief in the Messiah of Israel are fully compatible. Indeed, Jewish Jesus-followers are encouraged by Paul to continue to observe the Torah. There is no dichotomy: "On the Contrary, We Uphold the Law!"<sup>140</sup> Like some of the Messianic Jewish readers, PWJ scholars find scriptural support for Paul's observance in Acts, with both groups stressing the importance of Paul's continued Torah observance. However, the PWJ scholars place greater focus on the *fact* of his doing so whereas most of the Messianic Jews focus on the importance of "the Jesus event" in introducing modifications. In sum, PWJ scholars proclaim that Paul continued full Torah observance without modifications—the minority position among the participants; the majority, instead, express views that exhibit similarities with the PAJ perspective wherein Jesus is the decisive factor. The Torah is important to claims of Paul's continued Jewishness, yet here an interesting conflict plays out, as most assign higher authority to Yeshualogy than to unchanged Jewish observance. This thinking is made stronger when focus shifts from Paul's observance to their own.

## Torah Observance among the Messianic Jewish Readers

God's saying, "I'm saving you by grace and not by works [cf. v. 6]." ... So the issue of Torah observance, the observance of the Mosaic law, of God's law ... is without a doubt in my experience the most disagreed upon, or controversial issue in Messianic Judaism by far. We agree on a lot; this is the area where there is the most discussion, disagreement, uncertainty. Obviously, I have my own thoughts. Obviously, I'm not wearing *tsitsit*; there's probably mixed fabric in my clothing. [But] I don't eat pork, [so] I keep *biblical kosher*.... You can get into the whole discussion of what is Jewish.

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<sup>138</sup> Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 176–87; Thiessen formulates it as "according to many Jews, Jewishness consisted of proper descent *and* proper ritual observance," Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 143. My emphasis. Nanos makes a similar claim when he states that Judaism has two fundamental pillars, acknowledging the election of Israel and faithfulness to the Torah. Nanos, *Mystery*, 6, 9; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 4, 13–14, 85–114.

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Hedner Zetterholm, "Torah Observance in the First Century."

<sup>140</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 208–39 (the quote is the heading of the chapter); Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 94–130; cf. the idea of a fully Torah-observant Paul as the major argument in the scholarly contribution to PWJ by the Messianic Jewish theologian Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews* (see also Chapter One).

It's a big part of our identity that we are Jewish and we are Israelis, because we are. It's not that we have to do it [Torah observance]. We celebrate the feasts, we have *bar mitzvahs*, *bat mitzvahs*.

What's difficult about being a Messianic Jew in Israel is that we have different opinions of what it means to be Jewish. We try, we do our best that [most] of what we do are *biblical Jewish things, what the Bible teaches*, that are part of our people, and then there are many other things which are good, could be rabbinical, could be cultural. Obviously, we're happy about Independence Day, which is an Israeli thing. Or certain holidays that might not be biblical, but they are cultural for our people. Unless they are not things that are going against Scripture, we embrace them, you hear me? It's a very big part. We do the Torah reading every week.... We don't have a lot *kippas* or *tsitsits*, but anyone can wear whatever they want in that sense, yeah.

[But] I think we prefer to *stay as close to the biblical things that define the Jewish people, as opposed to extrabiblical things*.... I think the law [the Torah] is wonderful, I think it's perfect, I think it's holy. It's beneficial, it's edifying, but it's not mandated because there is a new covenant. The law is in our hearts.<sup>141</sup>

Dov is a talkative and charismatic second-generation Messianic Jew, born and raised in Israel. As his loud and engaged voice fills the small room where we meet, he repeatedly comes back to the sheer conviction, which he shares with many other readers, that God saves humanity only through grace, not through works. This participates in a dichotomy familiar to traditional Pauline scholarship and Christian theology (see Chapters One and Two). Just as several of the Messianic Jewish readers apply the term “works” (v. 6) to Paul’s Torah observance, they also apply it to their own, leading to the discussion in this section of how the issue is negotiated in the empirical-religious readers’ lives. Representing the majority of the scripturalists, Dov points out the many dilemmas they face as Israeli Messianic Jews. What is the role of the Torah? How Torah-observant should they be? His “explanation” (see above) is typical of mainstream Messianic Judaism in Israel, yet it is filled with tensions concerning the biblical discourse and the surrounding Jewish society. Without a doubt, Torah observance plays a major role in Messianic Jewish identity negotiations (see Chapter Two), yet, at the same time, it is “the most disagreed upon, or controversial issue” within the movement. No other issue divides believers more and there is no unified doctrine on the Torah in theory or practice.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> “Dov.” My emphasis.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Stuart Dauermann, “Jewish Believers in Yeshua and Halachic Torah Observance: Whether, What, and How?,” in *Chosen to Follow: Jewish Believers through History and Today*, eds. Knut H. Høyland and Jakob W. Nielsen (Jerusalem: Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 2012), 187–203, 187; see also Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, 140–222. Harvey’s study is a comprehensive discussion of the views of Messianic Jewish theologians on “Torah in Theory” and “Torah in Practice.” He divides them into two major groups, those who are “Torah Positive” and those who are “Torah Negative.”

Illustrating how the Torah is perceived and observed, Richard A. Robinson uses the categories of *restorationists* and *traditionalists* (also referred to as “Kinzerian”).<sup>143</sup> Most of the Messianic Jewish readers express, verbally or otherwise, a restorationist approach, meaning that they want to restore a first-century form of observance, which they deem authentic.<sup>144</sup> Dov says, “What we do are biblical Jewish things, what the Bible teaches,” giving voice to an ideology of the Bible as the highest authority. The traditionalists, on the other hand—the minority of the empirical-religious readers—argue that Messianic Jews also need to embrace post-biblical Jewish tradition.<sup>145</sup> Congregation *Alef* suggests a restorationist ideology, whereas *Bet* is more traditionalist, although these two stances should not be considered two distinct groups, but rather on a continuum similar to that of evangelical-Jewish to more traditional-Jewish expressions, liturgy, and traditions (see Chapter Two). A similar framing, although expressed differently, is that of Spirit and Torah, the relationship between the two, and where the emphasis should be put in Messianic Jewish life and theology.<sup>146</sup>

Messianic Jewish leaders, Richard Harvey has shown, may “abandon, adapt, adopt, or accept” Torah observance.<sup>147</sup> Nor is there a commonly agreed-upon definition of the Torah within the Messianic Jewish world, which causes confusion among believers for whom the Torah and Torah observance are important concepts. Does the Torah refer solely to the Pentateuch, or also to the rabbinical concept of the Oral Torah? When the Messianic Jews speak of a “religious Jew” or a “Torah-observant Jew” they seem to picture a contemporary (ultra-)Orthodox Jew who values the post-biblical tradition of the Oral Torah. Most scripturalists separate “biblical Judaism” (reported in the biblical texts and somehow related to Second Temple Judaism) from “post-biblical Judaism,” in other words, rabbinic Judaism. This is, however, an anachronistic way of speaking about it, as Judaism as we know it today arose in the post-Second Temple period.

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<sup>143</sup> Richard A. Robinson, “Jewish Believers and Their “Roots”: Continuity or Discontinuity?,” in *Chosen to Follow: Jewish Believers through History and Today*, eds. Knut H. Høyland and Jakob W. Nielsen (Jerusalem: Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 2012), 167–85, 167.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. Dulin, “Messianic Judaism,” esp. 36–37.

<sup>145</sup> This separation of biblical versus rabbinical as the true versus the “artificial”/“man-made” has also been noted in another study on Messianic Jews in Israel, see Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 151.

<sup>146</sup> Lessard and Rosner, *Two Views*. The Torah-Spirit discussion is carried out between a theologian and a congregational leader in the Messianic Jewish world. An interesting contribution to this discussion is the sort of middle position represented in the two-volume set *The Law of Messiah: Torah from a New Covenant Perspective* (2019) where the Messianic Jewish authors apply a “Yeshua-focus” to the *taryag mitsvot* (the 613 commandments in the Torah), see Michael Rudolph and Daniel C. Juster, *The Law of Messiah: Torah from a New Covenant Perspective*, 2 vols. (Montgomery Village: Tikkun International, 2019).

<sup>147</sup> Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, 181.

For Dov, religious Judaism today represents “extrabiblical things” which should be avoided. As our interview unfolds, he almost explicitly equates “works” with the Oral Torah. Again, most Messianic Jews in Israel harbor great suspicion of rabbinic Judaism (which, theologically speaking in light of the above discussion, is viewed as hardened and stumbling). It is perceived as legalistic and, therefore, as prioritizing works above grace, and ritual purity above purity of the heart. Most Israeli Messianic Jews are not brought up within observant Judaism, which further causes stereotyping: indeed, many lack knowledge and personal experience of contemporary religious Jewish life. Instead, they, and especially the restorationists, are influenced by evangelical theology and education with its emphasis on grace, not works, and on the principle of *sola scriptura*,<sup>148</sup> thus echoing its Protestant heritage. With his evangelical college training, Dov displays a clear focus on grace and the Bible.

For Dov and the majority who adhere to a form of biblical Torah observance, the formulation of such *halakhah* becomes *individualistic*, for there are no official teachings unifying the whole Messianic Jewish world. The “correct version,” Harris-Shapiro argues, is a “pick-and-choose” observance,<sup>149</sup> where the believers select what they find meaningful for deepening their Jewish identity. There appear to be no guiding rules for this except personal conviction and “what the Lord tells them.”<sup>150</sup> The restorationists balance between perceived Jewish “legalism” and the traditional Christian reception of the Torah as obsolete. Flexibility is the distinguishing mark of the Messianic Jewish attitude toward Torah observance.

Dov’s views exemplify these various negotiations over central issues of Torah observance. One issue is food, of which he remarks, “I don’t eat pork, [so] I keep biblical kosher.” With this phrasing he sets up a dichotomy between observing the Torah in a biblical and a rabbinical way.<sup>151</sup> Abstaining from pork is one way to emphasize his Jewish identity. Chayim, in contrast, who does not stress his Jewishness, thinks that, given the non-kosher vision of a “Chinese restaurant menu”

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<sup>148</sup> Juster, “The American and Israeli,” 133.

<sup>149</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 139–41; cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 217. Zelson Warshawsky describes some commandments as simply “selected out” and the rest as “superseded” by the new covenant in Christ (note the terminology she uses!).

<sup>150</sup> Describing how to discern what to observe and what not, Harris-Shapiro writes, “you pray about it and you choose.” Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 140.

<sup>151</sup> Mainstream Judaism does not share this separation of biblical and rabbinical kosher; it seems to be specific to Messianic Judaism.

(see Acts 10<sup>152</sup>), “you could barbeque [pork] in Jerusalem if you want.”<sup>153</sup> Most Messianic Jews, however, adhere to some kind of kosher-sensitive or kosher-styled lifestyle based on biblical, or just personal, principles. I have not yet visited a Messianic Jewish home with a kosher kitchen in the sense of having separate areas for dairy and meat preparation and where *kashrut* is observed but they presumably exist in small numbers. At the same time, keeping at least minimally kosher is an easy default position in Jerusalem, where pork is rarely sold; furthermore, most shops and restaurants have a *teudat kashrut*, a *kashrut* certificate from the Chief Rabbinate (or similar authority).<sup>154</sup>

Another topic Dov raises in regard to the Torah is that of religious clothing. Indicating his well-fitting, faded, almost ripped, jeans and a T-shirt tight over his broad shoulders, he exclaims, “Obviously I’m not wearing *tsitsit*. There’s probably mixed fabric in my clothing [forbidden in Lev 19:19<sup>155</sup> and Deut 22:11<sup>156</sup>].... We don’t have a lot of *kippot* or *tsitsits*, but anyone can wear whatever they want in that sense, yeah.” Like most of the Messianic Jewish readers, he does not wear a *kippah*. Dov also comments on not wearing *tsitsit*, the ritual strings that serve as a reminder of the 613 *mitsvot* (commandments) in the Written Torah. It should, however, be noted that wearing them is a conditional commandment: *if* one wears a four-cornered garment, *then* one needs *tsitsit*. It is unclear whether Dov knows this. While not all religious men wear it, this garment is still a sign of Orthodox praxis, which most of the participants perceive as legalistic behavior better avoided. Hence, and worth stressing, (non-)identification with contemporary issues of religiosity (“doing x”) appears stronger here than the biblical commandment (“do x”).

Avraham offers a similar but harsher reflection:

I would call that cosmetic, cosmetic, cosmetic [religious Jewish clothing and expressions], because it doesn’t go much deeper than that. It’s an outward appearance that is really not what God is wanting us to do. But it’s making them [Messianic Jews who are traditionalist-Jewish and more Torah-observant] feel well. “You see, we’re really Jewish so we have to do [it], and we’re doing this and that.” ... *I don’t think it’s right.... In the end it is Messianic [faith], in the sense that it has been restored to*

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<sup>152</sup> “In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’” (Acts 10:12–15 NRSV)

<sup>153</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>154</sup> Cf. Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, 208; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 140–41.

<sup>155</sup> “You shall keep my [God’s] statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” (Lev 19:19 NRSV)

<sup>156</sup> “You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together.” (Deut 22:11 NRSV)

*what God intended it to be from the beginning.* That's why it's not a question of being a synagogue or wearing *tsitsit*, or putting on a *kippah*. It's not about that.<sup>157</sup>

This clearly captures the tensions between different forms and expressions of Messianic Judaism. Most of the empirical-religious readers are uncomfortable with the idea of “showing off” their faith visibly in “outward appearance.” While Dov regards religious clothing as optional but not to be encouraged, Avraham with his Orthodox Jewish background is more critical, insisting that Jewish “cosmetic” practices are not what God really wants, but rather a sign of legalism or “playing religious Jews.”<sup>158</sup> In Avraham’s opinion, Jewish clothing and observances are not biblical identity markers but rabbinic, commanded in the Oral Torah. This, in fact, is not entirely correct but displays how he views the need to distance himself from contemporary religious, Jewish society, and how Jesus has taken the gravity center in place of the Torah. In his fervor to be “authentic,” that is biblical, he rejects being called a rabbi and calling his congregation a synagogue as these concepts are tightly connected to contemporary religious Judaism. “It’s not about that,” he declares, echoing the critique of appearances also noted in Protestantism by anthropologists, for instance, especially among evangelicals.<sup>159</sup> Instead, the concern is interiority, faith of the heart, and salvation by grace, echoing the Protestant and evangelical heritage and its emphasis on God’s grace, not works. This could also be compared with the song sung in *Alef*, “Oh, the blood of Yeshua cleanses us of all impurity.” Restoration is a key word within Messianic Judaism and figures frequently in the interviews; as Jewish believers they are “restored” from both Judaism and Christianity, which have gone astray; they are the physical and spiritual restoration to God’s “pure” calling and intention for his people.<sup>160</sup> Yet, things biblical are also transformed around Jesus.

While Dov continuously refers to his congregation as doing “biblical Jewish things,” he also emphasizes that they, as a community, celebrate some non-biblical holidays along with modern and national Israeli holidays such as Independence Day. “It’s a very big part,” he says, “[as long as] they are not things that are going against Scripture.” They are thus not strict restorationists. Jewish *cultural* and especially

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<sup>157</sup> “Avraham.” My emphasis.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. “Menachem.”; cf. the discussion on the “fantasy of immediacy” (see Chapter Six); Engelke, “Number and the Imagination,” 812–13. Similar ideas within the Messianic Jewish world in Israel are also confirmed, and denoted as “carnal,” with negative overtones, in Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 169.

<sup>159</sup> E.g., Engelke, “Number and the Imagination,” 812.

<sup>160</sup> For a focus on restoration as central concept in the discussion of feasts, and the majority of Messianic Jews in Israel who view their faith more as a spiritualization than material (a spirit-body dichotomy), see Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 144, 212–14.

*national* celebrations are judged favorably if they strengthen Jewish identity.<sup>161</sup> Dov's mention of celebrating *bar/bat mitzvahs* is also significant because, despite being grounded in rabbinic law, this ceremony is now a festive and regular custom within all streams of Judaism. But Messianic Jews do not celebrate ceremonies in the same way as other Jews, but rather in light of Jesus. As Avraham elucidates:

Don't celebrate them [the feasts] just the way they have traditionally been celebrated [rabbinic Judaism]. Celebrate them as prophetic eschatological feasts that have to do with God's plan for the coming kingdom. Why? Jesus did not just die on any day of the week, he died on Passover to fulfill the deeper meaning of the Passover. He is the Lamb of God. The Holy Spirit was not poured out on any day; it was poured out on Pentecost. So God relates in the new covenant to the feasts of the Lord. They are not man's feasts. They are feasts God gave to Israel. He relates to the feasts in terms of the Messiah, and so I would say we should celebrate the feasts in a messianic way.<sup>162</sup>

The feasts are celebrated with a "Jesus touch" (see Chapter Two); for example, festive prayers can be transformed to mark Jesus's fulfillment of the meaning of Passover, as Avraham suggests. Jewish feasts are also celebrated either because Jesus and Paul celebrated them, or because post-biblical holidays often showcase the survival of God's people. As Jesus is the core of the celebrations, Avraham feels that feasts should be celebrated as a taste of the coming kingdom.

When I ask Avraham specifically what he thinks that Messianic Jews should do in terms of Torah observance, he raises the topic of Shabbat. "We are basically celebrating the perfection of God's creation and the perfection of God. So I would say we should celebrate the Shabbat, but I don't have to celebrate it the way the rabbis say."<sup>163</sup> Messianic Jews hold the Shabbat (from Friday sunset until Saturday sunset) as the holy day of the week, instead of Sunday, the Christian day of rest and commemoration of Jesus's resurrection, to emphasize their belonging within the broader Jewish community and for its mimetic aspect: just as Jesus and Paul kept Shabbat, so should they. Living in Israel, where Shabbat permeates the whole of society as the day off and most of the country closes down, a strong majority of congregations also gather on Shabbat for practical reasons, and because it serves as a reminder of God's faithfulness, that he "finishes what he begins."<sup>164</sup> Halakhic Shabbat observance includes refraining from specific kinds of work and creative activity, such as writing, cooking, driving the car, and using electricity—things that recreate God's supposed rest after fulfilling creation. Messianic Jews generally do not observe Shabbat this strictly as it represents a kind of religious, "legalistic"

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 147–52.

<sup>162</sup> "Avraham."

<sup>163</sup> "Avraham."

<sup>164</sup> "Avraham."

Judaism. In *Alef*, for example, the leader drives his car to meet his congregation (as there is no public transport on Shabbat), and they use electricity and instruments in their worship service. As with the dietary laws, Messianic Jews tend to “pick and choose” how they celebrate. Lighting the Shabbat candles on Friday night is a popular custom, as is gathering with friends and family. Spending Shabbat with the congregation in worship and fellowship is valued by many. Celebrating Shabbat should focus on God and “Yeshua,” on honoring and worshipping rather than on abstaining.

As Avraham wants the movement to become “more Jewish,”<sup>165</sup> he aspires to a “more biblical” form of Judaism. Yet one visible development within the Messianic Jewish landscape in Israel is that many contemporary congregations are tending to become more Jewish in terms of expressions, liturgy, rituals, and so forth: increasingly incorporating traditional-Jewish liturgical elements and prayers, rather than promoting a Jewish lifestyle, evidenced in a reference Dov makes to his congregation’s Torah scroll. This seems to be a phase of maturity or assimilation, especially among congregations founded in the 1970s. Meanwhile, the Caspari study shows that congregations founded in Israel during the 1990s by North American Messianic Jews emphasize the importance of living a Torah-observant life more strongly than those founded by Christian missionaries.<sup>166</sup> While *Bet* was not founded by Americans, it has been free of any missionary influence and firmly grounded in religious Jewish expressions and traditions from its inception. Paralleling this tendency to increasing Jewishness on a congregational level is the individual trend of *baalei teshuvah* (“masters of repentance”). Usually a term designating secular Jews who turn to religious Judaism, there is a Messianic variation as well. Many first-generation Messianic Jews seek their Jewish roots, re-routing themselves toward a more Jewish life, while maintaining faith in Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>167</sup>

Dov reflects on the status and the role of the Torah today for Messianic Jews in the lengthy quote that introduced this section. The guide from which to pick-and-choose is ostensibly the Bible (i.e., restorationist) whereas the “menu” is contemporary Jewish society. Religious Jewish society would probably describe Dov as non-observant, and secular Jews as *masorti*, “traditional.” An interesting contradiction takes shape in his wording. He says, “It’s not that we have to do it [Torah observance]... I think the law [the Torah] is wonderful, think it’s perfect, I think it’s holy. It’s [observance is] beneficial, it’s edifying, but it’s not mandated because there is a new covenant. The law is in our hearts.” How do he and others

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<sup>165</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>166</sup> Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 28–29. This corresponds to the general observation that many Messianic Jews in the United States are more Torah positive and closer to mainstream Judaism(s) (see Chapter Two).

<sup>167</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 112.

reconcile this? Kinzer has suitably suggested that the most common Messianic Jewish attitude toward the Torah is that it is “valuable but optional.”<sup>168</sup> *Ideologically* the Torah is idealized—Dov perceives it as wonderful, holy, and perfect—but this is not how it is *practiced*. It seems to be a contradiction inherent in the forms of Messianic Judaism that are more restorationist and evangelical in nature and theology, in contrast to those of traditionalists.

The participants have a complex relationship to the Torah, straddling the line between Judaism and Christianity. One of the reasons why most Messianic Jews avoid strict observance is because they think it is legalistic and works-focused, hindering a “pure” faith of the heart, thus displaying the Protestant heritage. Living in Israel as the readers do, Orthodox Jews become the embodiment of such “legalistic” observance. Many Messianic Jews I have encountered in Israel seem rather surprised by the question of why they should observe the Torah. Similar to how Paul’s Torah observance was constructed, for many of them the Torah (practically) is negotiated as peripheral or secondary to their Jewish identity as believers in Jesus: having Jesus as a hermeneutical key to the Bible, and the inauguration of the new covenant, have caused a fundamental change in how “reality” is perceived. Still, the Torah has a purpose for Messianic Jews. While not wanting to be “too observant” (legalistic), so as to distinguish themselves from religious Judaism, they still value the Torah (described as wonderful, holy, and perfect) for distinguishing them, as they see it, from traditional, anti-Jewish Christianity. Upholding the Torah, ideologically and verbally, emphasizes their Jewish identity.

While Dov and Avraham have served as representatives for the restorationists, a small number of readers align themselves instead with a more traditionalist view of Torah observance. In the meeting with Asher and Michael, *kippah*-wearing and of American origin, they both argue that, as Messianic Jews, they need to embrace the Torah in their daily lives. Why? “I, as an individual,” Asher explains, “must keep the Torah in order to live a life pleasing to God.”<sup>169</sup> This minority stream in Israel—of positively affirming Torah observance and post-biblical Jewish traditions, customs, and institutions—is closely linked to the thinking of the Messianic Jewish theologian Kinzer. In his book *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (2005), Kinzer argues that Messianic Jews are obligated to follow basic Jewish practice, embracing the Jewish people and religious tradition, including *postbiblical* Jewish customs and *halakhah*.<sup>170</sup> They should live such a life as an act of covenantal fidelity, which is similar to the scholarly idea of covenantal nomism (see Chapter One), according to which grace and gratitude for the covenant should be met with observance, with

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<sup>168</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 13.

<sup>169</sup> “Michael and Asher.”

<sup>170</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 13–15, 23.

“works,” which is what Asher also suggests. Hence, rabbinic Judaism (including the Oral Torah) are affirmed within the traditionalist strand. Most Messianic Jews in Israel, as explained above, strongly reject this thinking, whereas the situation in the United States seems to be more multivocal.

A traditionalist perspective is deeply rooted in contemporary Jewish tradition and life with a focus on the collective life with mainstream Judaism, whereas the restorationists focus more on the individual’s faith. This, again, reflects the division between Jewish communal praxis and privatized evangelical faith. Kinzer and his allies do not, however, propose a Messianic Judaism that wholly embraces contemporary Orthodox Judaism but rather, like Conservative Judaism, one that embraces Jewish *halakhah* and tradition combined with an openness to modern society.<sup>171</sup> Based in the United States, the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC) has published a document entitled *Standards of Observance*, in which halakhic advice is laid out for Messianic Jews who want to adhere to the Torah. The document formulates their goal as guiding believers “to a richer and fuller life as Jews obedient to the Torah through Messiah Yeshua, and obedient to Yeshua through the Torah.”<sup>172</sup>

Among the Messianic Jewish readers, Aryeh most clearly positioned himself as a traditionalist and as a follower of Kinzerian Messianic Judaism. “I am fully Torah-observant,”<sup>173</sup> he answers when I ask about this relationship to the Torah. Nuancing this, he adds that not all aspects of the Torah are applicable to him since some apply only to specific groups.<sup>174</sup> He explains that he “pursue[s] obedience to the Torah” because “the enlightenment brought by Torah represents spiritual nourishment.” He continues to explain the why and how of his observance with reference to the instructions of “Harav Yeshua ben-Yosef” (Rabbi Jesus, the son of Joseph) to his disciples to obey the authority of the Pharisees and the scribes who sit on Moses’s seat (Matt 23:1–2<sup>175</sup>). This implies his ongoing participation in religious Jewish traditions and observance, which includes honoring rabbinic literature and

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<sup>171</sup> Kinzer, *Israel’s Messiah*, 186; Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, 171, 200, 210.

<sup>172</sup> “Standards of Observance,” Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, [http://ourrabbis.org/main/documents/MJRC\\_Standards\\_Aug2014.pdf](http://ourrabbis.org/main/documents/MJRC_Standards_Aug2014.pdf). (page ii)

<sup>173</sup> “Aryeh.”

<sup>174</sup> Among the commandments, some are only applicable to certain groups within society, such as special commandments for *kohanim* (priests) related to their service in the temple, and to women, such as purity laws that apply during her menstruation, and family purity regulations (so-called *niddah* laws).

<sup>175</sup> “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.’” (Matt 23:1–2 NRSV) Aryeh does not, however, comment further on this reference, which is interesting since Jesus, as reported in the gospel, seems to go on to criticize the authority of Moses.

observing the commandments in the Oral Torah. In this choice, he and other traditionalists stand in contrast with most of Messianic Judaism in Israel.

This long discussion regarding both Paul's and the Messianic Jewish readers' Torah observance was provoked by reading about grace and works (v. 6), thus clearly exemplifying what can happen when working with the social life of Scripture: the textual practice of one small word ("works") can then be applied to much broader questions relevant for the readers in their individual contexts, for their identity and theology.

In sum, it is almost impossible to bring contemporary discussions of Torah observance with the development of rabbinic and modern Judaism(s) into dialogue with historical perspectives on Paul. If one were nonetheless to try, the so-called restorationists' construction is mostly similar to that found in the PAJ perspective but also close to the PWJ perspective as it has been described above (and in Chapter One). The restorationists argue that Jesus is primary and Torah observance secondary, modifiable, and flexible. The traditionalist approach that sees Paul as fully observant more closely resembles the PWJ perspective. While all the Messianic Jewish readers positively uphold the Torah as an *ideological* concept, their *practical* observance differs. Thus, one might say that while the restorationists embrace the *biblical (Written) Torah ideologically*, traditionalists also (strive to) embrace the *Oral Torah in a practical way*.

## Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has discussed identity and the Torah—with an insertion on (post-)supersessionism—focusing on how the Messianic Jewish readers in this study understand the opening of Rom 11, in conversation with PWJ readings. I have argued throughout that the reading is as much about making the text relevant in the lives of the readers as interpretation. Both the empirical-religious and the scholarly readers find strong textual support in Rom 11 for their convictions of Paul's Jewishness and in rebuttal of supersessionism. Paul and Rom 11 have proven very important for Messianic Jewish identity negotiations. Here Messianic Jews find biblical support and foundation for their identification with Paul and the remnant: they can both maintain their Jewish identity and at the same time claim that they are "special" or fulfilled as Jewish believers in Jesus. Paul's positive relationship to the Torah is acknowledged by both, but more fully embraced by PWJ scholars, and more reworked around Jesus in the empirical-religious readings. A similar approach to that of constructing Paul was seen in how the Messianic Jewish discussed their own Torah observance: it should be both "biblical" and be (trans)formed around, and by, Jesus. In sum, reading Rom 11 and discussing the themes of identity,

supersessionism, and the Torah have displayed that the Messianic Jewish readers have a textual ideology and practice whose focus on post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy is always negotiated but not always merged; post-supersessionism is the ideologically and rhetorically most important, but practically and theologically Yeshualogy, for most scripturalists, ranks above it. After this focus on intra-Jewish matters, it is now time to turn to how relations are constructed in dialogue with Rom 11.

## *Five. Relations and Yeshua*

And they [the Gentiles] are receiving life from the Jews. You [Gentiles] have been grafted *into* them. That's why you are alive. That's what you're getting from the fatness of the root, because you've become part of the tree of Messianic Israel. You should be grateful, not boasting. You see, what the Church did—I sometimes say this jokingly—the Church planted a Christmas tree instead of the olive tree.... Humanity is made up from a biblical perspective of the Jews and the Nations, those two parts.... It's the wholeness of Christ if it's Jew and Gentile and that is what the New Testament calls the “one new man.”

*Avraham*, November 2019

For Avraham, as for his fellow Messianic Jewish readers, relations between (Messianic) Jews and Gentiles play a fundamental role in understanding how the movement reads the Bible and understands its surroundings. “The Church planted a Christmas tree instead of the olive tree,” Avraham explains jokingly, but in his voice I can hear profound sincerity and sorrow. The impression he gives is one of deep wisdom, of a man living near the heart of the Lord, as he describes himself. As a preacher he is solemn yet engaging, low-key yet charismatic. According to him, throughout Christian history the relationship between Jew and non-Jew has been quite the reverse of what God intended. The Christmas tree analogy presents a deep ideological critique of Hellenized Christianity, a form of Christianity that has, in Messianic Jewish eyes, replaced its Jewish roots: a Christianity as something foreign to Israel, not of Israel. Reading the olive tree metaphor with Messianic Jewish eyes, however, rather supports a relationship wherein the non-Jews have been grafted into Israel.

This chapter focuses on how the Messianic Jewish readers read and understand the middle section (vv. 11–24)<sup>1</sup> of Rom 11, where we encounter Paul's famous

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<sup>1</sup> The previous chapter also reached into verses 11–12, creating a small overlap. The focus, and thus discussion, is different, however.

image of the olive tree. Of *inter-Jewish* character, the metaphor has become a much-loved text within the Messianic Jewish movement as it is perceived to give—as Avraham suggests above—“A biblical perspective of the Jews and the Nations, those two parts.... It’s the wholeness of Christ.” As Nahum, another reader, explains, this section of Rom 11 especially concerns “the relationship between Jews and Gentiles [as believers in Jesus],”<sup>2</sup> and is thus of utmost importance for the participants. As “Yeshua” dictates these relations, this theme is naturally also integrated into this chapter. Quantitatively, discussions of Jesus and Jewish-Gentile relations take up most space and time in the interviews, which suggests the importance of these topics. A basic argument throughout this chapter is that in place of “replacement thinking” Messianic Jewish readings nurture a two-fold “dependence theology,” that is, a construction of humanity as (a) Jews and Gentiles being co-dependent on each other for God’s plan to unfold, and (b) Gentiles being dependent on Messianic Israel. As Avraham states, “You have been grafted *into* them.” He continues, “If it’s Jew *and* Gentile,” the “wholeness of Christ” is made real. For Messianic Jews, as we will see, the olive tree contains both Jews and non-Jews, distinct yet united in calling and value. This constitutes the very important conceptualization of “the one new man.”

This chapter is made up of four larger sections. First, I briefly discuss major issues within Messianic Jewish rhetoric. Second, the empirical-religious readers’ understanding of Rom 11:11–15 is examined with special attention to the theme of co-dependence between Jew and Gentile expressed across a large time span. In the third section, readings of Rom 11:16–24 and the olive tree metaphor are analyzed with a focus on relations captured as “unity within distinctiveness”: how Jews and non-Jews are the two parts of humanity that remain intact also in Christ, and how they are perceived as equal but different, reflecting the concept of “the one new man.” Finally, I move to how the themes of Jewish-Gentile relations and “Yeshua” are made relevant to the social lives and contexts of the participants. Throughout this chapter, once again, there is a continual conversation with the Paul within Judaism (PWJ) perspective to cast further light on similarities and dissimilarities between the two reading communities.

## The Rhetoric of the Savior and Humanity

Both Messianic Judaism and the PWJ perspective have invested considerable effort in developing their own vernaculars to express their ideological agendas in order to free themselves from traditional Christian theological heritage and to bring Paul

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<sup>2</sup> “Nahum.”

“back” into a Jewish context (see Chapters One and Two). In line with the focus on rhetoric as textual practice,<sup>3</sup> this section unpacks the precise terminologies that are used to discuss two fundamental issues within both discourses; those of Jewish-Gentile relations and “Yeshua.”

In constructing a distinct Messianic Jewish identity, the most important and natural adaptation is the use of “Yeshua” instead of “Jesus.” Hebrew terminology serves a double function: it strengthens the Jewish identity of the believer and simultaneously emphasizes the Jewishness of (faith in) Jesus. While PWJ scholars agree with the latter claim, they obviously avoid this emic term in favor of “Jesus” or, more commonly, “Christ” and “Messiah.” “Yeshua” and other Hebrew terms are used not only in the Hebrew-speaking world, but in the English-speaking Messianic Jewish world as well. Being aware of this, I consciously used “Yeshua” during the Bible-reading interviews out of respect for the participants’ worldview as the interviews took place in English. Methodologically, this was a way to show the scripturalists that I was familiar with their vernacular and ideology, and verbally confirm that they should be at ease with using their vernacular with me as a scholar, and thus (partly) an outsider. I had also mentioned that I spoke some modern Hebrew, indicating my partial immersion in Israeli society.

While I had the impression that using “Yeshua” was fundamental and integral to Messianic Jewish self-understanding, the interviews surprisingly displayed a different reality, with readers using a multitude of designations to refer to their savior, including several traditionally Christian names. Analyzing the interviews, the four terms were most commonly used were “Yeshua” (including Harav [rabbi] Yeshua), “Jesus,” “Messiah,” and “Christ,” whereas the Hebrew term “Mashiah” (“Messiah”) was surprisingly absent.

Although it is impossible to do a valid statistical analysis with only eighteen participants, the rhetoric used is nonetheless worthy of reflection. “Jesus” is frequently used by twelve, hence a majority. For some, “Jesus” is the most common, or only, designator used. Chayim, for example, who does not especially emphasize his Jewishness constantly uses “Jesus.”<sup>4</sup> For those few who never use “Jesus,” a conscious, explicit emphasis on the Jewishness of the movement and their faith is visible: Dov and Yoel, both representing congregations with a strong evangelical-Jewish, charismatic flavor, never use “Jesus,” only “Yeshua.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, and in contrast to Chayim, those on the traditional-Jewish end of the spectrum—such as Aryeh, who strongly stresses the Torah—only, or mostly, use “Yeshua.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>3</sup> See earlier discussion (Chapter Three). Bielo mostly uses the term rhetoric to refer to larger sets of discourses, whereas I use it here in the narrower sense of how single words are used.

<sup>4</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>5</sup> “Dov.”; “Yoel.”

<sup>6</sup> “Aryeh.”

“Yeshua” is a term used by all the participants, although less frequently by those in the middle.

“Christ” and “Messiah” are primarily used by those who do not have Hebrew as their first language. The use of “Messiah” is not surprising given their focus on him as the Messiah of Israel and their own identity as *Messianic Jews*, although the absence of the Hebrew term is noticeable. “Christ,” however, is more surprising as it has marked connotations of traditional Christian theology and Greek heritage, which Messianic Jews commonly strongly oppose. Aside from these terms, no pattern is visible, and mixed use of several names for the readers’ savior is prevalent.

How can we explain the repeated use of terms—especially “Jesus”—that Messianic Jews should presumably avoid? Perhaps some participants might use Christian terms due to my own position as Christian, but this is not the whole explanation; “Jesus,” for example, is used naturally and without reflection. It seems that typical Messianic Jewish terminology is not as integrated into Messianic Jewish life in Israel (at least when speaking English) as commonly thought and expected; nor is it considered very important. The “Jesus” language probably reflects a lingering influence and affinity with the movement’s background and relations with the evangelical world and mission organizations. The different expressions also testify to the diversity in the movement.

Turning to the topic of ethnic relations, both Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars regard the Pauline letters as speaking of a humanity made up of two groups: Jews and non-Jews. Both the empirical-religious and the scholarly readers firmly avoid anachronistic terms such as “Christian” to explain Paul’s writings. The PWJ perspective, although with extensive discussion, commonly prefers the rhetoric “Jews and non-Jews” and “Israel and the Nations.”<sup>7</sup> This terminology emphasizes the ethnic distinction between the two. PWJ scholars have more of a focus and interest in discussing the collective’s relations rather than those of the individual, such as found in Rom 9–11.

Messianic Jewish rhetoric on humanity, however, is partly dissimilar to scholarly usage. The terminological pairing “Israel and the Nations” does not appear in the interviews, and “Nations” is seldom used.<sup>8</sup> The term “Israel” is much more common when referring to the Jewish people, in which they include themselves. The Messianic Jewish readers strongly prefer to talk about “Jew(s) and Gentile(s).” This is not surprising as this is the most common way of translating Paul’s terms into English, and adopting these biblical terms is in line with their biblical ideology. Messianic Jews tend to switch between speaking about the individual and the

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., the first part in Paula Fredriksen’s monograph on Paul is entitled “Israel and the Nations,” while the last part of the final chapter bears the heading “Romans 9–11: Israel and the Nations.” Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*.

<sup>8</sup> One exception was Natan who stated that he preferred the terms “Israel and the Nations” because, he said, they were more biblical. “Natan.”

collective as there is a hermeneutical focus on the individual Jew's salvation through faith in Jesus. This is probably an expression of their evangelical heritage and the importance of the salvation of each and every individual, and is thereby reminiscent of the Paul and Judaism (PAJ) rather than the PWJ approach. Thus, the Messianic Jewish readers inhabit a rhetoric that partly overlaps with PWJ scholarship, but is either unfamiliar with or simply does not adopt the perspective's terminology of "Israel and the Nations." On the other hand, Messianic Judaism does have a strong resonance with the PWJ perspective in how they conceptualize the interaction between the two parts of humanity, to which we now turn.

## “How much more”: God's Plan Unfolding

Paul proclaims God's vision for humanity—for Jews and non-Jews—in two sections, intertwined yet separate, beginning with a wider cosmological announcement stretching over a large timespan (vv. 11–15), thereafter moving on to the olive tree metaphor as a picture of the relations as such (vv. 16–24). This section focuses on the first part, usually summarily addressed by Pauline scholarship, which received a surprising amount of attention from the Messianic Jewish readers. Yitshak went so far as to declare that these verses are “the very heart of God,”<sup>9</sup> thus pointing to the perceived depth and truth of this vision, and the immense importance that understanding it “correctly” has for Jewish-Gentile relations.

Herein, Paul makes an important statement about the addressees, which must be elucidated before turning to the topics themselves if Paul is to be understood correctly here and throughout Rom 11. When the Messianic Jewish readers encounter, “I am writing to you Gentiles” (v. 13), they perform a “plain” reading of this, explaining simply that Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles: Paul the Jew is writing to non-Jews. At the same time, the letter to the Romans, as “God's living Word,” is viewed as addressed to *them*, to explain the mystery of Israel's unbelief.<sup>10</sup> They do not make much of the possibility that Gentiles are Paul's primary audience. This verse does not, therefore, play the same fundamental hermeneutical role for the participants as it does in the PWJ perspective where it forms one of the basic assumptions and characteristics for reading Paul within Judaism. In contrast to earlier Pauline scholarship, within-scholars argue that Paul's presumed audience consists of non-Jews, rather than a universal assemblage, and that the apostle is addressing them, trying to solve the “Gentile problem,” and bring them into

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<sup>9</sup> “Yitshak.”

<sup>10</sup> “Jacob.”; “Andrei.”; “Yoel.”; “Yitshak.”; “Nahum.”; “Ze'ev.”; “Avraham.”; “Dov.”

community with the God of Israel (see also Chapter One).<sup>11</sup> Yet both scripturalists and PWJ scholars stress that the “current” focus on the Nations needs to be repositioned within the wider framework and time perspective of Israel’s restoration.<sup>12</sup>

“But through their [Israel’s] stumbling, salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous” (v. 11). Coming back to the discussion of supersessionism and whether God has rejected his people (see Chapter Four), the Messianic Jewish readers here employ a strong textual practice of making this appear relevant: *God* has hardened Israel with a purpose, namely, to make it possible for the non-Jews to be saved. In other words, according to the participants, here Paul is offering an explanation for how the whole world will be redeemed (vv. 11–15) and describing how Jews and non-Jews are dependent on each other for this to evolve. Dov, who speaks with passion and assurance, is given the main voice here, as the scripturalists present similar understandings of the paragraph:

Here it’s saying that God sent *Yeshua*, and the people [the Jews] as a whole did not accept *Yeshua* as their Messiah.... *Rather*, through their trespass, their trespass being their rejection of *Yeshua* for the majority of the people, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Yay, that’s great, that’s wonderful. And then this is, this is great, this is almost the *purpose clause* of why this happened, “so as to make Israel *jealous*” [v. 11].... Meaning, God is saying that his *plan*, right, was so much about grace and my sovereign choice and election, “my *plan* entails this to happen for you,” that they would reject *Yeshua*. The *plan*, then, is now that the gospel goes to you and you can be saved, Gentiles.... You now have a responsibility, turn it around and bring the gospel back to the people it was supposed to come to.... Your job, it’s not to hit them over the head, but to live a life to return the gospel to them in a way that they are gonna be *jealous*.... If the Jewish people trespass, their rejection of *Yeshua* means the riches came to the whole world, and if their failure to accept *Yeshua* means that the Gentiles get all these riches of salvation, “how much more will their full inclusion mean!” [v. 12]

Everything you know now is good, imagine even better when they accept *Yeshua*!... So, “*How much more*,” I think he uses the term in the sense of, “Wow, it’s gonna be even better.” ... Verse 15 is my favorite verse in the whole chapter. “For if their rejection,” right ... if their [the Jewish people’s] rejection of *Yeshua* means that the world can be reconciled to God, “the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be”? What will the Jewish people, their acceptance of *Yeshua* mean “but

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 187; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 122, 155–56, 159; Thiessen, *Paul*, esp. 44–46; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 217; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 121; Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 553–54; Nanos, *Mystery*, 83; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 18–19, 87; Ehrensperger, “Die ‘Paul within Judaism’-Perspektive,” 459–61; Campbell, *The Nations*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 121; Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 253–54; Elliott, “Question of Politics,” 223.

life from the dead”? [v. 15].... I mean, this is what I’ve devoted my life to, this to happen, that’s my life right there. Romans 11:15. When my people accept *Yeshua*, there will be life from the dead, not spiritual life from the dead, but physical life from the dead.... How God lays out his *plan* for humanity, the connection between *Yeshua* coming back and the Jewish people accepting him as Messiah are connected events, and *Yeshua*’s return is also a connected event with life from the dead, actual resurrection. So I think these three things are intertwined, so you can’t separate them.... If you can tap into how important this is to God’s heart, and how much blessing the world will receive, [it is] greater than anything!<sup>13</sup>

There are three themes of special interest in Dov’s elaboration: *God’s plan*, *Yeshua*, and *jealousy-making*. First, God’s plan, in Dov’s reading, is not only a recurrent theme, but a reading strategy to make sense of Paul’s words. God has everything under control: what seems a terrible situation with Israel hardened—or “trespassing”—will culminate in a “how much more” (v. 12) when one day they are saved, while, between these two points in time, the non-Jews, because of Israel’s stumbling, have been included in the redemption. The non-Jews also have an important role—“*so as to*” (purpose clause, v. 11)—in bringing the Jewish people back. In other words, both PWJ scholars and the Messianic Jewish readers understand Rom 11 as portraying a pendulum swinging from the Jews to the non-Jews to the Jews. In the unraveling of God’s plan, described as a *process*,<sup>14</sup> the fate of the two is dependent on each other. Dov and his fellow readers thus understand these Pauline verses as telling the “big story” about the restoration of the world. The most prominent and important reception is that both the Messianic Jewish readers and PWJ scholars perceive this text as ultimately portraying the interrelationship between Israel and the Nations, the two groups that together make up “humanity.”<sup>15</sup>

The scripturalists reason that “God loves the stumbling of Israel”<sup>16</sup> as it is for a better cause, and “the rejection is neither complete nor final.”<sup>17</sup> Dov, alongside within-scholars like Paula Fredriksen, recurrently refers to God’s plan as a way to legitimize why most Jews do not believe in Jesus at this time. Generally, the Messianic Jewish readers have a stronger focus on Gentile salvation, whereas the

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<sup>13</sup> “Dov.” My emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> “Avraham.” Cf. “If the fall of Israel has been riches for the world, what is the riches for the world? The salvation of the Gentiles, salvation is coming to the Gentiles, and their [the Jews] failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their [the Jews] fullness mean?” “Ze’ev.”; cf. “Michael and Asher.” For PWJ scholars, see e.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 161; Nanos, “Introduction,” 26.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 8–31.

<sup>16</sup> “Andrei.”

<sup>17</sup> “Michael and Asher.” The strong denial of any sort of reading supporting replacement thinking has been discussed earlier (Chapter Four).

PWJ scholars are keener on stressing that Israel is only *partially* hardened.<sup>18</sup> They both, however, consider this status *temporary* and a tool for bringing forth the salvation of Gentiles (see more in Chapter Six).

Yet, just as Messianic Jewish readers and PWJ scholars agree about the co-dependence between Israel and the Nations, they both have a special focus on the coming future for Israel (v. 15). Jacob, representing several readers, argues that “the leading theme, I would clearly say, is God’s covenantal dealing with Israel,”<sup>19</sup> meaning that he considers the Jewish people to be the ultimate focus in Paul’s writings. This idea that Israel was always before Paul’s eyes, even in his mission to the Nations, is also present in PWJ scholarly thinking: for example, where Neil Elliott argues “the nations are not ‘primary,’ *even in his work with them in the present*: rather, the salvation of ‘all Israel’ [v. 26] is his paramount priority,”<sup>20</sup> as is God’s plan. Taking a step back, it is worth noting that none of the participants reflect upon Paul’s “logic”: why, in fact, would some need to be removed to give place to others? Instead, in line with their literal ideology of the Bible, they just accept this as describing what is happening. Furthermore, reading this within the framework of “the big story” over the long-term functions as a textual practice to “avoid,” and find a scriptural means of escape from a supersessionist reading.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the Messianic Jewish readings, both in these verses and others, differ from the PWJ perspective in one important matter: Jesus. In the quote above, Dov repeatedly intersects Paul’s writing by adding “Yeshua” as the way to explain it. The plan that Paul portrays is depicted as God’s; rejecting and accepting Jesus both for Israel and the non-Jews is what assists its unfolding. Paul, in the participants’ view, speaks about salvation made possible through faith in Jesus. In other words, Dov and his fellow readers distinctly display a Yeshualogy hermeneutic (see Chapter Three, and how this plays out in readings discussed in Chapter Four), which guides their reading. In the scholarly readings, however, the focus is rather on *God* than Jesus (see Chapter One). In several studies, Jesus is not a hermeneutical key; rather, he plays a hidden role in making sense of what Paul writes, although Jesus in some cases, such as in Thiessen’s study, is the explanation for why the Jews first stumbled, and also the reason for “acceptance” (v. 15).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 103; Nanos, ““Broken Branches,”” 114–20, 135; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 150.

<sup>19</sup> “Jacob.”; see also “Ze’ev.”; “Yoel.” Cf. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Elliott, “Question of Politics,” 223. Emphasis original. Cf. Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 236.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Kinzer, from a Messianic Jewish theological perspective, notices that Paul does not address the question of why God’s plan looks the way it does, as it necessitates a hardening of Israel, but accepts the status quo. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> Thiessen, *Paul*, 45, 119; see also Nanos, ““Broken Branches,”” 114–20.

Third, the topics of jealousy and the “current” task of the non-Jews to make Israel jealous are themes that appear frequently in the interviews. Yitshak, also cited above, excitedly says that provoking the Jews to jealousy is “the very heart of God,”<sup>23</sup> a claim that clearly highlights the importance of this idea. While the scripturalists apply it to contemporary times, in the PWJ reception it functions more theoretically to link the salvation of the non-Jews to the Jews coming back to the God of Israel.

Salvation of the Gentiles, Dov explains, is equated with “riches” (v. 12) and “reconciliation of the world” (v. 15). Being the charismatic that he is, Dov adds that these riches are the fruits and the gifts of the Spirit. His focus, though, is not on what this means, but on its consequences: Jesus-believing non-Jews are ordered to live a God-infused life led by the Spirit *so that* Israel will become jealous. The Messianic Jewish readers thus make the text relevant by offering elaborate missiological connections to today’s realities. Jews will also want to live such a good life and, therefore, the participants reason, will turn to Jesus. In the interview with Yoel, I asked what this implies practically. “You can be a missionary, you could move to Israel and plant a congregation, you can serve one of the Messianic bodies here in Israel, you can sow money to the congregations here in Israel, you could plant a prayer house and pray for Israel.”<sup>24</sup> This non-Jewish (Christian) support, he contends, would help Jewish believers to be more fervent in their activities, adding that the Gentiles’ calling is “now to love the Jewish people and to show them the God that they rejected.”<sup>25</sup> Christians who support Israel, both as a people and as a land, would give rise to curiosity and thereafter provoke the Jews to jealousy. How these actions would lead Jews to Jesus, however, remains rather opaque; while Yoel thinks it would arouse jealousy and curiosity among the Jews, the more natural reaction—as history also witnesses—would instead be disgust and anger among the majority. The mission would then be incomplete.

Simultaneously—and perhaps in contradiction to what Paul implies—as a Jesus-believing Jew, Dov inscribes himself into this text of making Israel jealous (see also Chapter Four). With his acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, he reasons, Israel can now see the first signs of “life from the dead” (v. 15). He clearly finds his life’s mission in this text: “This is what I’ve devoted my life to.” Making Israel jealous here becomes a means to help in God’s plan to bring Jews to faith in Jesus. This is his identity and his calling (outreach work is more discussed in Chapter Six).

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<sup>23</sup> “Yitshak.”

<sup>24</sup> “Yoel.” A similar idea of bringing the gospel “back” to the Jewish people and praying for them is expressed by Eli.

<sup>25</sup> “Yoel.” Cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 101–02, 119–20; in the latter reference one of her informants express some doubts about this practical form of jealousy-making.

To sum up this discussion, Paul’s exclamation “What will their [Israel’s] acceptance be but life from the dead!” (v. 15) is showed much affection by the scripturalists as it promises a glorious future for the Jewish people.<sup>26</sup> The Gentile situation is good, but something better is coming. “Everything you know now is good, imagine even better when they accept Yeshua!” Dov exclaims enthusiastically. “How much more will their full inclusion mean!” (v. 12).<sup>27</sup> The expression “how much more” has, for the scripturalists, futuristic connections of hope, of describing the taken-for-granted coming situation when the Jews will have accepted Jesus. Dov explains that “how much more” refers to “life from the dead” (v. 15) at the end times with the salvation of “all Israel” (v. 26; on further issues of time and eschatology see Chapter Six). It is, for now, enough to say that for Dov and his fellow Messianic Jewish readers, the return of Jesus is considered to be tightly interlinked with the fulfillment of God’s plan: the salvation of Israel.

## The Olive Tree Metaphor: United yet Distinct

When Avraham says, with deep sorrow, that the Church planted a Christmas tree instead of an olive tree, he is asserting that the Christian world has totally misunderstood what constitutes humanity. For him and the Messianic Jewish world, the olive tree metaphor offers the biblical (and thus “true”) understanding of relations in the world. God has created a world, a humanity, that consists of two parts—Jews and non-Jews. They are distinct, yet they form a unity in the Messiah.<sup>28</sup>

The olive tree metaphor is extremely important for Messianic Jewish identity and for constructing their relationships to others. The empirical-religious readers spend considerable time discussing this part of Rom 11 with me in the interviews to make sure that I understand the metaphor “correctly,” thus confirming the idea in reception theory that what is important is assigned considerable time. As the metaphor is regarded as displaying their worldview, the text has featured in ethnographic studies on Messianic Jews arguing for an understanding of “unity without uniformity.”<sup>29</sup> Making a distinction between Jews and non-Jews is not only

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<sup>26</sup> E.g., “Andrei.”; cf. “Michael and Asher.”

<sup>27</sup> “Dov.” Aryeh also explicitly says that this section of Rom 11 described a situation changing from good (the inclusion of the non-Jews) to better (Israel as accepting God). Avraham offers a similar reading, asking rhetorically, “How much more, how much greater will it be when Israel accepts the Messiah?” “Aryeh.”; “Avraham.”; Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 135; cf. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 133–35.

<sup>28</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>29</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 186; cf. *xix*, 101–02; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 71–73.

a social and theological construction but also cosmological. This feature—a fundamental difference between Israel and the Nations laid down in creation by God himself, and with a specific purpose—is described as a “cosmological otherness” by historian Paul Boyer<sup>30</sup> and is particularly prevalent in evangelical apocalyptic thinking—and apparently also that of Messianic Jews. Yet, in the olive tree or in “the one new man,” a theological unity exists between the two groups of humanity. Similar to the Messianic Jewish readings, PWJ scholars highly value the metaphor, as the text supports one of their major assumptions about Paul’s worldview: that the ethnic differences between Jews and non-Jews remain when united in God’s family, in contrast to earlier strands of Pauline scholarship (see Chapter One).

The olive tree metaphor should be read as one piece in the puzzle of properly understanding the issue of unity and distinctiveness, or as Dov says, the “complementary relationship.”<sup>31</sup> However, due to the intense textual practice generated by the metaphor, the discussion is divided into sections. While not all readers are given voice here, they share the same basic understanding of the image, unless otherwise noted.

## The Root as Sanctifying

In his prelude to the metaphor, Paul states, “If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy” (v. 16). Readers identify the “part” and “first fruits” with the “remnant” (v. 5), and thus with the Messianic Jewish believers themselves, who hence perform a sanctifying function for the people of Israel.<sup>32</sup> Also a standard interpretation within premillennialist eschatology, the branches are in turn made holy through the root. Holiness, Ze’ev explains, has to do with being set apart, *separated*, by God.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 220.

<sup>31</sup> “Dov.”

<sup>32</sup> “Ze’ev.”; “Andrei.” The identification is also in use in the name of one international Messianic Jewish teaching ministry, *First Fruits of Zion*, however, they claim to have their name from two prophecies in Isaiah.

<sup>33</sup> “Ze’ev.”

For PWJ scholars, the “root” has several interpretations: it could refer to Jews<sup>34</sup> or the patriarchs<sup>35</sup> or simply not matter,<sup>36</sup> but none of the interpretations receive any particular focus. The understandings of the Messianic Jewish readers are similarly heterogeneous. About half suggest Jesus to be the “root,” whereas the other half propose the patriarchs and the promises given to them. One exception, Aryeh, suggests the Torah.<sup>37</sup> These various interpretations do not correlate with different strands of the Messianic Jewish movement; there are leaders on the evangelical-Jewish side of the spectrum in the “promise group,” and more traditional-Jewish ones within the Jesus-group. Addressing the issue, Ze’ev explains:

He’s [Paul’s] saying “root,” singular, but he doesn’t tell you what he means, so you’re left with the question: is the root Abraham, or is the root the fathers? I believe the root is Jesus. I believe the root is Jesus, yeah. The root is what gives the tree its nourishment, the root is what gives the tree its identity, ah [thinks]. And the root is the source of life from which the water comes into the tree. And the storage of life is in the root. Ah. And Jesus of course is called [that] in the book of Revelation: “the root and the offspring of David”<sup>38</sup> [Rev 5:5, 22:16]. He’s the root and the offspring of David.... Through him [Jesus] Israel can fulfill her calling and her destiny. It’s not just like he fulfills it and Israel is rejected and thrown away. He fulfills it so that in him, and through him, Israel can fulfill her calling as a nation through Messiah.<sup>39</sup>

Arguing that the “root” is Jesus, Ze’ev (and Jacob, using the same references) employs the textual practice of letting the Bible interpret the Bible (textuality): reading Jesus into textual gaps. This is similar to common textual practice in Protestant evangelical circles. “If it says the root is holy, then I find what is the root; Jesus says, ‘I am the root.’”<sup>40</sup> Reading other passages in the Bible where Jesus identifies himself with the root are understood to describe reality. The readers perform a creative reading by comparing Jesus to the characteristics of a physical root, the root being both the life-giver and identity-maker of the tree. In light of his

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<sup>34</sup> Ehrensperger, *Mutually Encouraged*, 151.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 142–43. She does not, however, state this explicitly but argues that the olive tree needs to be understood through a perspective of heritage and lineage.

<sup>36</sup> Nanos, ““Broken Branches,”” 133–34.

<sup>37</sup> “Aryeh.”

<sup>38</sup> “Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’” (Rev 5:5 NRSV) “‘It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.’” (Rev 22:16 NRSV)

<sup>39</sup> “Ze’ev.”

<sup>40</sup> “Jacob.” It should perhaps be noted that the tree metaphor exists not only Rev, but also in the Hebrew Bible and in the Gospels (e.g., Joh 15). Given their biblical ideology, they most probably are familiar with these references as well, but in this case, Rev alone served its purpose.

continued explanation of the connection between the Messiah and Israel, Ze'ev implies that Jesus gives life to those of Israel and the Gentiles who belong to the tree. Whomsoever belongs to the tree, to Jesus, is made holy through the holiness of the root. In the root, the people of Israel reach their fulfilled identity, as Avraham reasons, "He [Jesus] is the final identity of [the people of] Israel. It's messianic."<sup>41</sup>

Identifying Jesus as the "root" naturally yields a "Jesus tree," whereas if the patriarchs and the promises are the root, the result is an "Israel tree." Readers who make the latter interpretation, give more sweeping illustrations. Eli reasons, "So the root is, I think it has to do with God's faithfulness, and God's promises [to the patriarchs], and God's faithfulness to his promises and his covenant."<sup>42</sup> This group of readers concludes that the promises and faithfulness of God keep the Jewish people united and alive.

Simply put, a Jesus-understanding of the root naturally requires faith in Jesus to belong to the tree and thus have life, whereas the other reading emphasizes the Jewish people as such. Regardless of how the root is understood, the Messianic Jewish readers stress that those attached, or having been attached to the tree, have been made holy, in other words, separated. As the metaphor continues, this includes both the people of Israel and the Nations, which supports the idea of unity within distinctiveness among the branches.

## Jews: The Natural Branches Both of the Tree and Broken-Off

Using the textual support of the olive tree to argue that distinct ethnic identities remain in Christ, serves the participants in two ways; it *supports a post-supersessionist reading* of Paul, and it offers textual support for their *Jewish identity as Jesus-believers*. All the Messianic Jewish readers interpret the natural branches—whether part of the olive tree, broken off, or grafted in again (vv. 17, 20–21, 23–24), believing or un-believing—as a picture of the Jewish people. Similarly, PWJ scholars understand both sets of the natural branches to maintain their identity as Israel—indeed, this is a fundamental conviction within this perspective.<sup>43</sup> Avraham is the most articulate on this topic, summarizing the main ideas among the Messianic Jewish readers.

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<sup>41</sup> "Avraham."

<sup>42</sup> "Eli."; cf. Chayim who stated "the root is basically, I do believe, the faith of Abraham, or the promises God gave to Abraham which relate to the promised seed [Jesus]." "Chayim."

<sup>43</sup> E.g., Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 254. For further references, see earlier discussion (Chapter One) and below.

*Avraham:* So “if the root is holy, then the branches are also holy” [v. 16], *the true branches*. They are holy, because they are getting their life through the root. And “if some of the branches were broken off” [v. 17], speaking about the unbelief of Israel, they were broken off because they’re no longer part of this messianic tree.... *God broke off the natural branches, which is Israel, that did not believe in the Messiah.*

*Me:* But you just said that Paul is very keen on saying that God has not cast away his people?

*Avraham:* He’s saying it’s a *temporary* situation. He’s not saying this is a permanent thing. “What will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” [v. 15] So he’s already from the very beginning always pointing to *when Israel [as a people] comes to faith*. He’s pointing to the situation that existed in his time and still exists. But [he’s] also *pointing to the prophetic time when Israel as a nation will receive the Messiah*. So he’s *not only just pointing out the negative, he’s always referring back to the positive.*

*Me:* Would you say that the broken off branches are still Israel or not?

*Avraham:* Yeah. Well... The ones who do not yet believe? *They’re Israel, but they are not redeemed yet. But they are Israel, yeah. Salvation will come to them. It’s in process now....* The only way Israel’s [non-believing Jews are] going to experience the goodness and the grace and mercy of God is if they don’t continue in their unbelief. Then the broken branches that are lying on the ground, God will pick them up and graft them in again so they become part of the tree [cf. v. 23].... Paul is saying God is more than able to take the natural branches and graft them back into their own olive tree. We [as the people of Israel] belong in the *messianic olive tree* [cf. v. 24]. We [as the non-believing Jewish people] have been *broken off because we rejected the Messiah*, but it’s still our olive tree.<sup>44</sup>

Reading the olive tree metaphor, the Messianic Jewish readers are, again, utilizing the hermeneutics of post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy, negotiated dialectically, at the same time upholding their literalist biblical ideology that every word is “God’s living Word.” As Paul seemingly repeats himself through the letter with different words and perspectives, it is not surprising that the participants do the same. Only a minority of the participants address the—for them—sensitive theme of being “broken off” and its associations with rejection and replacement, while for Avraham and his fellow readers, Paul’s use of “(un)belief,” “faith,” and related terms are always interpreted as referring to Jesus. As the negotiations of (post-)supersessionism were discussed in depth in last chapter (see Chapter Four), below I offer a shorter analysis of how the same theme is conveyed in the readings of olive tree metaphor (see also the above section on God’s plan).

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<sup>44</sup> “Avraham.” My emphasis.

A hermeneutic of Yeshualogy is displayed when the metaphor is described as a “messianic olive tree.”<sup>45</sup> Avraham speaks about faith in Jesus as a prerequisite for Jews being in the tree, an understanding shared by all participants (except Aryeh, see Chapter Four). Messianic Jews are “the true branches,” Avraham says, making an applicatory reading to himself. Consequently, those Jews who do not believe in Jesus are broken off, an effect the participants needed to acknowledge, given their biblical ideology, but tried to avoid. It should here be noted that Jesus *ultimately* seems to be the arbiter in their reading practices (as in Chapter Four). This strong focus on Jesus is, naturally, not surprising among Jesus-believing Jews, but is moderately dissimilar to the focus on God in the PWJ perspective; thus, there is instead an overlap with the other Pauline perspectives.

Nonetheless, and simultaneously, the Messianic Jewish readers strongly promote a post-supersessionist textual practice, as do the PWJ scholars. While taken for granted and fundamental, it is a hermeneutic much negotiated and sometimes problematic to uphold theologically. As I have argued, post-supersessionism is ideologically and rhetorically fundamental for Messianic Jewish identity, yet constitutes a theological problem in relation to their Yeshualogy (see Chapter Four). Yet the olive tree metaphor contains several scriptural arguments—the only valid evidence the participants, due to their biblical ideology—for promoting a post-supersessionist reading when forced to address Paul’s statement about branches being broken off. On a rhetorical note, Avraham explains the metaphor in collective, plural terms; he deploys a language of “we,” “branches,” “Israel as a nation,” and so forth. Chayim explicitly states that the metaphor is “about groups, not individuals.”<sup>46</sup> This focus on the collective rather than on the individual is similar to that found in the PWJ perspective. While many try to avoid the question of the broken-off branches, perceived as threatening, Avraham argues in the excerpt above that, just like Paul, one must look not only on the negative, but “always refer[ring] back to the positive.”

During the interview with Avraham, therefore, I press him a little on the topic of the broken off branches, trying to identify and explore tensions in the reasoning. And he struggles; there is a lot of “both-and” thinking in his reasoning: branches “are getting their life through the root,” basically making him say that broken off branches are not alive. The consequence of that is not theologically explored further by anyone. However, the broken off branches are still identified as Israel, although Avraham seems a bit insecure about this and hastily adds, “but they are not redeemed yet.” The Messianic Jewish readers become very uneasy when asked what “broken off” actually means in terms of covenantal status and avoid answering, apart from Michael and Asher who quickly explicate that broken off has to do with

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<sup>45</sup> With a slightly different emphasis, Jacob described it as a “Jewish family tree.” “Jacob.”

<sup>46</sup> “Chayim.”

“becoming broken off of the covenant”<sup>47</sup>—echoing classic replacement theology, and thus not a reading from PWJ. Ultimately, while the participants “cannot” say that unbelieving Jews are rejected, they are not Israel in the “redeemed” sense of being saved through their faith in Jesus.

Here, Avraham, and others with him, also try to “solve” the dilemma—viewing it positively—by using a rhetoric of time, using the perspectives of “now and later” as an interpretative key for God’s unfolding plan. A similar textual practice aimed at resolving tensions is found in dispensationalist hermeneutics, where the apocalyptic scenarios solve problems in the “now time” caused by a literalist hermeneutics. As Avraham reasons, “He’s [Paul is] saying it’s a *temporary* situation.” God will “graft them back into their own olive tree.” This, they think, will occur smoothly, as their “DNA fits the tree.”<sup>48</sup> No one, however, mentions that, in the light of history, Jews are usually more skeptical towards “Jesus talk” than unbelieving Gentiles. The metaphor is viewed as being in a “process” of becoming more and more fully restored—“salvation will come to them.” The participants find a scriptural means of escape here in Paul’s own words about branches being grafted in again (vv. 23–24). The emphasis is on this future act; redemption will come as those cut off come to faith in Jesus. But does not a temporal situation also suggest a temporal state of being set aside in their thinking? The participants do not show any open reflexivity over this, although the topic obviously makes several uncomfortable, while others seem unconscious of the theological problem posed. No one dares to discuss the status of the currently broken off branches, apart from the emphasis on their still being Israel. In sum, it seems that Rom 11 provides the Messianic Jews with ideological and rhetorical arguments for their post-supersessionist hermeneutic, yet from a theological perspective the dilemma is not solved. For them, it will eventually be solved through Jesus. Furthermore, Yeshualogy plays out more strongly in speech about the individual (Jew), while post-supersessionism is more apparent in discourses about the collective (the Jewish people).

As discussed above, the PWJ perspective is caught in the same dilemma of upholding the proposition that broken off branches are not rejected and cast off, but divinely ordained. Within-scholars utilize the same strategy of stressing the *temporal* situation, and the *partial* aspect; “some,” (v. 17), not all, of the branches are broken off.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Mark D. Nanos has contributed significantly by proposing a post-supersessionist translation of the Greek text where phrases such as

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<sup>47</sup> “Michael and Asher.”

<sup>48</sup> “Dov.”

<sup>49</sup> E.g., Thiessen, *Paul*, 119; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 182–84.

“broken off” instead are translated as merely “broken” or “bent,”<sup>50</sup> rhetorically framing the discussion more in terms of the national, coming redemption of Israel.

## Non-Jews: The Wild, Grafted-In Branches

Besides the natural branches, Paul also speaks about wild olive branches grafted into the tree because of faith and supported by the root, meanwhile warning against boasting and pride (vv. 17–22, 24). Both communities of readers, unsurprisingly, explain the wild branches as non-Jews that believe in Jesus. Eli, for example, comments, “You as Gentiles, you’re the wild olive.”<sup>51</sup> As is also the case among PWJ scholars, the Messianic Jewish readers spend considerably more time discussing those branches grafted in than those broken off. Of particular interest is the question of what has become of those grafted in, in relation to the natural branches. Whereas Jesus again plays a fundamental role in how Messianic Jews read this text (“faith in Jesus”), for PWJ scholars, Jesus together with the Spirit constitute more of a medium through which non-Jews can become part of the olive tree.<sup>52</sup> Both the scholarly and the empirical-religious readers’ understanding of Paul leads them to consider, however, that the whole metaphor speaks of God having control over unfolding his plan for the world.

As an expression of the social life of Scripture, a “grafting-in theology” has developed in both Messianic Jewish and evangelical circles worldwide, and especially in Israel. Usually integrated into Christian Zionist education, it serves to acknowledge the Jewish roots of Christianity,<sup>53</sup> and denotes a theological stance that focuses on the Jewishness of Messianic faith; as a result, the adherents express a strong rejection of replacement theology. Adherents are typically Christian Zionists who “love Israel”—both the people and the land—at least in their own rhetoric. One practical expression of this theology is the so-called “grafted in” necklace, also known as the “Messianic Seal,” popular among evangelicals and Messianic Jews. It combines the symbols of the ancient Christian *ichthys* fish with a Jewish *menorah* that together form a Star of David, and is commonly found in pilgrimage shops in

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<sup>50</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 277; Nanos, “Translation of Romans 11,” 206–08; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 151, 178–79.

<sup>51</sup> “Eli.”; cf. Johnson Hodge, “Question of Identity,” 169–73; Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 187–88; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 151.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 139; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 148, 150–51; cf. Nanos, ““Broken Branches,”” 137.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 173–74; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 95, 113. Several programs could be mentioned here, but the important issue is to note the frequent reception of the olive tree metaphor in use among some Christians.

Jerusalem.<sup>54</sup> The design expresses unity within diversity as well as the Jewishness of faith in Jesus.

As the thinking behind “grafting in” is of the utmost importance in understanding how the Messianic Jewish readers negotiate relations with non-Jewish Jesus-believers, three readers are given voice. Representing different strands within the Messianic Jewish world, they conceptualize the “grafting in” as follows:

*Ze’ev*: And you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in *among* them, and have become a *partaker* of the root [cf. v. 17].... They’ve [the Gentiles have] been grafted *into* this holy remnant of Israel and *they’ve been brought into this messianic identity of Israel*. This is very important, and they become *partakers* of the riches and the life that comes through this tree. This tree is, of course, you can say a *family tree*. It’s like a *genealogical tree*. *With them*, with them, this is very important, *not in place of them*, even though some would say they were broken off and now we’re in the place where they would have been. You’ve been brought into their [Israel’s] tree, it’s their tree, and you are *partakers* of the root with them [cf. v. 17], which is the life of God, the *riches* of God that comes through, it’s the *inheritance*.... So an important point here, of course, is that you are *not independent*, you are not off to yourself,... the root supports you [cf. v. 18].<sup>55</sup>

*Chayim*: So, to bring you *into the family*—someone you don’t know, who doesn’t know how to eat at the table, doesn’t know any manners, who makes his poop in the living room next to everyone—it’s not wise. I [as in God] really need to love you, extra love, in order to do that. In other words, you cost me more than what I can gain from you.... I allowed you to *participate* in the root [cf. v. 18], in the bone marrow. In other words, I *added you into the DNA of the blessing*. You became a part that is impossible to take away anymore, the moment you entered into it. It’s like for me to adopt another child and to add him into the *inheritance*. It’s like an *adoption*.<sup>56</sup>

*Asher*: [The Gentiles are] being grafted *into the promises* that God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on some level.... In God’s economy, there’s the *kehila* [community] of Israel; there’s not a new institutional church. The Gentiles [who] were once foreigners to the *covenant of promise*, distant, those type of things, have now been *made part of an extension of Israel*. So I think that’s what it means to be grafted in. I don’t believe it means that Gentiles have been grafted into Israel, and now become Jews or have to act like Jews or be like Jews. [Rather,] I believe they are *participants with Israel* in God’s messianic plan for the kingdom.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Jackie Feldman, *A Jewish Guide in the Holy Land: How Christian Pilgrims Made Me Israeli* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 94.

<sup>55</sup> “Ze’ev.” My emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> “Chayim.” My emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> “Michael and Asher.” My emphasis.

Although Ze'ev, Chayim, and Asher use different rhetoric to express their ideas of what grafted in means, the theological interpretations are alike. The same holds true for PWJ scholars; perhaps nowhere else are the overlaps stronger than here. Both the participants and PWJ scholars consider Jesus-believing non-Jews as being brought *into* Israel. This forms a stark contrast to readings from Paul outside Judaism (POJ) and PAJ perspectives (see Chapter One), which assert that Jews are brought *out of* Israel into the Church. It is, for both reading communities, an important distinction of *who* moves in *what* direction. For those in this study, non-Jews are the ones who change location, as expressed by rhetoric such as “into,” visible in every quote above, which resembles the “in-language” preferred by PWJ scholars.<sup>58</sup>

The Messianic Jewish readers use a range of expressions for what happens with grafted-in non-Jews, such as *partakers*, *participation with*, and *adoption*. To this terminology, present also in the PWJ perspective, Fredriksen adds the parallel expression of “joining with” (see more in Chapter One). What do these expressions imply? Fredriksen here makes a distinction with which, I think, the Messianic Jewish readers (especially Asher above) would also agree: that to “join with” differs from the term “join,” which is avoided. Non-Jews are included in God’s plan for Israel, but they are included as non-Jews to maintain a separateness between the two. They are neither converting nor becoming Israel; instead, they are, she argues, *turning* towards Israel-the-people.<sup>59</sup> “Turning” terminology is not prominent among the Messianic Jewish readers; rather, they describe the inclusion as “becom[ing] part of Israel without being Jewish,”<sup>60</sup> or with Asher’s terminology from above, “an extension of Israel.” The expressions of partaking, participating with, and adoption further nurture this conviction. The participants deploy a textual practice of non-Jews as *sharers*, as Ze’ev says above, “of the riches and the life that comes through this tree.” Or, as Asher phrases it, they are included in the promises made to the patriarchs. Still, this distinction between the natural and the wild branches, between Jews and non-Jews, is constantly strongly upheld by the Messianic Jewish readers, as in PWJ scholarship. They are united yet distinct.

Despite the many expressions visible in the interviews to explain *that* the non-Jews are grafted in, the participants are more interested in stressing the separateness, rather than the *what* of which they actually partake. Ze’ev mentions “the life of

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 103–04, 145; Thiessen, *Paul*, 118–22. For further references, see earlier discussion (Chapter One).

<sup>59</sup> Both the rhetoric and the theological idea of the Nations *turning* to the God of Israel in the end times is a widely disseminated, biblical thought in Jewish apocalypticism. Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 75; cf. Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 188; Johnson Hodge, “Question of Identity,” 169; Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’s Advisors to King Izates,” 149.

<sup>60</sup> “Natan.”

God”; more precisely, it is, in fact, not clear to what the “inheritance” or the “riches” refer, although one could speculate. The patriarchs and the promises are continuously referenced, but without further explanation; however, if the promises mentioned are those given to Abram/Abraham (Gen 12), this would imply that non-Jews have also inherited the land of Israel. This idea is, however, strongly rebuked; the land—as well as the Torah for that matter—is part of the “cosmic otherness” separating and distinguishing Israel from the Nations (see more in Chapters Four and Six).

Non-Jews are adopted, especially in the rhetoric of Chayim, that is, they are added into the inheritance of the united family of God. Gentiles, not Jews, are the ones who have something *added* to their identity when joining the tree. A lineage language both stresses a relationship of not taking someone else’s place and a distinctiveness in relation to the other family members; both Jews and non-Jews are now receivers of the heritage as legitimate sons but ethnic differences also remain.<sup>61</sup> This is similar to what Ze’ev implies when he emphasizes that Gentiles-in-Israel are “not independent” but dependent. This framing of theirs is not surprising given their ideology of ensuring that I understand the theology that grafted-in non-Jews are *added* to Jews in God’s family, rather than *replacing* them.

Consequently, several readers within both communities offer the important rhetorical emphasis that Jesus-believing non-Jews are grafted in “among” the Jewish branches (v. 17).<sup>62</sup> While several versions, such as the NRSV, translate it as “in their place”—a reading that easily provokes interpretations of Gentiles replacing the Jews—translations such as the NKJV and NASB instead use “among,” which is better supported by the Greek text (*en autois*). Promoting a textual practice of “among,” this suggests a post-supersessionist understanding of the metaphor. Reading “among” supports their theology, a tree with distinct branches—“natural” and “unnatural”—sharing the riches of the root together. It might be worth pointing out that those who use a translation saying “in their place” do not react negatively to this, but rather avoid it.

Upholding the difference with yet another argument, the scripturalists repeatedly argue that those non-Jews grafted-in are so only because of their faith in Jesus and that this results in behavioral requirements. Yoel explains:

“Do not boast over the branches [natural, Jewish]” [v. 18]; and there is where replacement theology is destroyed. You should not boast over the Jews, because, remember, *you* were the tree that was wild, they [the Jews] were the chosen ones. We

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<sup>61</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 77, 103–04, 145; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 151; cf. the headline “Intermezzo: The Turning of the Nations” followed by discussions on “Lineage” and “Separation,” Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 145, 148, 151.

<sup>62</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 277; Nanos, ““Broken Branches”,” 133–34; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 179–80.

[the Jews] let you in to this tree. So do not be arrogant [cf. v. 20]. If you do, meaning, if you become arrogant, consider that you the Gentiles do not support the root, the Jewish people, or Yeshua, but the root supports you.... And you, stand by faith! Do not be arrogant, but be afraid, because if God did not spare the natural branches, the Jews, because of their unbelief, he won't spare you either [cf. vv. 20–22].<sup>63</sup>

Reading with a history of Christian boasting and anti-Judaism in the background, considerable emphasis is laid upon merely repeating Paul's words about not boasting and not being proud.<sup>64</sup> The empirical-religious readers, somewhat supported by the within-scholars,<sup>65</sup> discuss Paul's warnings to the non-Jewish branches of the tree in detail. "And they [the Gentiles] are receiving life from the Jews. You [Gentiles] have been grafted into them. That's why you are alive."<sup>66</sup> They are the ones dependent on the tree, not the other way around. As such, they are in a more vulnerable situation than Jesus-believing Jews. Hence, according to Yoel's view, quoted above, "replacement theology is destroyed." Dov suggests that the word translated as "support" (v. 18) could be better understood: "Do you know what a piggyback is? When you carry someone on your back. It's that. It's not like support, support is a lot softer a word. No, literally carrying you."<sup>67</sup> No one comments on whether this dependent status is congruent with being equal and not a "second class" member of the tree.

Instead, according to the scripturalists, non-Jews should be grateful for being loved so much so that they now, according to God's plan, participate with Israel. Given Paul's agricultural imagery, this should have been an impossibility and completely unwise: no one grafts a wild branch into a cultivated tree, it is done the other way around, which is a typical rabbinical hermeneutic of turning things upside-down. Thus, the grafting in supposedly displays the miraculous nature of God's act. Chayim also makes it clear that non-Jews should be grateful, not proud, in his odd image of a non-Jew as someone "who makes his poop in the living room." They really do not belong in the tree, Chayim explains, but are adopted into it by the grace of the God of Israel. The arrogance of the Nations, also the title of a monograph by Elliott, causes them to be cut off:<sup>68</sup> they "stand only through faith" (v. 20). The participants constantly repeat Paul's threats of being cut off as non-Jews (discussed further below). In sum, the Messianic Jewish readers find strong

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<sup>63</sup> "Yoel." Emphasis original.

<sup>64</sup> "Nahum."

<sup>65</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 142; Ehrensperger, "The Question(s) of Gender," 270–73.

<sup>66</sup> "Avraham."; cf. Ehrensperger, *Mutually Encouraged*, 151; Nanos, *Mystery*, 19; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 31–32, 180; Thiessen, *Paul*, 120.

<sup>67</sup> "Dov."; cf. "the Jews claim their link to Abraham by birth (and God's promises) and the gentiles by adoption (and God's promises)" in Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 146–47.

<sup>68</sup> Elliott, *Arrogance of the Nations*.

textual support, perhaps stronger than indicated in the above discussion, for a post-supersessionist understanding when focusing on non-Jews in relation to the olive tree metaphor. With this, the focus now switches from the parts of the olive tree to how its unity is negotiated.

## The One New Man, Husband and Wife: Unity and Distinctiveness

In the epigraph to this chapter, Avraham reflects upon what the olive tree metaphor with its different branches exposes. “Humanity is made up from a biblical perspective of the Jews and the Nations, those two parts.... It’s the wholeness of Christ if it’s Jew and Gentile and that is what the New Testament calls the ‘one new man.’”<sup>69</sup> In other words, for Avraham, the metaphor is an expression of a bipartite humanity united in Jesus. Similarly, Carol Harris-Shapiro has noted that Messianic Jews constantly negotiate their uniqueness and separation from Jesus-believing Gentiles, although united by their faith in Jesus. Her study from the United States, ethnographic in character and not especially theological—and less so, Bible-oriented—confirms the immense importance of this worldview among the adherents, as it also becomes one of her sociological findings.<sup>70</sup>

When the Messianic Jewish readers in Jerusalem try to make sense of the issue of *unity with distinctiveness*, they move from the picture of the olive tree into other metaphors such as that of “the one new man” and of husband and wife (discussed below). The symbols display a textual practice of intertextuality, of interpreting “Scripture through Scripture.” About half of the scripturalists brought up the symbol of marriage and almost as many, “the one new man,” which demonstrates their importance among the empirical-religious readers in this study. While used as synonymous, they are unpacked separately for clarity, preceded by theoretical discussion of the meaning-making potential of symbols, per se, and followed by examination of an internal, practical critique of one of them.

Taking a step back, the many metaphors applied by the participants—olive tree, “one new man,” husband and wife—make it reasonable to argue that what they seek to express is of utmost importance to them. Although metaphor theory has traditionally been used in biblical studies,<sup>71</sup> here I turn to anthropological theory to highlight the social situatedness of the readers, and approach the metaphors as *symbols*. From this perspective, they aim to express the inexpressible, so what do the symbols mean for the Messianic Jewish readers? Although meaning, as such, is

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<sup>69</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>70</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 71–72.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 198–204.

a contentious concept, it has pushed the anthropology of Christianity forward in a Geertzian spirit.<sup>72</sup> Along these lines, the expressions used can be viewed as meaning-carrying symbols through which people—in this case the scripturalists—orient and construct their understanding of the world around them. As such, they serve to offer legitimate explanations and resources for solving perceived problems. Adjusting Clifford Geertz’s rather timeless approach to meaning, Talal Asad has argued, rightly in my opinion, for the need to take social and historical processes into account in order to understand the meaning attributed to symbols; this posits the effects of power and authority as explanatory factors in what the symbols mean and why they are applied.<sup>73</sup>

The meaning with which symbols are charged is believed to tell the truth about something. Messianic Jews, as argued throughout this study, constantly struggle to formulate an identity felt to be “authentic.” In his anthropological study of Messianic Jews in the southern states of North America, John Dulin sets forth what he calls the “evaluative grammar of authenticity,”<sup>74</sup> which is simply a model for determining whether a claim can be justified as “authentic.” For something to be claimed as authentic by the religious, he argues, a symbol—in this case, three different symbols—needs to be connected to some form of divine agency or intentionality. One example of divine intentionality (referred to by Dulin as “indexical underpinnings”) can be Bible reading, especially in settings where the biblical ideology is that of “God’s living Word” and is, as such, felt to be “literally true.” This is an ideology shared by the Messianic Jewish readers in this study. The fact that the symbols in this case are themselves biblical loads them with even greater perceived authenticity and thus they serve as what Dulin calls “models of reality.”<sup>75</sup> The different symbols at play in the interviews—the olive tree from Rom 11 and the two other New Testament images of the “one new man” and the husband-and-wife analogy—are all “models of reality.” They should therefore be viewed as emic descriptions of reality, as explaining how the Messianic Jews view the relationship between Jew and non-Jew in the world.

The emphasis on distinctiveness, regardless of rhetoric used, needs historical and social contextualization to explain the inherent powerplay. The Messianic Jewish

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<sup>72</sup> Geertz argued that cultures (in a wide sense thus also including religions) are best understood as “semiotic systems” of symbols with meaning-making potential around which humans organize their lives in the world. According to him, the core of religions or religious convictions is their potential to offer meaningful answers to seemingly meaningless situations and experiences. Approaching religions as offering meaning has, since then, been the guiding force in anthropological studies inspired by Geertz. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>73</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> Dulin, “Messianic Judaism,” esp. 36–38.

<sup>75</sup> Dulin, “Messianic Judaism,” 35.

readers encounter Rom 11 in a situation where the history of Christianity more broadly, as well as earlier approaches in Pauline scholarship, have proclaimed all Jesus-believers to constitute a group of humanity denoted “Christians.” Jewish identity has been constructed as something from which Jewish Jesus-believers are “delivered.”<sup>76</sup> The history of forced conversions, extremely sensitive for Messianic Jews, adds to this background.<sup>77</sup> This, however, is almost ironic as they are not shy about evangelizing other Jews to become Jesus-followers. Their textual practice, therefore, mobilizes symbols to work as authoritative biblical arguments for retaining their Jewish identity. This rhetoric of distinctiveness is used in interpreting the symbols so as to support a Messianic Jewish identity and “ecclesiology.”<sup>78</sup> In contrast, a corrupt Hellenized Christianity that emphasizes the universal unity of *all* believers as Christian—as being the same and something beyond Jewish and non-Jewish identities—is attacked through these symbols. Why? To legitimize a unique and “authentic” Jewish identity among the Messianic Jews.

The symbol of the “one new man,” comes from Ephesians. While most, if not all, Messianic Jews claim Paul to be the author of the letter, most Pauline scholars do not. Speaking of the effects of Jesus’s crucifixion, the author argues:

For he [Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh *he has made both groups into one* ... [so] that he might create in himself *one new humanity* in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross. (Eph 2:14–16 NRSV. My emphasis.)

The two groups are the Jews and non-Jews. What the NRSV translates as “one new humanity” is translated as “one new man” (*eis hena kainon anthrōpon*) in versions such as NASB and NKJV. The symbol, as such, has been integrated into the religious language of Messianic Jews in the last decade or so, but without a precise definition, which is not surprising as symbols are not static entities but rather in a continual process of being (re)negotiated, and thus flexible in use.<sup>79</sup> Yoel goes into preaching mode, his fervor clearly showing that he is speaking about, for him, a very important expression:

We’re gonna be talking about Jew and Gentile *working together*; “one new man,” what it is, and why do we need it?... I wanna introduce you to the idea of a *calling of distinctive value*. Distinctive value. Distinctive value means this: you can have two people with different gifts, equally important.... What does the new branch look like?

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<sup>76</sup> E.g., von Harnack, “What is Christianity?,” 175.

<sup>77</sup> E.g., Marina Caffiero, *Forced Baptisms: Histories of Jews, Christians, and Converts in Papal Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>78</sup> As they avoid terminology such as “church,” “ecclesiology” is only used in the absence of something better.

<sup>79</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, cf. 23–24.

Does it ever start to look like the old branches? The truth is in cultivation of the olive branches, the new branch will always keep its own look. The leaf does not change shape, it does not change color, the bark does not change color, *it stays its own style. Although it is now living off its new olive tree. Are we on [an] equal plane? Equal plane of value? Yes! We are valued the same. But we are distinct in the way we live, and in what we are called to do.*<sup>80</sup>

Yoel is one of the Messianic Jewish readers who addresses all three symbols most compellingly, one image after the other as he tries to make his point clear. All the symbols, as Avraham states above, are ostensibly ontological and theological models of humanity and how humanity is constituted by Jews and non-Jews. The symbols are all interpreted as speaking of the same construction: one humanity in two shapes, united yet distinct in the sense of “cosmic otherness,” transcending culture and sociology; there is a divinely ordained ontological separateness between the two. A tree with an orange branch produces oranges, whereas a lemon branch grafted into the same tree continues to produce lemons while sharing the same root.<sup>81</sup> The “one new man” symbol, for Yoel and his fellow readers, represents intra-ecclesial matters; it is *one* as in one community of Jesus-believers, it is *new* because non-Jews were made part of this through Jesus. Whereas the unity and, as Yoel emphasizes, the value is the same, there is also what he refers to as “distinctive value”; namely, the idea of Jews and non-Jews also inhabiting different ways of life and calling. While the expression “one new man” seems to signal a greater focus on unity, those participants who speak of it stress the intact separateness of the elements as least as much.<sup>82</sup>

Yet, to make this discussion more complex, those scripturalists who employ this symbol belong in the evangelical-Jewish, or the middle, of the spectrum of categorizing Messianic Jews; none leaning towards the traditional-Jewish end do so. Those closer to the Christian evangelical camp than the mainstream Jewish, are keener to stress unity among *all* Jesus-believers than distinctiveness. This, at least, is the argument made by Gabriela Karabelnik Reason in her study on the theology of UMJC (more traditional-Jewish) and MJAA (more evangelical-Jewish), the major Messianic Jewish organizations (see Chapter Two). This seems partly to hold in the Israeli setting as well.<sup>83</sup>

The symbol of the one new man is widespread in at least some Messianic Jewish circles. One approach to the theology contained in the image is visible in the recently published book *One New Man: Reconciling Jew and Gentile in One Body of Christ*

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<sup>80</sup> “Yoel.” My emphasis.

<sup>81</sup> “Aryeh.” Agriculturally speaking, this is actually possible.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 165–71. Here, Kinzer mostly stresses the remained distinctions and compares the Jew-Gentile partition with the husband-wife distinction.

<sup>83</sup> “Competing Trends,” Reason.

(2019), written by Ariel Blumenthal, a Messianic Jewish leader in Jerusalem.<sup>84</sup> The front page illustratively pictures the back of a Jewish man clothed in a *tallit* and *kippah* with a Star of David embracing another man of Asian descent clearly representing the Gentile Christian—illustrating a “distinctive value” while united. Another practical yet different case, revealing the flexibility of the symbol, is that the expression “one new man” is also used by the Israeli informants in Keri Zelson Warshawsky’s study of Messianic Jews, here as an ideal of a Jesus-believing community that is neither too Jewish, nor too Christian, but in the middle, where both groups feel at home.<sup>85</sup>

Putting the understanding of the “one new man” into conversation with PWJ scholar Kathy Ehrensperger, an interesting dichotomy appears. Writing about the expression in the context of gender—also useful here—and the problem of universalization, she rather understands the implications of “one” and “new” as promoting an erasure of the particular identities of Jew and non-Jew, man and female. In other words, the non-Pauline expression, in her understanding, does not suggest a unity with two parts, but a unity where the (earlier) distinctions are transformed into a new oneness.<sup>86</sup>

The unity envisioned by the participants is felt to transcend this world. In the interviews it is assigned a triple meaning, referring to the unity of the whole of humanity, of the people of Israel and the in-grafted non-Jews, and all Jesus-believers. Most readers, however, understand this imagined unity as one embracing all believers in Jesus, and as forming one body of Christ—which is also the most common interpretation in Christianity historically. The unity is divinely ordained and part of the plan to redeem the whole world. In this context, Dov offers the remark that “the strong separation between Jews and Gentiles” that the world supposedly witnesses is a work by the devil who causes the separation so as to prevent Jesus’s return; in this take, the perceived importance of the two “flowing together” again are displayed as part of God’s plan (see above).<sup>87</sup> In the unity, there is “fullness, the two are supposed to flow together,” expressed by the two groups having an interrelationship; the wholeness, or the unity, has to do with “the two working together.”<sup>88</sup> As this is further explained by Dov, “You’re supposed to take

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<sup>84</sup> I contacted the author and asked for an interview, but he declined with a reference to his newly published book which, he said, gave the best explanation of how he understood Rom 11 and the olive tree metaphor. Ariel Laurence Blumenthal, *One New Man: Reconciling Jew & Gentile in One Body of Christ* (Sisters: Deep River Books, 2019).

<sup>85</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 176.

<sup>86</sup> Ehrensperger, “The Question(s) of Gender,” 260–61; cf. Campbell suggest this verse to promote a oneness in Christ with remained distinctiveness between Jew and non-Jew; what is made new is, instead, an overcome hostility. Campbell, *The Nations*, 26.

<sup>87</sup> “Dov.”

<sup>88</sup> “Yoel.”

each of your giftings and bless each other. You need each other.... Make sure to retain this complementary relationship to bring about worldwide revival, life from the dead, these amazing things.”<sup>89</sup>

The symbol of husband and wife was also used to explain the relationship between Jew and non-Jew. Ze’ev reasons with serenity and almost tangible wisdom:

He [Paul] always connects the Gentiles to the Jews; I mean, that’s one of the things he does in this chapter [Rom 11]. He shows the *interrelationship*, because the whole concept of replacement theology is the same thing as you read about the fall of the devil; I mean, “I am and there is no other.” ... The Jew first and then to the Gentile [cf. v. Rom 1:16], which is important because it shows that though there is no difference. You know, the whole issue of “is there a difference between a Jew and Gentile?” In Christ, Paul says, there’s no Jew, no Gentile, no male, no female [cf. Gal 3:28<sup>90</sup>]. But then comes the question, well, what is he talking about? Well, he’s obviously talking about the fact that *before God, we’re all absolutely equal, no one is better*, no one has a greater salvation. We all have an equal salvation. *But a man is not a woman, and a woman is not a man, and in a marriage, you have two, you have the man; you have the woman....* And each one in Christ comes into his or her true identity, and so it is with the Jew and the Gentile; *there’s a fullness in the two coming together.*<sup>91</sup>

Also illuminating here is a further excerpt from the interview with Yoel:

*Husband and wife is a good example.... So Jew and Gentile is the same as a man and a woman. Distinctive value. They look unique, they live unique, they have different callings. But the team must work together. The marriage must work. The one new man has to be one flesh. Doesn’t even the Bible talk about a man and a woman coming together becoming one flesh? It’s the same imagery. Praise God! To God, me and my wife are of the same value. But I’m a man, she’s a woman. I’m the head of the household because that’s what God told me; she is the helpmate because that is what God told her. Being the head of the household is not more important than being the helpmate.... And now you have the two parts of the one new man, the two parts of the ingrafted olive tree.*<sup>92</sup>

Also having a strong biblical foundation (Eph 5:21–33), the husband-and-wife symbol has a similar function in the textual practice of the participants as the “one new man.” Marriage as a picture of unity, of a special unity, with husband/man standing in for Jew, and the wife/woman for non-Jew, suits their aim. As Ze’ev

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<sup>89</sup> “Dov.”

<sup>90</sup> “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28 NRSV)

<sup>91</sup> “Ze’ev.” My emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> “Yoel.” My emphasis.

formulates it, “there’s a fullness in the two coming together,” illustrating that both parts of humanity are needed—together—for God’s plan to unfold. On the other hand, the Messianic Jewish readers choose to invest much more effort and time in commenting on the “distinctiveness,” rather than the “unity” in the more theologically oriented sections of the interviews. The bottom-line is that, again, in their view, there is a fundamental distinction between Jews and non-Jews that remain in Christ. When relying on the biblical texts to construct their worldview, the Messianic Jews, again, find scholarly support in the PWJ perspective where one of the most fundamental assumptions is that of ongoing ethnic differences; Jews remain Jews and Gentiles remain Gentiles even when brought together into unity (see Chapter One).<sup>93</sup>

Yet the symbol of husband-and-wife goes one important step further than the “one new man” symbolism. The ideological consequences here are not visible in PWJ scholarship. The rhetoric used by Ze’ev and Yoel strongly stresses the distinctiveness between husband and wife, *and* it imposes hierarchical thinking, also present with regard to the grafted wild branches which were framed as adopted and in a weaker position. This is especially visible in Yoel’s reasoning about the husband’s being the head, and the wife the helpmate. Translating these symbols, the head would be the Jew and the helpmate the non-Jew.

In western, secular society, this language of head and helpmate readily gives rise to strong protests over interpretations of submission and oppression. While it is urged that this thinking should be entirely dismissed (see below), all the participants producing it carefully and repeatedly point out the equal value in the unity. For them, an integral aspect of the distinctiveness is manifested in the practical qualities of different callings, tasks, and roles: in “distinctive value.” It is, as they say above, about an “interrelationship” and a “fullness in the two coming together”—in other words, about *complementarity*. Yet the equality is repeatedly pointed out as being “before God” in a theological framing connected with value and salvation, but not in relations between the parties. The references to the husband-and-wife relationship as the head (above) and the body (below), were so frequent that it cannot be without significant value. Yoel “sanctions” the head and helpmate explanation with, for the Messianic Jewish world, the strongest arguments possible: scriptural references and the exclamation, “That’s what God told me.”

Furthermore, the intensive use of the marriage metaphor needs to be understood within its social and ideological context. Messianic Judaism shares a conservative gender ideology like that of (parts of) evangelical Christianity, which is engaged in a “culture war” against secular and liberal values in an effort to defend “biblical

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<sup>93</sup> E.g., Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 24, 80; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 252–56; Thiessen, *Paul*, 7; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, where the whole study circles around the argument that ethnicities as Jews and non-Jews remained distinct; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, e.g., the first chapter is entitled “Israel and the Nations.”

truths.”<sup>94</sup> Without a view of marriage as comprising distinct roles, the symbol would not serve its function. Their head-helphmate ideology also plays out in the leadership of Messianic Jewish congregations in Israel (see Chapter Two); only men are in the leading—the head—positions. On a reflexive note, it was within these discussions of the symbols that some, such as Yoel, voice their curiosity about whether my presumed husband has allowed me to conduct this study or not (see Chapter Three). It is also worth noting that all the participants refer to the concept as “one new *man*,” and not “humanity.” As the symbol sustains a unity with distinctions, it thus also mobilizes a perspective not of egalitarianism (the ideology explicitly promoted), but of hierarchical positioning: one above the other.

This discussion of “placing” and roles is not as far-fetched and purely theoretical as one might think, quite the opposite. Offering a glimpse into discussions in the Israeli Messianic Jewish world, Chayim briefs me on an ongoing explosive conflict over how this unity and distinctiveness of Jew and non-Jew “should” be constructed: whether as egalitarian or hierarchical. During the past two years, he says, a committee of elders has felt obliged to investigate the teachings of one major and influential Messianic Jewish ministry for, as he puts it, “heresies and stupidity.” Chayim explains that, in his view, part of the conflict is well-captured by the husband-and-wife metaphor:

Others will think that the fact they are Jews, well, it’s like winning the lottery. And it’s something that they should boast of. And always remind you of: “You little thing, we are equal in salvation but in this equality I’m above you!” ... Husband and wife? With all due respect, God [would then] tell you [as non-Jew/wife] to submit to me [Jew/husband].... [They] really believe that our Jewishness is a crown, a special crown, that God gave [us to be] above the others.<sup>95</sup>

Telling me about this, Chayim snorts, laughs tiredly, and shakes his head in wonder and disgust several times. What he is asserting is that some Messianic Jews do, in fact, consider themselves to be superior to non-Jews, identifying not only with the *natural* branches, but the head. Chayim himself completely rejects this idea as he is a strong advocate for equal unity. As Chayim represents the most evangelical-Jewish participant, those of whom he speaks are closer to traditional-Jewish groupings. The internal conflict, he explains, has to do with so-called NAR teachings (New Apostolic Reformation); the group under investigation advocates restoration of the fivefold ministries (Eph 4:11<sup>96</sup>) and the supposedly lost offices of

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. “Dov.”; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 61–71.

<sup>95</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>96</sup> “The gifts he [God] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” (Eph 4:11 NRSV)

the Church, such as prophets and apostles.<sup>97</sup> For Chayim and his fellow critics, restricting these offices to Jewish Jesus-believers would force Gentile believers into a theological as well as practical position of submission, not equality.<sup>98</sup>

Symbols and meaning-making processes, according to Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson, can fail when the supposed meaning does not emerge or when (part of) a community internally criticizes and opposes the use of a certain symbol. A failed symbol would be one where the sought-after meaning production does not succeed.<sup>99</sup> This raises the question: is the marriage symbol a failed one? Here, and echoed in the Messianic Jewish readers' language, the husband is described as the head, being above the woman, or in Yoel's words, "the helpmate," as that is "what God told her." Is the symbol a failure? If the participants want to promote a hierarchical understanding of the symbol, with man placed above woman (i.e., Jew above non-Jew), it is not a failed symbol. But if not, if the readers would rather promote an *egalitarian* distinctiveness, then the symbol has failed or, at least, is shaky as it offers opportunities for a hierarchical interpretation. The "one new man" symbol is, then, the more secure and stable. It seems to me that the Messianic Jewish readers would answer these questions differently. Ultimately, the many symbols displayed in Messianic Jewish rhetoric primarily serve to stress the distinctiveness of Messianic Jews within the larger community of all Jesus-believers.

## Bilateral Ecclesiology

In the above discussions on the Messianic Jewish readings of the olive tree metaphor, including the concept of the "one new man," the empirical-religious readers have argued for a unity in Jesus that distinguishes between Jews and Nations. It is here worth drawing attention to Mark S. Kinzer's contribution to Messianic Jewish ecclesiology, originally a Christian term so the usage might seem

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<sup>97</sup> The New Apostolic Reformation is a cross-denominational movement—not an organization—originating in Pentecostal and charismatic churches. The adherents seek to establish a new "branch," so to speak, within Christianity, besides Catholicism, Protestantism, and the Orthodox traditions. With a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the movement promotes a church leadership imitating the fivefold ministries in Eph 4:11 (see above).

<sup>98</sup> A national elders' committee meeting, the *Kenes Artzi* (Hebrew-Speaking Congregational Leadership Conference) was supposed to have taken place in March 2020 to solve the conflict and vote on proceedings but was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The conflict received public attention early in 2020, being described as a "major division" with potential to lead to "the first official breakup" in Israel. "Messianic Jews Head Toward Breakup," <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/messianic-jews-in-israel-head-toward-breakup/>. The conflict is also reported elsewhere.

<sup>99</sup> Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson, "Meaning, Anthropology, Christianity," in *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*, eds. Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson (New York: Berghahn, 2006), 1–38, esp. p. 2.

contradictory here, but it is deployed in this discourse to refer to the Christ-believing community of Jews and non-Jews—not the Church as such. As one of the key intellectual voices in the movement, his writings tend either to be rejected as unbiblical or applauded as groundbreaking within the Messianic Jewish world.<sup>100</sup> As part of his program of a so-called postmissionary Messianic Judaism, Kinzer proposes a “bilateral ecclesiology”:

Only one structural arrangement would allow for *distinctive Jewish communal life* within the context of a transnational community of Jews and Gentiles: the one ekklesia must consist of two corporate subcommunities, each with its own formal or informal governmental and communal structures. Thus the first implication ... is that the ekklesia is bilateral—*one reality subsisting of two forms*.... A second implication arises out of the first: *the Jewish branch of the twofold ekklesia must identify with the Jewish people as a whole and participate actively in its communal life*.... The one ekklesia of Messiah Yeshua is not made up of individual Jews and Gentiles, mixed together in an undifferentiated collective, but of *two distinct corporate entities joined* in what should have been an indissoluble bond of love and mutual commitment.<sup>101</sup>

The idea of a bilateral ecclesiology contains the idea that the *ekklēsia*, the community of Jewish and non-Jewish believers in the Messiah, are united. The *ekklēsia* forms “one reality” in an invisible, cosmological sense. This *ekklēsia* is bilateral as it exists in “two distinct corporate entities”—one Jewish and one Gentile part. The ethnic differences remain, as the non-Jewish part “participates” with the Jewish part as “equals and sharers.”<sup>102</sup> Kinzer’s thinking, so far, is in line with the view of the Messianic Jewish readers in Jerusalem.

In Kinzer’s view, as displayed above, however, the cosmological and theological distinction between Jews and non-Jews also causes a distinction or rather separateness between the two forms on a practical and physical level: “each with its own ... governmental and communal structures.” One key feature in Kinzer’s thinking is that Jewish believers are not to distance themselves from the Jewish people, but are rather encouraged to “participate actively in its communal life,” that is, share the life with the Jewish people and not primarily with non-Jewish Jesus-believers. Belonging to a Messianic Jewish wing similar to that of *Bet* (who shares this vision; see vignettes in Chapter Two), Kinzer argues for a theology wherein the Torah (Written and Oral) is still intrinsic to Messianic Judaism and practiced by adherents. A similar focus on Torah observance is visible in the historical (re)construction of Paul made by PWJ scholars. In other words, the ethnic unity of

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<sup>100</sup> Mark S. Kinzer, “Epilogue *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, Three Years Later: Reflections on a Conversation Just Begun,” in *Israel’s Messiah and the People of God: A Vision for Messianic Jewish Covenant Fidelity*, ed. Jennifer M. Rosner (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 175–95, 176–77.

<sup>101</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 152, 164. My emphasis.

<sup>102</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 152–53.

Messianic Jews with the Jewish people as a whole should also be upheld in practical terms. To connect this to the discussion above, the roles and callings of Jews and non-Jews are certainly rooted in the practical. This practical separation between the two parts of the *ekklēsia* is supported by Aryeh, who wears religious Jewish clothing and refers to himself as a Kinzerian disciple, and whose views stand out from those of other participants.<sup>103</sup> The other empirical-religious readers do not show any explicit support for Kinzer’s practical ideas, and rather seem to lean in the opposite direction as they regularly worship side by side with non-Jews in their Messianic Jewish congregations in Jerusalem (see below). This is further evidence that the majority of the congregations in Jerusalem belong more closely to the evangelical-Jewish end of the spectrum than the traditional-Jewish (see Chapter Two).

Finishing this section, two examples of the entanglement of Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars should be noted. On the one hand, Kinzer, from a Messianic Jewish perspective, finds support for his bilateral ecclesiology by referring to the within-scholar Nanos and his historically oriented hypothesis that the Gentile part of the *ekklēsia* addressed in Rome and Galatia were connected, in the sense of a practical relationship, with the Jewish community.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, reversing the process, the within-scholar Tucker uses Kinzer’s work to understand Romans, borrowing the term “bilateral ecclesiology” from him. Tucker, however, uses the term “half-ways” to argue for a humanity in the Messiah composed of a unity within distinctiveness, but he does not address Kinzer’s practical applications of the concept.<sup>105</sup> This offers a concrete example of the entanglement where Messianic Jewish theology has actually influenced a scholar in his understanding of a Paul within Judaism—a reverse or mirror reflection of what this study set out to explore.

## The Metaphor Alive:

### Relations to the Christian World Today

The Messianic Jewish readers constantly apply the olive tree metaphor—understood to pertain to relations between Jews and non-Jews who believe in Jesus—to their life and context in Jerusalem. The theme discussed above, of distinctiveness within unity in the Jesus-believing community, is considered here with regard to contemporary negotiations. This involves taking a closer look at two practical realities of relations that arise in the Bible-reading interviews and illuminate how

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<sup>103</sup> “Aryeh.”

<sup>104</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 164; see also Nanos, *Mystery*, e.g., 68–75.

<sup>105</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 7.

“the Word of God” is made relevant: the critique of Christianity and the status of so-called Messianic Gentiles and their relationship to the Torah. These topics are regularly and repeatedly brought up by the participants in the process of making sense of Rom 11, but it should be noted here that both topics engage Christianity and Christians—and not Judaism and Jews, which articulates something about how Messianic Jews read the Bible. In Gospel studies, one usually hears that Jesus had the greatest controversy with the Pharisees not because he disagreed most with them, but because he was closest to them. The same can be said for most Messianic Jews in Jerusalem; they are closer to the Christian world than the Jewish despite their strong emphasis on being Jews that believe in Jesus (see Chapter Two). The two topics below shed light on how, in Simon Coleman’s words, the Messianic Jewish readers engage with a text “From Narrative to Embodiment”:<sup>106</sup> in other words, illuminating the social life of Scripture.

### Criticizing Christianity

When Paul warns the wild branches (interpreted as non-Jews) against boasting, he adds the threat of their being cut off (vv. 18, 20–22) from the metaphorical olive tree. These statements are interpreted within their historical circumstances by all Pauline scholars, especially discussed within the PWJ approach. Paul, it is assumed, is directing his warning at their presumed belief that they have replaced the Jews as God’s chosen people.<sup>107</sup> The Messianic Jewish readers, however, apply Paul’s harsh warnings to criticism of contemporary Christianity, as examples presented by Yitshak and Ze’ev make apparent:

*There’s a lot of Gentiles being cut off from the tree [cf. vv. 20–21] and they don’t even realize it. They’re cut off. They think they are there, but they are not because there’s such an abuse of the gospel and such wrong teachings. People just, you know, think they are really part of this great thing with God, but they have nothing to do with God, nothing to do with the character of Yeshua and the teachings of the Lord, and what it means to follow Him.*<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 117–42. Capitalized in original.

<sup>107</sup> E.g., Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 277; Ehrensperger, *Mutually Encouraged*, 151; cf. Elliott, *Arrogance of the Nations*; Elliott argues that it is not so much about a Gentile boasting over Jewish identity, a “Christian” supremacy over Israel but rather Paul in his letter to the Romans challenges the boasting over Israel and also wider cultural trends that supported this boasting, that is, the imperial context. See also Nanos, *Mystery*, 19; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 31–32, 180; cf. “Avraham.” See also earlier references.

<sup>108</sup> “Yitshak.” My emphasis.

Again, “do not boast” [v. 18]. It’s not like the Gentiles have the promise, a covenantal promise of God, except through their relationship of faith to Jesus. So, they need to fear, because *the only thing that keeps them in the covenant now is the fact that they ... have faith* [cf. v. 20]. That’s why being a nominal Christian doesn’t mean anything. It’s not a question of being a nominal Christian, *it’s a question of being a believing Christian*. And then *a further warning*, “for if God did not spare the natural branches, *perhaps he will not spare you*” [v. 21]. And if you’re looking at what’s happening in Sweden today in the Lutheran church, and the archbishop is a practicing lesbian [*sic*<sup>109</sup>].... And she just made a statement in one of the churches in Stockholm [that] they should take away all the Christian symbols so the Muslims could feel at home, and you can see its *apostasy, it’s a church that is no longer [part of] the Church*, it’s a church [only] by name. I’m not saying there are no Lutheran believers, there surely are. There are definitely Lutheran believers who are part of this reality [on the tree], but what Paul is saying is that they should fear, because they should stand by faith. You see how many Christians are really falling away, I mean they are really losing the faith. It’s scary...<sup>110</sup>

In fact, all of the participants in this study make similar, severely harsh and profound critiques of the Christian world, provoked by Paul’s words. Speaking of the situation, voices and feelings display dismay, resignation, and some anger. Messianic Jews perceive most parts of the Gentile Christian world in terms of opposition: to them, there is no unity, only separation. Critique of churches and Christians for going astray, and for boasting seemingly without reason, are tropes that come up repeatedly in the interviews. Paul’s warnings are turned into warnings to contemporary Christians about being cut off from the covenant with God. Referring to the above sections, the scripturalists find it much easier to talk about non-Jews being cut off than Jews, and what this implies: having “nothing to do with God.”

Here it might be worth reflecting on my positionality. Most participants have me outlined as “a believing Christian” with sympathy for their overall theology, without my explicitly saying so (see Chapter Three). Thinking that I will agree with their judgment and division of the Christian world, or at least understand their thinking, probably helps them to open up more and be blunter and more honest than if I were not judged as sympathetic towards them. If the situation were different, I would have been considered one of the broken off branches, an appellation that could have made them express their ideas in a milder form to avoid conflict.

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<sup>109</sup> Ze’ev is not entirely correct in his statement here; the Lutheran Archbishop of the Church of Sweden at this time, Antje Jackelén, is married to a man. He is confusing her with the Bishop of the Diocese of Stockholm (2009–2019), Eva Brunne. As for his reference to removing the Christian symbols from a church, I am not aware of this in either case. The Diocese of Stockholm, however, has the reputation for being the most liberal.

<sup>110</sup> “Ze’ev.” My emphasis.

Yitshak is a bit harsher than Ze'ev, but his point is the same: many Gentile Christians are not spared, but actually cut off from the olive tree. Just as Israel is thought of as two groups, “the rest” and “the remnant” (see Chapter Four), so the Christian world is divided into “nominal Christians” and “believing Christians.” Those not considered believing Christians have, according to a general Messianic Jewish critique, several traits. It has to do with *faith* and a *relationship* to Jesus, especially displayed by Yitshak, and with teachings and theology. “*They have nothing to do with God, nothing to do with the character of Yeshua and the teachings of the Lord, and what it means to follow Him.*”<sup>111</sup> Similar critiques of most forms of Christianity are found in evangelical Christianity and Christian Zionism.<sup>112</sup> A “believing Christian” in the Messianic Jewish mindset of most participants is, not surprisingly, a non-Jew with similar ideas to them. It is someone with a “living and personal” relation with Jesus, the only savior of all humanity, who shares the ideology of the Bible as the highest authority and as God’s infallible and inspired “Word.” It also involves valuing the Jewishness of Christianity and acknowledging the role of Israel in history and the future: both the people and the land.

The dichotomy between nominal and believing Christians also appears in Avraham’s exclamation in the epigraph that opened this chapter, that churches have *planted a Christmas tree instead of the olive tree*. This is central in the understanding that “abuse of the gospel and such wrong teachings” leads to all sorts of perceived faults in Christianity. Already discussed is the traditional teaching that all Jesus-believers are Christians, no matter the ethnicity, and do not recognize a “unity with distinctiveness.” Messianic Judaism sees itself as an “authentic” expression of the Jewishness of the Jesus movement, while Christianity as a faith system and institution embodies an “inauthentic” form of faith. The ostensible wrongdoing of the Christian Church is that it chose the Christmas tree instead of the olive tree, or, in other words, replaced its Jewish origins with Greek and pagan influences. Typical examples of this, mentioned by Avraham, is how Christianity changed calendars and replaced Jewish feasts with what came to be Christian holidays, such as Christmas. This is further exemplified in Zelson Warshawsky’s ethnographic study on Messianic Jews in Israel, where the Christmas tree analogy also appears to criticize a Christianity gone wrong.<sup>113</sup> Using historically simplified and sometimes even false claims, Messianic Jews adhere to a dichotomy wherein

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<sup>111</sup> “Yitshak.” My emphasis.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Dulin, “Messianic Judaism,” esp. 36–37; see also Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 173–84; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 27.

<sup>113</sup> “Avraham.” Cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 100–03, 151–52.

Hellenistic-influenced Christianity is loaded with elements perceived as inauthentic, man-made, and unbiblical, rather than divinely ordained and biblical.<sup>114</sup>

In circles that see something “pure” and “authentic” in the Jewish roots of the faith, the claim of Hellenization is often used as a tool with which to accuse Christianity of spiritualized and allegorized, rather than literal, readings of the Bible. This construction is deeply ironic: the majority of Messianic Jews in Israel have invented a Judaism that reads “literally,” which deeply contradicts how Jewish hermeneutics have worked both in antiquity and today.<sup>115</sup> Theirs is not a textual practice of literalism (although their ideology is), but deeply one of creativity (as this study details). But this non-literal Christian hermeneutic, the readers argue, has ostensibly paved the way for all kinds of liberal theology, inclusive soteriologies, heresies, replacement theology (“Israel” as referring not to historical Israel but to a “new” Israel, that is, the Church),<sup>116</sup> preaching the Aryan “blond Jesus,”<sup>117</sup> and all things “unbiblical,” leading Christian adherents to misunderstand God, Jesus, “and what it means to follow Him” completely.<sup>118</sup> Several readers explicitly express their hostility toward these forms of “lukewarm mediocre Christianity”<sup>119</sup> that apparently function more as “social clubs” for people having fun than for those living the life of believing Christians with a personal relationship with Jesus.<sup>120</sup> Although harsh warnings are directed towards all Christians not acknowledging the “authentic,” Jewish-based form of faith, other forms, especially the Roman Catholic Church, are looked upon with extreme skepticism at best.<sup>121</sup> Andrei is one believer of many, he says, who has nothing to say to those “apostates,” an expression Ze’ev also uses, “before they become good evangelicals, until they fix their theology and get rid of

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<sup>114</sup> This is the main reason why Messianic Jews host such strong feelings of animosity towards the Roman Catholic Church. Cf. Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 143.

<sup>115</sup> This is not an accurate position based on historical research. It is well accepted that Jewish hermeneutics in antiquity not only adhered to a literal understanding of Scripture, but that, for example, the Scripture in itself always was a *relevant* text. Kugel defines four assumptions for ancient interpreters of the Bible, see James L. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17–23.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 179–80.

<sup>117</sup> Yitshak.”

<sup>118</sup> Yitshak.”

<sup>119</sup> “Ze’ev.”

<sup>120</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>121</sup> A very small number of Messianic Jews in Israel are engaged in ecumenical dialogue and work both nationally and internationally. A few, however, are also in settings such as the international forums of the Messianic-Roman Catholic dialogue group and the Helsinki consultations, and the national setting of Toward Jerusalem Council II. The last-mentioned gathers denominational leaders primarily in Israel that strive for a new council that would steer the community of Jesus-believers into a more Jewish understanding and foundation.

Mariology and stuff like that!”<sup>122</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, like many Protestant ones, is considered as Ze’ev formulated it: “A church that is no longer [part of] the Church” where Christians are falling away from faith. Hence, in Messianic Jewish rhetoric, these are cut off from the tree, and in consequence, spiritually dead and out of the covenant. This, it should be noted, is not the only stance among Messianic Jews but, as the evangelical world often uses the same rhetoric, it seems to be more represented in Israel than in the United States due to the former’s strong evangelical influences.

A recurrent expression and result of this “wrong relationship” to the Bible and Jesus (internal, faith-focused)—perceived as apostasy—is immorality (external, practice). A long-range consequence of not understanding the significance of the Jewishness of the Jesus movement is succumbing to the prevailing culture of sin, which is felt to be especially found in liberal Protestantism. Homosexuality in particular and “wrong, impure” sexuality in general are repeatedly raised as the ultimate signifiers of those who are apostates rather than believing Christians. Ze’ev suggests the Church of Sweden as an example of a church that fundamentally misunderstands the ways of God; as well as mentioning what he perceives as its affirmative attitude to Islam, he uses the Church’s acceptance of homosexuality as proof—and the archbishop (incorrectly) as his ultimate example—of a Christianity that “is falling away” from Jesus and being cut off from the olive tree. This is further evidence that (many) Messianic Jews and their ideas of “believing Christians” belong at the conservative end of a moral, conservative-liberal scale. The rather traditional-Jewish Nahum similarly delivers a harsh rebuke of Swedish girls who “take their clothes off.”<sup>123</sup> The references to Sweden are probably both because of my being Swedish and because it allows them to inscribe themselves in the internationally disseminated trope of Sweden’s sexually liberal culture, and hence, in their eyes, a place of immorality and apostasy.<sup>124</sup> This witnesses how judging lifestyles works as a way to consider whether someone lives a “Jesus life” or not.

Ultimately, “such wrong teachings,” to use Yitshak’s expression, constitute an “abuse of the gospel” and result in the warnings to many Christians about being cut off from the tree and the covenantal relationship with God. Being part of the tree, being saved, is a dynamic rather than static relationship for these readers.<sup>125</sup> Christianity is perceived as having been boastful and proud throughout history, with a self-understanding of superiority—which, from a Messianic Jewish perspective,

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<sup>122</sup> “Andrei.”

<sup>123</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>124</sup> Nahum’s reference is reminiscent of the “Swedish sin” story, a trope used internationally for the country’s liberal stance, especially on nudity and sex, in movies and political decisions between the 1950s and the 1970s. Yitshak also made several references to Sweden as an example of a country with considerable sin and boastfulness, “Yitshak.”

<sup>125</sup> “Avraham.”; cf. “Aryeh.”

is false—and Paul’s warnings about being cut off, losing faith, and losing salvation are now being realized by a just God. “All the apostasy,” Avraham reasons, “[is] getting them [the churches] into trouble and the judgment of God will come, no question about it.”<sup>126</sup> The antidote, the Messianic Jewish readers claim, is doing away with the Christmas tree and acknowledging the “true” and “authentic” tree, the olive tree, a symbol here for “true faith”: the Jewishness of faith in Jesus. The criticism, in sum, is reminiscent of classic culture-war critique and rhetoric from the “authentic” part.

Along with the criticism and warnings that the Messianic Jews directed toward Christians, the topic of Jewish-Christian relations arose. Mainline churches, both in Israel and in the diaspora, quite often engage in dialogue with mainstream Judaism to nurture coexistence and mutual understanding, a commitment shared by several PWJ scholars (see Chapter One) but strongly rejected by the majority of participants and Messianic Jews in Israel in general.<sup>127</sup> Andrei, a big, loud man, declares during the interview:

We’re a pain in the neck for Jewish-Christian relations. Why? Because the Jewish-Christian relations are built on the premise that the Christians just accept the Jews as they are. “After the Holocaust we leave you alone.” Some think, “They [the Jews] don’t, we don’t, need Yeshua.” ... But we [as Messianic Jews] are insisting that we [as Jews] need Yeshua.” Most Jews don’t like that. And some Christians, especially those Christians that dialogue with the Jews, they don’t like that. I had a group of visitors here, very liberal in their understanding of the Scriptures. They were very hard on dialogue groups. And I dropped a phrase in a talk and said, “*The worst kind of anti-Semitism is to refuse to preach the gospel to the Jewish people.*” ... And I said, “Well, because the Bible says that the gospel is for the Jews first” [cf. Rom 1:16<sup>128</sup>]. ... Especially for a guy like him [the leader of the visiting group] who tries to show that he’s a friend of the Jews, and that he’s for peace and coexistence, ... I really stamped on his toes.<sup>129</sup>

Andrei hits the nail on its head when speaking of the necessity of Jesus for Jews to be saved. Jews and Christians involved in interfaith dialogue, PWJ scholars, and Messianic Jews all agree to the distinction that Jews are Jews and non-Jews are non-Jews (phrased in different terms). Here the similarities end. Of interest here is how

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<sup>126</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>127</sup> Avraham and some with him consider Messianic Judaism to be a bridge between the two faith communities, but this is more on a theoretical and theological level than a practical one (see Chapter Four). Cf. Yaakov Ariel, “A Different Kind of Dialogue?: Messianic Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations,” *CrossCurrents* 62:3 (2012): 318–27, 318–26; Rosner, “Messianic Jews and Jewish-Christian Dialogue.”

<sup>128</sup> “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Rom 1:16 NRSV)

<sup>129</sup> “Andrei.” My emphasis.

Andrei views Christians: with the understanding that Jesus is the dividing point, which makes Messianic Jews “a pain in the neck.” As Andrei illustratively explains, a premise in dialogue circles is to not evangelize the Other, but to respect them as they are and seek to understand them.<sup>130</sup> He strengthens his claim by referring to a visiting dialogue group he met, who appeared to have a liberal understanding of the Bible, because they—in his words—preferred peace and coexistence over preaching that Jews also need Jesus. Most Christians involved in interfaith relations are presumably considered not to be “true believers,” as understanding of Jewish-Christian relations today is felt to be directed by historical circumstances such as the Holocaust, instead of a biblical authority that, to Messianic Jews, requires preaching to the Jews above all. Andrei despises dialogue-oriented Christians for accepting the Jews “as they are,” suggesting that the “worst kind of anti-Semitism is to refuse to preach the gospel to the Jewish people.” For him, and other Jewish believers in Jesus, it is evident that everybody—Jews included—needs Jesus, and this foundational conviction determines their approach to Jews and Christians alike. For Messianic Jews, true unity between Jew and Christian *exists in* Jesus, and is not, as Andrei perceives it, *built* in dialogue aimed at coexistence. In other words, in this sociological relational example, Yeshualogy is (also here) more important than a post-supersessionism.

In the participants’ criticisms of Christianity and harsh warnings to that world, Zionist, evangelical Christians—“the believing Christians”—are presented as the closest partners and friends of Messianic Jews, given the heritage of Messianic Judaism and the resulting shared theological convictions (see Chapter Two). Yet Messianic Judaism in Israel also has a complex relationship with them. The following, therefore, contextualizes and nuances this relationship by highlighting two day-to-day situations, preceded by a fieldnote anecdote about the broader cultural context wherein this relationship sometimes becomes strenuous for Messianic Jewish congregations.

One never leaves disappointed or unamazed after a visit to the café and the compound belonging to Christ Church in the Old City in Jerusalem. Run by the Anglican “Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People” (CMJ), it is well-known for its focus on the Jewishness of the gospel and its support of Messianic Judaism. The place attracts many “born-again” Christians of all sorts from all over the world, alongside a few cases of Jerusalem Syndrome.<sup>131</sup> During my years in Jerusalem, I

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<sup>130</sup> E.g., the foundational document for the Catholic Church on interreligious dialogue, *Nostra Aetate*. “*Nostra Aetate*,” Proclaimed by Pope Paul VI, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

<sup>131</sup> Jerusalem Syndrome is a religiously-themed phenomenon triggered by visiting Jerusalem expressed in delusions, psychosis-like experiences, and obsessions. Mostly occurring among people who were healthy before their visit, they often become convinced of being a biblical person, Jesus being the most common. In case of need, there is a psychiatric clinic specialising in the syndrome, which usually lasts for a few weeks. See e.g., Moshe Kalian and Eliezer Witztum,

have spent quite some time there over lemon and poppy-seed cakes and cheap coffee, trying to write up this study. I have tried, but not really succeeded; it is perhaps *the* gathering place in Jerusalem for “believing Christians” bashing on about God’s miracles, the end times, the “true” way of reading “God’s Word,” and likely—and mostly unlikely—understandings of biblical prophecies connected with the present. One ever-present topic is the fascination with Messianic Jews. Eavesdropping there offers a crash course in how Christians “who love Jews” think. So many interesting and passionate conversations are going on—on so many weird topics!—that it is simple impossible to work.<sup>132</sup>

As the first day-to day situation, as mentioned above, it is common for evangelical groups visiting Israel to attend Messianic Jewish services, fascinated by the Jewish roots of Christianity and the movement itself. Becoming a kind of “tourist attraction,”<sup>133</sup> a visit to a Messianic Jewish congregation has become a common item on the itinerary of evangelical and Christian Zionist pilgrimage tours. This is especially true of the more evangelical Messianic Jewish congregations, based on my participant observation, whereas congregations with more Jewish-flavored rituals and expressions tend to be perceived as being “too Jewish,” and thus strange. Meeting Jesus-believing Jews is felt, especially by evangelical Zionists, to be both “exotic” and a proof of God’s acts in the end times. Messianic Jews also function as a tool for visitors to discover and connect more deeply with the Jewish roots of their faith in Jesus, while they also promote support, primarily political, financial, and moral, for the State of Israel.<sup>134</sup> The vignettes (see Chapter Two), especially of *Alef*, illustrate how accustomed congregations were to receiving visitors, with their simultaneous English translation and transliteration of Hebrew lyrics. While the constant stream of dozens, sometimes hundreds, of visitors coming and going every week contributes financially to Messianic Jewish congregations, it also has its downsides; Messianic Jews have reported being frustrated by the “commercialization of Israeli Messianic life.”<sup>135</sup> During one service I attended in one of the more charismatic, evangelical-Jewish congregations, it was announced that only people who were staying in Jerusalem for at least one year were welcome

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“The Management of Pilgrims with Malevolent Behaviour in a Holy Space: A Study of Jerusalem Syndrome,” in *Pilgrimage and Tourism to Holy Cities: Ideological and Management Perspectives*, eds. Maria Leppäkari and Kevin Griffin, RTPS (Oxfordshire: CABI, 2017), 100–12, 104–11.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Guy Delisle, *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 225.

<sup>133</sup> Eidsheim, “Negotiating a Messianic Identity,” 74.

<sup>134</sup> Feldman, *Jewish Guide in the Holy Land*, 94–98; Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage*, NAR (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 48, 155–57.

<sup>135</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 197–08, 115–17, cf. 128–30. Quote from p. 130.

to introduce themselves to the leadership during the fellowship, a move that seems to express a certain weariness with the number of short-term visitors who want a personal conversation with “a living sign of the end times.”

Second, given that many Messianic Jewish congregations and house groups in Israel are a result of mostly evangelical mission work, many still have ties to, or operate directly under the umbrella of international (primarily American) organizations and denominations. This affects not only theology and praxis, but also leadership and, perhaps most importantly, finances. While the financial support from evangelicals has been pivotal for the survival of many Messianic communities, it also causes dependence. To offer one example, when a congregation wanted to deviate from its evangelical heritage and welcome more Jewish practices and traditions, its patron threatened to cut off the funding if the congregation did not act in line with the donors’ preferences.<sup>136</sup> The congregation valued their own independence more highly than financial support, chose the more Jewish way, and went into a transformation phase liturgically and in terms of adherents in the midst of the ensuing financial crisis. Although an extreme example, this is a well-known struggle and reality that shows itself in many different versions.<sup>137</sup> It conveys the difficulties experienced by many Messianic Jewish congregations in their quest to be autonomous and create their own identity.

The examples stress that while united with (and dependent on) believers of the evangelical world in many areas, it is not uncommon for Messianic Jews in Israel to struggle to assert their distinctiveness. Many express a need to put more passion into building and supporting their local congregations and minding their own business in order to nurture their own independent, genuine identity as a Messianic Jewish community in Israel.<sup>138</sup> This was the case also among many of the participants in this study when speaking about the future of Messianic Judaism in Israel.

## Messianic Gentiles and Torah Observance

There is something like a new Jerusalem meeting going on (Acts 15). Just as the early Jewish Jesus movement witnessed a huge influx of non-Jewish followers, so does the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement, and the same question arises again now: how should these non-Jews relate to a Jewish context in terms of Torah observance? The textual practice surrounding the olive tree and especially Jewish-

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<sup>136</sup> Personal conversation with lay Messianic Jews.

<sup>137</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 275; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 112; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 87, 143–45; Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 107–24, 131.

<sup>138</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 110; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 113–14.

Gentile relations unsurprisingly leads to discussions of so-called Messianic Gentiles during the interviews.<sup>139</sup> In this section, I explore the potential theoretical and practical threat that Messianic Gentiles pose to the theology of distinctiveness—of unity yet difference in the Christ-following community. The problem: some non-Jews want to practice Judaism as much as possible, whereas Messianic Jews oppose this idea as it threatens their unique position and identity.

Gentile involvement and immersion in Messianic Jewish congregations is a well-known fact, acknowledged both by the movement and scholars. In her ethnographic study, Hillary Kaell asserts that at least seventy percent of the participants in American Messianic Jewish congregations are, in fact, not ethnically Jewish.<sup>140</sup> The numerical equivalent in Israel is unknown but probably much lower, given the demographic difference of a Jewish majority. Kaell argues convincingly that the reason for this high percentage of Gentiles in a Jewish movement can be explained by “mimetic discipleship.”<sup>141</sup> Discovering both the Jewish roots of their faith in Jesus and the contemporary movement of Jewish Jesus-believers pushes these Christians to take on a double discipleship in imitation. Exploring this Jewish affinity, Kaell further explains Gentile involvement as a born-again seeking practice and process motivated by components of biblical, prophetic, experiential, and genetic character.<sup>142</sup> Through the process of imitation, Messianic Gentiles often transform themselves into “playing Jews,” so to speak, which can blur the strict boundary between Jew and non-Jew performed by the Messianic Jewish movement. Smudging this line is, at least theoretically, threatening to the movement and its endeavors to create and maintain a distinct identity as *Jesus-believing Jews*. Here, it is especially the experiential aspect of Torah observance—of practical and social interaction—that becomes a critical one to negotiate from both a Messianic Jewish and Messianic Gentile perspective.

The Messianic Gentiles that Kaell portrays have adopted different forms and degrees of Jewish lifestyle and Torah observance, visible, for example, in clothing and *kashrut* (food regulations) with which they identify not *as* Jews, but *with* Jews. On the Jerusalem scene, Chana (a pseudonym) serves as a prime example: she lives fully emerged “as one of them” and is deeply involved in a Messianic Jewish congregation. An acquaintance of mine before this study started, we have run into

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<sup>139</sup> I here use the concept of “Gentile” to denote a person who is not Jewish ethnically speaking, and “Messianic Gentile” to refer to a non-Jew who is immersed in and has made a Messianic Jewish congregation his or her “home congregation.” There are many cases where these categories become fluid, for example, when people are not ethnic Jews, but “feel Jewish” and thus more or less define themselves as Jewish and often as part of one of the lost tribes of Israel.

<sup>140</sup> Kaell, “Under the Law of God,” 497.

<sup>141</sup> Kaell, “Under the Law of God,” esp. 498, 503, 509.

<sup>142</sup> Kaell, “Born-again seeking,” esp. 51–62; Kaell, “Under the Law of God,” esp. 499–505; see also Dulin, “Reversing Rupture,” esp. 619, 621–30.

each other every now and then over the years, although it was a long time before she confessed to me, with slight embarrassment, that she was not ethnically Jewish, “just” spiritually and in terms of how she lived her life. Over the course of fieldwork, I have met several Messianic Gentiles who have struggled with the extent to which they should live a “Jewish life” in terms of culture and Torah observance, as they “feel” Jewish.”<sup>143</sup> From both a PWJ perspective and the participant Chayim, grafted-in non-Jews are described as being added to the DNA of blessings belonging to Israel.<sup>144</sup> This symbolic understanding of DNA has a practical parallel: among Jewish-affiliated Gentiles in the United States that “feel Jewish,” the interest in DNA tests and genetically tracing one’s heritage has increased in an attempt to search for slivers of Jewish roots.<sup>145</sup>

The attraction to Messianic Judaism among evangelical Christians is a natural part of Messianic Jewish life in Israel today. Besides Christian one-time visitors, long-term visitors and volunteers often adopt a Messianic Jewish congregation as their place of worship when in Israel.<sup>146</sup> These people are united by their deep fascination and appreciation, almost love, for Jews, an emphasis of the Jewishness of the Jesus movement, and support for the State of Israel. Several of the Messianic Jewish leaders, for example, are married to non-Jewish women and intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews are common among congregants. This practice seems, indeed, to undermine the threat of “being swallowed up” by non-Jews, but is not discouraged, which one could expect if Gentiles were considered a real problem.<sup>147</sup> Here, however, the problem is not their presence *per se*, but, rather, when non-Jews—either identity-wise, practically, or theologically—challenge the cosmological distinctiveness embraced by Messianic Jews.

In making Rom 11 relevant for the presence of Messianic Gentiles among them, about half the participants raise the topic of non-Jews and their affinity with Torah observance (viewing it haphazardly as observing the Written and Oral Torah). The scripturalists express their aversion to this with intense feelings: Jacob’s reaction is to spit out “*What? No, no, NO!*”<sup>148</sup> and Yoel exclaims resolutely that they “do *not*

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 72–75.

<sup>144</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 75, 151; cf. Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255–56; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, esp. 76–77, 109, 126, but the argument runs throughout the whole book; “Chayim.”; cf. “Dov.”

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Sara Imhoff and Hillary Kaell, “Lineage Matters: DNA, Race, and Gene Talk in Judaism and Messianic Judaism,” *R&AC* 27:1 (2017): 95–127, 95–118.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 82, 174, 182.

<sup>147</sup> My impression here from the Jerusalem context is that the children of a non-Jewish mother and a Jewish father are considered Jewish, in contrast with halakhic definitions but rather in line with Reform Judaism. This, however, is not an issue discussed in the interviews.

<sup>148</sup> “Jacob.” Emphasis original.

live like Jews!”<sup>149</sup> In fact, all the empirical-religious readers who mention the topic are clearly hostile to the idea that non-Jews should follow the Torah, which was and is God’s gift solely to his people Israel. Gentile Torah observance seems to be understood as a potential threat as it practically erases the differences between Jew and non-Jew, which they argue are essential. Paradoxically, on a practical level—not necessarily ideologically—the majority of participants have themselves a rather lax relationship to the Torah, thinking that the new covenant has redefined their own Jewish obligation to it (see Chapter Four). In the following, a few—slightly varied—examples of how the Messianic Jewish readers negotiated issues of the Gentile presence and Gentile Torah observance are discussed. First, Avraham, and a social example:

In Israel you will find that the majority [of people in Messianic Jewish congregations] are Jews, but there are Gentiles of the Nations that are part of it. So there’s always, *always the two connected together*. Which means that, like in our congregation, we celebrate certain things that normal [Christian] denominations don’t [Jewish feasts]. So the Gentiles that are part of us, *they’re part of us*. We don’t make a difference and say, “Well, you’re a Gentile, I’m a Jew.” We say this one congregation is made up of Jews and Gentiles. But the core of it is our Messianic Jews who believe in Jesus. *But you partake in everything that we have. It’s shared with you.*<sup>150</sup>

Avraham’s evangelical-Jewish and charismatic congregation attracts both many visitors and Messianic Gentiles. It is also one where Torah observance for the Jewish part is not central or especially important, which explains why it does not show up in Avraham’s thoughts. While theologically upholding the distinction between Jew and Gentile, the social and practical unity between the two is more important to him: “always the two connected together” and “they’re part of us.” In his congregation, Gentiles are described as being fully part of what happens—“you partake in everything that we have”—including in terms of celebrating Jewish feasts in a Messianic shape. The non-Jews, it should be noted, partake in what the Messianic *Jewish* congregation decides are appropriate expressions of worship and celebrations. From what Avraham shares with me, a congregational unity (and uniformity?) is the most important factor: a unity formed around their mutual faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.

Second, and a theological input: in conversations about the “one new man” and distinctiveness within unity (see above), some participants raise the theological idea known as the “one law doctrine.” As a trans-denominational faction in the Christian world, its adherents believe that there is one law, the Jewish Torah, which not only

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<sup>149</sup> “Yoel.” Emphasis original.

<sup>150</sup> “Avraham.” My emphasis. This understanding of Jewish/non-Jewish interaction comes very close to the one the PWJ scholar Runesson suggests that Paul himself put forth, see Runesson, “Paul’s Rule,” esp. 219, 222.

the Jews are obliged to observe but all of humanity, including commandments that are traditionally seen as identifiers of the Jewish people such as *kashrut*, Shabbat observance, purity rules, and so forth.<sup>151</sup> As a theology embraced by some Messianic Gentiles when adopting Jewish practices, and also present among a few Messianic Jews,<sup>152</sup> the idea of Gentiles practicing the Torah, as noted, is vehemently rejected by the participants:

The root of this [one law doctrine] is insecurity in your relationship with Yeshua. When you don't fully understand Romans 9–11 and Ephesians 2, you can be tempted as a Gentile to walk in insecurity in your calling. And when you're insecure in your calling, you feel that someone else has a better calling, [and] you try to be their calling.... The insecurity issue; we need to overcome [it]!... They [the adherents to this] think "if I keep the Law, I'm saved" or "if I keep the Law, then I'm chosen and special." But Paul is saying, "Grace!" [e.g., Rom 11:5–6]<sup>153</sup>

Rejecting Gentile Torah observance, Yoel explains it as "insecurity in your calling" based on an incorrect understanding of Rom 11, especially the olive tree. He argues that not recognizing that, as Gentiles, they are just as valued as Jews, possessing their own unique calling as Jesus-followers, creates a sense of being second-class and envious of the Jews, which results in practicing Torah observance. A correct understanding of Rom 11 would enable Gentiles as non-Jewish Jesus-believers to see their own, equally important, role in the divine drama. Keeping the Torah does not save them, Yoel argues, but rather disrupts their relationship with Jesus. Gentile Torah observance does not respect God's divine plan and therefore threatens the unique calling and identity of Jews, to whom the Torah belongs. Using Paul's writings, Yoel asserts that non-Jews must understand *their* calling and that God saved them through faith, not "works" (cf. v. 6). With their abstaining from Torah observance, the Torah is "protected" as a solely Jewish business and as a practical way of safeguarding a distinction between Jew and non-Jew. While rhetorically different, the conclusion is similar to that in the PWJ perspective: Paul fights against Gentile arguments that they need to convert to Judaism and/or hold the entire Torah

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<sup>151</sup> There are several movements that operate in the "space" between Judaism and Christianity. For a discussion on Noahides and Ephraimites, two of the major groupings, see Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 141–53.

<sup>152</sup> Ron Cantor, a Messianic Jewish leader in Israel and CEO of the Messianic Jewish organization Tikkun International, has written a blog post on this matter where he states, "Perhaps the best-known proponents of this view [the one new doctrine] are the writers of First Fruits of Zion, including Tim Hegg." First Fruits of Zion is also a large and influential Messianic Jewish organization. I have not encountered this idea among the participants in this study. "One Law Movements," <https://messiahsmandate.org/one-law-movements/>.

<sup>153</sup> "Yoel."

(which belonged to the Jews) to be part of the Christ-community; they cannot be saved through the Torah but through faith alone.<sup>154</sup>

In a similar vein to Yoel's criticism of the "one law doctrine," Michael and Asher refer to Gentiles' observing the Torah as conveying a "grafted-in replacement theology,"<sup>155</sup> thereby indicating a reverse form of identity transformation: traditional forms of Christianity argued that Jews become Christians when they come to faith in Jesus, and today some Gentiles argue that they need to become Jews, or as Jewish as possible, to be part of God's family. This idea therefore does not promote a unity in diversity, but the opposite. Once again, a "correct" understanding of Rom 11, Michael and Asher propose, serves to uphold the distinction between Jew and Gentile while at the same time promoting unity.

Third, and a practical case: Aryeh was most elaborate in his description, but his ideas are echoed in other interviews. He claimed that Jews alone are to adhere to the Torah, whereas non-Jews are to follow some of the regulations:

The natural Jewish branches continue to produce Jewish fruit, Jewish praxis. And Gentiles continue to produce Gentile fruit, Gentile praxis. Now one can ask what constitutes Gentile praxis? Obviously, there is good fruit and bad fruit, good praxis and bad praxis. So, obviously, Gentile branches who practice idolatry are probably not gonna stay on the tree.... *When you graft a non-Jewish culture into Jewish principles,...* in some sense it destroys the [non-Jewish] culture, hopefully only the culture that was the bad part.... These wild branches represent *Gentile disciples who are exempt from any Torah observance beyond the minimal "Noahide-style" obligations in Acts 15:28–29....* Especially I make the distinction in terms of the practices of things like *tallit*, *tefillim*, and *kippah*. There is no reason why the entire world should be wearing *tsitsit*. Now, if they enter into a Jewish environment, out of respect you would expect them to put on a *kippah*. If they are allowed to partake in the Torah reading, wearing the *tallit* is part of the cultural tradition, *a sign of respect, not of obligation....* What do they [Gentile believers] do in order to embrace the covenant? [It has] primarily to do with *not profaning the Shabbat*, not necessarily sanctifying the *Shabbat*, but not profaning the *Shabbat....* The point is the essential recognition that this day is special, for contemplation, for prayer, for devotion.<sup>156</sup>

Belonging to a very Torah-observant congregation, Aryeh maintains that the ethnic differences remain even when united in a congregation. The Jewish part continues to produce "Jewish fruit," which for him is the lifestyle formed by the Torah. Gentile practice, or "Gentile fruit," can be either good or bad, but it is never the same as observing the Written and Oral Torah. What is this Gentile fruit? Everything that is

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<sup>154</sup> E.g., Thiessen, *Paul*, 162–63; cf. Zetterholm, "Paul Within Judaism Perspective," 187–93. (For further references, see Chapter One).

<sup>155</sup> "Michael and Asher."

<sup>156</sup> "Aryeh." My emphasis.

not consistent with Jewish culture, such as Halloween and Christmas (comparable with Avraham's Christmas tree), constitutes rotten fruit: pagan practices that need to be purified. Viewed in the larger frameworks of the interviews, the behavior of a "true" and "believing Christian" (discussed above), including recognizing the importance of the land of Israel, is good Gentile fruit. It is produced when Gentile branches are grafted "into Jewish principles" which are expressed by observing the essential obligations of abstaining from idolatry, basic foods laws, and fornication (Acts 15).<sup>157</sup> Usually referred to as the Apostolic Decree by the Jerusalem Council, it addresses how non-Jews should behave within the Jewish Jesus community; it is often suggested that it contains an adaptation of the Noahide obligations, thought of as valid for all humanity, that the early Jewish Jesus movement required the non-Jewish part to practice to be part of the movement, instead of observing the Torah.<sup>158</sup> Aryeh adds to this that non-Jews should honor the Jewish Shabbat as a special day, inspired by Jewish observance but in a lighter form, probably because of the high value placed upon the Shabbat institution by contemporary religious, Jewish society. As he continues, he makes a theoretical distinction between Jew and non-Jew in terms of special Jewish garments but on a practical level he nonetheless argues that non-Jews, as "a sign of respect," should seek to look like Jews when they interact with each other during services. Showing reverence to the ethnic Jewish part is thus more important than maintaining an outward difference between Jew and non-Jew.

Ultimately, what Aryeh advocates—without being more specific than just discussed—in the social interaction between Jew and non-Jew in a Messianic Jewish congregation is that Gentiles abandon forms of non-Jewish culture and take on the moral behavior and adjustment dictated by the Jewish environment, but without converting to Judaism. Conversion would dissolve the supposedly divine separation of Jew and non-Jew, which is fundamental in the unfolding of the end times (see earlier discussion), whereas Jewish-positive behavior serves to honor the "mother community" to which the non-Jews are added. Hence, many Messianic Jews live in

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<sup>157</sup> See also "Yoel.;" "Nahum." The text referred to here and by Aryeh in the quote above reads, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well." (Acts 15:28–29, cf. v. 20 NRSV)

<sup>158</sup> The original story of God's covenant with Noah (Gen 9–10) tells of only one commandment—to abstain from eating blood—but this is reworked in postbiblical rabbinic tradition and general reception history to speak about "the Noahide commandments," seven commandments that are pictured as universal, thus also valid for the Nations. The Jewish part of humanity is, in this line of thinking, *also* obliged to follow the 613 commandments in the Torah as these are made within the covenant between God and Israel. On Noahide commandments, see more in Christine Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law?: Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 354–70; cf. Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 14.

the tension of arguing that ethnically the differences must remain, but practically they should be a little nudged.

There is a tension between how Gentile Torah observance is viewed by many Messianic Jews and Messianic Gentiles. Messianic Jews *theoretically* reject Gentile Torah observance to safeguard the distinctiveness between Jew and non-Jew to which they all adhere, while many Messianic Gentiles want to have a Jewish lifestyle, thereby stressing the unity aspect. Yet, on a social level, as non-Jews join with Jews in Messianic Jewish congregations, it is the Jewish members that set the parameters for non-Jewish participation. Both Avraham and Aryeh assert that non-Jews are not to bring any pagan, or non-Jewish, customs with them, but are rather to adapt to the Jewish forms of worship. Upholding both a distinction and a unity, it seems to be that the Messianic Jewish way to handle this is to promote non-Jews to be “Jewishish”<sup>159</sup>—following the basics of Judaism (outlined in Acts 15) and applied to a contemporary Messianic Jewish context. If this is correct, it is not surprising that many non-Jews strive to become as Jewish as possible to avoid being viewed as “Jewish-light” in a second-class sense and that “more Jewish” would imply more equality on a social level—both ideas, however, being strongly rejected by the Messianic Jewish community. This, it seems, leaves Messianic Gentiles in a limbo situation not dissimilar from the one 2,000 years ago.

Ideas resembling the Messianic Jewish way of practically handling the social inclusion of non-Jews in a Jewish Jesus community are found in how the PWJ perspective envisions the large number of non-Jews who sought to join the earliest Jesus movement. Central to within-readings is that Gentiles become partakers through Christ, not through imitating the Jews’ Torah observance. This is *not* a discussion of *how* the non-Jews become grafted in, but of *how* they should behave *while part* of the Jesus-believing community; they also turn to the apostolic meeting (Acts 15). A strong majority of PWJ scholars argue that non-Jews should not keep the whole Torah as it is a gift given specifically to the Jewish people, but a lighter, more universalized version of Jewish life as a way to show respect. Non-Jews are to keep the Apostolic Degree (again, Acts 15), where especially the denial of lower gods, of idolatry, has a prominent position, besides abstaining from blood from strangled animals, and fornication—alongside repudiating conversion to Judaism and living holy lives according to the Ten Commandments. Non-Jews should Judaize, and act Jewishly, in Christ.<sup>160</sup> This adaptation echoes the contemporary Messianic Jewish response. Nanos goes a step further, arguing that Paul wanted

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<sup>159</sup> The term “jewishish” has been used by the PWJ scholar Nanos when he argues that Paul suggested that non-Jews in the Jewish Jesus community were to behave “jewishly,” to be “jewish-like” or “jewishish” without becoming Jews. Mark D. Nanos, “Paul’s Non-Jews Do Not Become ‘Jews,’ But Do They Become ‘Jewish’?: Reading Romans 2:25–29 Within Judaism, Alongside Josephus,” *JJMJS* 1 (2014): 26–53, 53.

<sup>160</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 94–130, esp. 111–12, 117–19, 124–26; Nanos, *Mystery*, 369; cf. Campbell, *The Nations*, 260–66; Thiessen, *Paul*, 162–63.

non-Jews brought into a Jewish community to behave (more) “Jewish(ly)” but without becoming Jews,<sup>161</sup> which sounds somewhat reminiscent of a Messianic Gentile desire to observe the Torah. Just as Yoel does above, PWJ scholars customarily argue that Paul’s negative statements about the Torah are directed solely towards his Gentile audience recipients, as warnings that they cannot be saved through the Torah but only through faith.<sup>162</sup> In sum, both PWJ scholars (historically) and the Messianic Jewish readers (contemporarily) propose that non-Jews be turned socially into “semi-Jews.”

It seems fair to sum up that Messianic Gentiles (and “true believers” in a broad sense) inhabit a complex role in the Messianic Jewish mindset in terms of unity and distinctiveness. In Messianic Jewish congregations, Gentiles are welcome, but Messianic Jews are still the foremost authority dictating the terms and conditions of non-Jews’ behavior in their midst. Whereas all the Messianic Jewish readers uphold the idea of a distinct Gentile ethnic identity, day-to-day desirable behavior seems, to various degrees, to propose more flexible boundaries between the two groups united in their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. This subordination of the non-Jews into a Jesus-believing environment is very reminiscent of the first early Jesus-believing communities, as proposed by the PWJ perspective’s historical understanding of Acts and Paul’s letters, but in a modern version. As it all started in Jerusalem, and with the desire to recreate this ostensibly “authentic” form, Messianic Jews are proud that this is once again happening in Jerusalem; however, this model failed in antiquity—Jesus-believing Jews and “Jewish” Gentiles were rapidly marginalized between rabbinic forms of Judaism and non-Jewish forms of (what came to be) Christianity. It remains to be seen whether the same model will instead “succeed” and survive today, and if so, why now?

## Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the middle part of Rom 11 with a special focus on the themes of Jewish-Gentile relations and Yeshua. From the perspective of how relations are envisioned, both Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars in their constructions of Paul envision one humanity in two groups: Jews and non-Jews. According to both communities of readers, the distinction between the two groups remains, even when united in Jesus, or in God’s family. This distinction helps the participants promote their own Jewish identity and supports a post-supersessionist

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<sup>161</sup>E.g., Nanos, “Paul’s Non-Jews,” 50–53.

<sup>162</sup>Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 122, 155–56; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 217; Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 190–93.

understanding of Paul. Furthermore, both the Messianic Jewish readers and the within-scholars argue that this part of Rom 11 pictures the relationship between Jews and Gentiles as necessarily co-dependent for God's plan to unfurl over time, at the same time as non-Jews are dependent on the people of Israel. Both Messianic Jews and PWJ scholars criticize a history of interpretation that asserts a superior Christianity, in favor of turning back to the Jewishness of Paul's letter. Using a Messianic Jewish rhetoric, this idea is visible in the metaphor of preferring the olive tree to the Christmas tree.

The Messianic Jewish readers differ from the PWJ scholars, and this is very important, in that, as believers in Jesus, they constantly read "Yeshua" into the text. This textual practice of Yeshualogy has proven to have more impact and a superior role than that of post-supersessionism, although both have the same ideological importance. Furthermore, given the different genres of readings produced, Messianic Jews constantly read Rom 11 as speaking to them today as "God's living Word," with the Christian world as their conversation partner, to which Rom 11 also is applied and made relevant; this is promoted to create a "true" unity around "Yeshua" of Jew and non-Jew side by side, together yet different in calling and practice. This, for them, is one fruition of the "one new man" that will help bring the Messiah back—in a time that is soon and to their place in Jerusalem, topics which are explored in the next chapter.

## Six. Time and Land

God did not bring us back home 1,000 years ago or 500 years ago, he brings us back as dry bones, as in the hour in the time when the gospel has reached the end of the earth, beginning in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria. Not before, not after. This is very unique. It's coming back here, circulating the world, and coming back here.... So, when we look at Romans 11, we really understand that this is an amazing hour on God's timetable, again.... And the whole Bible, and all history is moving to bring this event [the eschatological crescendo] into reality. And we've seen enough of God's promises being fulfilled together to put our trust in what he says and say, "Yeah, that day is coming when all of Israel will be saved." ... It's a great hour, it's a great hour. And I'm in the midst of it.

*Yitshak*, November 2015

For Yitshak, as for his fellow readers, the topics of time and land are prominent and intricately intertwined in their readings of Rom 11. In fact, the interviews show that the Messianic Jewish readers find it difficult to speak about time without also speaking about the land and vice versa. Yitshak makes it very clear: God brings "us," the Jewish people, "back home," to the land of Israel. *This* is a time when the gospel has reached the end of the earth—to use Bible language—and is now coming back to Israel, and, he exclaims joyfully, this time—today—is "an amazing hour on God's timetable" and "a great hour." His words are of eschatological urgency; the biblical prophecies about the very end are about to be fulfilled. Indeed, it is a unique time, and he, in Jerusalem, is "in the midst of it."

This chapter explores Messianic Jewish readings of the end of Rom 11 (vv. 25–36 with a special focus on vv. 25–25 and v. 29<sup>1</sup>) through a focus on the themes of

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<sup>1</sup> These verses were given considerable attention and effort during the Bible-reading interviews due to their importance for Messianic Jewish identity and theology. The other verses did not receive as much attention, not only because they were of less importance and were mostly just read through and left unremarked, but also because the end contains Paul's doxology (vv. 33–36), which was

the end times and land of Israel. Based on the reading interviews, an important argument in this chapter is that Messianic Jewish identity is eschatological on a very fundamental level. As Yitshak illustratively depicts, Messianic Jews construct themselves as active participants and essential signs in the end times as “God’s promises [for the end times are] being fulfilled.” This self-understanding profoundly shapes the participants’ textual practice and the search for relevance when reading Rom 11.

The chapter analyses the interlinked themes of time and land from different angles, beginning with the broad understanding that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). This is followed by several sections focusing on time, on how the gifts and calling of Israel must be expressed eschatologically, and on the still valid call of Israel, without which the people of Israel cannot be saved. Issues of time are here explored in depth, and special attention is given to how “the full number of the Gentiles” (v. 25) and “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) are interpreted. It is argued that their identity, interpretative tradition, and hermeneutic are deeply eschatological. Thereafter, focus shifts to a discussion of evangelization as a form of practical application of the eschatological paradigm. Living in what they perceive to be the end times, the Messianic Jewish readers take on the call to share “the good news” with their fellow Jews. In the final major section, the understanding of the land of Israel as the gift *par excellence* is explored from past, present, and future angles. Reading from the physical place of Jerusalem, aspects of contextual value for the scripturalists are analyzed, followed by how the participants attest to the eschatological significance of the materiality of the land. As with the other chapters in Part II, the empirical-religious readings are continuously explored in conversation with the scholarly understanding of the text from a PWJ perspective.

## “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable”

The Messianic Jewish readers unanimously express their great fondness for Paul’s words: “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). “This verse, 29, is *very, very, very* important,”<sup>2</sup> Avraham excitedly exclaims. Similarly, Dov bursts out, “People [Messianic Jews] *love* this verse!”<sup>3</sup> They speak for all the scripturalists and the whole Messianic Jewish world.

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confirmed but with which little was done, while most of the verses were regarded as discussing the same ideas as earlier in Rom 11, and hence earlier in this study (see Chapters Four and Five).

<sup>2</sup> “Avraham.” His emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> “Dov.” His emphasis.

Shifting gaze to the PWJ perspective, it has been said that “the ‘calling’ and the ‘election’ of God are the bedrock of Paul’s confidence (11:29).”<sup>4</sup> This quote from Paula Fredriksen is only one of many that reiterate the verse’s importance. The Pauline statement is a lynchpin for understanding Paul’s theology; especially for the scholarly paradigm, but also for the Messianic Jews. It is also used as a framework for further interpretations, exemplified by J. Brian Tucker, who writes that “Paul succinctly states his hope: ‘God has not rejected his people’ Israel since his ‘gifts and callings are irrevocable’ (11:1, 29).”<sup>5</sup> Connecting the end with the opening of Rom 11 in this way serves all readers as a summary of Rom 11 and Paul’s central message.<sup>6</sup>

*Why* is this verse so significant for both the participants and the PWJ scholars? Paul’s words provide both groups with biblical “proof” for a post-supersessionist theology. As argued throughout this study (see especially Chapters Four and Five), this is central to the ideology and hermeneutic for both reading communities: God has not rejected his people Israel. Mark D. Nanos argues that “Romans 11, which explains God’s commitment to Jews because of the irrevocable promise made to the fathers, is a *key text for those seeking to reverse the legacy of contempt for Jews and Judaism.*”<sup>7</sup> The validity of the call to be God’s own people is permanent and unchangeable. While both groups of readers share the fundamental “truth” of this verse, the PWJ scholars apply it mostly to their historical understanding of Paul (and to contemporary Jewish-Christian relations), while for the participants in this study the exclamation is also important for them in the present as it promotes and confirms their Jewish identity (see Chapter Four). They both read and cite this statement frequently in a plain way, not investing any particular interpretative practice in it, but rather as a backdrop for their basic ideological convictions of God’s faithfulness towards Israel—“It is what it says.” Michael offers a prime example of this form of literal reading when he states simply: “‘For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable’ [v. 29]; what does that mean? If it’s irrevocable, it is irrevocable! It just reads so clearly to me.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the Messianic Jewish readers in general do not devote very much time to this verse. This brings us back to the opening question about rejection, which, from the perspective of reception

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<sup>4</sup> Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 195–97.

<sup>5</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 32, cf. 194–95.

<sup>6</sup> “Aryeh.”; see also “Avraham.”; “Ze’ev.” For a publication from a Messianic Jewish leader, see for example Daniel C. Juster, *The Irrevocable Calling: Israel’s Role as a Light to the Nations* (Clarksville: Lederer, 2007). See also Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 131.

<sup>7</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 253. My emphasis. This verse is something of a favorite in the writings of Nanos as it is frequently cited and discussed, and is the verse most referenced in the index of his collected essays. For one additional reference, among many possible, see Nanos, “‘Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable.’”

<sup>8</sup> “Michael and Asher.”

theory could easily lead to the conclusion that these words after all are not very important.<sup>9</sup> Again, however, I think this understanding would be misplaced. Viewing it instead from a social life of Scripture approach, the biblical ideology displayed in the verse is central to Messianic Jewish self-understanding; it is their point of departure as they “love this verse!”

*How* are the gifts and the calling actually understood? For both reading communities, the emphasis in the claim that Paul’s statement is “true” is not on *what* (gifts and calling) but on *that* (irrevocable). This often results in patchy and vague discussions of the content (except regarding the land, see below), although the gifts and calling are recurrently connected to the election and covenant of Israel among both participants and PWJ readers.<sup>10</sup> “God is faithful to the promise he made to the patriarchs.... The covenant is corporate and national, you know, the idea [is] that God made a covenant with Israel and it’s irrevocable and unconditional and all those things.”<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, several of the Messianic Jewish readers connect the gifts and the calling with Paul’s preceding statement: “as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors” (v. 28). This textual practice of biblical history is recurrent: Fredriksen identifies the “Abrahamic family” as the receivers of the irrevocable promises,<sup>12</sup> and Asher repeatedly asserts that “God has remained faithful to his promises that he gave Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”<sup>13</sup> Avraham develops the argument further:

Israel is beloved because they [the patriarchs] were faithful. [quotes v. 29.] *God will never take back what he has given*, no matter how disobedient we are [cf. vv. 30–32]. And the *gifts*, the promises that he made to the fathers, the prophets; the calling of God for Israel, its *calling* to be a kingdom people, its *calling* to bless all Nations; he will *never ever* take those promises back. No matter what happens, no matter how long the journey is, *they [the promises] are irrevocable, cannot be changed.*<sup>14</sup>

While this quote contains several interesting aspects, God functions as the center in Avraham’s reading, because God is the giver, and the gifts and calling “cannot be changed.” Israel is *beloved* (v. 28) and unique, “a kingdom people” with a mission

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<sup>9</sup> One needs to take another methodological issue into consideration; by this point in the interviews, the participants had already spent a lot of time with me and Rom 11, and we all felt a need to wrap up and close the sessions.

<sup>10</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 12, 32, 128–29; Nanos, ““Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable”,” 215; Nanos, *Mystery*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> “Michael and Asher.”; cf. the exclamation “they [Israel] are still the elect people of God!” by “Nahum.”

<sup>12</sup> Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 195–97.

<sup>13</sup> “Michael and Asher.”; cf. “Nahum.”; “Yoel.”

<sup>14</sup> “Avraham.” My emphasis.

to “bless all Nations.” This construction of Israel is well-known within Christian circles, but here Avraham also hints at the intertwined nature of Israel and the Nations that Paul discusses in the following verses on (dis)obedience (vv. 30–32, see also Chapter Five) and is highlighted in the sections on the full number of Gentiles and all Israel (vv. 25–26). Ultimately, Avraham reiterates what already has been said, that God’s calling of Israel is “never ever” going to change as God is faithful, the rhetoric of unchangeability promoting a post-supersessionist discourse of Paul.

Avraham wraps up his argument by saying that “the election of Israel continues ... and the Church has missed it, I would say ignored it too.”<sup>15</sup> The stress placed on this verse by both reading communities also holds an inherent critique towards the Church. She has missed Paul’s pro-Jewish program, and instead lost track of Israel as the chosen people when claiming to be the new chosen people, thus asserting a replacement theology. Paul’s own words, therefore, are claimed to be the most useful corrective to such a wrongdoing, which is one reason why they are so accentuated in the interviews: the participants stress that the covenant is God’s gift to Israel—not the Church (see also Chapter Five).<sup>16</sup>

In one of the later interviews, noting the sweeping discussion of what Paul supposedly meant on a more detailed level, I asked Dov to be specific:

Obviously, he [Paul] is talking about *the gifts that God gave to Israel*. The *calling* is a *gift* to Israel that will never change. *God will never go back on them....* Paul continues, “[T]hey are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, *the covenants*, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah.” [9:4–5 NRSV] *And the funny thing is that all of that is present tense! It’s not past tense.*<sup>17</sup>

Dov almost sounds surprised when he notices the present tense: it is a “funny thing.” He “discovers,” in the present tense, that the promises are still valid. The textual practice of interpreting “Scripture through Scripture” comes easily for him, as he knows his Bible well, but here I almost get the feeling that he does so as he is not really sure how to explain the gifts and calling; it is easier to refer to the authoritative words of the Bible. Dov and Chayim, who quote the same passage (Rom 9:4–5), explicitly focus most on Paul’s mentioning of the covenants as gifts still belonging to Israel. Here they find biblical proof that the covenants, as well as the “new covenant” prophesied in the Hebrew Bible (Jer 31), still belong to the Jewish people. Adopting Paul’s words concerning what the gifts and calling constitute, Dov

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<sup>15</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>16</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 150.

<sup>17</sup> “Dov.” My emphasis.

continues to elaborate that “God is talking to Israel, the Jewish people” about this, that God has called Israel to be “my witnesses to the world of who I am.”<sup>18</sup>

Nanos also raises the same section from a PWJ perspective, but in extended form (Rom 9:1–5<sup>19</sup>), to explain the gifts. He especially points to the mention of the Torah, which as irrevocable gift would continue to serve an everyday function for the Jewish people even after the Christ event,<sup>20</sup> a topic not raised here by the participants (see further discussion on the Torah in Chapters One and Four). In another practical interpretation, Fredriksen argues that for Paul circumcision is still valid and matters for Israel after “the Jesus event,”<sup>21</sup> which is not addressed by the scripturalists but an issue with which they most probably would agree.

It is also reasonable to think that Messianic Jews would agree with PWJ scholars’ interpretation of the reading that God’s irrevocable covenant to Israel also will lead to the fulfillment of the prophecy “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26).<sup>22</sup> Having said so, it is time to turn to discussions that distinctly address issues of time.

## Time, Expectations, and Experiences of the End

Walking the crowded, narrow streets of the Old City in Jerusalem, I have often marveled at the commercialism that reigns. The tourist shops—whether owned by Jews, Muslims, or Christians—sell the twisted ram’s horn of the *shofar* side by side with *sumac* (a sour, reddish-purple spice) and luminescent, turquoise rosaries in mega sizes. The *shofar*, having become sort of a tourist souvenir catering to Christian Zionists, is a religious item regularly used in many Messianic Jewish congregations such as *Alef*. Intrinsically Jewish, the Messianic Jewish world has adopted this instrument, paired with the significance of the trumpets blown to proclaim chaos, judgement, and later salvation in the end times described in Rev (see Chapter Two). The end times have not only been made part of commercialism,

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<sup>18</sup> “Dov.”

<sup>19</sup> “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” (Rom 9:1–5 NRSV)

<sup>20</sup> Nanos, *Mystery*, 178; cf. Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 85–114.

<sup>21</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 107.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 195–97.

but materialized; the *shofar*'s dull hum proclaims a new time, expectations, and an awakening: a significant sign of the end times—here and now.

Yitshak's rhetoric and identity in the introductory quote are dressed in an apocalyptic language. He speaks about contemporary times as being "very unique," "an amazing hour on God's timetable," and "a great hour, it's a great hour." God is now bringing to realization the biblical prophecies of Rom 11 and the end as such: "the whole Bible and all history is moving to bring this event [an eschatological crescendo] into reality." Looking at what is happening in the world, with the gospel reaching the end of the world and with the Jewish people back in the land of Israel, one thing is obvious to him. The end times have begun.<sup>23</sup>

In "History, Prophecy, and Memory," Carol Harris-Shapiro discusses how Messianic Jews are inserted in a time tension between past and future. Although a discussion on "The End of Days," her primary focus is on the role of factual and spiritual *history* in Messianic Jewish identity.<sup>24</sup> Yet, while that is without doubt of immense importance for claiming "authenticity," the participants in this study rather stress the present and, even more so, the *future* in the Bible-reading interviews on Rom 11 and in the meaning-making processes connected with the text. In fact, all the Messianic Jewish readers place Paul's exclamation—"the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved" (vv. 25–26)—in a prophetic, eschatological context: in the process of being fulfilled. The "and" that binds the two statements together is very important and repeatedly noted; God's plan for redeeming the whole world is a two-step process; first the Gentiles, which then results in the salvation of the Jews (see Chapter Five). The investment of a large amount of engagement and time in discussing these verses testifies to their importance for Messianic Jewish identity and theology as eschatological.

"I'm in the midst of it," Yitshak exclaims almost breathlessly, making sure that I really understand that this is an amazing hour indicating that the apocalypse is nearby. His rhetoric is similar to what has been called "semiotically aroused," capturing the idea of people who phenomenologically have entered the end times and therefore interpret every little detail in the world within this scheme.<sup>25</sup> Yitshak's explicit claim is also visible in several of the other interviews. In applying Rom 11 to today's world, many, if not all, of the participants believe the unfolding of the end times to have begun (just as Paul believed they had!). Ze'ev and Yoel, to give two examples from different expressions of Messianic Judaism in Jerusalem, address this topic repeatedly throughout the interviews:

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<sup>23</sup> "Yitshak."

<sup>24</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 112–35, for her discussion on the end times, see 133–35.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Allen Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.

I believe with all my heart that *in the end time more and more Jews will be saved, as we see happening. God is restoring, actually restoring, the picture of Rom 11.* Not just theologically but also *incarnationally in our time*, with the Messianic [Jewish] community that he's beginning to restore, and Jerusalem being the city of reconciliation.... *The end of time, which we are living in now.*<sup>26</sup>

All the Messianic Jews making *aliyah* and coming *back home to Israel*..., and you see the believing population in Israel starting to grow. *All of that is a sign to me of where we are at the prophetic timetable: the end of age.* We're coming to an end of the Gentile age, Yeshua is becoming stronger and [Messianic Jewish] congregations are planted.... *We're almost at the time of the great revival of Israel.*<sup>27</sup>

More examples could be given. The point, however, is to show that the Messianic Jewish readers think of the current time as part of the (beginning of) the end time, with the land of Israel being central in this conviction. Reading Rom 11, and especially the last part of it, they see Paul's prophecies appearing "incarnationally," that is, materially and physically, *today*. They are experiencing an eschatological drama in which they themselves are part. The birth of the Messianic Jewish movement itself, and their being part of it, is a strong physical sign of the beginning of a realized eschatology; as such, they as Jewish believers are authenticity markers of God's promises of restoration. The return of Jesus is soon, but before that a few steps in the eschatology must be fulfilled.<sup>28</sup> Reading from the place of Jerusalem, the "homecoming" of the Jews to Israel and the Messianic Jewish movement are all signs to them that they are standing on the brink of the end (see also Chapter Two). In other words, time and land are intricately linked in Messianic Jewish thinking; the eschatology is, as this chapter displays, close to that of Christian Zionism.<sup>29</sup> Apocalyptic rhetoric and "knowing" that they live in the last days is a conviction common among believers within "literalist" cultures.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, in the PWJ perspective, eschatology is at the very heart of this discourse. Paul is also constructed as being "semiotically aroused," as living in the end times: "the Kingdom of God, Paul proclaimed, was at hand."<sup>31</sup> His having this perception when writing Rom 11 makes time an important hermeneutical key in these scholarly readings of it: the final hour is here now, or very soon. The time is short or, in Pamela Eisenbaum's words, "It's the End of the World as We Know

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<sup>26</sup> "Ze'ev." My emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> "Yoel." My emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> "Avraham."

<sup>29</sup> This is confirmed by other studies on Messianic Judaism, e.g., Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, 223–24; 258–61.

<sup>30</sup> See for example Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 228–46.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, xi.

It.”<sup>32</sup> This eschatological acuteness is present to a higher degree in the PWJ perspective than in other scholarly constructions of Paul. According to PWJ scholars, for Paul it is not a question of who is saved and not saved, but rather of “who is in *now*, and who is destined to be in *soon*.”<sup>33</sup> The perspective, similarly, puts great emphasis on the two-step process of the eschatological scenario—the “and so” in Paul’s “the full number of the Gentiles has come in, *and so* all Israel will be saved” (vv. 25–26). The fate of the two is deeply intertwined and interdependent; it is “the restoration of Israel *and* salvation of the nations”<sup>34</sup> (see Chapter Five). Like the empirical-religious readers, the within-scholars argue that for Paul the “current” time is that of the Gentiles, about to be tipped over to the Jews. When both the Gentiles and the Jewish people are “regathered through the message of the messiah, the Kingdom could, finally, come.”<sup>35</sup> PWJ scholars, generally speaking and in contrast to the participants’ hermeneutics of Yeshualogy, are more focused on the fact of redemption, and less on how it will occur. Agreeing on the nearness, temporality creates a sort of dissimilarity; for the PWJ scholars’ Paul this was about 2,000 years ago, while for the scripturalists this “near-the-end” is transferred to the present. Although both reading communities embrace God’s two-step plan for redemption, the Messianic Jews have a stronger focus on themselves, as Jews, as eschatological signs, whereas within-Judaism scholarship has a broader emphasis on ancient Jewish eschatological expectations as expressed in non-Jews coming to Zion, the former finding scriptural legitimization for their eschatological identity.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, there is a clear similarity between the Messianic Jewish reading of Rom 11 and the construction of Paul offered by the PWJ perspective—for both, the end is here, or soon—yet there is one important distinction: Messianic Jews apply the text to today’s time, and the feeling of living in the early unfolding of the end times, whereas PWJ scholars emphasize that this conviction was Paul’s in his time. This difference is natural given the different agendas and ideologies of the two reading communities. Furthermore, when the empirical-religious readers engage in more close-up readings, several variations came alive to a degree not seen earlier in this study. In the two sections below, different voices and readings are discussed.

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<sup>32</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 250–55. The phrase itself is the headline in her study. On a cultural note, this is a R.E.M. song from 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Elliott, *Arrogance of the Nations*, 115. Emphasis original. Admittedly, this quote does not come from a discussion explicitly on Rom 11, but is highly applicable here.

<sup>34</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 277–78. My emphasis. See also Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 161–62, cf. 14; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 114; cf. Donaldson, “Paul,” 290.

<sup>35</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. e.g., Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007); Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 164–65.

## “The Full Number of the Gentiles”

Paul’s statement, “the full number of the Gentiles,” (v. 25) receives a great deal of attention from the Messianic Jewish readers. Three major—and starkly different—interpretations are prevalent (discussed below): “full number,” or “fullness” as NKJV and NASB have it, is understood to refer variously to an *amount*, a *time*, and a *trait*. Others merely read the verse and point out the importance of the prophetic idea it contains before moving on to what they perceive as more important: the salvation of all Israel. The backdrop for this discussion is the perceived interplay between Jew and non-Jew for God’s plan to unfold (see Chapter Five).

### Full number as a Numerical Majority but with Uncertainty

“A partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of Gentiles is coming in” [cf. v. 25]. So, well, so we’re waiting for the missionaries to do good work, in every nation of the world. To have the fullness of the Gentiles gathered in ... *I don’t know* what he [Paul] means by the fullness, I think he *probably* means the *full number of Gentiles*, so *I don’t believe that every person in the world will be saved*. Jesus was very clear about that.... Not everybody will be saved,<sup>37</sup> but ah.... The gospel, he [Jesus] said, shall be proclaimed to all the Nations [Mark 16:15–16 // Matt 28:18–20<sup>38</sup>] and it’s after this proclamation to all the ethnic groups, and after the people from every ethnic, it says in Revelations, people from every tribe and tongue will [think] *At least a certain number from every tribe and tongue will believe in Jesus* [Rev 7:9<sup>39</sup>]. Then there will also be a big salvation in Israel. Now if that’s going to be an abrupt shift or a gradual shift from God’s saving work among Gentiles to God’s saving work among Jews, *I don’t know*, maybe it’s a smooth shift. Because, I mean, right now the mission to Gentiles is working and flourishing in some places and yet the Messianic movement already exists, so it’s probably a smooth shift.<sup>40</sup>

For the majority of the participants, exemplified in Andrei’s understanding, Paul is talking about an amount or a numerical sense, a “full number,” of Gentiles that has

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<sup>37</sup> E.g., Matt 25:31–46, a section usually referred to as the “judgment of the nations” as Jesus here is reported to speak about the separation between sheep and goats.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., the so-called Great Commission. “And he [Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.’” (Mark 16:15–16 NRSV // Matt 28:18–20)

<sup>39</sup> “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” (Rev 7:9 NRSV)

<sup>40</sup> “Andrei.”; cf. “Eli.” My emphasis.

to come in, (or be “ingathered” in PWJ rhetoric<sup>41</sup>), before the time shifts over to Israel’s salvation and for Jesus to return. To “come in” is understood by all readers as “becoming believers in Jesus,” which is of such an obvious character for them that no discussion of it is perceived to be necessary. This idea is also common in the Christian world, and often connected to a call for evangelization. The “full number” is not interpreted as fullness in the sense of each and every one, it is not a one hundred percent, but “at least a certain number,” or “a strong majority” as Yoel phrased it.<sup>42</sup> Hence, Andrei, for example, does not make a literal interpretation but rather embraces a textuality of letting “Scripture interpret Scripture” in light of what he knows about Jesus traditions, namely “Jesus was very clear about that... Not everybody will be saved.” Yet both Andrei and Eli refer to the current need for missionaries to do “good work” among “every tribe and tongue” of Gentiles to help the time, or period of the Gentiles, to be fulfilled.

Surprisingly, given the biblical ideology of the text as “simply saying what it means” and Andrei’s declaration during the interview that he believes every word in the Bible to be “true,” he is uncertain about what Paul means here. In the account above he twice admits, “I don’t know,” and his voice is filled with an insecurity that also shows in his frequent use of “I think.” Eli, as another example, outright admits that he is “speculating a little bit,”<sup>43</sup> a confession augmented by an awkward smile. It is a surprising textual engagement because the Messianic Jewish readers have up until this point been exact and detailed, with strong opinions and convictions on what Paul means. So why here?

A culturally situated explanation is that the participants are probably familiar with the different interpretations and the lack of unified teaching on which to rely. Another, and more reasonable possibility, could be that until this part in Rom 11, the scripturalists have been able to connect the text to themselves or in other explicit ways make the text alive and personally relevant. In this case, “a certain number” ironically implies an uncertainty. The readers who do not apply Paul’s mention of “fullness/full number” to the material world (see below), are all hesitant about what Paul means: a prophecy to be fulfilled is, as Aron Engberg explains, filled with vagueness and unknowability.<sup>44</sup> The futurity aspect, in combination with an unclear physical correlation, makes it difficult for them to say something exact about it. If this argument holds true, it implies that Messianic Jewish textual practice and the wider stream of literalist culture is dependent upon actual history and contemporary events to give the text relevance in order to “interpret” it and not be insecure about what it might mean. Yet Andrei envisions the current time as offering “a smooth

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<sup>41</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 73–77.

<sup>42</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>43</sup> “Eli.”

<sup>44</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 162.

shift,” whereas the Messianic Jewish movement exists in a prophetic breaking point, or a tension, between the age of the Gentiles and the salvation of all Israel.

Of the three interpretations offered in the interviews, the only one correlating with readings from the PWJ perspective is this one, which understands Paul as referring to a set number of non-Jews—with the difference that PWJ scholars emphasize Paul’s insistence on the full number to come in *so that* all Israel can be saved (as did some of the empirical-religious readers), rather than elaborating on what the numerical factor means. In the case of Fredriksen and Eisenbaum, for example, “full number” is simply repeated without further explanation.<sup>45</sup> Shifting focus from the numerical understanding, the following two interpretations have no scholarly correlations at all as they are expressions of how Paul is made relevant and applied to today’s circumstances, which is of little to no interest from the historically oriented PWJ perspective.

### Fullness Indicator of Prophetic Time

The fullness of the Gentiles, oh, that’s a big story now! I’ll take you to Luke 21:24, . . . “They will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” [Luke 21:24 NRSV] And the word “until” is a key word, because the word “until” brings you to a frame of time of God’s timetable. So he [Luke] continues, “until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” *When the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled, Jerusalem is no longer under their foot.* Have you got that? *So when did that happen? 1967! OK?* Now, Paul talks about it from another angle in Romans 11. “They [the Jewish people] will fall by the edge of the sword.” We did. The temple has been destroyed, we’ve been led captives into all the nations; that took place. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, *and he gives us here a promise [about] “until.” How long? When is the end of it? When Jerusalem is being set free, no longer under the Gentiles. And here we are. 1967! . . .* “Blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” [cf. v. 25]. So when we think about the fullness of the Gentiles, I will just put it in [the land of] Israel.<sup>46</sup>

Yitshak, and also Nahum, representing opposite ends of the Messianic Jewish spectrum in Jerusalem of evangelical-Jewish and traditional-Jewish, both understand “the full number” to refer to a fullness indicating time—a fullness of time—simply embracing a textuality of juxtaposing Paul with Luke and applied to modern times. This prophecy, for them, is already fulfilled. Time, theoretically, is

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<sup>45</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 102, 150; Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 149–52, 236; cf. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 121; Nanos, *Mystery*, 122–23. Fredriksen refers to the Greek concept as either “fullness” or “full number,” but does not elaborate on the significance.

<sup>46</sup> “Yitshak.” My emphasis.

perceived as linear, where the end point is the perspective from which history is addressed. Nahum explicitly explains that it is “the fullness of the times of the Gentiles. The fullness of time! Time.”<sup>47</sup> Having a Zionist perspective, they understand the biblical prophecies (Rom 11 and Luke 21:24) as having been fulfilled in 1967 through Jewish territorial control (see also Chapter Two). This “temporal-territorial” way of connecting biblical prophecies to questions of the land of Israel is a well-known trope within the Messianic Jewish world and one I have encountered on a regular basis in Messianic Jewish teachings to “prove” the Bible and that God is faithful to his people.

What is 1967 about? In 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israel gained control over the whole of Jerusalem. Between 1948 (when the State of Israel was founded) and 1967, the city had been divided between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, with the consequence that Jews were not allowed access to their most holy place—the Western Wall, remnant of the temple. In Zionist terminology, the “reunification” of Jerusalem in 1967 now gave Jews access to the Old City with its holy sites. Israel’s victory and territorial expansion into the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Gaza strip was met with great joy, not only by many Jews but also by Christian evangelicals and Messianic Jews, and viewed as divine signs. The territories referred to as “Judea and Samaria” in Zionist discourse, loosely corresponding to today’s West Bank, has the ideological importance of constituting “the biblical heartland.” Among many Jews, the Israeli victory boosted Jewish self-confidence and gave rise to messianic expectations (see also Chapter Two).<sup>48</sup> The conquest was quickly wrapped in a rhetoric of the miraculous as the Israeli victory was far from certain and rather surprising as the State of Israel was—in the views of many, although a complex point—the one attacked, not attacking, and the purpose of the war was not in itself territorial expansion.

Reading 1967 as a fulfillment of Luke 21:24 is a well-known trope within the evangelical and Messianic Jewish world.<sup>49</sup> While Paul’s and Luke’s prophecies have been considered two distinct prophecies in apocalyptic thinking, for at least some of the participants they are brought together. Paul’s rather vague wording is, they think, explained through Luke’s mentioning of “until the times...” Believers in Jesus, both Jews and non-Jews, were quick to proclaim that the prophecies had now been fulfilled as Jerusalem was back in the hands of the Jews after nearly 2,000 years under non-Jewish rule. The Jews had been scattered in the diaspora for about

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<sup>47</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War over Israel’s Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967–2007*, trans. Vivian Eden (New York: Nation Books, 2007); see also Aviezer Ravitsky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> See Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 198; Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 69; Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 239; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 133–34.

two millennia as “captives among the nations.” Jerusalem had been—in their eyes—controlled, ruled, and “trampled on by the Gentiles.”<sup>50</sup>

For Yitshak and Nahum and so many others, the fullness of the times of the Gentiles was reached in 1967. The fullness here implies Jewish territorial control of the land. Hence, in 1967 the Gentiles—in other words, the Jordanians in Jerusalem—lost control and the Jews took over. “Jerusalem [has been] set free,” Nahum summarizes. “This has already happened.”<sup>51</sup> Yitshak similarly observes, “The fullness of the Gentiles, I will just put it in Israel,” thus indicating the location where the fullness of the times of the Gentiles was to occur and thus tightly connecting the themes of time and land. He speaks of “God’s timetable,” indicating a divine and prophetic vision that is closely connected to supposedly secular, modern politics.

With the time of the Gentiles being fulfilled, Nahum and Yitshak understand that a new phase of God’s plan has been put in place since 1967: from the “fullness” of the Gentiles to the salvation of all Israel. The pendulum of time for salvation has thus swung back to Israel, however gradually. With Jewish control of Jerusalem, the end of the world can now come. Another well-known trope to further prove the truth of this prophecy about 1967 is by linking the territorial expansion in 1967 to the rise of Messianic Judaism, which would indicate a shift from Gentiles to the Jews. Extremely important for Messianic Jewish self-identity, as has already been discussed (see Chapter Two), is that the movement emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which is taken to be a fulfillment of prophecy and not just a coincidence. Connecting Luke’s words with Paul’s, the “hardening” (vv. 7, 25) of the people of Israel because of their unbelief in Jesus has slowly started to be lifted away. Nahum also sees the Messianic Jewish movement as a prophetic fulfillment, saying that before 1967 “there [were fewer] than fifty Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel”<sup>52</sup> and only three congregations compared to today’s realities. While the historical accuracy of this assertion is questionable, what is important here is to note how historical events are used to confirm the idea of a prophetic fulfillment. In contrast to prophecies still to be fulfilled, these backwards-looking, already-fulfilled prophecies are easier to grasp, discuss, and naturally also more amenable to being filled with details.

“And here we are,” Yitshak concludes, being a Messianic Jew in Israel in a special time. He thus constructs a worldview wherein he is part of the fulfillment of the prophecy. As Messianic Jews, they are a prophetic fulfillment and proof that the biblical texts are indeed “true.” As such, they are signifiers of divine intent, which

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 198, 253, 265; Aron Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>52</sup> “Nahum.”

is very important for their own self-understanding. This textual practice of bringing text and contemporary world together closes the gap between the two. Writing about evangelical Christians in Jerusalem, Engberg argues, “they are experiencing the *literal* fulfillment of [Paul’s] words,”<sup>53</sup> phenomenologically speaking. The same goes for the textual practice of Messianic Jews. Prophecy, both fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled, functions as a way to create belonging and a purposive life. By perceiving themselves as situated in the midst of a larger prophetic scheme that is partially fulfilled, the text has become as relevant as possible for the scripturalists.

## Fullness as Gentile Maturity

There is a time limit to the Gentiles and that has to do with Paul’s saying “the fullness of the Gentiles” coming in. What’s the question? A lot of people say it’s the number of Gentiles. I don’t believe it’s a number. I believe it has to do with a certain maturity and a certain fullness. *Fullness has to do with growing up, not being a baby anymore. A certain fullness that will come into a part of the Gentile Church.*<sup>54</sup>

The character of non-Jews, the Christians, in the eschatological era has been raised during many of the Messianic Jewish sermons I have heard in Israel. The fullness, here comprehended as a trait, a characteristic, has to do with awakening and restoration of the Church. Some—not all—Christians, it is assumed, will become mature, sharing the ideology and theology of the Messianic Jewish movement (no surprise there) and grasping its divinely intended relationship to Israel and the Jewish people. Alone among the participants, but not in the wider cultural setting, Avraham confidently promotes this third way of understanding “the full number.”

For him, “the fullness of the Gentiles” implies a quality, “a certain maturity and a certain fullness.” The Gentile Church needs to leave the stage of babyhood and grow up to embrace wisdom and insight. The whole Christian Church does not need to reach this maturity; rather, “a part of the Gentile Church” is enough to switch it over from Gentile time to the coming time where “all Israel will be saved.” What, then, constitutes this maturity that Avraham envisions? Like so many other Messianic Jews, he separates “Christians” from “believers.” A believer is a born-again Christian, living in a personal relationship with Jesus, with a “right understanding of Scripture,” that is, knowing the Bible to be the true and infallible “Word of God” (see also Chapter Five). Yet the understanding of maturity goes further, which leads me to ask Avraham if he thinks that maturity is linked to recognizing Israel—consciously avoiding specifying it as the people or the land. His face lights up from my question, he nods enthusiastically, and tells me a story:

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<sup>53</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 159. Emphasis original.

<sup>54</sup> “Avraham.” My emphasis.

It's part of it. It's a big part, it's a *big* part. I can give you an example. In 2017, a group of leaders from the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, and also Australia came to Israel and they said, "We want to speak to some of the Messianic leaders." So I was among them. And they said, "We have received from the Lord that we're supposed to have a conference here the next Feast of the Tabernacles [Sukkot]. So we said, "Well, that's nothing new. We have many of [those]." They said, "No, no, no, we don't mean it that way. We mean that *you* should prepare a feast and invite us." All the feasts up to now have been people from the Nations having a Feast of the Tabernacles, but not the local Messianic community inviting the Nations. That has never happened, that is true.... So we prayed about this, and finally we came to an agreement.... We finally arranged the place. We couldn't get a place in the beginning because many of the places, the hotels, when they found that we were Messianic Jews, they said no.... I thought maybe a hundred, 150 people, may come, [but] to my surprise a thousand came. They came with gifts, they came to bless us, and they said, "You're the first one, and we've been like grafted in so we're coming here to become one with you." So that was, they had all the right understanding, according to me. I wouldn't say that that's the fullness of the Gentiles, but I would say it's something in that direction. I would say when the Gentiles come to a right understanding and grow into it, that's approaching the fullness of the Gentiles.<sup>55</sup>

Avraham here confirms that an element of mature Christianity is recognizing Israel in a wide sense; the Jewish people, Jewish believers, and also Jewish roots, and the land—"It's a *big* part." The leaders in Avraham's story did the opposite to what is common: they wanted the Messianic Jewish community to invite them as Gentiles to a feast. The "right understanding" that Avraham mentions is their position of, "You're the first one, and we've been grafted in" to Israel. Thus "maturity" and "fullness" are understood as recognizing one's place in God's plan and creation, acknowledging that Gentiles are grafted into Israel and dependent on the Jews and not the other way around (see Chapter Five). In Avraham's explanation of the fullness, he speaks about a "time limit" that has begun, but not yet fully been reached. Avraham handles the biblical text and its prophecy similarly to Yitshak and Nahum (see above) by closely relating it to current times and examples; this makes Paul's words personally relevant as Avraham considers himself part of a divine drama.

Christian maturity, therefore, implies having a "right understanding" of Israel and recognizing that they as Gentiles are dependent on Israel and not the other way around. This resembles how all the Messianic Jewish readers understood the olive tree metaphor. Avraham, as a strategy for working towards this maturity among the churches, and the alignment of the Church to Israel, is one of few Messianic Jews in Israel engaged in ecumenical work with Christian churches. There are, however, disagreements within the Messianic Jewish world over whether "full number/fullness" (v. 25) equals maturity: Chayim, for example, strongly objects to

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<sup>55</sup> "Avraham." Emphasis original.

this understanding of Avraham. For him, the consequences of Avraham’s proposed “right understanding” would result in the Church’s voluntarily placing herself in a subordinate, unequal position to believing Israel.<sup>56</sup> This very understanding of maturity is one of the central points in the current conflict in the Israeli Messianic Jewish world, briefly discussed earlier (see Chapter Five).

The interviews display three different understandings of what “the full number of the Gentiles” means: whether it refers to *number* (amount), *time* (connected to land), or *maturity* (trait). This does not necessarily mean that holding to one of these means rejecting the others; some polysemy is likely present among the readers although not expressed here. In the second case, the prophecy is considered already fulfilled (1967), in the other cases it is a prophecy in the process of being fulfilled in the present. Regardless of interpretation, the empirical-religious readers’ experience of this apocalyptic text forms their identity in an eschatological shape—just as the PWJ scholars say it formed Paul’s identity.<sup>57</sup> Hence, the participants take on the role of “Pauls.”

## “All Israel will Be Saved”

Paul’s exclamation “and so all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) plays a fundamental role in Messianic Jewish thinking. *Tikkun*, the American-Israeli Messianic Jewish organization, has this verse as its slogan, using it to conclude each of its weekly newsletters. The theme is a constantly present trope during services and in teaching, prayers, and songs, so as to remind the believers of this promise. It is with this statement that God, through Paul, once and for all confirms that he is faithful to his people.

The proclamation is read in a “plain way” by the participants, taken for granted and used as a backdrop for understanding Paul. Several of the scripturalists simply read and quote the verse, seeing no need to dig into it more deeply, uncritically taking “all Israel” to refer to “every Jew”—whatever that means in terms of identity and time—and showing a firm conviction in the truth of Paul’s statement. Two other more detailed interpretations of “all Israel” are discussed below, where it should be noted that what comes to light is, naturally, merely what the interviews revealed from readings of Rom 11 and not their full eschatology. A more comprehensive analysis of different approaches to eschatology and schemes over the end times

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<sup>56</sup> “Chayim.” The conflict within the Messianic Jewish world, briefly discussed earlier (Chapter Five), is partly caused by whether “full number” is interpreted as maturity among the Nations or not.

<sup>57</sup> See nn. 31–35 in this chapter.

among Messianic Jewish theologians is available in Richard Harvey's study, in which it becomes clear that Mark S. Kinzer, representing a very traditional-Jewish approach, is furthest away from traditional Christian teachings.<sup>58</sup> Harvey's study also reveals that those leaning towards the former end of the spectrum spent considerably less time with these issues than the participants whose voices are heard below, who are in the middle and towards the evangelical-Jewish end. It is also important to remember that the empirical-religious readers are part of, and "experience" this prophecy and promise of an all-saved Israel: it is something that has started to unfold in the "now." They are the first fruits of all Israel.

## All Israel as the Majority

The reading interview with Avraham displays what appeared to be a common understanding of "all Israel will be saved" within the Messianic Jewish community in Jerusalem. He reasons in an assured tone:

"And so all Israel will be saved" [v. 26]. When that happens there will be a *national* salvation. So there is something that still has to happen in the Gentile part of the church that Paul calls fullness. And it's ["all Israel"], I'm sure, *not a number of people*. So a lot of people ask the question when they read Paul as he before said "not all Israel is Israel" [refers to Rom 9:6<sup>59</sup>]. So what did he mean? So, when he says, "all Israel will be saved," I think what he means was that national salvation, *even if it doesn't include every single one, that will be all Israel. Because "all Israel" at the end can only be messianic Israel*, that is, that's the destiny of Israel. It was God's plan with Israel when he created us as a nation.

I personally believe that there will be a national salvation just before he comes back and when he comes. Because that's what we see in Zech 12[:10],<sup>60</sup> it says, "they will look upon me whom they have pierced." It's talking about *some kind of national salvation. And that happens before the second coming of the Lord...* A lot of us [Messianic Jews] have still basically inherited some of the not-so-good things in the Church; the whole dispensational thinking, it's basically inherited from the missions, from the churches. I think it's a wrong understanding of Scripture, that's number one.

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<sup>58</sup> Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology*, 223–61, for the discussion on Kinzer, see 250–58.

<sup>59</sup> "For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel." (Rom 9:6 NRSV)

<sup>60</sup> "And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (Zech 12:10 NRSV)

Number two, it chops things up into sections where you almost feel that one section is not connected to the other. It's all chopped up. *There's not a sense of the wholeness of the plan of God. It is one plan of God.*<sup>61</sup>

In Avraham's conception there will come a "national salvation" in the eschatological drama, in which "all Israel" will be saved. The readings also display a strong hermeneutic of Yeshualogy: the salvation of all Jews is, "of course," when they confess and come to faith in Jesus as Messiah of Israel—their Messiah. For Avraham, and several of the other readers, "all Israel" is *not* equal to the whole of Israel as in any form of a totality of Jews. Not promoting such a literal understanding, "all Israel" is rather understood as "it doesn't include every single one." In Yoel's words "it doesn't mean every soul,"<sup>62</sup> whereas Nahum phrases it as "a representative majority."<sup>63</sup> The single verse of "all Israel" is placed within a wider framework of the Bible, with Avraham (and also Andrei<sup>64</sup>) pointing out that Paul considers "not all Israel is Israel" (Rom 9:6), forcing him to negotiate seemingly contradictory ideas. The idea that not everybody will be saved is further strengthened by the many biblical passages interpreted as proposing a heaven and a hell. In other words, a hermeneutic of Yeshualogy is above a literalist ideology; a Yeshualogy directs their creative "literalism."

Avraham emphasizes throughout the interview that "God's plan with Israel," which runs throughout the Bible, which accords with his words on seeing "the wholeness of the plan of God." By this, he seems to imply that some things need to be left to God to handle, and that they simply need to trust God. In his negotiations, Avraham ends up making the distinction—shared by others—that "all Israel" in the *eschaton* can only be "messianic Israel" that is, those Jews who have confessed faith in Jesus. In equating "all Israel" with "messianic Israel," there is a transformation of "Israel" around the Messiah (similar to how the "remnant" [v. 5] was redefined around Jesus) in the textual practice of Yeshualogy. For the participants, this is not accepted in a supersessionist, replacing way, but as a natural development in the end times as the concept "all Israel" in its entirety is subsumed by "messianic Israel"—believers in Jesus.

Explored further below, Jesus's return to Israel plays a fundamental role in Messianic Jewish thinking. The national salvation of Israel occurs just before—alternatively also during—the return of Jesus, according to both Avraham and

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<sup>61</sup> "Avraham." My emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> "Yoel."

<sup>63</sup> "Nahum."

<sup>64</sup> "Andrei."

Jacob.<sup>65</sup> “Out of Zion the Deliverer will come,” Paul writes (v. 26), as a continuation of “and so all Israel will be saved.”

It is also worth pointing out that Avraham’s approach stands in opposition to Chayim’s view (see below) as they have different relationships to different Christian traditions. While Avraham does not offer a more extensive version of his eschatology, he criticizes “the whole dispensational thinking,” which, he explains, Messianic Judaism has “inherited from the missions.” His main critique is that this form of eschatology is “a wrong understanding of Scripture” in its chopping-up of periods in the end-time scenario. He instead proposes a “wholeness,” in which everything that Paul and the whole Bible speak about is according to the *one* plan of God, a process unfolding (see Chapter Five and below on Chayim). Ironically, dispensationalism was originally developed as a reaction against a theology of wholeness.

### All Israel as One Third

The reading interview with Chayim turns out differently from the others when we come to speak about what “all Israel will be saved” means. His is a grand example of how a few words can provoke—and then be applied to—a whole system of eschatological thought. Although the other readers do not share such a full picture of their eschatology with me during the reading interviews, it does not necessarily suggest that they do not share any of Chayim’s convictions. In fact, during participant observation of congregations during services, I have listened to more or less full eschatological musings resembling to those of Chayim’s.<sup>66</sup>

*They [Jewish and non-Jewish Jesus-believers] are not called the Church, you call them believers of the tribulation. So those who join the tribulation, who accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, they are called the remnant in a sense. Because all the remnant will be saved, all Israel will be saved. Those are all the remnant who stayed alive and will be saved, the others will be killed as non-believers or whatever. Okay, so this is what I see. So it’s never that all those who enter into the tribulation are going to end up believers. We don’t have this promise. I wish! But I don’t have a [Bible] verse to prove it.... That’s why we do believe that the rapture would be before the tribulation.... As such, we [all Jesus-believers] fulfill what Israel [Jewish non-believers in Jesus] fails to fulfill temporarily. Until the rapture. During the rapture God takes Israel, kicks them out, shakes them around, kicks them around.... Why? In order to take out one third to be saved. And that’s all [of] Israel that will be left. Why one third? Because that’s what Zech 13:8–9 says. Now, when will all Israel be*

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<sup>65</sup> “Jacob.”

<sup>66</sup> Cf. the short discussion of (pre)millennialism, rapture, and tribulation in Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 133–35.

*saved? It's the leftover of the tribulation. Jesus will come then and then he will come to judge. When Jesus returns it will not be a time for options. It will be a time of judgment of the Nations, the goats and the kvasim, the lambs.... When Jesus returns it will be judgment upon those who by that moment [are] un-saved and acceptance to the kingdom for those who are saved. And of Israel, one third will be left. And that would be all Israel. It would be the one hundred percent.*<sup>67</sup>

When Chayim tells me all of the above, he does so with great certainty and authority in his voice and body language; his rhetoric is draped in dispensationalist terminology as he speaks of the rapture and tribulation.<sup>68</sup> However, his is not an expression of traditional dispensationalist theology as formulated by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century (whose scheme he several times contradicts) but rather of cultural dispensationalism where the ideas are present but without systematization, and perhaps more influenced by prophecy fiction such as the *Left Behind* series.<sup>69</sup> Instead of unpacking each word in his eschatology, it rather seems fitting to approach the quote as *negotiations* about Bible belief and end-time speculations. Somehow, he needs to balance and find a way through all his beliefs: that of the ultimate, literal truth of the Bible, of personal faith in Jesus as the only way for salvation, and of both heaven and hell as plausible destinations. Here, he is visibly influenced by an evangelical or a fundamentalist heritage, and not Pauline scholarship.

Chayim's negotiations serve the purpose of explaining "all Israel." His textual practice is deeply "literally creative."<sup>70</sup> Using the prophet Zechariah to interpret Paul, herein he finds the solution of "all Israel" as being one third of the original number. Chayim solves his negotiations with a scriptural means of escape—the meaning of "all"—claiming that *the "all Israel" that "will be saved" is one third of Israel*. Hence, for him, one hundred percent of Israel is the one third of Israel because only one third has remained, the "leftover," after the tribulation—an understanding also shared by Dov.<sup>71</sup> With this, Chayim protects the literalism of "all Israel" *and* his conviction that a lot of the Jewish people will not become believers

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<sup>67</sup> "Chayim." My emphasis.

<sup>68</sup> Dispensationalism is a detailed eschatological system that divides both history and the biblical texts into different "dispensations," i.e., separate eras with different events such as the rapture and the tribulation. The teaching quickly developed into different versions as events were placed differently on the eschatological timeline. One characteristic of dispensationalism is the division between the Jewish people and the Church. The classical understanding of rapture is that Jesus-believers will miraculously and physically be "caught up" (*raptus* in Latin) to God in a saving act before the chaos of the tribulation.

<sup>69</sup> Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 45, 165.

<sup>70</sup> Bielo, "Literally Creative."

<sup>71</sup> "Dov."

and he supports his ideology of the whole Bible as God’s “living Word.” The singling out of the one third and the salvation of all Israel occurs in the apocalyptic events following what he refers to as the tribulation, the “stage” in the apocalyptic scenario of suffering and chaos (cf. Matt 24 in which Jesus’s teaching about the signs of the end times is narrated). The intertextual usage of Zech 13:8–9<sup>72</sup> is also creative as the prophet speaks about one third being left in the *land of Israel* and put through a cleansing fire. For Chayim, it becomes an image of salvation. Ultimately, Chayim’s rather confused, in my view, comment is guided and made cohesive by a textuality that understands the Bible as a unified story and a profound Yeshualogy.

What is “Israel”? In this specific and single case, Chayim offers a double definition of the concept but does not seem to recognize this. In the first section he talks about Jewish and non-Jewish believers as constituting the “believers of the tribulation,” which he equates with the remnant (v. 5) and “all Israel,” while in the second, he defines “Israel” as the Jewish people, especially those who do not yet believe in Jesus, thus presenting both a contradiction and a flirtation with an understanding present in older Pauline perspectives. Chayim does call himself “the black sheep” of the movement, not caring especially about this Jewishness, which places him at the evangelical-Jewish end of the spectrum of Messianic Judaism.

### Conversing about “All Israel”

When placing the Messianic Jewish readings in conversation with readings from a PWJ perspective, the following is worth noting: none of the Messianic Jewish readers (perhaps except Chayim) would think of “Israel” as being redefined, as being something else, or being wider than solely ethnic, historical Israel, that is, the Jewish people. The same is true for the PWJ perspective: “Israel” is always and only the Jewish people, the ethnic, historic Israel—it is never redefined or enlarged to include non-Jews, as in older Pauline scholarship.<sup>73</sup> Here is one important point of similarity, the fact that Messianic Jews read “all Israel” as do PWJ scholars, which is in line with a post-supersessionist reading. Yet Avraham redefines Israel from the people, as such, to “messianic” Israel (Jesus-believing Jews alone). This neither conforms exactly with within-scholars’ formulations, nor with the Paul and Judaism (PAJ) perspective, where N. T. Wright argues for “Israel” to be as “Paul has

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<sup>72</sup> “In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are my people’; and they will say, ‘The Lord is our God.’” (Zech 13:8–9 NRSV)

<sup>73</sup> E.g., Nanos, ““Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable,”” esp. 216–18; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 156, 161; Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 12, 32, 63; Campbell, *The Nations*, 232; Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 195.; cf. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 128.

redefined it to include (1) Messiah-believing Jews ... *and* (2) Messiah-believing Gentiles.”<sup>74</sup> The Messianic Jewish understanding is instead something in between these two Pauline scholarly trajectories—but as noted—strongly formed by Yeshualogy.

Reading “all Israel,” PWJ scholars do not share the understanding of some of the participants in terms of one third of Israel. Rather, the Messianic Jewish understanding of “all Israel” as denoting the majority of the Jews is also present in the understanding of PWJ scholars, but expressed differently. Tucker, for instance, proposes that Paul pictured “a large-scale turning of the Jewish people to the Messiah Jesus close to or at the time of the Parousia.”<sup>75</sup> Simultaneously, voices are being suggesting a seemingly “plain” reading: that “all Israel” means “all Israel,”<sup>76</sup> a way of handling the text that is also present among the participants. *That* “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) is the decisive issue, not exact numbers, to (seemingly) hold on to a hermeneutic of post-supersessionism.

The Messianic Jewish readers strongly agree with PWJ scholars that the salvation of all Israel is the second step, after the Gentiles, in the eschatological scenario (see also Chapter Five). Among the Messianic Jews, however, it is “obvious” that Israel will be saved by coming to faith in Jesus, hence, the Deliverer (v. 26) is the Messiah. However, as mentioned earlier, within the scholarly paradigm, understandings of the role of Jesus are divided, emphasis less accentuated, and sometimes it is not addressed explicitly (see Chapters One, Four, and Five). Most scholars, with whom the empirical-religious readers agree, construct a Paul that envisions a time when Israel will turn to the Messiah Jesus.<sup>77</sup> A minor faction portrays Paul as proposing a dual salvation scenario, arguing that God himself will turn Israel to faithfulness towards him and that Jesus has no function for Israel.<sup>78</sup> Nanos, offering an alternative translation in his attempts to propose a post-supersessionist reading, suggests that Israel will not necessarily be saved, but “made safe” and “protected.”<sup>79</sup> The Messianic Jewish readers, perhaps except Aryeh, strongly oppose a dual salvation reading, although they and the scholars do agree that Israel’s salvation, or redemption (whatever it implies), is the focus in Paul’s thinking and it proves that

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<sup>74</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1244. My emphasis.

<sup>75</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 185, see also 188.

<sup>76</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255; Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 103, 140; Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 150, 161; Ehrensperger, “The Question(s) of Gender,” 274; Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective.”

<sup>77</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, “Question of Worship,” 199; Zetterholm, “Paul Within Judaism Perspective,” 187–89; cf. Campbell, *The Nations*, 304, 313. Campbell here stresses not Jesus, but that this verse in Rom (v. 27) is actualizing the “new covenant” prophesized in Jer 31.

<sup>78</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 255.

<sup>79</sup> Nanos, ““Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable,”” 217.

Israel is not rejected. Yet, for the Messianic Jewish readers, Jesus is accentuated in a way not present in the PWJ scholars' construction of Paul. This, perhaps, is not surprising since they are the part of Israel saved by "Yeshua"—or so they believe.

## The End Times through Prophecies

When the Messianic Jewish readers engage in explaining Paul's words about the end times, many of them—such as Avraham and Chayim—use the prophecies in Zech 12–13. Here again, time and land are deeply intertwined. The *roeh* in *Alef* also preached on the prophecies in Zechariah connected to these themes. Addressing this text, the scripturalists specifically referred to two phases they see in it: chaos and salvation. The chaos is placed in an end-time scenario, often understood as the tribulation, where biblical prophecies about wars, famines, natural disasters, and all forms of suffering will cause turmoil on earth.<sup>80</sup> Applied to today's realities, contemporary times are viewed as experiencing the first signs of what is going to be much worse in the eschatological drama.

So, I think there is gonna come to a point... there's a passage, I think in Zechariah 13, that talks about the time coming when there's gonna be huge persecution against Israel. Seems to indicate that at the end ... a lot of suffering and a lot of people are gonna die.... I, I, I feel that it's probably saying that there's gonna be a really tough time for Israel.<sup>81</sup>

Dov clearly speaks within this paradigm of awaiting chaos, because so the Bible says; indeed, a "huge persecution against Israel" is a trope much repeated by Messianic Jews and Christian Zionists. This results in a "tribulational" framework where everything seemingly "bad" against the people or the State of Israel—regardless of anti-Semitic attacks or political threats—are interpreted within this understanding of persecution. Eschatologically loaded political chaos is also a theme within this rhetoric, especially that of Israel being destroyed, a theme that resonates with actual threats made against Israel from enemy states, particularly Iran with its nuclear program.<sup>82</sup> For the Messianic Jewish readers, and in contrast to Pauline scholarship, this time of suffering is acute and present. With Zech 13 in the background, Chayim speaks about the coming tribulation, formulated by other readers in political terms: "the global attack against Israel"<sup>83</sup> and a "world rising up

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<sup>80</sup> E.g., Faydra L. Shapiro, "Taming Tehran: Evangelical Christians and the Iranian Threat to Israel," *SR* 39:3 (2010): 363–77, 368.

<sup>81</sup> "Dov."

<sup>82</sup> Shapiro, "Taming Tehran," esp. 370.

<sup>83</sup> "Jacob."

against Israel.”<sup>84</sup> Equally, some readers, such as Nahum, are convinced that the global rise of anti-Semitism and the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement against Israeli goods were clear signs that this end-time period of chaos had begun.<sup>85</sup> The world is doomed. The particular period of my fieldwork was one of violence in Israel, witnessing, for example, the “Knife Intifada” against Israelis; this has reinforced eschatological speculations among the participants, as have Messianic Jewish media discussions of more recent conflicts such as the Israel-Gaza war during the spring of 2021.

One illustrative example of how Messianic Jews read the Bible and world events side by side in an effort to understand God’s timing is found in *Birth Pangs* (2020).<sup>86</sup> Written by Ron Cantor, a Messianic Jew based in Israel, the catchy front cover proclaims, “The beginning of the end is here, what you must do to be ready.” The title is taken from the gospels (Matt 24:8<sup>87</sup>) where Jesus foretells the signs of the end, and the year 2020 is proclaimed as such. Elaborating why, several chaotic aspects are presented: the Covid-19 pandemic, racial riots, the explosion in Beirut, Islamic violence in Europe, Donald Trump losing the US election, and extreme natural disasters. While this kind of date-setting is a bit unfashionable in present-day Christian Zionism, the author “explained” that the book was written in a prophetic frenzy, led by the Spirit, as a practical guide for the end times. Although the believers pray for peace, they “know,” based on the Bible, that the challenges of today will become much worse before the coming of the Messiah.

Many readers—about one third—refer to Zech 13 to speak about what follows the time of chaos: salvation. After proclaiming the salvation of all of Israel, Paul adds that “out of Zion will come the Deliverer” (v. 26), clearly understood by the scripturalists to be Jesus. Yet this statement was somewhat neglected by the Messianic Jewish readers, who instead quoted the prophet’s words: “And I will pour out a Spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him” (Zech 12:10 NRSV). The future of Israel is ultimately framed within the prophecies of Zechariah, and in continuation with Paul, of God pouring out his Spirit. Dov makes this connection explicitly when he states, “At that point, when the Spirit is poured on them [by God], they are all gonna be saved, and that’s all of Israel. So that’s how all of Israel will be saved.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> “Yitshak.”

<sup>85</sup> “Nahum.”

<sup>86</sup> Ron Cantor, *Birth Pangs: The Beginning of the End is Here, What You Must Do to Be Ready* (Privately published: 2020). He has also authored a book entitled *The Coming End-Time Awakening*.

<sup>87</sup> “All this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (Matt 24:8 NRSV)

<sup>88</sup> “Dov.”

Why is this prophecy of such value? The spatial context of Zechariah is Jerusalem. Jerusalem as a city, as a place, is decisive for the eschatology of the Messianic Jewish readers, not least in the reading of 1967 and the reunification/occupation (Israeli/Palestinian perspective) of Jerusalem as a fullness of the times of the Gentiles. Yoel applies the prophecy to the end-time scenario by referring to “all the power from the holy Spirit that’s breaking out in Jerusalem! How many millions will come to faith in the last revival? That’s what he [Zechariah] is talking about.”<sup>89</sup> The national salvation, in their minds, appears in the land of Israel, and in Jerusalem specifically (discussed more in depth at the end of this chapter).

## Eschatology as Identity and Interpretative Tradition

In this summarizing section on time related to Rom 11, I make the argument that Messianic Jewish identity is deeply eschatological and made eschatological through their engagement with the Bible. Brian Malley in his study, *How the Bible Works* (2004), formulates an “empirical model” of evangelical Bible reading based on his fieldwork in a conservative Baptist church in the United States.<sup>90</sup> According to him, this model displays what evangelicals actually do with a biblical text when they make sense of it, what they say it “means,” that is, their interpretative practices. Considering the many overlaps and the historical dependence between Messianic Jews and evangelicals (discussed in Chapter Two), Malley’s model is applicable to the Messianic Jewish readers in this study as well. According to his model, evangelicals (a) have an “interpretative tradition” wherein the goal is not only to establish meaning, but also to ascribe beliefs to the Bible and to establish “transitivity” between the text and beliefs: theological, cultural, political. However, (b) they do not have a “hermeneutical tradition” in the sense of a set of rules for interpreting a text; rather, (c) their reading is motivated by a constant “search for relevance.”<sup>91</sup> The interpretative tradition is, therefore, (d) caught between “the Scylla of interpretative freedom and the Charybdis of irrelevance.”<sup>92</sup> Reading a biblical text therefore requires a degree of individual freedom so that it may be made relevant to a specific situation; with too little freedom, the interpretative tradition

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<sup>89</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>90</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73–74.

<sup>91</sup> This is similar to Jewish hermeneutics as it was in antiquity. James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15–17.

<sup>92</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73–74; see also Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 168.

risks disintegrating, rendering the text simply a historical document. As I understand Malley, his use of “interpretative tradition” is similar to what I have called hermeneutical strategies as part of textual practice (Yeshualogy, post-supersessionism, and relevance—the last partly inspired by Malley; see Chapter Three), yet Malley’s ideas about an interpretative tradition offer deepened insights into Messianic Jewish interaction with the Bible.

The strength of the interpretative tradition is its ability to connect larger tropes or themes with the biblical text as a form of umbrella under which a close-up reading can take place, while at the same time retaining the focus on the wider theme. Malley reasons that this textual practice emphasizes the *fact* of connection [between the Bible and beliefs] more than of particular connections. For instance, as seen above, Rom 11 is read with the belief that the end times have somehow begun, rather than expressing details about this; the *idea* is what matters. And thus, a great deal of “what the Bible says” may be transmitted quite apart from actual exegesis [“what the text says”].<sup>93</sup>

This chapter—and, indeed, the whole study—stresses that time, or rather the end times, have proved to be of considerable importance, and is the perspective from which the Messianic Jewish readers engage with Rom 11. It is thus reasonable to think of eschatology and the eschatological tradition as an interpretative tradition; the eschatological conviction constitutes “the belief” and “the fact” that the Messianic Jewish readers connect with the Bible and specific texts such as Rom 11. *That* the Bible speaks about the end times is thereby more important than *exactly* what it says.

This can, therefore, explain why the empirical-religious readers offer different readings of “a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (vv. 25–26). It also offers a reasonable explanation, first, for why so many express insecurities about what the text as such means, and second, the many sweeping readings, confirming the words in a literal way but not engaging in making sense of them. Similarly, several of the Messianic Jewish readers, when they come to Paul’s doxology at the very end of Rom 11 (vv. 33–36), seem to be grateful for his words, summarized by Avraham as “no one can figure out the ways of God,”<sup>94</sup> which functions almost as an excuse and a scriptural means of escape when they do not know what Paul means. Engberg explains that this “inattention to detail and the absence of a systematic eschatological narrative” still promotes a textual ideology of literalism, of the Bible as “God’s infallible Word”; the “*general* prophetic narrative” is superior to “*particular* events” or texts.<sup>95</sup> However, working with Bible-reading interviews of

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<sup>93</sup> Malley, *How the Bible Works*, 73. Emphasis original.

<sup>94</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>95</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 169–70. Emphasis original.

a specific text, in this case Rom 11, I tend to think that Malley is a bit too quick to dismiss the role of specific biblical texts in creating “the belief” or “the fact.” A single text can be very valuable in discerning an interpretative tradition. Nonetheless, the most important aspect here is that all the Messianic Jewish readers frame Paul’s words within an eschatological, prophetic interpretative tradition.

Through the interpretative tradition of eschatology, the empirical-religious readings presented above have persistently been made relevant for the participants as readers today, one of the fundamental hermeneutical strategies addressed earlier (see Chapter Three). These texts are also rendered about *them*, even in the cases where Paul speaks about Gentiles or other Jews who do not believe in Jesus. The Messianic Jewish readers construct the text as relevant because they consider the Bible to be “the living Word.” This is most apparent in the application of “the full number of the Gentiles” as a prophecy that has already been fulfilled or is about to be fulfilled, and of “all Israel will be saved” as a prophecy not yet but soon to be fulfilled. Prophecies considered fulfilled are naturally more specific and detailed as they can be applied to a historical event (such as 1967), whereas prophecies yet to be fulfilled, not surprisingly, are blurrier. Taken together, they create a sense of meaningfulness, of God’s faithfulness, and sustain an expectation of more to come. Moreover, Rom 11 is rendered profoundly relevant for Messianic Jews as the sheer existence of the modern Messianic Jewish movement is perceived as occupying this tension between the two phases of eschatological unfolding, as a prophetic sign and as evidence of God’s faithfulness to his people and promises.

Abram (Bram) Poljak (1900–1963), a pioneer in the Messianic Jewish movement, wrote of this relevance of the text to contemporary events: “[I]f the Bible is true and if Yeshua is the Messiah and the King of the Jews, then the Messianic Jewish movement is the most important phenomenon of *our time*—the distinguishing feature indicating that *the world has come to a turning point*.”<sup>96</sup> The “turning point” is the rise of the Messianic Jewish movement whose believers identify themselves as the “first fruits” and the remnant (e.g., Isa 37:31–32<sup>97</sup> and Rom 11:16<sup>98</sup>, see also Chapter Four). A Messianic Jewish teaching ministry has chosen the name “First Fruits of Zion,” which illustrates the importance of this prophetic identification. Moreover, the importance of time in general and as hermeneutical key has proved significant throughout this study. It might be argued that, following this logic, Rom 11, more than any other, is a text about the participants themselves. When Paul writes about their negotiations with their Jewish and Gentile surroundings, he is

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<sup>96</sup> “About First Fruits of Zion,” <https://ffoz.org/info/about.html>. My emphasis.

<sup>97</sup> “The surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward; for from Jerusalem a remnant shall go out, and from Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isa 37:31–32 NRSV)

<sup>98</sup> “If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.” (Rom 11:16 NRSV)

laying out the eschatological drama wherein they themselves are actors and living, material, prophetic signs of the end times, and provide the model for how they will form their own identity. Rom 11 is written to, for, and about them as Messianic Jews (see also Chapters Four and Five).

The concept of time is itself very flexible and thus suitable for the Messianic Jews in their efforts to make Rom 11 relevant. Having an interpretative tradition of eschatology automatically makes the text relevant until the end times actually appear (assuming they ever do). Messianic Judaism is caught in a meantime: between already fulfilled and yet-to-be fulfilled prophecies. Living in this tension while eagerly awaiting and working for the return of Jesus is an efficient meaning-making tool. While this conviction is generally shared theoretically by all forms of Christianity, for Messianic Jews it is something acute and almost tangible. Susan Harding has coined the expression “flexible absolutism” in her study of fundamentalist Christian rhetoric, language, and politics. She explains this as a “rhetorical capacity” to make new or changing positions appear as “eternal absolutes.”<sup>99</sup> In the quote by Poljak above, he speaks about “our time”—as in, *his* time, which is now long ago; yet it is nonetheless still “true” for today’s Messianic Jews: it is still “our time.” The concept of absolutism is thus applicable to time and text; the fact that the end times are coming serves as an absolutism while remaining flexible about when this will actually happen and how.

Flexibility, creativity, and the search for relevance mean that texts such as Rom 11 always have something to say; they are flexible enough to be applied to current events and to speak to all kinds of situations. This is true both for Messianic Jews and for evangelical Christianity more widely. As seen throughout this chapter, and especially with the opening quote by Yitshak, *current* time—“I’m in the midst of it!”—is constructed as a very special time in God’s timetable. For Messianic Jews, textual flexibility and relevance ensure that it always is “such a time as this.” The expression originates in Esther (Esth 4:14<sup>100</sup>) and indicates a special time where God is doing something extraordinary, often in regard to the Jewish people. It has been something of a catch phrase within Christian Zionist and also Messianic Jewish circles<sup>101</sup> to suggest that this is special time when the prophecies are being fulfilled. Ultimately, it serves to create a connection between the biblical text and contemporary events, making the present a continuation of the biblical story.

The analysis so far has presented the Messianic Jewish readers as caught between times, yet simultaneously enrolled in a greater eschatological drama. As Engberg argues, “the field of Bible prophecy contributes to the production of the sense of

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<sup>99</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 275.

<sup>100</sup> “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” (Esth 4:14 NRSV)

<sup>101</sup> Durbin, ““For Such a Time as This””; Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, esp. 170.

importance, urgency, and contemporary and personal relevance,”<sup>102</sup> yet I would hasten to add that it also contributes to hope and positive expectation as the scripturalists find “proofs” that God is faithful through interpreting prophecy. In regard to Messianic Judaism, Harris-Shapiro argues similarly that “factual history ... can prove the veracity of Biblical claims”:<sup>103</sup> in other words, the very existence of the movement proves to Messianic Jews that the Bible is “true,” and that its proclaimed end is near. Their interpretative tradition and identity, in sum, seem to be fully eschatological: they construct their identity in light of biblical prophecies about the end times and their experiences of them as they come alive. The last word in this discussion, to confirm my argument from an emic perspective, is given to Daniel C. Juster: “our [Messianic Jewish] identity in the Land is seen as eschatological, for we may be players on the stage of history just before the return of Yeshua to Jerusalem.”<sup>104</sup>

## Called to Spread the Good News

Shifting focus in the textual practice from how the end of Rom 11 is interpreted and understood by the Messianic Jewish readers, this section rather focuses on the practice of applying Paul’s words to their own actions in regard to sharing “the good news” about “Yeshua” with fellow Jews. Eschatology and mission are deeply connected; it was so in Paul’s time, throughout Christian history, and it is so also for the Messianic Jewish readers today. Therefore, the very phenomenon of spreading the gospel is motivated by an apocalyptic framework. In his historical study, Yaakov Ariel shows how Christian missions to the Jews were largely motivated by eschatological convictions.<sup>105</sup> Correspondingly, in his presentation of Messianic Jewish outreach, insider Stuart Dauermann also asserts that the eschatological perspective in Rom 9–11 motivates Jewish outreach to the Jewish people. Discussions of “the full number of the Gentiles” and “all Israel will be saved” (see above) are thus to be understood within the framework of reaching out with the good news and inviting people to become included, or “saved.”<sup>106</sup> It is a

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<sup>102</sup> Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 172.

<sup>103</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 113.

<sup>104</sup> Juster, “The American and Israeli,” 133; for more from him on this topic, see Juster and Intrater, *Israel*.

<sup>105</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 9–21; Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 244.

<sup>106</sup> Stuart Dauermann, “Messianic Jewish Outreach,” in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*, eds. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 90–97, 92–93.

call to believers to work towards drawing as many as possible into becoming part of the world to come. In other words, engaging in mission is a contributory part of bringing prophecies about the end to fulfillment.

The focus for this third part of the chapter is the practical response of living in the end times: evangelization, or outreach, towards other (non-Jesus-believing) Jews. This is clearly the practical outworking of the above-discussed numerical understanding of the “full number of the Gentiles (v. 25). The Messianic Jewish readers constantly bring up this topic in the interviews, especially when the themes of time and eschatology are discussed at the end of Rom 11. This is not surprising, as a major theoretical approach when working with empirical reception studies is the reading strategy of making the text relevant for the readers’ situational context and interests. Based on the interviews, this section offers a few examples of how evangelization is negotiated in the Israeli setting.

When Chayim and I discuss the eschatological prophecy of “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) in relation to the “life from the dead” (v. 15), he exclaims, “Do you want to see the world resurrected? Of course! So go and preach to the Jews.”<sup>107</sup> Clearly motivated by an eschatological conviction, he argues that the task of Messianic Judaism is to expand the remnant (v. 5) of Jewish believers. Connecting it to his own congregation, he explains, “This is what we do. That’s why a big part of our budget is evangelism.”<sup>108</sup> He continues to explain what his congregation does every week in preparing gatherings to reach out to new people with “the good news.” Asking whether he sees any effect of this in terms of a larger number of Jewish believers, he replies:

You know, you see the sea. It looks so calm. But ... there’s turmoil under the sea. And I do believe that’s what happens now.... In the last two years, we [his ministry] invested a lot in YouTube. We prepared our recording studio, we prepared special video clips on salvation. Very easy to understand and very catchy in that sense. 4.5 million viewers after thirty secs of a three-minute clip.... God is the one who changes their [the Jews] hearts.<sup>109</sup>

The idea behind Chayim’s image of the sea figures in several of the interviews, making it a cultural trope within the Messianic Jewish world in Israel. The evangelization work invested in by Messianic Jews so that more Jews will come to discover Jesus as their savior—the goal of their efforts—does not appear to have resulted in much. But “there’s turmoil under the sea”: although clear results might be lacking, their mission efforts prompt change and serve as preparation. One day, Chayim is convinced, their work in the present will show great dividends as the

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<sup>107</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>108</sup> “Chayim.”

<sup>109</sup> “Chayim.”

congregations will see large numbers of Jews coming to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The absence of immediate, showy results does not seem to discourage the leaders, rather the opposite, motivating them to work even harder. They trust God to work according to his plan, they are “just” his servants, helping to live out the prophecy of “all Israel will be saved.”

The second part in the quote above addresses methods of evangelization. Chayim is clearly proud of their recording studio, which he describes warmly and at length. Using the Internet and various digital media platforms have become popular means of reaching large audiences with the gospel, not only in the evangelical Christian world and in the Middle East more broadly, but also among Messianic Jewish congregations. This “behind the desk” evangelization produces appealing, easy-to-grasp clips with the message that “Yeshua” is the promised Messiah of Israel. A common theme raised by participants is the profound skepticism felt by Israelis towards the Messianic Jewish movement; overcoming it with digital outreach is more successful than face-to-face methods. Besides having fancy websites, several, such as Eli, are engaged in the publishing industry, producing material about faith in Jesus in Hebrew. Many local Messianic Jewish congregations are also actively involved in different kinds of social and charitable work to reach out to people in need and live out the call to witness about Jesus.<sup>110</sup>

A few contextual notes are in place here. A strong majority of Messianic Jews has no hesitation regarding mission to the Jews, in fact considering it essential. This creates a contrast, and potential conflict, with their close partners in the Christian Zionist missions active in Israel that avoid outright evangelization in favor of social outreach initiatives such as delivering food packages to poor people and affiliating with the Israeli political establishment. Although prioritizing evangelization, many Messianic Jews in Israel—including the empirical-religious readers—are caught in a complicated situation with regard to the State of Israel. The state has a long and complex history of how it relates to evangelization, described in detail elsewhere,<sup>111</sup> which is still visible in a strong discomfort with public preaching among Jews. While restricted, evangelism is, however, legal. Thus, for example, the Messianic Jewish National Outreach Committee, founded in the early 1980s, has actively led public evangelism campaigns in Israel ever since. Speaking from his own experience, Akiva Cohen notes that “Israelis freely evangelize in many different ways.”<sup>112</sup> However, this does not go unchallenged, with the most severe opposition coming from the ultra-Orthodox organization Yad L’Achim (Hand to Brothers). As an anti-missionary movement, they strongly oppose the Messianic Jewish

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 110; Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 279–81.

<sup>111</sup> Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, 275–79; Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 110–13; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 92–93.

<sup>112</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 110.

movement and view Jewish believers in Jesus as betrayers of “Jewish corporate solidarity.”<sup>113</sup> Yad L’Achim’s slogan, “We don’t give up on even a single Jew!”<sup>114</sup> powerfully describes their passion, manifested in making life hard for Messianic Jews individually and collectively through attacks and campaigns, as well as lobbying to make proselytization illegal.<sup>115</sup> Despite this societal hostility, the Messianic Jewish readers express a sincere conviction that sharing the gospel with their fellow Jews is what they are called to do—and will continue to do by various means.

Yitshak provides another example. A great entrepreneur, he serves a congregation that is deeply engaged in outreach in the more traditional sense of preaching, praying, singing, and talking to Israelis in classic street evangelization fashion—in his view the form that most profoundly answers to the eschatological urgency found in Rom 11. My being part of a co-constructive process is never as clear in the Bible-reading interviews as it is with him. Assuming that I am a born-again Christian believer, Yitshak dedicates considerable time to getting me to join his evangelization team:

*Why didn’t you come for the missions?... You’re an academic girl? The real life is not in the academic bullshit!... Join us here at [name]! Come and be part of our team!... You’ve done the wrong choice. Come here instead. Change your ticket!... Why not you? Trust the Lord, your heart is in the right place.... So you are coming for how long? We need you.*<sup>116</sup>

The phenomenon of being witnessed to as a researcher on religious groups is well-known fact, attested to in studies such as Harding’s,<sup>117</sup> and, in the field of Messianic Judaism, the studies by Harris-Shapiro and Tamir Erez.<sup>118</sup> In the case of Erez, it went so far that he was finally asked to leave his field site in Tel Aviv because he remained personally uninterested in joining the congregation—“mission not accomplished”—they did not succeed in turning him into one of them.<sup>119</sup> Yitshak went further as he wanted me to join him and his team. He became increasingly persistent and had great difficulty in understanding my role as a researcher. How could I possibly want to study the Bible academically, or how others read the Bible,

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<sup>113</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 113.

<sup>114</sup> “Background,” Yad L’Achim, <http://yadlachim.org/?CategoryID=188>. I have kept the most common way of transliterating their name here.

<sup>115</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 113; Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 44–45.

<sup>116</sup> “Yitshak.” Emphasis original.

<sup>117</sup> Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, xi–xii.

<sup>118</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, e.g., 9–12.

<sup>119</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” esp. 51–52.

when, instead, I could preach the Word? While this could reflect a general skepticism towards academic theology that also permeates the broad spectrum of evangelical Christianity,<sup>120</sup> it more strongly speaks about the order of priorities in the end times. Yitshak's whole life is devoted to preaching the "Word of God" in order to save as many as possible. How could I possibly choose something else? He continued to try to convince me to quit my job and come and serve in his ministry until, about an hour into the Bible-reading interview, I finally made it clear to him that I was not interested in sharing the gospel with Jews on the streets. Upset by this, his confidence in me seemed to crumble and he loudly started to pray that I would discover what God *really* had intended for my life. Declaring that I was a waste of time in "this very special time," he left to return to the unsaved Jewish souls.

The salvation of Israel provokes many strong feelings among the Messianic Jewish readers, especially when the call to evangelize is discussed. Many of them explicitly and harshly reject the notion that Jews do not need Jesus and that mission to Jews in post-Holocaust realities should be discouraged. Chayim, again, as a representative, attacks such Christians:

They say, "They [the Jews] have their own covenant. Let them be happy. Don't offend them with the gospel!" I do believe it's hatred! There is no stronger hatred than this kind of sentence. Imagine it's your child. I know ... how to stop him from going to hell, and you say, "Don't tell him the truth, it offends him."<sup>121</sup>

As discussed earlier in the context of Jewish-Christian relations (see Chapter Five), Chayim and others with him find sharing the gospel with the Jewish people essential to their Messianic Jewish identity. Notwithstanding the political history, "it's hatred" not to share the gospel. With his reference to "their own covenant," Chayim suggests that the idea of a dual salvation—the Torah for Jews and Jesus for non-Jews—is a theology that sends people to hell. The rejection of this theology through the promotion of evangelization stands in stark contrast to the views of within-scholar Eisenbaum, who argues for a Pauline conception of a dual salvation.<sup>122</sup> Quoting the Bible, Andrei refers to Paul's statement "that the gospel is for the Jews first,"<sup>123</sup> (cf. Rom 1:16<sup>124</sup>), a gospel they feel that they, as believers, need to share

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<sup>120</sup> Bielo, *Words Upon the Word*, 40–41.

<sup>121</sup> "Chayim."; cf. "Natan."; "Andrei." Andrei's case was further discussed earlier (see Chapter Five) under the heading "Criticizing Christianity" where he was quoted as saying that the worst form of anti-Semitism was to refuse to preach the gospel to the Jews.

<sup>122</sup> Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*, 251–52; cf. the within-related scholar: Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, 142, 146.

<sup>123</sup> "Andrei."

<sup>124</sup> "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Rom 1:16 NRSV)

to be true to “the Word of God.” This once again confirms that, regardless of surrounding politics and theological sensibilities, faith in Jesus and the textual practice of Yeshualogy are the guiding forces for the scripturalists—no matter what.

At one service I attended in one of the larger Messianic Jewish congregations, Paul’s words “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (v. 25) were delivered as a prophecy when a group of young adults were about to travel abroad to evangelize. Being sent out to non-Jews is rather uncommon for Messianic Jews, but this time it was motivated by this prophecy. The congregational leader wrapped up the prayer by reminding the missionaries that their work of preaching and praying among the Nations ultimately served to bring forth the salvation of their people, the Jews (v. 26). This little episode highlights that the connection between Paul’s words in Rom 11, eschatology, and evangelization is a lived reality in the Messianic Jewish world.

Missionary Messianic Judaism, which we have seen promoted in the examples above, stands in contrast to the *postmissionary* Messianic Judaism proposed by Kinzer. The “post” suggests a Messianic Judaism free from (Christian) missionary influences and instead based in Jewish traditions. As an outcome, although minor, a postmissionary paradigm also discourages missions in the classic sense—both in theory and practice—of telling others, “Jesus is the only way to God, repent, and come to faith!” Aryeh, the only explicit supporter of this among the participants, opposes the idea of missionaries and evangelization with their traditional connotations, as well as opposing missionary influence on the movement. The “postmissionary” approach, instead, formulates the call of Jewish believers to “bear witness to Yeshua within the people of Israel,”<sup>125</sup> a rhetorical change also intended to stress the Jewishness of Jesus as something natural and integral to Jewish life. Aryeh, similarly, explains the attitude of his Messianic Jewish synagogue (similar to *Bet*) by saying, “We’re not about to evangelize them [the Jews], but we demonstrate the truth we discovered. We explain everything until the chaos comes up. We’re not trying to make other Jews to be anything but better Jews.”<sup>126</sup> This is not only a change of rhetoric from “evangelizing” to “witnessing,” but of mindset: Aryeh neither believes in an imminent eschatology, nor (it seems) in confessing Jesus as the Messiah as a requirement for salvation. He rather aims at making Jews more observant of the Torah and would have them speak positively about the Jewish Messiah Jesus. This postmissionary approach is strongly rejected by missionary Messianic Jews.

The Messianic Jewish readers make Rom 11 relevant not only through eschatology, but also through the connected lens of outreach to the Jews. Before bringing this discussion to an end, one more topic needs to be addressed. In the

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<sup>125</sup> Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, 13–16, quote from 301.

<sup>126</sup> “Aryeh.”; cf. Dauermann, “Messianic Jewish Outreach,” 90–97.

Messianic Jewish effort to evangelize, with whom do they identify: Paul or Peter? PWJ scholars stress that Paul was the apostle to the Nations (v. 13): the common distinction is that Paul focused on the Gentiles, whereas the mission of the apostle Peter was directed towards the Jews (Gal 2:7<sup>127</sup>). If this is the case, then, Messianic Jews should associate themselves with a continuation of the Petrine call in their outreach to fellow Jews. This explanation, however, is oversimplified. Rather, I think Messianic Jews are better viewed as “being Pauls” in an updated version (see discussion in Chapter Four). Paul, it is thought, focused on the Gentiles in the first phase of bringing redemption to the world—reflected in the statement about the full number of the Gentiles. Thereafter, a shift is understood to occur when the inclusion or salvation of the Jews would take place. According to Paul’s view of the eschatological scenario, which the Messianic Jews share, our contemporary time is the beginning of those times. Therefore, it is reasonable to recognize the Messianic Jewish readers as *continuing* Paul’s mission as it is laid out in Rom 11, adapted and updated for our time and the current stage of God’s plan for saving all humanity. Their identity and the practical outworking of this identity, in other words, is fully constructed and revealed in the light of eschatology.

## The Land as the Gift *Par Excellence*

After a two-hour long service in a Messianic Jewish congregation, I accompany two couples in their 70s to a hilltop in the desert-like landscape somewhere between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. It is perfect weather for such a trip; it is sunny yet not too warm and the October weather makes the air light and breathable after a long, hot summer. Here Yehudit, one of the women exclaims, “Our Trinity is the Torah, Yeshua, and the Land!”<sup>128</sup> As I hear this, I immediately think of Erez’s understanding of Messianic Judaism as being formed around the ideas of Judaism, belief [in Jesus], and Zionism.<sup>129</sup> For the woman, just as the *roeh*’s sermon in *Alef* and the *bar mitzvah* boy’s words in *Bet* testify (see Chapter Two), Messianic Jews host a deep love and loyalty for the land of Israel. She makes a sweeping gesture as if to cover all the Judean desert to stress what she means. “This is *our* Land,” she continues as we look down on Bedouin villages and Arab towns in what today is the West Bank. For her, as for so many, the land of Israel is a gift to the Jewish people from God. Her husband puts his arm around her and starts to tell me the story of

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<sup>127</sup> “On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised.” (Gal 2:7 NRSV)

<sup>128</sup> Personal conversation, October 2019.

<sup>129</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 44.

being a young soldier in the 1967 Six-Day War. He fought, he solemnly says, for his right to the land, and he got himself shot and severely injured. Emotionally shaken by the storytelling, his wife adds, whispering their calling, “We need to take it back. Yeshua wants us to do so.”<sup>130</sup>

Although Christian Zionism is a complex phenomenon, it is broadly the ideology and praxis of supporting and loving the people of Israel and the land of Israel, understood as the Jews and the State of Israel.<sup>131</sup> In *The New Christian Zionism* (2016),<sup>132</sup> the newness of the phenomenon is argued to be a denunciation of classic Christian Zionism’s roots in dispensationalism and, thus, future events, in favor of more historical and biblical theological arguments for the ongoing validity of the covenantal promises given to the people of Israel—hence, the ongoing significance of Israel is the redemption of the world. The return of the Jews to the land and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 are argued to be partial fulfillments of a larger eschatological scenario, while not claiming the state to be without fault.<sup>133</sup> The anthology, which includes contributions from Messianic Jewish theologians Kinzer and David Rudolph, presents many ideas resembling those of the participants (see below).

The Zionism in Messianic Judaism has also been noted in two other scholarly publications: according to Keri Zelson Warshawsky, Messianic Jews are found in the intersection of Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism, influenced by both.<sup>134</sup> Philip La G. Du Toit, on the other hand, argues for commonalities between Messianic Judaism, the PWJ perspective, and Christian Zionism—serving as the scholarly background for motivating this study (see Chapter One). Describing these three as “interrelated,”<sup>135</sup> however, needs to be corrected; as argued below, it is faulty to claim that PWJ is intertwined with Christian Zionism. Historically, the scholars rarely even mention the land of Israel and never—obviously—the State of

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<sup>130</sup> Personal conversation, October 2019.

<sup>131</sup> The number of publications could here be numerous. For a few examples, see Göran Gunner and Robert O. Smith, eds., *Comprehending Christian Zionism: Perspectives in Comparison* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Aron Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 11–15; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 2–8; Robert O. Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>132</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, ed. *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016); see also Jennifer M. Rosner, “The Land in Messianic Context,” in *The Future Restoration of Israel*, eds. Stanley Porter and Alan Kurschner, forthcoming).

<sup>133</sup> Gerald R. McDermott, “Introduction: What Is the New Christian Zionism?,” in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 11–29, 11–15, 27.

<sup>134</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” *xviii–xix*; cf. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 127–30.

<sup>135</sup> Du Toit, “Radical New Perspective on Paul,” 1, 3–4.

Israel when exploring Paul. Contemporarily, on the personal level of the scholars, it is also faulty; about half if not the majority of the PWJ scholars are not Christians, and among those who are, there seems to be a dismissal of contemporary Christian Zionism rather than support (see Chapter One).<sup>136</sup> The claim is, thus, anachronistic, from two perspectives.

Concerning Messianic Judaism, this study has similar findings: the insertion of the land of Israel into a sort of trinity, for example, clearly illustrates its centrality for Messianic Jewish identity, just as the land figures frequently as a central trope in the two vignettes. In a similar vein, studies on Christian Zionism have traditionally argued that past or futuristic aspects of textual engagement with the Bible have encouraged an affinity with the land of Israel,<sup>137</sup> while more recent studies have also showed how the present plays a function in nurturing this love.<sup>138</sup> Seeking to understand what “the gifts and the calling” include, the Messianic Jewish readers offer interpretations and applications about the land of Israel that involve all aspects of time: *history*, *present*, and *future* (discussed below).

With this background, and given the Messianic Jewish readers live in Jerusalem, it is not surprising that the land theme is raised repeatedly in the interviews. Engaging with Paul’s words, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29), *all* the participants assert that the land is a natural and substantial component of these gifts. Asking if the land is one of the gifts, one of them, Dov, looks at me in surprise and almost shouts, “Of course, of course!”<sup>139</sup> The Messianic Jewish readers have a strong biblical ideology of the land as a gift *par excellence*; undoubtedly, it was the gift mentioned by Paul that received the most attention from the scripturalists (see above), probably because of its material and controversial character, and all the more as it is deeply intertwined with their eschatological identity. This section therefore explores the textual practice of land in the readings of Rom 11 and this “Israel talk” within a wider discussion of the land. The expression “land of Israel” is favored, but is not identical with the State of Israel; rather, the contemporary nation is a physical representation of the land promise fulfilled. As the final empirical part of this study, it is reasonable to give special attention to the land of Israel as a way to firmly situate the study in its home and origin: the social life of Scripture in Jerusalem. A word of caution, however: the issues are discussed because they appear in the interviews; in other words, I am not offering an exhaustive analysis of Messianic Jewish land theology.

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<sup>136</sup> Personal conversation, March 2021.

<sup>137</sup> E.g., Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation*.

<sup>138</sup> Aron Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 4–6.

<sup>139</sup> “Dov.”

## The Past and the Patriarch

According to the biblical story, God calls the patriarch Abram (Abraham) to leave his country and go to the land that God will show him (Gen 12). God also promises to make Abram and his descendants into a great and blessed people. A few verses later God repeats the land promise by saying “to your offspring I will give this land” (Gen 12:7 NRSV). This calling of Abram/Abraham to the land, which turns out to be the land of Israel, is gradually unrolled in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible. When the Messianic Jewish readers engage with Paul’s words about gifts and a calling that are irrevocable (v. 29), they look to the biblical story, which for them is the historical past, to find support for what this implies—a textual strategy inherited from the evangelical community and the textuality of reading the Bible as telling one, unified story. Two thirds of the participants make explicit reference Gen to 12: Yoel, for example, states, “I believe the Land of Israel is one of the covenants God made with Israel,”<sup>140</sup> followed by Dov who asserts, “of course, the Land,” is one of the gifts God has given Israel, and explains, “That’s in Genesis 12.”<sup>141</sup> This biblical discourse of the land promise is also an integral part of the Christian Zionist narrative. Again, through the textual practice of letting the Bible interpret the Bible, the empirical-religious readers use a different biblical text to argue their case. They consider the land, including a calling to it, to be a gift from God, a gift and call they find by looking to the past. Through the divine promise that the land is given to the patriarch’s offspring, they as Messianic Jews understand themselves as members of this group, together with the rest of the Jewish people. The biblical ideology of the Messianic Jewish readers makes God’s words to the patriarch, as well as Paul’s word “irrevocable,” still valid and applicable to them as readers today.

While the Messianic Jews jump at the possibility of understanding the land of Israel as included in the gifts and calling, PWJ scholars are much more restrictive in their interpretation. They have no difficulty acknowledging that the idea of the land was an integral part of Jewish restorationist theology during the Second Temple period, nor that there was a close connection between people and land in antiquity, nor even that non-Jews would stream to Jerusalem in one strand of apocalyptic Jewish thinking.<sup>142</sup> Surprisingly therefore, given the focus on reading “within Judaism,” the issue of land is overlooked within the scholarly paradigm in this context of Rom 11. The land is not commonly read into Paul’s statement in the way

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<sup>140</sup> “Yoel.”; see also “Michael and Asher.”; “Andrei.”

<sup>141</sup> “Dov.”

<sup>142</sup> E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 22, 115; cf. Thiessen, *Paul*, 21–22; Johnson Hodge, “Question of Identity,” 168–69.

that Messianic Jews do, and the reasons for this are unknown, although it might be for the contemporary, ideological reason of avoiding being considered Zionists.<sup>143</sup>

There are, however, two exceptions: Nanos and Tucker, both within-scholars, explicitly argue that the land is one of the gifts mentioned by Paul. Both use the same textual practice as the Messianic Jews, of interpreting the Bible through the Bible by referring to the Genesis story. It is worth noting here that Tucker builds part of his argument on PWJ scholar and Messianic Jewish theologian Rudolph's "Zionism in Pauline literature."<sup>144</sup> Tucker poses the question, "Has Israel Lost Its Land Promise?"<sup>145</sup> Arguing that the land is connected to the calling of the Jewish people from the time of the patriarchs, Tucker concludes, "In highlighting Abraham's seed as those who inherit the world, the particular promise for the land has not been swallowed up by the universalistic impulse."<sup>146</sup> Putting it this way, Tucker argues that the land promise is still valid for the Jewish people, without being specific about whether this conclusion applies only to Paul's time, or also to the present. It has not been replaced with "the universalistic impulse" commonly perceived as a revised land promise in the New Testament: the idea that the land of Israel "belonged" to the people of Israel only under the "old" covenant until the time of Jesus and the new covenant (see further discussion below). The land, in other words, he argues, is still part of the gifts and calling to the Jewish people.<sup>147</sup> Nanos also mentions the land as one of the gifts, although just in passing and does not develop this further.<sup>148</sup>

To argue for the validity of the land promise, Tucker reasons, is to promote a post-supersessionist reading of Paul and the gifts. He furthermore explicitly connects "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26) with the restoration of Israel as the Jewish people in the land of Israel, an eschatological argument with clear similarities to that

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<sup>143</sup> For an overview of a few important exegetical works where contemporary pro-Palestinian political convictions impact historical research, see Rosner, "Land."

<sup>144</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 73–81. In fact, Rudolph is mentioned in the headline on p. 73; see also David Rudolph, "Zionism in Pauline Literature: Does Paul Eliminate Particularity for Israel and the Land in His Portrayal of Salvation Available for All the World?," in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 167–94.

<sup>145</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 72–80, 244; cf. Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans' Apostle*, 15, 105. Fredriksen here speaks of Gen 15 and Rom 15 which connect the theme of promises to include the land promise.

<sup>146</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 79–80. In his conclusion he further states that "this insight [Israel's continued covenantal identity] was supported further by the idea that Paul thought the restoration of Israel included a political component that did not lose focus on the land," 244.

<sup>147</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 77.

<sup>148</sup> Nanos, "Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable," 224.

of the Messianic Jewish readers.<sup>149</sup> In contrast, Johnson Hodge argues that the land promise to the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible is enlarged by the inclusion of the Gentiles “to inherit the whole world,” here used in an universalized manner to denote that Jews and non-Jews together will inherit the whole of earth in the end times.<sup>150</sup> In sum, Messianic Jews often use Gen 12 to argue for an inclusion of the land of Israel among the irrevocable gifts and calling, whereas PWJ scholars also refer to this text but do so more commonly to argue for the irrevocability of Israel-the-people. The land does not inhabit a central role in scholarly discussions on Paul; however, Paul’s words are highly relevant for Messianic Jews today when claiming their right to the land.

Yet, Fredriksen claims that Jerusalem was the place of God’s *mishkan* (dwelling place) for both Jesus (Matt 23:21<sup>151</sup>) and Paul (Rom 9:4<sup>152</sup>).<sup>153</sup> During the Second Temple period, as among all peoples in antiquity (mentioned above), people and place were inextricably linked, so too in Jewish restoration theology and apocalypticism. The history of the people of Israel is negotiated between exile and return, between sin and forgiveness. In the words of Fredriksen, “repentance/returning to God would lead to redemption/return to the Land.”<sup>154</sup> The land of Israel, therefore, plays a fundamental role in the restoration of the people of Israel. The PAJ scholar Dunn has entitled his magnum opus *Beginning from Jerusalem* (2009),<sup>155</sup> yet, while correct in terms of the origins of the Jesus movement, it is as much, it seems, about the “ending in Jerusalem.” Although the land does not receive much attention from PWJ scholars in the context of Paul and Rom 11, this restoration theology is nonetheless hidden in the background of how PWJ scholars construct their understanding of the apostle. The land of Israel is important in the future and in the end times. After all, “out of Zion the Deliverer will come,” (v. 27) as Paul wrote.

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<sup>149</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*, 192–94.

<sup>150</sup> Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs*, 70, 88.

<sup>151</sup> “And whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.” (Matt 23:31 NRSV)

<sup>152</sup> “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.” (Rom 9:4 NRSV)

<sup>153</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 19. Fredriksen mistakenly refers to the first reference as Matt 23:31; cf. Runesson, “Question of Terminology,” 67 n. 26. Herein it is stated “the centrality of Jerusalem to Paul” followed by a number of biblical references.

<sup>154</sup> Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, The Pagans’ Apostle*, 24.

<sup>155</sup> Dunn, *Beginning From Jerusalem*.

## The Present and the Future, the Restoration(s) and the Return(s)

### *Negotiations about the Land in the Land*

Waving Israeli flags; praying for the protection of the State of Israel from spiritual and physical threats; Bible teachings about the glory of the land. These verbal and physical expressions are weekly, if not daily, expressions of Messianic Jewish Zionism. While the Messianic Jewish readers profess their love for the land of Israel as a gift and calling, their love is not reciprocated by the Jewish people, but rather collides with how they are treated in Israel. Therefore, discussions of the land in past, present, and future theological discourses should also address a few contemporary matters of socio-cultural value to contextualize the participants' negotiations and situation in the land. These naturally diverge from possible similarities with historically oriented Pauline scholarship.

The Messianic Jewish readers speak of the land of Israel as their homeland, but their access to it is disputed. They identify with the irrevocable call to Abram/Abraham to leave his original home and settle in the promised land. The rhetoric of “coming home” is strong and recurrent in the interviews, echoing the well-known belief within wider circles of Zionism. The “homecoming” expression conveys feelings of belonging, of strong attachment, of significance. Perceiving Israel as their homeland serves as an emic category of claiming the right to, in Zionist vocabulary, the Jewish homeland as Jewish believers in Jesus.<sup>156</sup> The concept of “re-rooting,” figuring in Zelson Warshawsky’s study, stresses the same ideology of the Jews as brought “back,” brought “home” to the land to which they have belonged since the Abrahamic calling. The empirical-religious readers in this study as well as the participants in Zelson Warshawsky’s study, experienced the urge to be rooted in the land of Israel as an integral part of being “fulfilled” in their Messianic Jewish identity,<sup>157</sup> as Yoel illustrates in his interview when he offers an example from his own current experience: “God has just called [name] back home, and is now preparing to bring home her whole family to Israel.”<sup>158</sup> As in so many narratives, God is given the role of orchestrating the return of Messianic Jews to the land of Israel. However, although the participants consider Israel to be their homeland, along with the whole Jewish people, the State of Israel does not agree with this, which explains Yoel’s reference to God as “preparing.”

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<sup>156</sup> The rhetoric is also used among Christian Zionists in Jerusalem. See Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 133.

<sup>157</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 80–82, see the whole chapter eight, 80–136.

<sup>158</sup> “Yoel.”

The Hoq Hashvut (Law of Return) makes persons with at least one Jewish grandparent eligible to make *aliyah*<sup>159</sup> and receive immediate citizenship in Israel, but excludes Messianic Jews. Numerous cases of applications from Messianic Jews have reached the Supreme Court since the so-called Brother Daniel case in 1962, when a Jewish Carmelite monk applied for citizenship, but was denied it.<sup>160</sup> The Knesset made an adjustment to the Law of Return in 1970, adding that “for the purposes of this Law, ‘Jew means a person who ... is not a member of another religion’” (section 4B).<sup>161</sup> Messianic Jews keep stressing that they are not members of another religion; they are as Jewish as any other Jew and reject being called “Christians.” Still, believing in Jesus is ruled as belonging to another religion, something strongly validated by the so-called Beresford case in 1989.<sup>162</sup> The aggravating circumstances have naturally denied citizenship to many Messianic Jews,<sup>163</sup> and the participants, like Messianic Jews in general, strongly oppose this application of the law. Despite these legal difficulties, Zelson Warshawsky notes that Messianic Jews in the diaspora often find ways to navigate through the system without denouncing their faith in Jesus. Over the last three decades hundreds of believers from around the globe have unobtrusively managed to make *aliyah* and receive citizenship under the Law of Return—the strategies, however, seem to vary according to possibility and the extent to which applicants’ hide their faith in Jesus.<sup>164</sup> During fieldwork, I happened to meet with a Messianic Jewish lawyer who specialized in discrimination against Messianic Jews in the *aliyah* process, as well as a deeply committed couple who devoted most of their time and finances to helping Messianic Jews “come home.” This testifies both to actual problems and the engagement with helping their own “come home”—living in Israel is part of restoring the world for Jesus’s return.

Messianic Jews meet with resistance and suspicion from the Israeli state and society. While being denied acceptance to “their homeland” is obviously viewed as

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<sup>159</sup> *Aliyah* means Jewish immigration to the State of Israel. The Hebrew term translates literally as “ascent,” implying going up to Jerusalem which is placed on high, and harks back to the biblical pilgrimage traditions of ascending to Jerusalem. The opposite, “*yeridah*”—Jewish emigration from the land of Israel—literally means “descent.”

<sup>160</sup> Brother Daniel was denied citizenship as a Jew under the Law of Return, but was later granted it through ordinary naturalization processes.

<sup>161</sup> “The Law of Return 5710 (1950),” <https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/return.htm>.

<sup>162</sup> See discussion on the theme of *aliyah* in, for example, Akiva Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 111–12; Faydra L. Shapiro, “Jesus for Jews: The Unique Problem of Messianic Judaism,” *JRS* 14:(2012): 1–17, esp. 3; Keri Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 86–87; Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 130–33, 169, cf. 106–07; Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, 191–202.

<sup>163</sup> Cohen, “Messianic Jews,” 111–13; cf. Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 44.

<sup>164</sup> Zelson Warshawsky, “Returning To Their Own Borders,” 86–91.

the greatest betrayal and discrimination, the participants still spent much more time during the interviews speaking about their love for the land of Israel than their problems with its bureaucracy. The allegiance is manifested in the fact that Messianic Jews are loyal and “good” citizens of the State of Israel; their support is also highly visible at a local level. At *Alef*, as mentioned above, a large Israeli flag decorates the front of the congregational hall. Impossible to miss, it clearly signals a nationalistic love and support for the homeland, here concretized as the State of Israel. The blue and white flag with its central Star of David is, in my impression, more common than uncommon in Messianic Jewish congregations where it is routine to pray for the people of Israel and for the State of Israel: for protection, success, and bringing all Jews “home.” This is one of the many ways through which Messianic Jews, such as the scripturalists, express their attachment to the land.

This allegiance to the State of Israel is also visible in the importance of Israeli secular national holidays, mentioned, for example, by Yoel,<sup>165</sup> which are celebrated in an almost sacred way along with the rest of the Jewish people in Israel (see Chapters Two and Four). While obviously post-biblical in character, the celebrations are embraced as *nationalistic* expressions of love. Commemorating and mourning Israeli soldiers who lost their lives fighting for the Jewish state (Yom Hazikaron), followed by the joyful celebration of the foundation of the State of Israel (Yom Haatsmaut), and the “reunification” of Jerusalem (Yom Yerushalayim) are all part of Messianic Jewish congregational life. However, Holocaust Memorial Day (Yom Hashoah), the fourth “secular” Israeli national day, receives much less attention, an observation also made by Harris-Shapiro at her field site in the United States.<sup>166</sup> Based on the hundreds of newsletters I have received over the years of this study from Messianic Jewish organizations and the like, Christian Zionist organizations in Jerusalem are more committed to commemorating Yom Hashoah in solidarity with the Jewish people than Messianic Jews are. Messianic Jewish commitment towards the other national holidays has to do with their commitment towards the land, or rather the State of Israel, of celebrating the prophecy fulfilled of a homeland again and the eschatological hope invested in this physical restoration. As much as the holidays celebrate something that has already happened, they are primarily a reminder of what is yet to come on Israeli soil and, as such, are viewed from an eschatological perspective.

Furthermore, Messianic Jews’ loyalty to the State of Israel is visible in their deep commitment to the Israeli Defense Forces’ (IDF) protection of *their* land. Several readers, including Chayim and Eli, tell me anecdotes from their mandatory military service about the hard time Messianic Jews had in the army; as believers in Jesus

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<sup>165</sup> “Yoel.”

<sup>166</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 121–25.

they were not allowed to advance as far as others.<sup>167</sup> Nonetheless, congregations today put considerable effort into supporting Messianic Jewish youth during their army service, often keeping close track of “their” young adults currently serving. During services, noted during fieldwork, prayers are usually offered both for the IDF at large and for soldiers belonging to the congregation. On the American scene, believers have been compared to the Israeli army in the spiritual sense of defending the land, and witnessed dressing in Israeli military clothing and performing dances with military themes to express their attachment to the IDF and the State of Israel.<sup>168</sup>

Despite the loyalty that Messianic Jews hold toward the State of Israel, they see themselves as met with the opposite, suffering discrimination and suspicion from society in general and specifically from anti-missionary organizations such as Yad L’Achim (see above). One practical example on an everyday level is evidenced in the stories told by several participants of the difficulties they face in buying or leasing buildings in order to expand their congregations when contractors discover they are Messianic Jews. Life in Israel for them is becoming fraught with conflict as the state grows more diverse, with concurrent growth in secularization and the radicalization of both religion and politics.<sup>169</sup>

A final aspect of engagement is that Messianic Jews, at least at a leadership level, are constantly engaged in reporting and interpreting contemporary Israeli politics through the lens of their biblical understanding of prophecies. Reading “the signs of the time” to confirm the eschatological unravelling is a well-known trope within Zionist circles.<sup>170</sup> As I am writing this, Joe Biden is president-elect following the 2020 US Presidential election. The Messianic Jewish world has written extensively on the topic and, in the aftermath of the election, Aaron Hecht at Kehila News, explicitly speaking for the larger community, published an article stating that “This is not what most of us were hoping for,”<sup>171</sup> clearly siding with Donald Trump. Framing Trump in almost divine terminology has not been uncommon in the Messianic Jewish world, as in some Christian spheres, as the majority sides with right-wing politics and, naturally, a pro-Israel policy. But the election result forced a reinterpretation, and now the negative light in which Biden is viewed is considered good news and part of God’s plan. God, by allowing Biden to be elected, will push more American Jews to make *aliyah*, which will make the State of Israel a stronger nation. The receivers of the Kehila News newsletter are encouraged to be part of this “intensity” by encouraging Jews through various means to “come home” to

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<sup>167</sup> “Chayim.”; “Eli.”

<sup>168</sup> Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 63.

<sup>169</sup> Erez, “Mission Not Accomplished,” 43–45; Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, *Facts & Myths*, 25.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 120, 146.

<sup>171</sup> “Some Encouragement and a Suggestion,” <https://news.kehila.org/some-encouragement-and-a-suggestion/>.

Israel. Behind Hecht's words, however, there is a deeper meaning. The movement of Jews, not necessarily Messianic Jews, "back home" is a continuation of the eschatological scenario wherein God will (re)gather his people to "their" land. Immigrating to Israel, therefore, is to be part of the physical restoration of Israel (discussed below). This is an excellent example of "flexible absolutism" (see above), of the creativity and flexibility of biblical literalists, not only explicitly in Bible-reading processes but also in the general (re-)production of their world view, which is considered fully dictated by God.<sup>172</sup> Reading contemporary politics is thus achieved in light of the eschatological understanding based on their Bible reading.

The examples above are all expressions of a sense of belonging in the land of Israel, and expressions of the Messianic Jewish readers' Zionist convictions in the present. But this is not the whole picture. The land is a material gift one is to support and protect, today *and* in the future. Defending and supporting the physical restoration of the land of Israel, expressed in the State of Israel, serves to prepare for the future spiritual restoration, and the fulfillment of the eschatological drama.

### *Incarnation, Materiality, and the Return of Jesus*

With Jerusalem perceived as "the city of reconciliation"<sup>173</sup> today, Paul's words about a Deliverer from Zion (v. 27) is understood by the scripturalists in eschatological terms; Jesus will come back to Jerusalem on his return, his second coming, once again establishing his *mishkan* in the city. The Messianic Jewish readers share this scholarly framework, which ties future restoration closely to both people and land. The participants go further, however, being more elaborate and creative about the importance of the land in the end times in a textual practice of relevance. Why? Because of their eschatological identity (as "first fruits") through which they seemingly perceive and experience what Paul awaited. The return of Jesus, incarnation, materiality, and restoration were all recurrent themes in the Messianic Jewish readings of the end of Rom 11 and of the end times as such. Avraham, who will be the major voice in this discussion, since he returns to these themes repeatedly, asserts with certainty and gravity:

Why is he [Jesus] going to put his feet on the Mount of Olives? Why is he going to come into Jerusalem? What does it mean that God gave him the throne of his father David? The throne of David is not in heaven. It's down here on the earth.... The work of the Messiah, *the Messianic Kingdom to come is very, very connected to [the Land of] Israel* because it will begin here in Israel when Jesus comes back.... *Incarnation cannot take place without the Land of Israel.* You cannot become a nation if there isn't the land that is your nation. *There are three things; God, the people of Israel,*

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<sup>172</sup> Cf. Bielo, "Literally Creative."

<sup>173</sup> "Ze'ev."

*and the Land. Those three.... The Messiah is coming HERE on the Mount of Olives. You take away the Land, he can't come.*

The Church has, let's say with the Old Testament, either *allegorized or spiritualized* it, and taken it out of an *incarnational context*. For the Jew, the incarnational context of the Word is very important because that is what God always wants. Why did God bring us into the Land? *To express his kingdom that would be incarnated in the Jewish people....* God became man as a Jew. *Because that's the calling of Israel to be an incarnational people.* That's another *gifting* of Israel that the Church needs to understand, because if they don't, *they don't really understand salvation*. That's why you had the Gnostics for example. But he [Jesus] really was a man.<sup>174</sup>

The people of Israel and the land of Israel, in Avraham's reasoning, are deeply tied to the return of Jesus. The quote is indeed rich and complex as it touches upon several difficult and important theological themes. A keyword in Avraham's explanation is *incarnation*, which he uses in several ways. The etymology of "incarnation" is "to become flesh" or "be made flesh." Inherent in the word is the idea of *embodiment* and *materiality*. Avraham does not use "incarnation" in the traditional Christian theological sense—of God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ—but rather with present and future applications in a threefold way: to the land, the Jewish people, and Jesus's return.

Thus, he uses the word "incarnation" in a similar way to "*restoration*," which is more commonly used both within the majority of interviews and in theological discourses such as Christian Zionism.<sup>175</sup> Restorationism, in the past connected to dispensationalism but actually pre-dating it and broader in scope, is a theological system integral to both Christian Zionism and Messianic Judaism.<sup>176</sup> This is true of the Messianic Jewish readers, as their statements about "restoration" (or "incarnation") are more connected to *general* convictions and ongoing processes of the end times than a detailed scheme of what *exactly* is to happen, which is usually the case within classic dispensationalism (see above discussions). Restorationist theology consists of two interlinked concepts: the physical restoration of the land of Israel and the spiritual restoration, or rebirth, of the people of Israel.<sup>177</sup> The physical

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<sup>174</sup> "Avraham." My emphasis.

<sup>175</sup> E.g., "Jacob.;" the concept of "restoration" figured in a majority of the interviews; Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 64, 113, 119; Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 52–61.

<sup>176</sup> Aron Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 42–49, 144.

<sup>177</sup> The Messianic Jewish organizations IAMCS and UMCJ have included sections on Israel in their faith statements. IAMCS formulates it as "Israel's national restoration is to recover the remnant of His people Israel from the four corners of the earth, and restore the Davidic Kingdom," and "We believe in God's end-time plan for the nation of Israel and for the world. A central part of Messianic Judaism is the belief in the physical and spiritual restoration of Israel, as taught in the Scriptures. The greatest miracle of our day has been the re-establishment or rebirth of the State of Israel according to prophecy." "IAMCS Belief," UMCJ formulates it similarly: "In gracious love, God gave to Israel the holy Torah as a covenantal way of life, and the holy

restoration is a prophecy already considered to have been fulfilled with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, with the modern state viewed as (but not necessarily equal to) a physical manifestation of the biblical land promise given to Abraham by God. “It has begun,”<sup>178</sup> Avraham explains (see above); the restorationist process leading to the very end of times has thus been set in motion. The spiritual restoration is a rhetoric used to designate when the Jewish people at large will come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah—corresponding to the idea of “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26)—in the soon-to-come eschatological crescendo. Thus, the land as a gift and calling, and its holiness, received more attention from the participants in its present and future state than as the locus of the historical events of Jesus’s life and ministry. In contrast to this traditional Christian perspective, for Avraham and the other participants the land of Israel is special not because of what *has* happened but because of what *is* happening and *will* happen.<sup>179</sup> The future to come is as biblical as what has already happened.

While several recent studies argue against the common notion that Protestant Christianity rejects holy places and material piety,<sup>180</sup> many scholars still maintain that evangelicals in particular emphasize that God is present and available everywhere. Matthew Engelke has termed this “the fantasy of immediacy” which, he argues, has its background in a “concern with mediation and its material instantiations” and can be defined as “a relation to the divine that is free from unnecessary and perhaps even counter-productive trappings.”<sup>181</sup> This anti-material stance might also be presumed to be part of Messianic Judaism, whose roots are in the Protestant tradition, with a biblical ideology of *sola scriptura* and an emphasis on a pure and clean faith of the heart. The materiality of Jewish clothing is, to give one example, rejected as “cosmetics” standing in the way of true worship (see

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Land of Israel as an inheritance and pledge of the blessing of the World to Come.” “UMJC Statement of Faith,” <https://www.umjc.org/statement-of-faith>. Both attributes several biblical references to support their claims, among which Rom 11 features in both.

<sup>178</sup> “Avraham.”

<sup>179</sup> Messianic Jews share this time focus with Christian Zionists and many evangelicals, e.g., Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 119–20; Harding, *Book of Jerry Falwell*, 134; Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked*.

<sup>180</sup> E.g., James S. Bielo, “Materializing the Bible: Ethnographic Methods for the Consumption Process,” *PMJ9* (2016): 54–69, 54–66; Anderson Blanton, *Hittin’ the Prayer Bones: Materiality of Spirit in the Pentecostal South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Webb Keane, “Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion,” in *The Objects of Evidence: Anthropological Approaches to the Production of Knowledge*, ed. Matthew Engelke (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 105–21; Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked*.

<sup>181</sup> Engelke, “Number and the Imagination,” 812.

Chapter Four), a view which is representative of the majority of participants in this study belonging to more evangelical-Jewish congregations than traditional-Jewish. It is reminiscent of Protestant polemics against Judaism and Catholicism, with most participants assuming the position of their heritage. The explanation by Avraham above, one mirrored by the other readers, stands in stark contrast to assumptions about “the fantasy of immediacy.”

Instead, the land of Israel is framed in a rhetoric of “incarnational context,” which stresses the materiality and embodiment of land with a terminology even stronger than that of a “physical restoration.” The land of Israel, expressed through the State of Israel, is an “in-car-nation”—a nation in flesh, so to speak. The land of Israel is the only gift among those mentioned by Paul that is “touchable” and physical in nature. Stressing the importance of the “embodiment” of the land, also present in Christian Zionism, the terminology of incarnation points towards the deeper meaning attributed to the land of Israel. With the physical restoration of the land, the end-time prophecies are starting to be fulfilled, confirming that God has not cast away his people (v. 1); the land as an incarnation, in the Messianic Jewish readers’ mindset, serves—like Jesus’s incarnation—the role of a material and visible sign, or object, of God’s presence. It is an incarnation of God’s faithfulness and God’s plan. In Avraham’s interpretation, Jesus’s incarnation is almost placed in parallel with the incarnation of Israel, although a more correct way of understanding him is to view it as a two-step incarnation: the incarnation of the land of Israel is required for the second incarnation of Jesus—in other words, Jesus’s return to Israel and the world. Thus, in present time, the land of Israel becomes a representation of God’s presence, meaning that, instead of manifesting the Protestant “problem of presence,”<sup>182</sup> the land becomes an *experience of immediacy*.

With the land of Israel serving as an actual representation of God’s presence, the Jewish people is perceived as a necessary component in this theological construct—just as it was in the ancient discourse. Avraham describes how the calling (v. 29) of the Jewish people is to be an incarnational people in the land, a conviction that the Jews should inhabit the land (however defined in terms of physical boundaries) because it belongs to them, just as Yehudit claimed above. An integral part of the physical restoration of the land is therefore to bring the Jewish people “back home,” something that was wrapped in a terminology of miracles by several of the scripturalists. “We came back into this, our, country ... the miracle of gathering all of us is great.”<sup>183</sup> Menachem, who has immigrated to Israel, considers himself “the fulfillment” of the prophecy of being restored and chosen by God as “brought from

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<sup>182</sup> Engelke, *Problem of Presence*, esp. 9–11; cf. and note the title, Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*.

<sup>183</sup> “Menachem.”

[the] outside back.”<sup>184</sup> The restoration of Hebrew as spoken language in modern Israel is also viewed as part of the restoration of physical Israel.<sup>185</sup> A final example comes from the interview with Andrei, where he claims that un-believing Jews are still Israel and not rejected by God as “the covenant still belongs [to them]. That’s the only way I can explain the return of the Jews to the Land in this unbelieving condition.”<sup>186</sup> Using the rhetoric of incarnation, “the Word of God” has, according to Avraham, been incarnated not only in Jesus, but also in the people of Israel living in the land of Israel, thus signifying God’s presence.

Furthermore, in the quote above, Avraham uses “incarnation” as means to critique “the Church.” This again shows how the Messianic Jewish readers constantly implement the biblical texts to oppose the Christian churches with which they do not agree, thus producing counter-readings. “Church” or “Christians,” in contrast to “believers,” are, in his thinking, those that have spiritualized or allegorized the Bible, especially in regard to the land of Israel. To deny or ignore the incarnational context of the land and the Jewish people is perceived as totally misunderstanding God’s intention for his whole creation. Avraham’s words, like those of many other Messianic Jewish readers, speak of “the Church” as being blind and having a “wrong understanding of Scripture” that turns its adherents into Gnostics, a reference used by Avraham to denote those who do not understand the significance of the physical, embodied land of Israel expressed through the State of Israel. In other words, if not Zionist, then Gnostics—which is to have totally misunderstood “God’s Word” (see also Chapter Five and above discussion on maturity).

While Avraham does not explicitly mention it during the interview, the most severe form of a spiritualization of the land promise is present, in the participants’ thinking, in Palestinian liberation theology and in liberal Protestant theology. This is raised in several interviews, probably because of the geographical closeness and the political disputes over the land. The main idea behind this Palestinian land theology can, for example, be found in the recent *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth* (2015),<sup>187</sup> written by Munther Isaac, a major Palestinian theologian and an Evangelical Lutheran pastor, who argues for a land theology that has been expanded from Israel (particularism) to include the whole earth (“spiritualized” universalism) under the new covenant. In the Messianic Jewish readers’ reasoning, denying the unique role of the materialized land of Israel by spiritualizing the land is inextricably part of anti-Jewish ideology. Yoel, as one example, is explicit in this: not recognizing the land of Israel in its materiality and

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<sup>184</sup> “Menachem.”

<sup>185</sup> “Menachem.”; “Eli.”; see also Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 112, 122.

<sup>186</sup> “Andrei.”; cf. Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, 64.

<sup>187</sup> Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centred Biblical Theology of the Promised Land* (Carlisle: Langham, 2015).

as a gift to the Jews is deeply supersessionist; other participants plainly apply this to Palestinian Christians.<sup>188</sup> There are, however, a few Messianic Jews who seek, by various means, to dialogue with Palestinian Christians about land theology.<sup>189</sup> Christian Zionists, in contrast, are perceived to have understood the “true” meaning of Israel. Several readers connect God’s restoration of Israel physically and spiritually with the restoration of the Church, in other words, with turning Christians from blindness to becoming true believers. “All of a sudden they all seem to love Israel, and they don’t really know why, but they do because it’s God’s work!”<sup>190</sup> Christian Zionists, it is thought, play an important role in making Christians understand the role of the land of Israel and the people of Israel in God’s salvific plan—their incarnations (see Chapter Five and above).

“*You take away the Land, he [Jesus] can’t come,*” Avraham proclaims. This statement, his closing argument to the claim that the Church does not understand salvation properly, pointedly ties the materiality of the land to with the return of Jesus. No land, no kingdom to come. The State of Israel, ideologically, is a foretaste of the Kingdom, a first fruit of God’s reign. While Avraham does not share his whole eschatological vision with me, the apparent connection he makes between land and return is reminiscent of millennialism. The physical restoration of the land is not only the first step to complete restoration, but a prerequisite for spiritual restoration, which is tightly linked to “all Israel will be saved” (v. 29) and the return of Jesus, although the empirical-religious readers have different opinions about which came first. The land of Israel, or the State of Israel, becomes a both a prefiguration and an incarnation of the Kingdom to Come in Messianic Jewish eschatology. Discussions of the return of Jesus take place within a semiotic discourse of materiality: Avraham and his fellow readers repeatedly emphasize that Jesus is coming back to the land they tread today, Jesus will come back to the Mount of Olives, and his kingdom throne of David is in the physical Jerusalem. Jesus will, once again, be incarnated. This image is strikingly clear also in the title of Kinzer’s book, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen* (2018).<sup>191</sup> Similarly, for the Messianic

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<sup>188</sup> “Yoel.”; “Chayim.”; “Aryeh.”

<sup>189</sup> E.g., Musalaha (Arabic for “reconciliation”) is an organization that works for dialogue and peace between Jesus-believing communities on the Israeli and Palestinian sides. For two publications that bring Messianic Jewish and Palestinian Christian voices together on issues concerning land theology, see Munayer and Loden, *Through My Enemy’s Eyes*, and Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden, eds., *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012).

<sup>190</sup> “Yitshak.”; cf. “Aryeh.” Yitshak was, however, open in his criticism of some groupings within contemporary Christian Zionism who say they love Israel and come on visits just to “wave flags in a great parade,” referring to the thousands of Christian Zionists from around the world who come to Jerusalem and march in a parade during the Jewish feast of Sukkot to show their support for Israel. For him, this is not enough. See more in Shapiro, *Christian Zionism*, 31–34.

<sup>191</sup> Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*.

Jewish readers the city of Jerusalem is wrapped in eschatological terms of restoration and reconciliation.<sup>192</sup> Living in Jerusalem in the present, they experience a taste of the future Jerusalem. As Jewish believers in Jesus, situated in Jerusalem, they are the first fruits of the spiritual restoration in the physically restored land of Israel. They find the legitimacy to claim their identity as Jews *and* believers in Jesus within this eschatological paradigm. Understanding themselves within this theological perspective of incarnation of land and people, their eschatological identity is further enhanced. Avraham and his fellow readers thus do not suffer from a “problem of presence” but rather themselves become an “incarnational presence” of the gifts and calling of God as irrevocable. Or so they would argue. With the land incarnated, the incarnation of God can come. Quoted also at the beginning of this chapter, this is what Ze’ev states in a voice filled with deep conviction:

I believe with all my heart that *in the end time more and more Jews will be saved, as we see happening. God is restoring, actually restoring, the picture of Rom 11. Not just theologically but also incarnationally in our time, with the Messianic [Jewish] community that he’s beginning to restore, and Jerusalem being the city of reconciliation.... The end of time, which we are living in now.*<sup>193</sup>

## Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has explored how the Messianic Jewish readers interpret and make sense of the last part of Rom 11 by focusing on two sets of verses: “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (vv. 25–26); and “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). The Paul constructed by the PWJ perspective is a Paul whose identity is clearly eschatological as he awaits the return of the Messiah, which is soon and very soon. In the same way but two thousand years later, the Messianic Jewish readers, through their reading of Paul and Rom 11, inhabit an identity and an interpretive tradition that is just as eschatological. In the language of Rom 11, they would say that the people of Israel are called to the gifted land of Israel; through the physical restoration of the land, God has ultimately proven his faithfulness to his people Israel. Whereas the scholarly paradigm and the empirical-religious readings differ in detail on an interpretative level, they share the outer frame: the end times have begun and God is still faithful to his people, the people of Israel. Among the Messianic Jewish readers, the themes of time and land are more explicitly and closely connected: living in the physically restored land of Israel gives them the clear eschatological

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<sup>192</sup> E.g., “Ze’ev.”

<sup>193</sup> “Ze’ev.” My emphasis.

identity of experiencing the beginning of the end that will culminate in the return of the Messiah.

Using what is almost a catch-phrase in the Messianic Jewish world in Israel for proclaiming faith in Jesus as the Messiah, Jacob quotes a Bible reference, originally from Psalms (Ps 118:26),<sup>194</sup> which mentions the “house of the Lord,” and, thus, is clearly associated with Jerusalem. Used not only in the Jewish *Hallel* prayers, but also in its adaptations when Jesus, according to the gospels, makes his messianic entrance into Jerusalem (e.g., Mark 11:9),<sup>195</sup> and as he laments over the city and foresees his return (e.g., Matt 23:39),<sup>196</sup> it functions both as a prayer and a prophecy to come true in the Messianic Jewish world. Proclaiming this, Jacob passionately summarizes what this chapter has argued in terms of time and land:

If you would ignore the very thing that the Word is working and promising, working for promising that the day will come when *we, the Jewish people, here in Jerusalem, say “Baruch Haba Beshem Adonai!” meaning recognizing him as the Messiah, greeting him as the Messiah, calling him back as the Messiah. If I’m not recognizing the fulfilling of the prophecy of the Messiah[s’ return], I’m very blinded.*<sup>197</sup>

Or, as Yitshak excitedly exclaimed in the introductory quote, “I’m in the midst of it!”<sup>198</sup> *Baruch Haba Beshem Adonai*—“Blessed is he [“Yeshua”] who comes in the name of the Lord.” They, as Messianic Jews in Jerusalem, are living in the time when they hope to greet the Messiah (on his return).

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<sup>194</sup> “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord.” (Ps 118:26 NRSV)

<sup>195</sup> “Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*’” (Mark 11:9 NRSV // Matt 21:9 // John 12:13) My emphasis. This text is also used in Christian liturgical traditions as the Gospel reading during Palm Sunday.

<sup>196</sup> “For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Matt 23:39 NRSV // Luke 13:35)

<sup>197</sup> “Jacob.” My emphasis.

<sup>198</sup> “Yitshak.”



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS



# *Seven.* Messianic Judaism and Pauline Scholarship: Conversations

This study opened with a story of an encounter between a Messianic Jewish leader and a Paul within Judaism (PWJ) scholar; the believer needed advice from someone with a supposedly similar understanding of Paul. Thus, it is appropriate to start this last chapter with a related story. In September 2019, the Messianic Jewish theologian Mark S. Kinzer and the Paul and Judaism (PAJ) scholar N. T. Wright engaged in a debate at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, entitled, “A Dialogue on the Meaning of Israel.” A large part centered on how the two constructed Paul and read Rom 11. The debate gathered nearly a thousand attendees and, as of two years later, nearly 45,000 views on YouTube,<sup>1</sup> consequently displaying the interest in this topic. The moderator of the debate, Gerald McDermott, has written extensively on the theology of Israel and edited *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (2016) with contributions from the Messianic Jewish theologians Kinzer and David Rudolph on Zionism in Luke/Acts and Pauline literature, respectively.<sup>2</sup> One central question during the debate was whether non-Messianic Jews are still members of God’s covenanted people. McDermott summarized the encounter in an article published by the Messianic Jewish journal *Kesher*, in which he wrote, “sadly, . . . he [Wright] revealed that he does not believe that [the] covenant is ongoing,” referring to God’s covenant with the people of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Kinzer, on the other hand, clearly did. This implies that, rather than agreeing with PAJ scholars (or, for that matter, Paul outside Judaism [POJ] scholars), Messianic Jews would have more in common with PWJ scholars—corresponding to the idea “going around” in religious, ideological, and scholarly circles. The debate illustrates that this study is part of an intense—and important—discussion in a broader cultural setting.

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<sup>1</sup> “N. T. Wright and Mark Kinzer: A Dialogue on the Meaning of Israel,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIBt64m-Py4>.

<sup>2</sup> McDermott, ed. *New Christian Zionism*.

<sup>3</sup> “Historic Debate Addresses the Future of the Jewish People: N.T. Wright and Mark Kinzer Meet,” <https://www.kesherjournal.com/article/historic-debate-addresses-the-future-of-the-jewish-people-n-t-wright-and-mark-kinzer-meet/>.

## Summary of the Study

It has been said that “reception studies are biblical studies on holiday”;<sup>4</sup> however, although the weather was mostly better in Israel than northern Europe, conducting this study could hardly have been defined a vacation, more an intellectual bootcamp. Interdisciplinary in character, it has focused on the Bible readings performed by eighteen Messianic Jewish leaders in Jerusalem—Jews believing in “Yeshua” (Jesus). Those readings stem from an empirical reception study conducted using what I have called Bible-reading interviews and analyzed in the anthropological theoretical framework of the “social life of Scripture” approach.

The aim has been to explore Messianic Jewish *readings of Rom 11* and *constructions of Paul*, in conversation with PWJ scholars. This has been based on the presumption in some religious, ideological, and scholarly circles (see Chapter One) that Messianic Jews actually understand Paul in the same way as within-scholars (see Chapter One). This perception, however, has been grounded in anecdotal observations and not on careful textual examination and comparisons, as in this study, with the goal of disqualifying, confirming, or nuancing it. Exploring Messianic Jewish readings with the PWJ readings as an *interpretative framework* has been open-minded, in the sense of remaining open to the possibility that the Messianic Jewish readings might instead correspond with other scholarly approaches to Paul. To be more precise, in this exploration the analytical terms of *similar* and *dissimilar* have helpfully been applied to distinguish correlations and discrepancies<sup>5</sup> in the Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 and constructions of Paul in relation to those by PWJ scholars.

Three questions were posed as an outcome of the aim: two sub-questions and one overarching. How do PWJ scholars read Rom 11? This was addressed and answered in Chapter One. How do Messianic Jews read Rom 11? This was explored in Part II when analyzing the Bible-reading interviews. To what extent (and further, how, when, why, and in what ways) do Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 correspond to readings made by PWJ scholars? Whereas this encompassing question has been tackled throughout the chapters in Part II by bringing empirical-religious readings into conversation with PWJ analysis, this final chapter aims at offering an answer to this and bringing this conversation between the two reading communities to a provisional conclusion.

Approaching the end, I am aware of two conversations that have lived parallel lives in this study. There has been a conversation between two reading communities

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<sup>4</sup> Gillingham, “Biblical Studies on Holiday?,” 17.

<sup>5</sup> With the rhetoric of reception theory, the so-called “cross-section” between diachronic (PWJ) and synchronic (Messianic Jewish) readings occur if, and where, the reading communities read in ways that are similar to each other.

or, more specifically, the Messianic Jewish readings have conversed with scholarly ones. There has also been a constant conversation within, and about, the Messianic Jewish interviews themselves as I have explored what they say and place them side by side in the narrative in Part II. This is an expected result of empirical research given both the time-consuming fieldwork and the challenges to do justice to the uniqueness of the material with satisfactory analyses. Both conversations, in my mind, make important contributions to further scholarly discussions.

The study consists of two parts: Part I “Frameworks for the Readings” (Chapters One-Three) outlines and situates the study within its scholarly, contextual, methodological, and theoretical settings, illuminating the field(s) from three different angles.

Chapter One—“Messianic Judaism and Paul within Judaism”—started off this study by situating it within the two reading communities of Messianic Jews and Paul within Judaism scholars, and suggesting why their relationship is worth investigating through the lens of Rom 11. Research aim and questions were formulated. Previous studies and emic perspectives on Messianic Judaism and identity, followed by Messianic Judaism and the Bible, were presented. Here I argued for a continued focus on identity negotiations alongside a new focus on Bible readings in these negotiations, given that the Bible is the final authority for the believers, and also considering the lack of studies addressing Bible reading and usage. This was followed by a large section presenting Pauline scholarly perspectives in terms of characteristics and readings of Rom 11. Herein I suggested renaming the perspectives “Paul *outside* Judaism,” “Paul *and* Judaism,” and (keeping) “Paul *within* Judaism”: the conjunctions effectively portraying how the approaches construct the apostle.

Chapter Two—“The Landscape of Messianic Judaism in Israel”—began with vignettes from two different Messianic Jewish congregations in Jerusalem, offering a taste of the movement from *Alef* and *Bet*. Focusing on identity, the chapter then depicted the historical development of the movement—first in general, and thereafter in Israel—in search and creation of an “authentic” and unique identity for its members as Jesus-believing Jews. This is negotiated between its evangelical heritage and the development of a messianic vernacular to promote a within-Judaism perspective ideologically, while denouncing Christianity. The last part focused on different characteristics and expressions of contemporary Messianic Judaism in Israel, arguing for using the spectrum of evangelical-Jewish (*Alef*) and traditional-Jewish (*Bet*) to analyze congregations, with the majority in Israel leaning towards the former. The importance of the Bible and of including it in further research were highlighted throughout.

Chapter Three—“Interviews, Reception Studies, and Social Life of Scripture”—offered theoretical and methodological discussions. I presented my criteria for selecting the Messianic Jewish participants, explained the choice of Rom 11, and

examined what fieldwork in Jerusalem looked like. With its interdisciplinary research design, this work is situated within biblical studies and reception studies, arguing for enlarging the latter to include empirical and contemporary studies as well. My focus thereafter shifted to the field of anthropology of Christianity and the “social life of Scripture” approach, which I found very helpful when analyzing the empirical material. I presented some of its major concepts—biblical/textual ideology and biblical/textual practice—in dialogue with Messianic Judaism, and also argued that three distinct hermeneutics are visible in Messianic Jewish readings: “Yeshualogy” (my concept), post-supersessionism, and relevance. I then discussed what I have denoted “Bible-reading interviews”: what they are and how I conducted them with the eighteen male leaders participating in this study. Issues of participant observation during services and my own reflexivity were also explored. Lastly, I argued that an interdisciplinary study combining two discrete fields needed to be packaged—language and style-wise—in “new wineskins.”

Part II—“The Readings in Context” (Chapters Four-Six)—explored the Bible-reading interviews with the Messianic Jewish readers, analyzing the empirical readings and bringing them into conversation with PWJ readings to point out similarities and dissimilarities. The structure loosely started with detailed discussion of how the text was understood by the readers before shifting to how the text was made relevant in the lives of the participants. What follows is simply a short summary of these chapters; the topics, in dialogue with PWJ readings, are explored in greater depth below.

Chapter Four—“Identity and Torah”—focused on readings of the first part of Rom 11 (vv. 1–12). Topics explored had an *intra-Jewish* perspective, that is, they discussed Messianic Judaism within a Jewish framework. This chapter consisted of three major parts: addressing issues of Paul’s and the participants’ Jewish identity, denial of supersessionism and negotiations concerning it, and Paul’s and their own Torah observance.

Chapter Five—“Relations and Yeshua”—centered on readings of the middle part of Rom 11 (vv. 11–24). Themes discussed had an *inter-Jewish* take, that is, they addressed questions regarding Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Jesus. The chapter began with rhetorical analysis, moving on to major discussions of how relations between Jews and non-Jews are depicted, of God’s unfolding plan for humanity, and of the olive tree metaphor. Finally, the theme and text of relations were applied to two contemporary discussions: the critique of Christianity, followed by Messianic Gentiles and their relation to the Torah. Throughout, “Yeshua” has proven central in understanding Rom 11 from the scripturalists’ point of view.

Chapter Six—“Time and Land”—examined readings of the last part of Rom 11 (vv. 25–36 with special attention to vv. 25–26 and 29). This chapter discussed the irrevocable gifts and calling, time aspects such as eschatological identity, the Gentile era and the salvation of Israel, ending with discussions on the land of Israel as a gift and material sign of the end times.

Chapter Seven—“Messianic Judaism and Pauline Scholarship: Conversations”—coming after Part II, brings the conversation to its peak and its end. In this final chapter the task at hand, after this summary, is to conclude by offering reflections on the aim of the study from different angles, point out implications and opportunities arising from the study, and present my findings as to how Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 and construction of Paul from the PWJ perspective reflect each other.

## Conversations from Different Angles

This section brings the readings of Rom 11 and constructions of Paul by the Messianic Jewish readers and the PWJ scholars into six conversations from different angles. The first asks if such a dialogue is even possible; the second offers insights into how the participants themselves speak about Pauline scholarship; and the third discusses how the two reading communities understood Rom 11 with a focus on *what* they say the text means. The final three parts focus more on *how* the text is read by discussing the textual practices of hermeneutics deployed by the scripturalists in dialogue with the PWJ perspective. The sections serve both as summary and conclusion of the empirical chapters as I identify similarities and dissimilarities between the two reading communities.

### An Impossible Conversation?

How on earth is it possible to bring empirical-religious readings into dialogue with scholarly ones and do both justice? The question has been brought up repeatedly as a response to this study. As far as I am aware, no one has yet created such a dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Is comparing these two sorts of readings a bit like comparing apples to oranges? At the same time, it should not be impossible: the text is the same for the two communities; as readers, the greatest dissimilarity between the Messianic Jews in Jerusalem and the PWJ scholars are their *textual ideologies*.

The written texts of the PWJ scholars are produced as a result of reading Paul and Rom 11 with academic eyes. Although I have depicted the major characteristics of this perspective, my focus on Rom 11 results in limiting the scope to writings

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<sup>6</sup> Hans Snoek, “Biblical Scholars and Ordinary Readers Dialoguing about Living Water,” in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Hans de Wit, et al. (Nappanee: Evangel, 2004), 304–14. Snoek’s contribution in the anthology is the most similar to how I have conducted this study; however, it is short and general, and therefore unfortunately not of much help.

relating to this text and having a strict, *exegetical* focus on it. The work of these scholars also has a *historical* goal: to construct Paul and to explore what Rom 11 meant as Paul wrote it. The biblical ideology among the scholars considers the Pauline corpus a collection of *historical documents*. This puts aside the topic of contemporary ideological concerns that, nonetheless, is subordinate to how the scholarly texts have been used in this study.

The Messianic Jewish readers, on the other hand, as believers in Jesus as the Messiah, offer *religious* (in contrast to a scholarly) readings of Rom 11. They come to the text with a *theological* perspective and conviction that shape how they read and use it. It is never, at least not for Messianic Jewish readers, only about the text or Paul and what either ostensibly says in its historical setting; it is always also *about them as readers*. The participants offer little comment on the historical horizon of the text; instead always applying it to themselves today. In meeting with the text, they are doing theology and are engaged in identity construction. This has to do with their biblical ideology, wherein the Bible is the living, infallible, true “Word of God” around which they should form their lives.

Using the analytical categories of the social life of Scripture approach, the reading communities inhabit different *textual ideologies*. Constituting a major dissimilarity between the two, this was rather expected. Pushing the conversation forward, a fruitful strategy is to turn to the *textual practices* of the scripturalists and the PWJ scholars and their outcomes. First, however, the participants’ own voices and conversations with Pauline scholarship are addressed.

## The Messianic Jewish Readers on Pauline Scholarship

Taking a step back to the fieldwork in Jerusalem: every now and then it happened that a Messianic Jewish reader made a reference to Pauline scholarship. This section therefore discusses how some of the participants themselves viewed their understanding of Rom 11 in relation to scholarly research.<sup>7</sup> Nahum, who served as an example in the opening of the study (see Chapter One), referred to the PWJ scholar Mark D. Nanos as a Messianic Jew because he purportedly reads Paul “just as we do.”<sup>8</sup> While Nanos is not one of them, this points to a notion among Messianic Jews that they have similar understandings of Paul and Rom 11 as PWJ scholars. But, as this study has shown, the Messianic Jewish movement is fairly diverse, which impacts their relationships with Pauline scholarship.

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<sup>7</sup> This study has as a sidetrack also noted how, on a scholarly and on the American scene, a few Messianic Jewish theologians and PWJ scholars refer to, and quote, each other; this implies to Kinzer, Tucker, and Nanos.

<sup>8</sup> “Nahum.”

Meet Chayim. As I walk into his office for the interview, he is preparing his sermon for the upcoming service. Both his big desk and bookshelves, similar to those of most participants, are overloaded with books. Asking me to help him clear some space so that we can see each other between the piles, I curiously catch a few titles and authors: Joachim Jeremias, Rudolf Bultmann, and so on. This surprises me. These are theologians closely associated with the POJ perspective. Chayim comments that he does not always agree with “everything they say, but they do have good things to say about *Jesus, salvation, and faith*”<sup>9</sup>—central themes in the POJ and PAJ perspectives, and not so much among PWJ scholars. As the interview unfolds, he is explicit that all he cares about is Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Jewishness and Judaism are not something, he angrily states, that one should uphold and point to for their own sake. It does not matter; only faith in Jesus matters. According to Chayim himself, he is on the evangelical-Jewish end of the spectrum, calling himself the black sheep of the Messianic Jewish world.

Meet Michael and Asher. Meet Natan. Wright is mentioned in both interviews; as one of the two major proponents of the PAJ perspective, it is not surprising that his name is familiar to many. In both cases, the readers reject Wright’s (presumed) view that the land of Israel is not included among the *irrevocable gifts* (v. 29). Michael and Asher refer to an essay about contemporary Israel by Wright they have recently read, in which Wright presumably strips the land of all significance in favor of a universalistic land theology within the New Covenant starting with Jesus. They explain this understanding as “somehow rooted in an anti-Semitic reading of the text,”<sup>10</sup> suggesting that not acknowledging the land constitutes supersessionism and, thus, is not a within-Judaism understanding. They add that Wright, like most people, is indoctrinated with the contemporary politics of Palestinians as victims and the sympathy widely felt for them. No one likes an Israel that is strong, they suggest. Their bottom-line critique of Wright is that contemporary politics have wrongfully affected his way of understanding Paul and, therefore, they assume, the land of Israel. Natan, similarly, criticizes Wright for not acknowledging that the land is included in the gifts and promises (cf. v. 29), observing, “Wright would say that’s an argument from silence [to include the land]; it [verse 29] doesn’t mention the Land, therefore the Land is excluded.... ‘All that was there in the Old Testament has now been fulfilled.’”<sup>11</sup> Natan clearly does not agree with this, adding that

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<sup>9</sup> “Chayim.” My emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> “Michael and Asher.”

<sup>11</sup> “Natan.” I am not exactly sure which article they mean, but the same idea can be found in several publications by Wright. For instance, he has argued, “the Land, like the Torah, was a temporary stage in the long purpose of the God of Abraham.... God’s whole purpose now goes beyond Jerusalem and the Land to the whole world.... Jesus’ whole claim is to do and be what the city and the temple were and did. As a result, both claims, the claim of Jesus and the claim of ‘holy land,’ can never be sustained simultaneously.” N. T. Wright, “Jerusalem in the New Testament,”

including the land among God’s covenantal promises should be considered the lowest common denominator among Messianic Jews. The explicit critique of Wright and his universalism suggests that the participants reject the PAJ (and POJ) perspective in favor of the PWJ perspective and its emphasis on Jewish particularism; the gifts and the calling are still in the sole and non-transferable possession of the people of Israel—the Jews.

Meet Aryeh. Not only is he the one closest to the traditional-Jewish end of the spectrum, he also makes the most references to Pauline scholarship. Aryeh is outspoken in placing himself beyond the PWJ perspective, saying that it is not *that* radical: “and then there are people like me, radical to the core; that kind of goes beyond this [the PWJ perspective].”<sup>12</sup> He recognizes that the PWJ perspective is rather new and has not figured everything out yet, but hopes to see adherents of that view reach his own conclusions one day. The within-scholars, according to him, need to be more radical, more *radix*—back to the roots—and step even further into the Jewish mindset of the Second Temple period to understand Paul. He summed up his approach effectively in this way: “I am not convinced that any of these [Pauline] perspectives truly represent Rav Shaul [Rabbi Paul]; and even the best of them, the Radical New Perspective on Paul [the PWJ perspective], does not extend far enough into understanding his Jewish background and continuing Jewish perspective.”<sup>13</sup> What Aryeh misses, for instance, is a stronger focus on *Torah observance*. Wearing typical religious Jewish garments, he described himself as “fully Torah-observant,” in terms of the commandments that are applicable to him, he hastens to add. Fully immersed in contemporary Jewish religious life, he is a strong follower of Kinzer’s postmissionary Messianic Judaism. He describes himself not as a Messianic Jew but as a Jewish messianist. He denounces everything that one would connect to classic Christianity; he speaks of redemption instead of salvation; he refers to Jesus—about whom he said little—as “Harav Yeshua ben-Yosef”; he proposes that Jews could be redeemed by being Torah-observant without proclaiming faith in Jesus, and so on. His language is swathed in Hebrew terms. In contrast to all the other participants, he freely refers to Jewish religious, philosophical, and intellectual history, discussing topics such as Rabbi Nachman and Rabbi Schneersohn.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? The themes brought up in commenting on Pauline scholarship—on Jesus, the land of Israel, and the Torah—bear witness to different nuances of belonging and attachment to Pauline scholarly trajectories. Placing the readers on the Messianic Jewish spectrum from evangelical-Jewish to

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in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, ed. Peter W. L. Walker (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1992), 53–77, 67, 70.

<sup>12</sup> “Aryeh.”

<sup>13</sup> “Aryeh.”

traditional-Jewish could identify the Pauline scholarly trajectory which they follow and find most inspirational—consciously or unconsciously. Representing the ultimate extremes in this study, Chayim, with his focus on Jesus and faith rather than Jewishness is the reader at one end—most resembling the POJ or PAJ perspectives in outlook—whereas at the other end is Aryeh with his emphasis on the Torah, who describes himself as going beyond PWJ characteristics. This clearly corresponds to the different significance the perspectives attribute to Jesus versus the Torah. If one were to suggest to either Chayim or Aryeh that his beliefs are most similar to the scholarly trajectory at the opposite end of the spectrum, I am convinced that he would vociferously object. Michael, Asher, and Natan’s criticism of Wright is not to do with his focus on Jesus but the denial by the PAJ perspective of the particularity of the Jewish people and God’s promises to *them*, a critique that supports their leaning towards PWJ. This argues for the distinct, remained identity of the Jewish people and for the gifts and calling (cf. v. 29) as still belonging solely to them, thus rejecting universalistic claims. Taking a step back to look at all the interviews, the same trajectories emerge.

## Identity and Torah, Relations and Yeshua, Time and Land

One way to put the Messianic Jewish readings into conversation with the readings from a PWJ perspective is to focus on the outcome of textual practice, in other words, *interpretation*—which, according to the social life of Scripture approach, simply refers to what a certain text, verse, or word is said to mean (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). This act of reading stays close to the textual level and focuses on content. An interpretative level would explain *what* “all” and “Israel” imply. Therefore, here I would like to summarize and draw out some conclusions from this conversation by focusing on the most important aspects covered in the empirical chapters without going into details about discrepancies in the readings, that is, I present the big picture.

*Identity and Torah:* Encountering Paul’s words at the beginning of Rom 11—“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (v. 1)—both the Messianic Jewish readers and the PWJ scholars claim they support the belief that he maintained his Jewish identity even after the Christ event. He was as Jewish before as he was after he became a Jesus follower, or as the Messianic Jews would say, as much a believer in “Yeshua.” This constitutes, naturally, a fundamental part in proclaiming a within-Judaism perspective.

An integral part of Paul’s Jewishness is his continued Torah observance. This is one of the most central claims and characteristics of the scholarly approach, provoked by the apostle’s seemingly oppositional pairing of works and grace (v. 6). The Messianic Jewish readers largely agree with this construction of Paul as

remaining Torah-observant after recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. However, the majority of readers argue that Paul's observance was made secondary, modified, and flexible around Jesus, the Torah no longer being the gravity center of Paul's thinking—a transformed understanding of Torah observance falling between the PAJ perspective and the PWJ perspective. A minority argue that Paul's Torah observance remained intact and unmodified by "the Jesus event," thus representing a position more similar to that of PWJ scholarship. The participants' own Torah observance is similarly stressed but more strongly so: a so-called restorationist position having more adherents than the traditionalist one. Everyone upholds the (biblical) Torah as an ideological concept, whereas embracing the Torah practically differs.

*Relations and Yeshua:* The Messianic Jewish readers share the idea with PWJ scholars that humanity is composed of two entities: Jews and non-Jews (although they have different preferred terms for these groups). In the Jesus-believing community, the ethnic identities remain: Jews remain Jews and Gentiles remain Gentiles. They are united, yet separate. Both the scholars and the believers argue that this distinctiveness is integral to Paul's thinking, and is *the* tool for pushing God's redemptive plan forward in time. The two groups of humanity are dependent on each other, and the fates of the two are deeply intertwined. This understanding of relations runs through the readings of the whole of Rom 11, while mostly discussed in terms of the olive tree metaphor (vv. 16–24), and in Paul's declaration about the end: "A hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved" (vv. 25–26). In common with the scholars, the empirical-religious readers interpret "Israel" to refer, always and only, to the Jewish people. Viewing humanity this way clearly unites the Messianic Jewish readers with the PWJ scholars, in clear contrast to other Pauline perspectives. In other scholarly Pauline perspectives, Israel is redefined to include Jesus-believing Gentiles, something which is not visible in the empirical-religious readings. Instead, PWJ and more so the Messianic Jewish readers construct an Israel with two parts; the rest, those not believing in Jesus, and the elect, those of Israel who believe in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and hence inhabit some form of proper, desired, or fulfilled identity as Israel.

Regarding the role attributed to Jesus, the Messianic Jewish readers have (naturally) a strong focus on "Yeshua" in their readings, whereas Jesus does not play a significant role in the PWJ understandings, especially when they concern the Jewish people (more about this below).

*Time and Land:* Time, or more specifically eschatology, has proven to be very important for both the empirical-religious and the scholarly readers in their constructions of Paul and their understanding of Rom 11. Both understand Paul to have lived with the expectation that the *eschaton* was imminent. The Messianic Jews, however, applied this experience of the end times more to themselves than to Paul. Perceptions of time will also be further elaborated below.

For PWJ scholars, as for all Pauline scholars, the land of Israel is not especially present in constructing Paul and reading Rom 11—at least not explicitly. In contrast, the land, as in the land of Israel, is extremely fundamental to the identity and theology of Messianic Jews. Therefore, the land is also present in their understanding of Paul, read in a way that affirms that the covenant, gifts, and calling (v. 29) to Israel are still valid; the land is a gift and they are called to it. The land of Israel, expressed in the State of Israel, confirms for the participants both that God is faithful to his people *and* that the restoration, the end times, have slowly begun. Being “back home,” as they phrase it, in a Jewish land, represents a major part of the physical restoration of Israel, the necessary step for the spiritual restoration when “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) and hence for the return of Jesus. As Jesus-believing Jews in the land of Israel, they perceive themselves to be prophetic signs of the last days.

*Rhetoric and Terminology:* The social life of Scripture approach points toward *rhetoric* and thereby *terminology* as textual practice and, thus, analytical tools. This study has shown how both reading communities exhibit the distinguishable feature and agenda of promoting a new terminology and vernacular. The overall rhetoric of Messianic Judaism is more Hebrew-flavored, often with pious connotations, than the scholarly sphere, in order to distinguish them as a Jewish, Jesus-believing movement claiming an ideological, biblical Judaism as the “authentic” expression of faith in Jesus. PWJ scholars offer a more historical language connected to Paul and Rom 11, one coherent with their ideology, such as speaking about “Jews and non-Jews,” “Israel” and “the Nations.” The Messianic Jewish readers, on the other hand, more pointedly retain a language reminiscent of their evangelical heritage, speaking about Jew and Gentile on both an individual and collective level. PWJ scholars have a historical focus, the adherents have greater contemporary interest. Yet, despite detailed differences, Messianic Judaism and PWJ scholars ideologically share the motivation for proposing new terminology: to reject Christian terms and theology as they are perceived as expressing a non-Jewish, even anti-Jewish, system and historically incorrect constructions, and to place the whole discourse (back) into its Jewish, biblical and historical context(s).

Before closing this section, yet one more subject must be addressed: the relationship between the Torah and the land of Israel. Both play a role for the Messianic Jewish readers in defending a post-supersessionist reading, yet there is a significant difference in how they are perceived. *The Torah, the majority of the participants suggest, should be viewed in light of Jesus. The land of Israel, all the scripturalists advocate, should not be perceived in light of Jesus.* In other words, Jesus has changed the centrality of the Torah but not the land. Viewing the land of Israel through the resurrection of Jesus, they claim, is rather what Christianity, especially Palestinian liberation theology, has done in proposing a universalized, transformed land theology. The textual practice they acclaim in one instance does not work at all in the other. If anything, the land of Israel is viewed through the lens

of “*Baruch Haba Beshem Adonai*”—of the Messiah’s eschatological return to the land. The majority of the participants in this study in Israel leaned towards the evangelical-Jewish end; if most had favored the traditional-Jewish end or if the study had been conducted among Messianic Jews in the United States, the results might have been different. But here the land of Israel appears more important than the Torah. The reasons for this have to do with the social life in which they engage with “Scripture”: their evangelical heritage and their relation to contemporary Jewish society, both nurturing a distancing from the Torah but not from the land. The Torah and Jesus have often been put in an oppositional relation to each other, conjuring a perceived (but unnecessary) need to take sides, whereas the land of Israel does not play by these rules. Instead of developing a Jewish theology that intertwines the Torah with Jesus, most of the scripturalists have developed one intertwined with Jesus and the land of Israel in an eschatological perspective. As such, it becomes an alternative way, and a renewed, less loaded way, of emphasizing their Jewish identity. Instead of claiming, like Torah-embracing Yehudit, that “Our Trinity is the Torah, Yeshua, and the Land!” the majority of participants in this study seem, rather, to inhabit a “*binity*” (something with two components) of “Yeshua” and the land of Israel.

Overall, on an interpretative level the Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 and constructions of Paul are similar to those by the PWJ scholars. Although dissimilarities exist—partly to do with the somewhat different emphasis attributed to the Torah—, there are strong and important overlaps between the two reading communities that do not correspond with other Pauline perspectives: most importantly Paul’s continued Jewishness, and the continued ethnic distinctions united in Christ (Jew and non-Jew). Throughout the empirical chapters, helped by Paul’s own discussion in Rom 11, the participants strongly resonate with PWJ scholars on the understanding that God has not cast away his people—this relationship is irrevocable.

## Yeshualogy and Post-Supersessionism

Currently, there is a cultural and scholarly upswing in interest in Messianic Judaism and questions of supersessionism in relation to both Jewishness and belief in Jesus. As a contextual note and example, these topics appear to be both alive and kicking in biblical studies as well other disciplines with religious interests. At the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology’s (SPOSTST) webinar on May 30, 2021, discussion on the topic of supersessionism departed from David Novak’s article on

hard and soft supersessionism, with the author present.<sup>14</sup> Not only does this initiative bear witness to the intense conversation going on, bringing scholars from different fields together, but something more interesting surfaced. In the Q&A part, a large number of questions concerning Messianic Jews were voiced. Apparently intriguing the Christian scholars present, this clearly showed that the topic of Jesus-believing Jews, alongside post-supersessionism, has a bright future requiring deeper analysis.

Besides the above thematic and interpretative discussion, another fruitful perspective onto similarities and dissimilarities is the *how*, the textual practice of hermeneutics. This and the next two sections are dedicated to this kind of conversation.

A hermeneutic of Yeshualogy is a biblical practice that “sees” Jesus everywhere in the text. I have deliberately denoted it “Yeshualogy” instead of “Christology,” for the term better catches Jewish believers’ understanding of their Jewish Messiah. Whereas Rom 11 itself never explicitly mentions Jesus, the Messianic Jewish readers approach the text fully (in)formed by their conviction that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. This, the very core of their identity, shapes everything in their lives including how they read Paul. Throughout the interviews, Jesus has been the constant factor that both forms their reading and comes out of their reading of Rom 11. The interviews were constantly filled with the addition of “Yeshua” or “Jesus” to their interpretations and explanations of what Paul means in Rom 11. In other words, only by adding Jesus as the explanatory force does Rom 11 make sense to them. To give but a few examples, the remnant are those Jews who believe in Jesus, the branches attached to the olive tree are those who believe in Jesus, and “all Israel” will be saved through faith in Jesus who one day soon will return. Jesus and faith in him direct their readings.

This hermeneutic is *dissimilar* to PWJ scholars in their engagement with Rom 11, among whom, as has been argued since the first chapter, Jesus does not play a decisive and central role. Some scholars, such as Pamela Eisenbaum, even go as far as to argue that Jesus is only for non-Jews whereas the Torah is for the Jews. This dual salvation model is, obviously, harshly rejected by Messianic Jews, but also by most of the scholars (less harshly). Jesus figures in their readings as the Messiah of Israel, although in a rather concealed way. Their readings are not Jesus-centered but God-centered, and Jesus more of an abstract tool for reaching God than a person and savior himself. This does not, however, mean that Jesus is wholly absent from their understandings of Rom 11, although the degree to which this is the case varies from scholar to scholar. What is important in conversation with Messianic Jews is that Jesus does not inhabit the same strong hermeneutical role he does for the Messianic Jewish readers. Instead, the Yeshualogy expressed by the Messianic Jews

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<sup>14</sup> “What is Supersessionism with David Novak: Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology 2021,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGN7yqBZG1s>. See also Novak, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft.”

in this study is more similar to how Jesus and faith in Jesus are strongly emphasized within the other two Pauline approaches: POJ and PAJ. This is, indeed, a major difference and major factor. A similar focus on Jesus is apparent in evangelical Christianity (which has its closest scholarly friends among those who occupy the PAJ perspective: Wright and James D. G. Dunn<sup>15</sup>), with which Messianic Judaism has several connections. It is, therefore, interesting to note that Kinzer in his *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen* (2018) argues against PAJ scholar Wright's conception of Israel as including both Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Jesus, while still seeming to view him as an authority on matters concerning the centrality of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

With post-supersessionist hermeneutics, readings favor and emphasize texts and verses that support the proposition that the Jewish people are still God's covenantal people. It is stressed that God has not rejected the people of Israel. Texts that seem to suggest the opposite, that the Jewish people have been replaced, are either ignored or read as not *really* meaning that. The texts are approached with the conviction that God is faithful.

The Messianic Jewish readers in this study all read Rom 11 with this textual ideology and practice strongly in place: it is a conviction which they bring to the text, and for which they find "proof" in the text. This was explicitly discussed (see Chapter Four) in relation to the opening of Rom 11: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!... God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (vv. 1–2). It was further discussed (see Chapter Six) in light of Paul's proclamation: "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (v. 29). The Messianic Jewish readers consider that Paul exclaims this truth, both in the opening and the end of Rom 11, for all Jewish people, not only Jesus believers. They are still God's covenantal people. These verses were considered the most important in Rom 11. Both here, when Paul explicitly stated this conviction, but also throughout the letter, as in the case of the olive tree metaphor (see Chapter Five), the Messianic Jewish readers put a lot of time and effort into arguing for a post-supersessionist reading. Just as Paul uses himself to demonstrate that God has not cast away his people, so do the Messianic Jews today through the principle of the remnant (v. 5), claiming that they also are part of the remnant and therefore proof that God has not cast away his people. A within-Judaism reading, therefore, supports a post-supersessionist reading just as it supports their own identity as *Jews* believing in Jesus.

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<sup>15</sup> Two examples of this affinity between Wright and evangelical Christians: Wright is understood by many as the most important apologetic for Christian faith since C. S. Lewis, a commitment shared by many evangelicals. Furthermore, Wright is a recurrent guest and often participant in the evangelical-apologetic podcast *Unbelievable?*, which shows him to be a biblical scholar with authority in these circles. Another popular podcast among these expressions of Christianity is "Ask NT Wright Anything."

<sup>16</sup> Kinzer, *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen*.

*Similarly*, this hermeneutical strategy among Messianic Jewish readers is also strong among PWJ scholars in their construction of Paul and their reading of Rom 11. Indeed, this conviction is one of the major characteristics within the perspective, as has been made obvious throughout the chapters. As the empirical-religious readers would fully agree, Nanos has argued that “Romans 11, which explains God’s commitment to Jews because of the irrevocable promise made to the fathers, is a key text for those seeking to reverse the legacy of contempt for Jews and Judaism.”<sup>17</sup> J. Brian Tucker, furthermore, has explicitly stated that the purpose of his monograph on Romans is to present a post-supersessionist reading.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the Messianic Jewish readers and the PWJ scholars have an analogous hermeneutical view in their post-supersessionist strategy.

Yet, for the Messianic Jewish readers, “supersessionism” is not only the theological construction that God has cast away his people Israel; rather, seemingly everything that they do not agree with is termed “supersessionism” or something related. One such example (see Chapter Six and above) is that not recognizing the land of Israel (as they do) as included in God’s irrevocable gifts (v. 29) is *the* strongest proof that someone promotes replacement thinking. The term risks becoming rather loose in its contours; it becomes a trope for everything “unbiblical.” A “post-supersessionist reading,” therefore, in Messianic Jewish thinking, has also much to do with Zionism and with reading the Bible with an emphasis on the land promise to the Jewish people.

Tensions, however, are present. Post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy are in constant negotiations with each other. While the Messianic Jewish readers repeatedly stressed that the Jewish people were not cast away, their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel often overrode this claim: the hermeneutics of Yeshualogy were placed above the textual practice of post-supersessionism. Two examples: just as the historical Paul himself seems to do in Rom 11, the empirical-religious readers *redefined* the remnant as those Jews who believe in Jesus. The majority of them also argued that Torah observance should be *reformed* in light of Jesus and the new covenant. And they repeatedly argued that, thanks to them, the rest were not rejected because of their faith in Jesus. The participants avoided themes that could easily lead to speculations about being rejected or not, such as with the broken-off branches. While stressing temporality and partiality, indicating that the Jewish narrative is unfinished, it could well be argued that there is a sort of temporal and partial “setting aside” *until* God’s plan with Israel is fulfilled and the Jewish people become Jesus followers—to apply emic terminology. This is one area of theological negotiations that deserves greater attention both from an empirical and textual (literature, official documents, etc.) point of view.

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<sup>17</sup> Nanos, “Letter of Paul,” 253.

<sup>18</sup> Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*.

For Messianic Jews, the emphasis on post-supersessionism is an expression of the emphasis on their Jewishness and connection to the Jewish world, while the emphasis on Yeshualogy is a manifestation of their faith in Jesus and relation to the (evangelical) Christian world, thereby displaying their both-and, or in-betweenness to the two religions. The conclusions can be summarized in the following points:

- Yeshualogy as hermeneutic strongly dominates the readings.
- Post-supersessionism is a strong hermeneutical strategy running throughout the reading of Rom 11. Such approach is upheld theologically, and even more so rhetorically and ideologically.
- Post-supersessionism proposes unity in distinctiveness within the Christ community; the categories “Jew” and “Israel” are still valid and intact; they are neither absorbed into the Church nor redefined or transformed.
- Post-supersessionism upholds the validity of the Torah and observance, both Paul’s and theirs, more accentuated towards the traditional-Jewish end of the spectrum than the evangelical-Jewish one. The land of Israel plays the same function ranging over the whole spectrum.
- There is a tension between the collective and the individual: post-supersessionism directs the collective, Yeshualogy directs the individual—the two are constantly negotiated against each other.
- Yeshualogy is more strongly displayed among the readers towards the evangelical-Jewish end of the spectrum; post-supersessionism and the Torah less so. The same seems to hold in reverse: post-supersessionism and the Torah are more strongly upheld among participants towards the traditional-Jewish end of the spectrum; Yeshualogy less so.
- Post-supersessionism is, ideologically, the most important hermeneutic to defend their identity as Jews, whereas Yeshualogy becomes the most important, theologically, to defend their unique status.
- In clashes between post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy, the latter directs the former and is prioritized; it is *through* Jesus-believing Jews that Israel as a people is not rejected and one day will be fulfilled and saved.
- Therefore, in sum, the “messianic” aspect rather than the “Jewish” is more stressed in the identity negotiations of the majority of the Messianic Jews in this study.

## A Hermeneutic of Eschatology

As I come to the end of this study, I have identified the need to make an addition—alongside Yeshualogy, post-supersessionism, and relevance—to the different hermeneutics which are part of the textual practices, namely *eschatology*. The

readers of Rom 11 have recurrently brought up the topic of time; the letter is understood within the tensions of present and future, good and better, and every discussion in the empirical chapters is framed within perceptions of time. Furthermore, discussions of time were evoked to solve the seeming contradictions between post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy. Perhaps the most acute problem emerges in the olive tree metaphor: the Messianic Jewish readers have argued that natural branches refer to Jesus-believing Jews and natural, *broken-off* branches refer to non-Jesus-believing Jews. How can broken-off branches not be rejected by God? The Messianic Jewish readers try to solve this dilemma through a hermeneutic of eschatology. They, *in common with* PWJ scholars, repeatedly stress that the “current” situation is a *temporal* and partial one. Applying a hermeneutic of time, Neil Elliott has effectively captured this approach in the framing: it is not about who is in and who is out, but about “who is in *now*, and who is destined to be in *soon*.”<sup>19</sup> The broken-off branches will one day be grafted back into the olive tree. A textual practice of eschatology is thus employed, seemingly to avoid a supersessionist reading: what seems negative in the now is according to God’s plan. A hermeneutic and interpretative tradition of eschatology, and an eschatological identity, seem to function in a dialectic relationship: without the participants’ perceiving themselves living in the end times as prophetic signs and “the first fruits,” the reading strategy would not have the same strength.

The conclusions can be summarized in the following points:

- The participants inhabit an eschatological identity; in their minds the end times have slowly begun and they consider themselves prophetic signs of the imminent shift from non-Jews to Jews in the apocalyptic scheme.
- An eschatological hermeneutic is read from the future end times, and serves as a scriptural means of escape to solve problems in the present.
- An eschatological hermeneutic helps in upholding a post-supersessionism: the “current” stumbling of Israel is only temporal and partial, while in the coming national salvation “all Israel” will be saved—through “Yeshua.”
- An eschatological hermeneutic thus holds together the hermeneutics of post-supersessionism and Yeshualogy.

Throughout the Bible-reading interviews—helped by Paul’s own words—the scripturalists have persistently brought up the topic—and applied a hermeneutic—of post-supersessionism, perceived to be most important to them: to them it claims an “authentic” and unique identity as Jews, distances them from Christianity, and stresses this in light of Christian replacement theology. Yet, while this might emerge as vitally important to them rhetorically and ideologically, this study suggests a

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<sup>19</sup> Elliott, *Arrogance of the Nations*, 115.

slightly different take on it. It suggests that post-supersessionism is subordinate to Yeshualogy and eschatology, as these two are the directives.

## Relevance and Making It About Them Today

When the Messianic Jewish readers read Rom 11, it is *about them, to them, for them*. With a biblical ideology as the “living Word of God” and the highest authority in life, this hermeneutic of relevancy should be perceived as a natural outcome—“What is God telling *me*?” From a theoretical perspective, the hermeneutic is a major contribution of the social life of Scripture approach, to take seriously the exploration of how readers engage with the text to make it relevant for them as readers. It is no big surprise, therefore, that the participants spent lots of time during the interviews making Rom 11 relevant for themselves today, connecting it to today’s realities, and applying it to a variety of contemporary discussions. And yet, I was surprised by the amount of energy spent on this aspect of reading Rom 11: that of making it into *social life*. It was, admittedly, also the part I most enjoyed: seeing how their “living Word” actually seemed to live—how it was transformed “From Narrative to Embodiment.”<sup>20</sup>

The examples throughout Part II are numerous, but to mention a few: the readers’ identifying themselves with the remnant (v. 5, Chapter Four); discussions of Messianic Gentiles and the criticism of Christianity (based on readings of the olive tree metaphor, Chapter Five); and the formation of an eschatological identity and the importance of the land of Israel (invoked by vv. 25–26, 29, Chapter Six). Three conclusions can be drawn from this emphasis on making the text relevant. First, the Messianic Jews’ reading process itself is not only about interpreting the text (“x means y”) but is as much about applying the text to their context. The reading process is really not complete without bringing the world into the text, and the text into the world. Second, their making the text personally relevant ultimately serves to support their own identity as Jesus-believing Jews. Third, among the Messianic Jewish readers, their linking textual practice to today’s settings is *dissimilar* from what we encounter in the readings from a PWJ perspective, caused primarily by different biblical ideologies.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the study, the Messianic Jewish readers have primarily criticized Christianity (not Judaism!) in several regards. One of the major issues concerns the

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<sup>20</sup> Coleman, *Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity*, 117–42. Capitalized in the original.

<sup>21</sup> This, however, should be a little nuanced. This study has also shown that some PWJ scholars are ideologically motivated by contemporary Jewish-Christian relations, arguing that their historical results are *applicable* to promoting today’s interfaith dialogues. Hence, they also make the text relevant for today. Yet this is not the focus in their *historical* constructions of Paul, whereas the textual practice among the participants is constantly present in their readings of Rom 11.

ideology of the Bible. The readers claim that the Church left her Jewish roots and became pagan: Hellenized, it took on a spiritualized and allegorical reading of the Bible. This stands in contrast to what they perceive as the “correct understanding of Scripture,” that is, an ideology and practice in a rather literal sense as the infallible “Word of God.” One fundamental example of this, according to the scripturalists, is how Gentile Christianity came to (re)interpret “Israel” as referring not to the Jewish people but to the Christian Church, thus creating a supersessionist theology. While the critique is correct in the sense that the church fathers and later Medieval Christianity promoted a four-fold model of biblical engagement that endorsed such readings, the participants’ critique of this form of this engagement with the Bible is indeed ironic from two perspectives.

*Why? From a historical, theological perspective:* because Jewish interpretation of the Bible in the Second Temple period was characterized by approaches similar to those of the church fathers. This approach, in fact, is also shared by the historical Paul himself *and* the Messianic Jewish readers in this study. Michael Fishbane and James Kugel have written on this: their shared conviction is that the Hebrew Bible in ancient Judaism, regardless of scribal, legal, aggadic, or mantological genre, was always in a process of interpretation and *application* to every new time and situation. The texts are “alive” and not static or fixed. While the interpretative process is directed by guidelines, their main assumption is that “the capacity of Scripture [is] to regulate *all* areas of life and thought.”<sup>22</sup> For Kugel, textual ambiguities force interpretations to change as time passes, as the biblical texts need to remain meaningful.<sup>23</sup> In his attempt to summarize Jewish approaches to texts during the Second Temple period, Kugel lists four assumptions about how texts were interpreted. In addition to assuming that the Bible was perfect and divinely inspired, the texts were, more importantly, assumed to be *fundamentally cryptic* but also *relevant for instruction*. The two latter assumptions necessarily imply the need for interpretation, for digging below the literal meaning; the purpose of reading the biblical texts is to make them relevant for reader(s) regardless of time and setting.<sup>24</sup>

This implies that Paul engaged with the scriptures in this way: he interpreted and applied the texts of the Hebrew Bible to his own setting and purposes. One example is how Paul uses the allegory of the remnant (v. 5): in the Hebrew Bible it denotes one thing (faithful Jews), but Paul—most likely—redefines it in his time to imply Jesus-believing Jews, thereby identifying himself with this picture. This reinterpretation and application illustrates what constituted “reading” during Paul’s times. Paul uses this Jewish hermeneutic when writing Romans, just as Messianic

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 3. Emphasis original.

<sup>23</sup> Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 14–19.

Jewish readers today do with Rom 11. The Messianic Jewish readers in this study are thereby “Pauls” in their engagement with the Bible. There are cases in this study where they read Rom 11 in a seemingly plain and literal way, such as by simply saying that “all” in “all Israel” (v. 29) means “all” as in everybody. However, and much more importantly, if there is one thing that this study has shown, it is that Messianic Jews are constantly engaged in reading the Bible in applicatory and relevant ways *for them*—often requiring a spiritualized or allegorical reading.

One striking example is how the empirical-religious readers construct time and, through Rom 11, place themselves at the perceived eschatological breaking points between the “full number of the Gentiles” (v. 25) and “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) as both the remnant (v. 5) and the “first fruits” (v. 16) of the soon-to-come redemption. This is an excellent example of how the text is made relevant and applied to them as readers today to form an eschatological identity and also a way to argue for an “authentic” and spiritual authority. A spiritualized reading—in the sense of reading the Hebrew Bible’s narratives as not having to do with actual historical, material events—does not necessarily equate with a reading made relevant for them today. The point, however, is that Messianic Jews—at least the participants in this study—cannot uphold a reading that is strictly literal; instead, their “literal” ideology produces highly creative and meaning-making readings that refer to their present situation. Proposing an ideology of both literalism and living Word is, in fact, much of a conundrum. The scripturalists’ stress on “Israel” in a supposedly literal way, as always and only referring to “Israel, the Jewish people,” is also a creative reading strategy, making it relevant for them by defending *their* Jewish identity. This insight is one of the many contributions of this study when it comes to questions of identity. It is also what Paul did, and what the Church has done for two thousand years. Speaking of biblical ideology, the Messianic Jewish emphasis on the Bible as “God’s *living* Word” consistently proves more alive than that of a *literalist* approach.

*Why? From a modern, anthropological perspective:* because this whole debate about the proper way of reading the Bible is not only an ancient discussion but even more a modern controversy. It reflects, for example, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the early 1900s in the United States, and its questions about authenticity and relevance. The modern Messianic Jewish movement largely, but not wholly, originated in the American scene with Christian groups that stressed a biblical ideology of infallibility and literalism. Thus, the Messianic Jews—broadly speaking—subscribe to this paradigm of fundamentalism and, accordingly, react against modernism, liberalism, and related clusters of ideas. Taking the paradigm of fundamentalism-modernism, Messianic Jews adapt this into a paradigm of messianism-Hellenism. With this novel option, Messianic Jews—by identifying with a messianist perspective—react negatively against (what they perceive as) Hellenism, or modernism: that is, all sorts of ideas that they perceive to go against “God’s Word” and be man-made. But they do not only react against something; they

also construct something with this paradigm. It is constructive in how it locates religious authenticity in the pre-Hellenized, Jewish Jesus movement. Therefore, it becomes important for them as Messianic Jews to claim and stress that they are in a restored community in continuity with this ancient Jewish movement. Claiming authenticity is thus a highly creative and rhetorical enterprise itself (cf. “grammar of authenticity”<sup>25</sup>). Ultimately, historical and theological claims are used to argue for a modern and anthropological authenticity. Describing the readers as “Pauls,” or “updated Pauls,” becomes even more remarkable in this light.

On a final note on “making it about them today”: in the textual practice of making the text relevant for them as Messianic Jewish readers, a consistent conflation occurs between the biblical and the contemporary. Through a dialectic process of inscribing themselves in the Bible and bringing the Bible alive, they construct themselves as biblical figures living in the “now” of a prolonged Bible story. The past and the future collapse into today. They are living in a constant conversation with the living “Word of God,” a sort of divine voice directing their steps.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, among the textual practices of hermeneutics—Yeshualogy, post-supersessionism, and relevance—used by the Messianic Jews in this study, one, post-supersessionism, has a strong overlap with PWJ scholars, whereas the two others do not have the same clear correlation in regard to Rom 11. To this, the hermeneutic of eschatology should be added; Paul is constructed by PWJ scholars as living in the end times, end times in which Messianic Jews perceive themselves to live today—as “Pauls,” the remnant, and the first fruits.

## Implications and Opportunities

This section consists of three parts that identify the consequences and suggestions resulting from this study: the first of a thematic character, the second methodological, and the final one, which identifies promising fields of research.

### Messianic Judaism: Identity and the Bible (Again)

First, the conversation focusing solely on Messianic Jewish engagement with the Bible has been in itself one of the key contributions of this study in the research field of Messianic Judaism. *Identity-as-reading* and *identity-through reading* have

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<sup>25</sup> Dulin, “Messianic Judaism,” esp. 35–38.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the conclusion drawn on Christian Zionists about their relationships to the State of Israel and the Bible: Engberg, *Walking on the Pages*, 193–94.

proven extremely useful in continuing the research tradition on Messianic Judaism and identity negotiations, while at the same time addressing how the Bible is part of these negotiations. As the first study to perceive it this way (*identity-as-reading* and *identity-through-reading*), focusing throughout the study on how Messianic Jews engage and read “God’s living Word” has proved very useful for providing deeper understanding of the movement. It is in reading the Bible, and through reading the Bible, that Messianic Jewish identity is, to a large extent, negotiated and formulated. With the Bible as the “final authority in all matters of faith and practice,”<sup>27</sup> using a key text as the central focus in this study has offered a unique glimpse, not only into reading processes but also a whole range of central theological areas for the movement. The Bible text, in other words, has functioned as a gateway to unravelling the participants’ thoughts and convictions in several important areas such as identity, relations, and time. With this focus as one significant sample, Messianic Jewish identity has proven to be not only “authenticated” through a genealogy dating back to the first Jewish, Jesus-believing community, but also towards the future, as they inhabit a strong eschatological identity. The present times are understood in light of what is to come, according to their understanding of the Bible. To study the social life of Scripture among Messianic Jews is, ultimately, a highly fruitful—perhaps the most fruitful—way to understand Messianic Judaism in Israeli society and elsewhere. It is, indeed, my firm conviction that the Bible needs to continue to feature in future research as well.

## Methodology: Empirical Studies in Biblical Scholarship

Second, and of a methodological character: a Bible scholar who works empirically? Throughout the course of this study, I have lost count of the number of people who have looked at me at best with surprise, and at worst with aversion. What did I say I was doing? And how is that possible? These are questions that need to be taken seriously. The response is not so much because the study focuses on the manifestly controversial Messianic Jews, but because its methodology has ranged from being called “super cool” to being accused of not belonging in the sphere of biblical studies. Honestly, I have asked myself those questions, too. But here I am, at the end of the study, proving that it was indeed possible, and this, I am convinced, is a major methodological contribution.

It was not only possible, but I am certain that the field of doing biblical studies empirically has a bright and promising future. Sometimes one hears that the field of biblical studies within the academic sphere is in crisis.<sup>28</sup> Everything seems to have

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<sup>27</sup> “UMJC Statement of Faith,” Delegates.; “Statement of Faith,” MJAA.

<sup>28</sup> This has been addressed by some scholars; for one example that suggests reception history to be a way forward, but does not go so far as to recommend empirical reception studies, see William

been done already, or so many think, and there is shrinking funding and fewer positions. While interdisciplinary studies have become increasingly popular, both to conduct and to fund, biblical studies have been slow in this arena when it comes to actually collaborating with disciplines and scholars beyond the usual neighboring disciplines. One way (among others) to make the discipline survive may be to walk out into the dirt and dust of the living—to study those who actually read the Bible.

Doing empirical reception studies within biblical studies opens up tremendous opportunities with seemingly endless potential: there is the possibility to create a new subdiscipline: different empirical methods, different biblical text(s), different readers, different places, different settings (the Global South being a forerunner in this). Just think what could be accomplished! Methods and theoretical approaches could be (further) developed. It requires, however, scholars who are willing to step out of their comfort zone(s), gain some interdisciplinary ethnographic and/or anthropological knowledge, or create teams of scholars from different academic disciplines. And they must have an interest in the life of the Bible today among its readers. It takes an adventurous spirit to sort out weird situations and general messiness, to handle ups and downs, and to cheer when that “high” arrives when an interview turns out well.

Being one of the first studies within biblical scholarship, as far as I am aware, that has conducted Bible-reading interviews, reading the Bible with people whose ultimate authority is the “Word of God,” has proven very fruitful. This is, therefore, also an encouragement to anthropologists to engage more in studies that deal with the Bible. It seems to me impossible to understand a religious group or individuals who seemingly find in the Bible “final authority in all matters of faith and practice”<sup>29</sup> without actually studying *how* they engage with it, read it, and use it. Studying Bible reading empirically does not only, as this study has shown, shed light on the readers’ interaction with and interpretation of the Bible, it also enables the researcher to understand more about readers’ theology, identity, and place in the world, as Bible reading is about the social life of Scripture—an approach that has been very useful and deserves to be further developed and discussed in future projects. Studying Bible reading can, if conducted well, offer a holistic portrait.

One caution, though. How does one, really, write a study that combines biblical studies with empirical research? This query has followed me throughout (see also Chapter Three) the work involved in producing this dissertation. The two fields, at least in my experience, usually have nothing to do with one another. They are each other’s opposites with respect to many basic assumptions, such as what constitutes “good research” and in what style one should attempt to present it. Should a study that breaks new ground methodologically speaking be packaged into a traditional

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John Lyons, “Hope for a Troubled Discipline?: Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History,” *JSNT* 33:2 (2010): 207–20.

<sup>29</sup> “UMJC Statement of Faith,” Delegates.; “Statement of Faith,” MJAA.

and conservative way of writing in biblical studies? Some might think so, but I am convinced that it would have made it more unreachable and confusing. As Jesus supposedly said: new wine belongs in new wineskins—old wineskins ruin the good wine.<sup>30</sup> A legitimate interdisciplinary study needs to be able to talk to both, or all, combined disciplines at the same time, to show why the study is important and valuable for the disciplines engaged. In this study, I have aimed at reaching out to both disciplines—biblical studies and anthropology of Christianity—and if I have managed to give both something valuable, I am not the one to judge. Bottom-line, in terms of future studies, it is my hope that the methodological novelty of working empirically with Bible reading can inspire many projects to come.

### Future Studies: From Here to Where?

Third and looking towards the future; as with all studies, filling one gap opens several others. There is much more to do in the area of Messianic Judaism generally, but here I suggest projects directly inspired by this study. They are a few Bible and/or field-based research projects with considerable potential that further address the need to study Messianic Jews in Israel and elsewhere; projects with a comparative element—juxtaposing, for example, Israel and the United States (and other parts of the world)—would add an important component, given that this study has suggested the movement in Israel to be (partly) different and more strongly evangelical-Jewish than the North American version(s).

*Jesus, the Bible, and Messianic Judaism:* Having focused on constructions of the Jewish Paul, a natural step for further research would be similar studies on understandings of Jesus and readings of the Gospels. Conducting research on Bible studies or preaching, or Bible-reading interviews, individually or collectively, with Messianic Jews focused on one or a set of related texts would further develop understandings of Messianic Jewish textual practice, identity construction, and Messianic Jewish theology. Such projects could also include scholarly discussions on Jesus the Jew.

*Upholding the Torah?* One area of great potential concerns the Torah (inspired by Chapter Four). As the most controversial area within Messianic Jewish life, further studies should have a holistic focus on how the Torah is negotiated: biblically, theologically, ideologically, and practically in everyday life; the role it plays within the Messianic Jewish movement in identity negotiations; and how these negotiations are performed in relation to Jewish (and Christian) communities.

*Messianic Gentiles as (Un)Invited Guests?* Israeli Messianic Jewish congregations host large numbers of Christians (see Chapter Five). As no comprehensive studies exist, they would be a welcome addition, from biblical,

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<sup>30</sup> Mark 2:22 NRSV // Matt 9:17 // Luke 5:38.

theological, and sociological perspectives. Studies could frame this either from the perspective of Messianic Jews as they stress the distinctions between Jew and non-Jew, and/or on the Messianic Gentiles themselves and their negotiations theologically and practically.

*Caring for the Land?* Further studies are needed in the area of Messianic Jewish eschatology and land theology, and the negotiations between present and the future tensions and commitments to materiality (see Chapter Six). The eschatological identity of Messianic Jews should also be more holistically explored. As this study has proved, the believers stress the *materiality* of the land of Israel, viewing it as a physical restoration preparing for Jesus’s return. Yet, despite this commitment to the physical land, there seems to be very little investment in actually caring for the land in the now, such as peace work, dialogue, or engagement in environmental issues. Studies could focus on negotiations between the immanent and the material, practically and theologically, in relation to Jewish and Christian teachings.

*Paul within Judaism and/as Ideology:*

This study has noted that many PWJ scholars are engaged in contemporary Jewish-Christians relations and dialogue, hoping to erase anti-Jewish tendencies and combat anti-Semitism. Further research is needed in the area of these scholars’ ideological commitments: whether and how today’s cultural interest in proposing a Jewish Paul intersects with their historical constructions of Paul and his letters.<sup>31</sup>

## A Final Conversation: Messianic Judaism as/and Paul within Judaism

When addressing what motivated this study, I mentioned three “voices,” namely: (a) a Messianic Jewish perspective; (b) an ideological perspective proposing a post-supersessionist theology; and finally (c) a scholarly perspective—besides lived experience (see Chapter One). They all indicated that Messianic Judaism had *something* to do with—and was similar to—the PWJ perspective. Whereas Du Toit in the latter category used “interrelated”<sup>32</sup> for this relationship, this concept gives Messianic Judaism too big a role in terms of influencing the scholarly paradigm. He also, as discussed and rejected (see Chapter Six), added Christian Zionism into this

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted, however, that PWJ has since the inception been criticized by the other Pauline perspectives, especially by the PAJ scholar Wright. PWJ scholars have been engaged in meeting this criticism. One example is Fredriksen, whose critique comes forth in her review of Wright’s *magnus opus*, see Paula Fredriksen, review of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols., by N. T. Wright, *CBQ* 77:2 (2015): 387–91.

<sup>32</sup> Du Toit, “Radical New Perspective on Paul,” 1.

interrelatedness. Rather, Rosner's phrase, "lends support to,"<sup>33</sup> better captures the relationship from an emic perspective: in the PWJ perspective Messianic Judaism finds a scholarly, historical backing for its emphasis on Judaism; for Paul as a Jew and Jewishness as a valid category in Christ; and a post-supersessionist reading and eschatological urgency. They find support for their own contemporary Jewish identity in the scholarly paradigm; consequently, the relationship is not equal. This, on the one hand, is not surprising, as the Messianic Jewish movement in contemporary times is strongly reminiscent of the early Jewish Jesus movement insofar as identity and relation negotiations are concerned. Nonetheless, taking a step back, it is fascinating that a controversial group of Jesus-believing Jews find their closest ally in radical, historical scholarship. Perhaps that, in itself, indicates that they both are onto something—which I personally think they are with the emphasis on *within Judaism*.

Before offering my final conclusions, I would like to point out one additional reflection: it is, of course, not a goal in itself that Messianic Jews should read the Bible in exactly the same way as PWJ scholars, as the two have different biblical ideologies. And, given the lack of hermeneutical focus on Jesus in the PWJ perspective, I doubt that Messianic Jews—especially a majority of those in Israel—would choose to read *exactly* according to the scholarly paradigm. Yet the scholarly support they encounter in the PWJ perspective adds legitimacy to the movement in both the Jewish and the Christian worlds, which should not be underestimated. On another note, Messianic Jews have something important to learn from PWJ scholars in the area of terminology and rhetoric when it comes to promoting a post-supersessionist reading of Paul: that is, Nanos' proposal, for example, of reading Jewish branches not as "broken off" but rather as "bent." Furthermore, to become more reminiscent of PWJ scholars' understanding of Paul, the majority of the Messianic Jews in Israel need to place a stronger focus on the Torah; both in light of Paul's continued Torah observance and by becoming more observant themselves. While there is perhaps no intrinsic value in a religious movement fully adhering to a single scholarly movement, from a scholarly point of view there is a value in acknowledging overlaps. Indeed, several insights from this scholarly community are also present in the religious community, without delving into the question of who was first with the "within-Judaism" claims.

From a somewhat different perspective, during research for this study, I have met people in different arenas with a deep respect and admiration for the PWJ perspective, who simultaneously hosted negative and strong opinions about Messianic Jews. Maybe this study, by demonstrating the many similarities Messianic Jews have with the PWJ perspective, can help adjust convictions of this sort. I also wonder, however, whether PWJ scholars can learn from the importance attributed to Jesus by the Messianic Jews; they almost seem afraid of Jesus, as if he

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<sup>33</sup> Rosner, "Messianic Jews and Jewish-Christian Dialogue," 153.

would threaten a within-Judaism, post-supersessionist perspective. But, for Paul, as a Jesus-believing Jew—a Messianic Jew, if one will—Jesus, in my understanding, probably played a bigger role than that displayed in PWJ readings.

The aim of this study—exploration of the relationship of Messianic Jews in Jerusalem to PWJ scholars—has reached an end for now. Is the idea “going around” that Messianic Jews understand Paul in the same way as PWJ scholars false or true? So, in regard to this conversation on their readings of Rom 11 and constructions of Paul, how could the ultimate results be summarized? Do Messianic Jews read the text and construct Paul in the same way *as* the within-scholars (*similar*)? Or, is the relationship better explained as Messianic Jews *and* PWJ scholars (*dissimilar*)? The answer that arises from this conversation is a *yes-and-no*. This double-ended answer displays that it is not a full agreement with the PWJ perspective, it might be better explained as a resonance rather than a complete similarity. This ambivalent answer reflects the very identity of Messianic Jews. They are caught between Judaism and Christianity, being perceived by many—scholars, Jews, and Christians—to be both Jews and Christians, or neither Jews nor Christians. This also reflects their relationship with the trajectories within Pauline scholarship: their views resonate with the PAJ perspective in terms of a focus on Jesus and faith as well as a Yeshualogy hermeneutic, but with the PWJ perspective on other questions including stressing the hermeneutic of post-supersessionism. The Paul constructed by the Messianic Jewish readers and PWJ scholars is similar; the readings of Rom 11 are also similar in, for instance, the emphasis on remained ethnicities in Christ as Jews and non-Jews. Those, however, of the empirical-religious readers exhibit greater diversity, and diverge altogether in some respects, particularly in the strong emphasis among the scripturalists on their eschatological identity and its close associations with the materiality of the land of Israel. This has to do with an important dissimilarity from all the scholarly perspectives: the biblical ideology of the Messianic Jewish readers emerges in the textual practice of making the biblical texts relevant and alive for them today. Despite this, Messianic Jews have their closest friend not in the PAJ approach (and the POJ perspective is far off), but in the PWJ perspective. Nuancing this further, participants belonging more closely to the traditional-Jewish end of the spectrum (like the *Bet* congregation) than the evangelical-Jewish (like *Alef*), given the former’s focus on the Torah and “within Judaism,” have stronger commonalities with the PWJ approach. Bringing all the different conversations in this chapter together, the Messianic Jewish readings of Rom 11 and constructions of Paul are more similar than dissimilar to those offered by PWJ scholars—but without being the same.

This conversation and exploration have come to an end. Indeed, the apostle Paul and the Messianic Jewish readers in this study have one additional thing in common. When they consider they have spoken enough, they retreat into a mystery: the impossibility of *really* knowing what is going on, to quote the doxology that ends Rom 11. And I too have said enough.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him,  
to receive a gift in return?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36 NRSV)

# Postscript: A Personal Reflection

But, wait. One more thing. Or, a few. Doesn't this happen to all of us, scholars as well as the religious? We cannot shut up; we always have more to say. As a postscript, the genre changes; this is not a part of the thesis, as such, thereby allowing greater freedom and different game rules.

One day, during my time in Jerusalem, I accidentally encountered a couple in their 70s. As it turned out, they were running a semi-secret Messianic Jewish synagogue in their home. After a long service the next Shabbat and a sumptuous lunch, this was the woman, Yehudit, who burst out in the creed, "Our Trinity is the Torah, Yeshua, and the Land!" These words have undoubtedly followed me throughout the study, inspiring not only the structure but these final words. The Torah. Yeshua. And the Land. A Messianic Jewish trinitarianism. This is it. This is what it's all about, for these folks. And it's a faith that comes out of their readings of the Bible, of "God's Word." To my surprise, the majority of Messianic Jews in Israel do not seem to be Torah observant to the extent I had expected. The other two, Yeshua and the Land, they fully seem to embrace, but the Torah often seems to slip between their fingers. Yes, I know, there are many who do live a life where the Torah directs everyday life. But, yet.

This leads me to ponder the question: what about the future of Messianic Judaism? If the Torah and Torah observance, as preached by Paul within Judaism (PWJ) scholars and the like, have nothing to do with being saved or not, but are the ultimate marks and gifts from God to the Jewish people, something they should observe in gratitude for being His first chosen people, should they not then as Messianic Jews live according to the Torah? The Torah does not stand in contrast to faith in Jesus. At all. Rather, the Torah identifies and signifies the Jewish people and is a practical way of emphasizing Jewish identity. I often wrapped up the interviews on a less formal basis than I conducted them, asking curiously what the participants thought about the future of the movement. While usually clothed in the language of God-talk, two distinct scenarios were repeated. Either the movement would become more similar to mainstream Jewish communities and more Torah-observant, or it would be more charismatic, shaped by so-called biblical Judaism from the first century. Not surprisingly, some wished for the first, others for the latter; some feared the first, others the latter. The question is important. With a small movement as it still is and still heavily influenced and entangled with evangelical

Christianity, the fear of the Torah and perhaps also a laziness should be overcome. Yet, with a rising awareness of the Jewishness of Christianity and with the huge influx of non-Jews into the movement, it seems unlikely on a large scale. Rather, there seems to be a risk of being eaten alive, so to speak: that the Gentile majority will take over and develop a form of Jewish-infused evangelicalism under the cover of Messianic Judaism. Then a kind of Judaism of non-Jews would develop (it might be good as such), but the risk would be a new split such as the one highly criticized in the early Jesus movement when the non-Jews took over. Neither seems to be a good future solution and survival strategy for a distinct, Jewish, Jesus-believing movement.

Here, perhaps, the question of the Torah reappears. While the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel—compared to the situation in the United States—more strongly avoid Torah observance for different reasons, I wonder whether a key to the future does not lie in the Torah. Theologically speaking, and also sociologically, a Messianic Judaism more in line with the mainstream Jewish community and living a life according to the Torah, seems, to me at least, to be what the movement needs to continue to build a unique identity as comprising Jewish believers in Jesus. If the Torah is *the* signifier for the Jewish people and an irrevocable gift from God, why wouldn't Messianic Jews also embrace it? A Messianic Judaism even more at home within Judaism—*contemporarily and biblically*—would reasonably take this step. A within-Judaism approach should not see a contradiction between the Torah and Yeshua but a dialectic relationship producing fruitful conversation. Embracing the Torah more wholeheartedly in terms of practice would allow the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement to produce a construction of Paul more similar to that proclaimed by the PWJ perspective. This is probably also one of the reasons why Messianic Jews in the United States are closer to PWJ formulations than the movement in Israel. Ignatius of Antioch might have proclaimed that “it is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism,”<sup>1</sup> but if Paul himself practiced Judaism, there is a solid biblical foundation—provided that the within-perspective is correct—for being Jewish and believing in Jesus as the Messiah. It should not be monstrous but enjoyable.

Messianic Judaism has often been described by Mark D. Nanos as a “laboratory,” a term I find both useful and problematic.<sup>2</sup> By laboratory, a dialectic is intended that goes as following: for the first time in modern times a distinct Jewish community of Jesus followers exists and through it and their struggles and negotiations, we can grasp a better understanding of first-century Messianic Judaism. Contemporary Messianic Judaism can thus serve as a laboratory, especially as the emic terminology presents the movement as a restoration. But what *can* we learn about

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<sup>1</sup> Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 10.3.

<sup>2</sup> E-mail conversation, April 2021.

the early, Jesus-believing community? And what can the contemporary movement learn by studying the first-century situation? Here one needs to be cautious. So much has happened throughout history. The parting of the ways has affected both Judaism and Christianity profoundly. On the Jewish side, we have the whole development of rabbinic Judaism in response to a destroyed temple in 70 CE, and in modern times the Shoah and the inauguration of the State of Israel. On the Christian side, we have all the Church Councils, the splits, and so on. A restoration of a first-century, Jewish, Jesus-believing community is, as far as I can see, a total impossibility although it might be possible to speak of a restoration, and perhaps a continuation, of its inner core. Regardless, Messianic Judaism walks a fine and difficult line with constant negotiations trying to make their way between and among the two major, fixed, and usually oppositional systems of Judaism and Christianity, and conducting this study has given me a deep admiration for Messianic Judaism for taking on this challenge.

As I wrap up this, an email arrives from Jennifer M. Rosner, the Messianic Jewish theologian, who sends me copies of her forthcoming books. And once again the topic becomes acute as I open her *Finding Messiah: A Journey into the Jewishness of the Gospel* (2021)<sup>3</sup> and cannot stop reading until the final page. Addressing several typical Christian theological subjects often approached with traditional, anti-Jewish understanding, Rosner instead puts forth a Jewish perspective intermingled with her own journey into a more Torah-observant lifestyle and discovery of the Jewish Messiah. Herein, she also addresses a topic on which this study does not linger, but which has spooked me every now and then during the writing: namely, that of “the parting of the ways”—the scholarly buzzword for speaking about when Judaism and Christianity departed from each other and became distinct movements a few centuries after the historical Jesus, Paul, and the other guys. With this, the ancient movement of Jewish believers in Jesus somehow became swallowed up by the Church and disappeared. No one wanted them. Reading Paul as having been within Judaism—the whole New Testament, for that matter, as within Judaism—is deeply tied to this question of the parting of the ways. A “within-Judaism reading” necessarily condemns the parting and instead promotes the opposite: inclusion rather than exclusion.

Are we witnessing a “joining of the ways”<sup>4</sup> *nostra aetate*—in our time? Both the PWJ perspective and contemporary Messianic Judaism bewails the historical development culminating in the parting of the ways as the opposite of what the Jewish Jesus and the Jewish Paul, as historical figures, supposedly wanted. But now,

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<sup>3</sup> Rosner, *Finding Messiah*.

<sup>4</sup> The expression “joining of the ways” has been used in relation to Paul’s vision for his mission by the PWJ-scholar Anders Runesson, see Anders Runesson, “Paul and the Joining of the Ways: Ordering the Eschaton, Preparing for Judgment,” in *Israel and the Nations: Paul’s Gospel in the Context of Jewish Expectation*, ed. František Ábel (Lexington/Fortress Academic: Lanham, 2021), 25–48.

Christianity around the globe is increasingly discovering her Jewish roots, Jewish-Christian dialogue is flourishing as never before (yet still much is needed), and the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement has been born. Regardless of whether or not this is assigned to God's handling in the end times or not, I wonder keenly whether this could be viewed as a step towards a "joining of the ways": not an erasure of the borders between Judaism and Christianity, but a movement wherein the Christian side starts to walk more closely to her Jewish older sibling. Time will tell. Maybe, even though there's a long way to go, Messianic Judaism here can be an important conversation partner. Or, as Pope John Paul II so wisely stated back in 1986 when speaking in the Chief Synagogue in Rome, that Judaism is "intrinsic" to Christianity;<sup>5</sup> maybe, maybe the Messianic Jewish movement can be a sort of incarnational witness to what this actually can entail. As Rosner has written:

The trajectory of this [Rosner's and possible mine] study leads us into a deeper consideration of Messianic Jewish theology and its potential contribution to this unique dialogical endeavor [Jewish-Christian in post-Holocaust times]. Let us ... reflect on the contribution of Messianic Jewish theology and the possibility of Messianic Judaism's increased role in the future of the new Jewish-Christian encounter.<sup>6</sup>

Writing about Messianic Judaism has been quite a journey both professionally but also personally. Everyone seems to get affected by this movement, whether with anger, admiration, or sheer confusion. I have lived through all possible feelings. Although some periods have been just hard work, with dull or null feelings, there have been periods when not only my brain but also my heart has been engaged in the topics of the study. As a non-Jew studying Jewish followers of Jesus and the Jewishness of the whole Jesus movement, one cannot but ponder the question of one's own situatedness. I feel deeply (or perhaps most) at home when the liturgy is celebrated in Hebrew. I mourn when I walk other streets than those in "the Holy Land." And I feel offended and deeply saddened when I hear Christians say something negative about Judaism or something that can easily be understood as supersessionist theology (and it happens all the time). And, admittedly, I have been irritated in many Messianic Jewish congregations when, ironically, I think they should do something in another way—often one closer to Jewish tradition. I guess my years of study have programmed me into this thinking, yet there's something

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<sup>5</sup> "The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Environment," Pope John Paul II, [http://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/magazine/documents/ju\\_mag\\_01111997\\_p-42x\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01111997_p-42x_en.html).; see also Bruce D. Marshall, "Elder Brothers: John Paul II's Teaching on the Jewish People as a Question to the Church," in *John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, eds. David G. Dalin and Matthew Levering (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 113–29, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Rosner, *Healing the Schism*, 298.

more, something deeper (which, of course, I can analyze intellectually). Still, however fascinated I am with Messianic Judaism, I am (sadly?) aware that I will always be an outsider. And I think it should be that way somehow. Yet I am more on the inside than most Christians, being deeply aware and interested in the Jewishness of all this stuff. I remain happy to mumble—sometimes jokingly, sometimes seriously—“*Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu, Melech Haolam*” and so on.

Time goes on. As we shifted into the second millennia, a Paul within Judaism was hardly heard of, the same with Messianic Judaism except within its own setting. Yet, since this study took off, many things started to happen that brought the two communities from being just strange stuff to an admired position of influence. Much more work is, nonetheless, needed. The conversation has just begun.



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