

History of Judeo-Christian Communities in the Jewish Diaspora

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Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities distinguish themselves from other Diaspora Jewish communities in their belief that Jesus is the Messiah. They differ from Christian churches in their synagogue lifestyle and stance that Jewish life is a matter of covenant responsibility and/or national duty for Jews. Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities are significant to the history of the Jewish Diaspora in part because they represent a bridge between the synagogue and the church. As David Noel Freedman (1969, 86) put it, "Jewish Christians were able to have active and effective relations with Gentile Christians and at the same time retain operating status in the non-Christian Jewish community. Thus a link was forged, however tenuous, between Christianity and Judaism and it persisted as long as the Jewish Christian community continued to exist. This halfway house with conduits to both sides, could serve as meeting place and mediator, communication center and symbol of the continuity to which both enterprises belonged."

The earliest Diaspora Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities were established in the first century CE by Torah-observant, Jesus-believing Jews from the Land of Israel who "traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message [that Jesus was the Messiah] only to Jews" (Acts 11:19). These communities were part of a Jewish "sect" called the *Natzerim* ("Nazarenes," Acts 24:5). Epiphanius, the fourth-century Church Father, describes Nazarene communities of his day:

[They] did not call themselves Christians, but Nazarenes . . . they remained wholly Jewish and nothing else. For they use not only the New Testament but also the Old like the Jews . . . [They] live according to the preaching of the Law as among the Jews . . . They have a good mastery of the Hebrew language. For the entire Law and the Prophets and what is called the Scriptures, I mention the poetical books, Kings, Chronicles and Esther and all the others are read in Hebrew by them as that is the case with the Jews of course. Only in this respect they differ from the Jews and Christians: with the Jews they do not agree because of their belief in Christ, with the Christians because they are trained in the Law, in circumcision, the Sabbath and the other things. (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29; trans. Klijn and Reinink 1973, 173)

Direct evidence of Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities from the 5th through 17th centuries is scanty. This is because, in the post-Nicean church, the catholic view that Jews could not become Christians and remain Jews was backed by canon law and Constantine's sword. Messianic communities in this period were forced to go underground. The Second Council of Nicea in 787 was the first ecumenical council to formally ban Jesus-believing Jews who lived as Jews from the church. Jesus-believing Jews were required to renounce all ties to Judaism through professions of faith like the one from the Church of Constantinople ("I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom").

Joseph Rabinowitz established the first Messianic synagogue of modern times in Kishinev, Russia, in 1884. It was called *Beney Israel, Beney Brit Chadashah* (Israelites of the New Covenant). Neither Rabinowitz nor his synagogue was connected to a Christian denomination; the government of Bessarabia legally designated the Messianic community a distinct Jewish sect (Kjaer-Hansen 1995, 64). Rabinowitz's synagogue considered circumcision, the Sabbath, and festivals incumbent upon Jews as section 6 of the community's *Twenty-Four Articles of Faith* makes clear:

[As] we are the seed of Abraham according to the flesh, who was the father of all those who were circumcised and believed, we are bound to circumcise every male-child on the eighth day, as God commanded him. And as we are the descendants of those whom the Lord brought out of the land of Egypt, with a stretched out arm, we are bound to keep the Sabbath, the feast of unleavened bread, and the feast of weeks, according as it is written in the law of Moses. (Kjaer-Hansen 1995, 104)

The Messianic community referred to their building (which seated 150–200 people) as a “synagogue,” and they read from a Torah scroll (Kjaer-Hansen 1995, 146). Traditional synagogue prayers were used with Messianic additions, and Jesus was referred to by his original Hebrew name, *Yeshua*.

Prominent Messianic Jewish leaders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries included Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein in Hungary, Mark John Levy in the United States, Philip Cohen in South Africa (whose Jewish Messianic Movement published the journal *The Messianic Jew*) and Hayyim Yediyah Pollak (Lucky) in Galicia. Other leaders included Paul Levertoff in Germany and England (who held the chair of Hebrew and Rabbinics at the *Institutum Judaicum* in Leipzig), Alex Waldmann, Israel Pick, Yehiel Tsvi Lichtenstein-Herschensohn, and John Zacker (who founded the Hebrew Christian Synagogue of Philadelphia in 1922). These individuals paved the way for the emergence of the Messianic Jewish community in the second half of the 20th century.

Historically, the earliest opponents of modern Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities were not traditional Jews but Hebrew Christians with a traditional Christian theology of Judaism and the Torah. In the 1917 issue of *The Hebrew Christian Alliance Quarterly*, the official journal of the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America (HCAA), Messianic Judaism was labeled a heresy, and followers were banished from the Alliance ranks. The *Alliance Quarterly* leaves no ambiguity about the HCAA stance on the Messianic community: “We felt it our duty to make it clear that we have nothing to do with this so-called ‘Messianic Judaism,’ in any shape or form, nor have we any faith in it.” The journal goes on to state, “Their grand sounding designation is a misnomer, for it is neither ‘Messianic’ or ‘Judaism.’ It does *not* describe any movement of Jews in the direction of recognizing our Lord Jesus as the Messiah, but an agitation on the part of some Hebrew Christian brethren, who have much to learn as to the true character of their high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” The editors note that the HCAA stands opposed to the “misguided tendency” of Messianic Judaism and that “we will have none of it!” They conclude with the statement, “We are filled with deep gratitude to God, for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in enabling the Conference to so effectively banish it [Messianic Judaism] from our

midst, and now the Hebrew Christian Alliance has put herself on record to be absolutely free from it, *now and forever*" ("Messianic Judaism" 1917).

In the decades that followed, Messianic communities receded from attention in Jewish Christian circles as Jewish missionary agencies and Hebrew Christian churches marginalized Messianic Jews. Hebrew Christian ministries like the American Board of Missions to the Jews put on a veneer of Jewishness to draw Jewish people to the gospel; Jewish identity and lifestyle were missiologically motivated and not a matter of covenant or national duty (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 40–41). It is estimated that more than "230,000 Jews became Christians during the first third of the 20th century" (Glaser 1998, 159). Almost all of these Jewish "converts to Christianity" assimilated into Gentile churches. Their children intermarried and, with rare exception, no longer identified as Jews (Rudolph 2005, 65; Rudolph 2003, 48–50; Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 54). Against this backdrop of indifference to Jewish difference and failure to maintain Jewish continuity, a resurgence of Messianic Jewish communities in the tradition of Rabinowitz occurred in the early 1970s.

Between 1967 and 1974, a large number of Jews in their early 20s became believers in Jesus and maintained their Jewish identity and lifestyle as a matter of covenantal responsibility and/or national duty. These young "Messianic Jews" joined the Hebrew Christian Alliance and, through majority vote, steered the organization in the direction of Messianic Judaism. In 1975, to the chagrin of the Hebrew Christian old guard, they successfully changed the name of the organization to the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA). This about-face reflected a sea change in the theological and cultural ethos of the movement, "It signaled a shift in the movement's sense of identity . . . Along with the change in name came a new focus on the development of distinct congregations of Jewish Yeshua-believers" (Kinzer 2005, 291). The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) was formed in 1979, and the International Association of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS) followed suit in 1986. In 2006, these two umbrella organizations represented more than 200 Messianic congregations in the Diaspora. An additional 200+ congregations around the world remain unaffiliated. The UMJC defines Messianic Judaism as "a movement of Jewish congregations and congregation-like groupings committed to Yeshua the Messiah that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in Torah, expressed in tradition, renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant" (www.umjc.org).

A common misunderstanding about Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities today is that they are the same as "Jews for Jesus." Most Messianic Jews, however, will deny any connection between the two. Why is this? The terms "Messianic Jew" and "Messianic Judaism" historically represented a commitment to Jewish continuity. In recent years, these terms have been co-opted by Jewish missionary agencies (of the HCAA variety) that maintain the traditional Christian view that the New Testament is ultimately indifferent to Jewish life (Telchin 2004, 21–158; Maoz 2003, 43–258). The prime example of such a group is Jews for Jesus, a Protestant evangelical missionary organization with a staff of more than 200 people (Ariel 2000, 219; www.JewsforJesus.org). Unlike mainstream Messianic synagogues, Jews for Jesus expresses little commitment to Jewish life and Jewish continuity. Most of the con-

verts they make join Protestant churches, and their children assimilate into Gentile Christian culture. The official stance of Jews for Jesus is that all of the distinctively Jewish covenant responsibilities specified in the Torah, including circumcision, are optional for Jews because Christians are “free” from the law (Brickner 2005, 193). By contrast, mainstream Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities are committed to Jewish continuity independent of their outreach within the Jewish community. They consider Torah observance to be a matter of covenant responsibility for Jews.

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Islamization and Jews in the Medieval Middle East

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Islamization refers to the complex set of religious, social, and cultural changes in the Middle Ages that transformed societies of the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, and parts of Central Asia into Islamic societies. These processes occurred at different rates in different regions and took from two to four centuries, or more in some areas.

The establishment and vast military expansion of the Muslim caliphate, which began in the early seventh century, led to an overwhelming majority of world Jewry becoming subjects of the new empire under conditions that generally permitted (along with Christians) communal autonomy and religious liberty in exchange for subservient social status and discriminatory taxation. Although the history of Jews and Judaism was shaped in many ways through accommodation and resistance to