Introducing Messianic Judaism and the UMJC

UMIC Welcoming Messiah Home

UNION OF MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATIONS

529 Jefferson St. NE • Albuquerque, NM 87108 • 800-692-UMJC • www.UMJC.org

Introduction: Yeshua and the Jewish people

From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Savior has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavor to understand. . . . I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories. (Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*)

Jesus was a Jew. In past centuries, people often reacted to Jesus' Jewishness as an embarrassment, a minor detail that was best overlooked, both within the Christian world and the Jewish world. Today, all that is changing. Indeed, his Hebrew name, Yeshua, is becoming widely known even within Christian churches. Many Christian scholars believe that one cannot really understand Yeshua's message apart from his Jewish frame of reference. And a Jewish reclamation of Jesus has been in process now for years.

"He was what was always missing in my Jewishness." In another striking contrast with the past, many Jewish people who believe in Yeshua today find their Jewish identity and loyalty to be strengthened, rather than diminished, by their faith in him.

Allen* grew up in an observant Jewish home in New York, encountered Yeshua as a college student, and struggled to incorporate faith in him with his Jewish identity. Finally, he says, "I thought, 'I am going to live once and then die; I don't want to look over my life and say I wish I had done things more Jewishly. I am going to live this way; this is what I want.' My whole life has been a gradual return to what I had before, but

now with the missing piece of the equation, Yeshua. He was what was always missing in my Jewishness."

Shelley describes her discovery of a Messianic synagogue soon after professing faith in Yeshua. "At that point, my spiritual life went on hyper speed. I was thirsting to know the Bible

and the basis for this information I was given. I joined Beth Messiah, the Messianic synagogue in Columbus where I was then living. I attended services there every Shabbat. I now began to understand the theological basis for my religious beliefs. My Jewish education gained a dimension I had never anticipated, one which embraced Yeshua. As a Jew, I did not feel like I converted to Christianity. To the contrary it now felt like understanding who Yeshua is added to my Judaism rather than detracted from it. Beth Messiah offered me a place to remain a Jew, true to my heritage, true to my upbringing, and yet with Yeshua as the cornerstone, the center of the Ruach I felt there."

"Understanding who Yeshua is added to my Judaism rather than detracted from it."

Another Jewish woman describes a Messianic synagogue that reached out to her and her ailing husband with prayer and emotional support. "At the urging of the Rabbi, I attended a Shabbat service. I had never experienced anything like it. With all my religious prejudices and discomfort with any mention of Yeshua, I felt a presence that defies description. I knew that this

1

^{*} Names are changed to protect privacy.

was something special and that the difference was Yeshua. I accepted him as my Teacher and Savior. Through his example, the love and life given to us from Hashem [the Lord] is fully expressed. I believe he is the human face of God."

"I believe he is the human face of God." These stories are part of a growing Yeshua movement among Jewish people, joined by non-Jewish friends and loved ones, a movement that is loyal both to Yeshua as Messiah and to the Jewish people. This movement would have been considered heretical in past ages, and remains controversial today, but continues to grow and develop. It promises not only to bring many Jewish people back to the God of Israel, but also to bring healing and reconciliation to the ancient rift between Jews and Christians. The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) was formed in 1979 to serve and advance this movement.

The UMJC captures the relationship between the Jewish people and Yeshua in the phrase, welcoming Messiah home. Yeshua arose among the Jewish people to be our promised king and Messiah. After centuries of estrangement, Yeshua is regaining his presence among the Jewish people, and increasing numbers of Jews are welcoming him home individually and in congregations. In the future, this Jewish remnant will expand in numbers and influence to call out the words of welcome that herald Messiah's return to rule over all the earth, "Baruch ha-ba b'shem Adonai—Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

This booklet will introduce you to the historical and biblical roots of this movement that has blossomed in recent decades and holds the key to future decades. And it may help you discover where you fit in as well. Welcome!

Russ Resnik
Executive Director
© 2010 Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations

1: Healing the Breach

JUST SOUTH OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT in Jerusalem, archaeologists have exposed layer upon layer of ruins, dating all the way back to the time of King Solomon. One of the most striking sites is an immense stairway leading up into the courts of the temple as it stood in the days of Messiah. Of the many places in Jerusalem that we connect to the story of Yeshua, this is one where he surely walked on his many visits to the temple. The traces of Yeshua's footsteps that remain there today are mingled with other footsteps, the steps of countless thousands of Jewish men and women who ascended to the temple in worship. Yeshua was part of his people in ancient Jerusalem; he walked with them, worshiped, ate, and drank, along with the rest of Israel. Yeshua's words and deeds set him apart, but his way of life united him with his people.

So it was with Yeshua's disciples. They also left their footprints on that vast stairway leading up to the Temple Mount. Like the Master, they lived and worshiped as loyal Jews. The faith they proclaimed was thoroughly Jewish in its origin and expression. For a few years it made tremendous inroads among the Jewish people. Indeed a first century Jerusalem follower of Messiah might easily have imagined that the time of restoration promised by Israel's prophets was at hand. Thousands of Jewish people were coming to teshuvah or repentance, recommitting themselves to the God of Israel, and joining together to form a new and dynamic body of faith. Signs and wonders appeared in the streets of Jerusalem as the apostles proclaimed the Good News of Yeshua. The Word of God was beginning to go out from Jerusalem to reach all nations, just as the prophets had foretold.

In Jerusalem today, however, the visible reminders of faith in Yeshua are utterly divorced from the Jewish world. The millions of Christian pilgrims who flock to Jerusalem to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher or the Garden Tomb or Gethsemane remain strangers. They generally connect very little with the realties of modern Israel, except for the economic realities of travel. And in the minds of most Israelis, the Yeshua they come to commemorate is a Gentile god. "Yes, he may have walked the streets of Jerusalem," they would say, "but he has nothing to do with us today."

Yeshua and his early followers were at home in the heart of the Jewish world, the city of Jerusalem. Today the faith they founded dwells as an outsider and a relic in modern Jerusalem. Yet it would not be accurate to describe the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as simply distant. Rather it is a relationship of deep misunderstanding, tension, and even hostility. The movement for Yeshua in first century Jerusalem did not blossom into the hoped-for restoration of the Jewish people. Instead, a terrible rift developed between the Jewish people and an increasingly Gentile church, which has persisted to our own day.

As the first-century church expanded far beyond Jerusalem, it abandoned its connection with the Jewish people. Tensions between church and synagogue only increased over the next few centuries to become firmly entrenched within Western culture. After the first century, the messianic movement was cast off not only from the mainstream Jewish world, but also from a church that wanted no trace of Jewishness in its midst. The modern controversy over Messianic Judaism reflects these ancient tensions between Jews and Christians that left Messianic Jews stranded in the middle and alienated from both sides. Even the personal search for a Messianic Jewish identity can be traced back to these early tensions.

ROOTS OF DIVISION

To understand this tragic division we will consider some key events of the first few centuries of our era, from both a Jewish and a Christian perspective. We will discover that the sources of division are not peripheral issues, but stem from the heart of Messianic Jewish faith. Indeed, the first great root of division began with the very claims of Messiah himself.

1. A Radical Messiah

He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:37-38).

Yeshua says that he did not come to cancel the Torah and the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). Then he illustrates this fulfillment with a series of teachings that expand the common understanding of Torah: "You have heard... but I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21-48). Yeshua clearly stands for a Torah-centered life for his Jewish followers, but he is saying much more. He is promoting a renewed life that expresses the heart of Torah in a way that has not been seen before. He is illustrating, and claiming a here-and-now reality for, the circumcision of the heart anticipated in Deuteronomy 30. Furthermore, beyond his teaching, Yeshua models a life of self-sacrifice that is *the* fulfillment of Torah and the Prophets.

In this way, Yeshua begins within the spectrum of Jewish understandings of redemption, and then expands the spectrum. Indeed, he does so in a way that forces the issue of his identity and place within Jewish expectations. The Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner comments on the Sermon on the Mount: "At many points in this protracted account of Jesus' specific teachings, we now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all." Neusner imagines a first-century Jew challenging one of Yeshua's followers:

"And is your master God?" For, I now realize, only God can demand of me what Jesus is asking. So if, with the disciple, I cannot reply, "Yes, in following Jesus I follow God," if I cannot do that, then I also cannot follow that master along the path that he by his own words sets before me. In the end the master, Jesus, makes a demand that only God makes..."

The choice applies to all of us; if Yeshua is indeed Messiah, a visitation of the God of Israel in human form, he must be first in our lives. Because of whom he claims to be, he makes a radical demand upon all who would follow him.

2. The Ingathering of the Gentiles

It flows out of this radical Messiahship that it must be offered to all nations. The first generation of Yeshua-believers was predominately Jewish; the second, from about 60 CE on, was predominately Gentile. The following generations became overwhelmingly Gentile.

How did the Jewish world respond to this change? It saw this influx of Gentiles as a threat:

-

¹ Jacob Neusner. *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus. An Intermillenial, Interfaith Exchange.* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 31.

² Ibid., p. 53.

- Religiously, it appeared to weaken Torah by allowing Gentiles into the faith community without requiring conversion and adherence to Torah. Hence, it appeared to dishonor God.
- Politically, it weakened the Jewish position of privilege with Rome, by diluting their demographics. If so many people were allowed to somehow attach themselves to the God of Israel, they feared it might devalue membership in the people of Israel.

Gradually the Jewish community, and especially its gatekeepers, came to view Messianic Jews as traitors, who were undermining their own people.

The church's response to the new Gentile majority also increased its separation from the Jewish world.

- The increasingly Gentile church saw the majority of Jewish people as rejecting Yeshua, and came to lump all Jews together as personally rejecting Yeshua. This led before long to seeing Jews and Judaism as inherently anti-Messiah. Fear and blame toward the Jewish people soon infected the church and replaced the biblical call to intercede and testify to Israel of their Messiah.
- The New Testament scriptures were uprooted from their Jewish context. In the hands of the church the New Testament became a Gentile book that viewed the Jews as the religious other, rather than as a Jewish book that reflected a deep disagreement among Jewish people.
- The Gentile majority, unaware of the nuances and subtleties of Jewish belief, tended to stereotype Judaism. In short, the new Gentile majority became anti-Jewish.

Where did all this leave the Messianic Jews? In the same period that they were beginning to be excluded from the synagogue, they were beginning to be defined out of a church that wondered why anyone would want to keep a Jewish identity after coming to the knowledge of Messiah.

3. The Fall of Jerusalem

Any national group under political attack or oppression tends to close ranks and form protective barriers for itself. Judaism at the beginning of the first century had a rich variety of religious approaches. At the end of the century, after a failed revolt against Rome, it was more strictly defined by a new orthodoxy. The rabbinic Judaism that evolved from Pharisaism came to regulate and define what was Jewish and what was not.

In 132 CE, 65 years after their defeat at the hands of the Romans, the Jewish people mounted another rebellion. Two factors in this revolt sealed the division between messianic and mainstream Judaism.

First, the leader of the revolt was a general named Bar Kosiba. His followers changed his name to Bar Kochba, or Son of the Star, a messianic title based on Numbers 24:17. Messianic Jews who had joined in the struggle against Rome could hardly continue, now that the leader had been declared the Messiah. When they walked out, other Jews considered them traitors.

Second, when this revolt ended in defeat, Rome took Jerusalem away from the Jewish people. In 70 the Romans had destroyed the temple and terminated all remaining Jewish self-rule. In 135 they went even further and leveled the city of Jerusalem. They rebuilt it as a Gentile city, named Aelia Capitolina, and declared it off limits to the Jews. This meant the end of the Jerusalem

Messianic community. From the days of James up to this time there had been fifteen Jewish bishops in Jerusalem. Now, there was no longer a visible focal point for the Jewish believers.

The Church's Evaluation

The church saw the fall of Jerusalem as well-deserved judgment upon the Jewish people. In about 160 CE Justin Martyr wrote a dialogue with the Jew Trypho, in which he said to him:

For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us [the church]; and that you alone may suffer that which you justly suffer, and that you may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem. . . . Accordingly, these things have happened to you in fairness and justice.³

The political climate also changed with the destruction of Jerusalem. Before that time, it was desirable for Christians to be identified with the Jewish people; now it became undesirable. The church was eager to separate itself from everything Jewish, and demonstrate that it was an entirely new and different faith.

4. Institutionalization

After the fall of Jerusalem, Judaism became increasingly well defined and rigid. This process culminated in the fifth and sixth centuries with the writing of the Talmud. There was still some latitude, but the Talmud became the basis for Jewish law and set the parameters of Judaism from then on.

The Church Triumphant

Under Emperor Constantine, who ruled from 306 to 337, Christianity became not only a legal and recognized religion, but the *only* legal religion. This arrangement began a process of disenfranchisement for the Jewish people. The rights they had enjoyed under pre-Christian Rome began to be stripped away. Finally, by the early Middle Ages, Jews had very few rights left at all.

More than this, under Constantine, the church saw itself as the New Israel, and Constantine, the Christian emperor ruling over a Christian empire, as embodying the Kingdom of God. In this view, the Kingdom of God was present as a triumphant church wed to a Christian empire. This view soon eclipsed the prophetic hope that God would restore Israel and rule from Jerusalem for a thousand years. Who needs a restored Israel when the church triumphant has taken over Israel's destiny?

The Yeshua-believing Jew now found himself in a perilous status. The church saw the Jews as hostile, wicked, and blind. The idea of a Jewish Christian or Messianic Jew was no longer acceptable. The Church of Constantinople, for example, required a statement of faith for a Jewish convert.

³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, 16. Quoted in David Rausch, *A Legacy of Hatred* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 21.

I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom, and above all I renounce Antichrist, whom all the Jews await in the figure and form of Christ, and I join myself to the true Christ and God. ⁴

By end of the fourth century the church had succumbed to the attitude Paul warns against in Romans 11:19-22.

You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in." Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear: For if God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in his goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.

SIGNS OF HEALING

This is a tragic history, but we can see evidence in our times that the great division between Jews and Christians, and ultimately between Jews and the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua, is being overcome. Let's consider the roots of division in reverse order to discern signs of healing.

4. Institutionalization

We live in a secular age, in post-Christendom, increasingly so since the enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The institutional church no longer has the power and prestige it once had. With the end of the established state church, the church can return to its true identity as a pilgrim community or a prophetic people, rather than as a triumphant institution. The church triumphant never effectively reached out to the Jewish people. It never understood the Jewish people, and often did nothing more than alienate and drive them away. Today's emphasis on the church as a body, an organism, a community, has tremendously healing possibilities. Judaism in the post-institutional era also has regained much of the diversity and openness of the first century.

3. Restoration of Jerusalem

When we look toward Jerusalem today we see the regathering of Jewish people from all over the earth, and the establishment of Jewish government and culture. Jerusalem is again the center of Jewish attention and activity. This goes back not just to 1948, but well over 100 years, as Jewish people began to return to the Land of Israel, not just to live as religious pilgrims, but to settle, farm, build towns, and raise children.

The prophets foretold this gradual, step-by-step restoration, which would culminate in a restored Jewish people:

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land.

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean;

I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you;

I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

⁴ Cited in James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (New York: Atheneum, n.d.), p. 397.

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. (Ezek. 36:24-28, NKJV)

If the destruction of Jerusalem in the first and second centuries was a deep root of division in the past, then the regathering of the Jewish people and the restoration of Jerusalem promise healing for the future. If Jerusalem's judgment was seen as a sign of God's judgment, what does it mean when Jerusalem is restored, as the prophets promised, to become a living Jewish city once more? It is a potent sign of God's move to heal the breach and bring the people of Israel to faith in Messiah.

2. The Gentile Majority After the Holocaust

In contrast with earlier periods, Gentile believers today often have great respect and understanding for Jewish people, Jewish tradition, and Israel. We sometimes take this new respect for granted and bemoan the continued anti-Semitism in other parts of the church. But we should remember that today the attitude among Christians in general regarding Jewishness is much more positive than it was even fifty years ago. The Holocaust and its aftermath brought a profound awareness among Christians of the evil of their anti-Jewish attitudes and assumptions. It has brought, and is still bringing, corporate repentance in many churches. For example, in March, 2000, John Paul II became the first Pope to visit Israel—in itself an act of apology. He visited Yad VaShem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, and prayed at the Western Wall, where he placed this prayer for forgiveness between its stones:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. And asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.

The interest of many Christians in the Jewish roots of their faith is very significant, and we hope that it grows and deepens. In addition, many Gentiles are seeking to return the New Testament to its original Jewish setting. Much of the best New Testament scholarship today sees the New Testament as a Jewish book that must be understood in light of the Jewish world and mind of the time it was written. It is no longer portrayed as a document totally alien to Judaism.

1. Yeshua's Messianic Claims

Yeshua's radical claim, of course, remains unchanged. But what was a root of division may also be a source of unity: not Christianity over Judaism, or the New Israel over the Old, but Yeshua himself. Many Jewish people today are willing to consider the possibility that Yeshua may be the Jewish Messiah. They are not strongly influenced by rabbinic authority, but are interested in going directly to the evidence of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. At the same time, many Christians are sensitive to the need to present the person of Yeshua to Jewish friends, rather than to promote their religion or doctrinal affiliation. Yeshua's messianic claims remain radical, and many will continue to deny them, but at least they are being considered on their own terms, rather than against the backdrop of competing religions.

In the midst of these signs of healing is the sign of Messianic Judaism itself. Remember that when church and synagogue split apart, they left the Messianic Jews in the middle, alienated from both. Eventually Messianic Judaism all but died out. Today healing is taking place, not so much on the level of ecumenical understanding, as in the ability of believers to reach out in love and truth to Jewish people, and in the ability of Jewish people to honestly consider the claims of Yeshua.

Paul says of the Jewish people, "And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (Rom. 11:23). Just as the Lord is restoring the Land of Israel under Jewish sovereignty, so also is he raising up a movement of Jewish people who believe in Yeshua, who affirm both their Jewish identity and their New Covenant faith. Both are essential to the future. Yeshua foresees a remnant within and among the Jewish people, back in the land of Israel, who will welcome Messiah home with the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:39).

2: WHO IS YESHUA?

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Isaiah 53:11

Yeshua's radical claims as Messiah have been a source of division between Jews and Christians—and between most Jews and Yeshua himself—for centuries. At the same time, however, Yeshua is a potential source of healing between Jews and Christians. The difference lies in part with how we answer the question, who is Yeshua? Or more particularly, who is Yeshua in relationship to Israel, that is, the Jewish people?

The contrast between Christian answers to this question and a Jewish answer is captured in one of the oldest debates between Jews and Christians—how to interpret one chapter of the Bible, Isaiah 53. This chapter speaks of the suffering servant of the Lord, and, at least since the Middle Ages, Jewish teachers and scholars have argued that this suffering servant is Israel. Throughout the same period, Christians have generally argued that the suffering servant is the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. This difference in interpretation, of course, reflects the great divide between Christians and Jews and between the majority of Jewish people and the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua. The accounts of the life of Messiah in the New Testament portray Yeshua's identity in a way that sheds light on this ancient debate. Indeed, their picture of Yeshua supports both interpretations to reveal that Yeshua himself is the bridge over the Jewish-Christian divide.

Different views of Yeshua

For many centuries, the Christian telling of the Yeshua story has emphasized that he came to the Jewish people and was rejected. Christianity then arose as the fulfillment of all that is in the Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians called the Old Testament, and as the replacement for Judaism, which became obsolete with Messiah's coming. The unwillingness of Jews to abandon the old faith, Judaism, and embrace the new, Christianity, was a sign of their stubbornness and spiritual pride. This replacement of religions was what God intended all along—Israel's story in the Hebrew Scriptures serves only to prepare the world for Messiah's coming.

The Jewish view throughout this same long period of history is that Yeshua did not fulfill the prophecies of Messiah recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, he is at best a good rabbi and teacher, and at worst, a false prophet. In either case he did not intend to start a new religion, but only to reform (or to corrupt according to some) the Judaism of his day. After Yeshua's death, his followers added to his teachings to create the New Testament, and to form a new religion, Christianity. But Yeshua himself failed to meet the Jewish expectations of Messiah.

When we say that Yeshua did not meet Jewish expectations in his day, we should consider what those expectations were.

First-century Judaism had multiple expressions, much like the Judaism of today. Indeed, we can say that in its diversity twenty-first century Judaism resembles first century Judaism more than any intervening form. Unlike today, however, almost all expressions of Judaism in the first century looked for a Messiah to come. They had different views of Messiah's nature and role, of course, whether he would be a military-political leader, a great Torah scholar, a healing charismatic, or some other figure. Some first century groups even ascribed divine qualities to the Messiah to come. But they shared the expectation that Messiah would someday appear.

In Hebrew, messiah or *mashiach* simply means "the anointed one." Scripture speaks of a variety of anointed ones, or messiahs, including a Gentile king, Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1). But the use

of the term messiah becomes more focused and developed in first century Judaism. Messiah is seen in connection with Israel and its status as the chosen people of God. His role is to empower Israel to fulfill her priestly mission as a light to the nations.

This priestly mission is implied at the initial call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and made explicit at Mount Sinai, after God delivers Israel from Egypt and says to them: "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). Through Israel, God will reveal himself to the nations, and the nations will experience God through Israel. This national priesthood replicates the role of the priests within Israel, who are responsible for the temple and its sacrificial system. God is present within Israel through the priesthood and temple, and all Israel experiences God through the priesthood and temple. By God's design, there is a mediating tribe, the Levites, between himself and all Israel. In the same way, there is a mediating nation, Israel, between God and the rest of the nations. The Messiah will enable Israel to represent God to all the nations, by establishing God's kingdom over all the earth. In the first century, this change would have required the overthrow of Roman rule. The real goal, however, is not just political revolution, but the kingdom of God. The coming of Messiah will have universal impact, but it will not violate the particular assignment that God gave to Israel.

Yeshua as one-man Israel

In accordance with this picture of Messiah, when Yeshua appears, he comes first to Israel. Indeed, Yeshua himself says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). He comes, however, not just for Israel, but for all humanity. He enables Israel to fulfill her mission toward the nations by representing all Israel in his own person. The nations will still come to God and experience him through Israel, as he always intended, but now they will do so through the person of Messiah.

This understanding of the Messiah and his role should help us see how great a mistake it has been to remove Yeshua from Israel. This error creates a false understanding of God—who is no longer seen as the God of Israel, but as an impersonal, abstract deity. This error has caused Jews to think that Christians worship a different God than they do. It also creates a false understanding of Yeshua. Instead of coming to empower Israel, he is seen as abandoning or denying Israel and its unique mission, which is why Jewish people often have such a hard time accepting him as Messiah.

To many readers throughout the centuries the New Testament has seemed to shift the biblical focus away from Israel, the central theme of the Old Testament,⁵ and to have almost nothing to say about Israel at all. This, however, is a superficial reading that misses a dominant strain in the accounts of Yeshua's life.

The early announcements of the birth and future ministry of Yeshua make it clear that he not only comes to Israel, but he comes to empower Israel to fulfill her mission. Thus, when Yeshua's parents bring him, as the Torah required, to the temple, "to do for him according to the custom of Torah" (Luke 2:27), they meet a man named Simeon who prophesies over the infant:

_

⁵ The term "Old Testament" is itself a product of Christian theology, which sees the Hebrew Scriptures as old, temporary, transitional to the New Testament. The usual Jewish term is Tanakh, which is an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Holy Writings), the same books as in the Christian Old Testament, but in different order.

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-31 NRSV)

Simeon's quote echoes Isaiah 49, in which the Lord addresses Israel as his chosen servant, saying,

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. (Is. 49:6 NRSV)

We have returned to the subject with which we opened this chapter, Isaiah's servant of the Lord. Notice that the servant, whom Isaiah identifies in other passages as Israel (44:1, 21; 45:4; 49:3), comes first to restore Israel. The servant is someone within Israel, representing all Israel, who accomplishes Israel's mission for the whole. So in the ancient Jewish-Christian debate over the identity of the servant in Isaiah 53, both sides are correct. The servant is Israel and at the same time, the Messiah. Messiah's role as the servant is first to restore Israel to the Lord and then to empower Israel to become a light to the nations. He represents Israel, first to Israel and then to the nations. If the servant has this two-fold assignment, we might ask how Yeshua accomplishes it. He relives Israel's history in his own life. He goes through the events of Israel's story in a direct or symbolic way, so that he can succeed where Israel failed, so that through him Israel succeeds.

Matthew's account of the early life of Yeshua brings out this theme most clearly. Matthew is sometimes criticized for misapplying the prophecies of the Tanakh⁶ to Yeshua. A classic example is Matthew 2:14-15.

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." (NRSV)

The prophet that Matthew is quoting here is Hosea: When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (11:1). Clearly Hosea is referring to Israel in the past, not to a Messiah coming in the future. Is Matthew quoting this prophecy out of context? No; it is a misunderstanding to think that whenever Matthew uses the word "fulfill" he is referring to a prediction that has come to pass. Rather, he is saying that the story of Yeshua unites with and carries forward the story of Israel. Israel went down to Egypt to survive and was brought back to the Promised Land. So Yeshua and his family go down to Egypt to survive and are brought back to the Promised Land. Israel is called God's son, and so is Yeshua. The term "son of God" has many implications, but the one that Matthew focuses on here is that it is a title for Israel, which Yeshua takes on in a unique way to reenact Israel's story. The chart below details a number of parallels between the story of Yeshua and the story of Israel. This does not mean that Yeshua replaces Israel, but that Yeshua accomplishes as a one-man Israel the mission of all Israel. In so doing he will become a light to the nations and the glory of God's people Israel.

-

⁶ See footnote 5.

Yeshua	Israel
Born as result of miracle	Born as result of miracle—birth of Isaac
Born in Bethlehem	David is born in Bethlehem to become Israel's greatest king.
Goes down to Egypt in early years	Goes down to Egypt in early years
Herod tries to kill the savior	Pharaoh tries to kill the savior
Transformed through the Jordan (enters as a carpenter's son, emerges as Son of God*)	Transformed through the Red Sea (enter as slaves, emerge as a free people)
After Jordan, spends 40 days in the wilderness to overcome where Israel fails	After Red Sea, spends 40 years in wilderness
Yeshua goes into the exile of death	Israel eventually goes into exile
He rises on the day of firstfruits	God promises return and resurrection of Israel
Shavuot-Pentecost (Acts 2)—the followers of Yeshua receive power to fulfill their mission	At the first Shavuot, Israel receives her mission amidst a display of God's presence
Shavuot touches devout Jews from every nation, who return to the nations from which they come. (Cf. "all nations" in Mt. 28:18-20)	At Shavuot, Israel is inaugurated as a priestly nation, to fulfill the promise "in you all nations of the earth will be blessed."

During his life on earth Yeshua had three primary ministries; healing, teaching, and casting out demons. These ministries provide another example of how Yeshua fulfills the story of Israel:

- 1. His ministry of healing fulfills Exodus 15:26 (as well as passages in the Prophets based on this promise): "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am *Adonai Rofecha*, the LORD who heals you." Yeshua is present in Israel as Adonai Rofecha bringing healing to many and freeing many from the sin that is linked to disease and illness.
- 2. His teaching and preaching echo the ministry of Moses, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, which echoes Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai. Yeshua, like Moses, goes up to a high place. His instruction opens with a summary known as the beatitudes, eight in number to reflect the Ten Commandments with which Moses begins his teaching. Yeshua is the "prophet like me" whom Moses promised (Deut. 18:15), as the Lord said, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command" (Deut. 18:18).
- 3. Yeshua cast out demons among the people that he encountered, which some modern readers find odd or even embarrassing. Are the gospels just reflecting old superstitions about evil spirits, or is something else going on? Demons are a sort of spiritual residue of idol worship, as Paul notes, "What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol

* Yeshua is by nature, from his very conception, the unique Son of God. At his immersion in the Jordan he is publicly announced and sent forth as Son of God.

-

is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God" (1 Cor. 10:19-20). Yehoshua (Joshua) is charged with conquering the Promised Land and casting out the idolatrous nations within it, along with all remnants of their worship. Yeshua comes to finish the task begun by Yehoshua, as he ministers throughout the Promised Land, driving out demons.

An exiled Messiah

This picture of Yeshua is far different from the way he has often been presented to the Jewish people. Instead of hearing of a Messiah who enters their history and enables them to fulfill their mission, Jews throughout the centuries were confronted with what seemed like a foreign God. To this day, most Jewish people tend to see faith in Yeshua as a betrayal of their Jewish identity and calling from God. Yeshua is in exile from his own people.

Scripture hints at this long exile in the story of Joseph. One of the medieval Jewish Torah commentators says that the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the sons. Joseph is a sign to Israel that one whom we will reject and cast out of our midst will become our deliverer. Joseph is the favored son, chosen from his earliest days as the heir of his father, destined to rule over the tribes of Israel. But first Joseph suffers rejection by his brothers because of this very destiny.

Now when they saw him afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. Then they said to one another, "Look, this dreamer is coming! Come now then, let us kill him, and cast him into one of these pits and say, 'Some wild beast has devoured him!' Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!" (Gen. 37:18–20, NKJV)

Yeshua tells the story of another son, which is really the story of himself. A father owns a vineyard that he rents out to vinedressers. When he sends messengers to collect his share of the fruit, the vinedressers beat and kill them one by one. Finally, the father sends his son, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the vinedressers see the son, they conspire against him to kill him, saying to one another, "This is the heir. Come now then, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance." So they take him and cast him out of the vineyard and kill him (Matt. 21:37–39).

Both sons are rejected and cast out to death, and both will be raised up from death to be exalted as ruler. Joseph emerges from the dungeon to become second only to Pharaoh in all of Egypt. As exalted ruler, Joseph becomes the source of salvation to the nations, recognized and honored among all. But he remains a stranger to his own brothers. Indeed, as the famine progresses and all the nations go down to Egypt for food, only the sons of Israel are still wondering where to obtain bread.

When Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another?" And he said, "Here, I have heard that there is grain in Egypt; go down to that place and buy for us there, that we may live and not die." (Gen. 42:1–2, NRSV)

And so, the sons of Israel come to Egypt and appear before Joseph, whom they cannot yet recognize. The story ends as God intended, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and saves them from famine. Now we realize that God has sent Joseph to save all the nations, so that he might in the end save the sons of Israel, who had been so slow to recognize him. Likewise, the other rejected son, Yeshua, will bring salvation to the nations, so that in the end "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26).

In the meantime, Yeshua remains like Joseph to the Jewish community of today. Just as the

brothers cannot recognize Joseph because he looks like a foreigner, an Egyptian, and speaks to them through an interpreter (Gen. 42:8, 23), so Yeshua appears as a foreign god to the Jewish people. But in the future Yeshua will reveal himself to his brothers, the tribes of Israel, saying "I am your brother" (Gen. 45:4). As in Joseph's story, his work of bringing salvation to the nations culminates in salvation for Israel. Today's Messianic Jewish movement is a sign that the long exile of Yeshua from his own Jewish people is drawing to a close and that the restoration of all Israel is at hand. Let's see how this movement blossomed a generation ago, and is continuing to thrive today.

3: Messianic Judaism Reborn

THE LATE 60S AND EARLY 70S saw the rise of a grass-roots Jesus movement that attracted all kinds of people, including younger counter-culture types, many of whom were Jewish. In the mid-70s, Dan Juster, who was to become a key Messianic Jewish figure, was leading the First Hebrew Christian Church, founded in Chicago in 1934 by the Presbyterians. Dan caught a vision of expressing his faith in Yeshua in a more Jewish way and shifted to worship on Shabbat, keeping the Jewish holidays, and a positive attitude toward Torah. One of his worship leaders was Joel Chernoff, who went on to pioneer Messianic Jewish music as part of the group *Lamb*. Joel had come to the congregation with the revolutionary idea of employing Jewish style worship songs in place of the old hymns. The idea took off. First Hebrew Christian Church was renamed Adat Hatikvah to reflect its new Jewish self-image.

Changes like these contributed to the development of the messianic synagogue. This structure seemed to resolve the identity crisis of Jewish followers of Yeshua, bringing their Jewish identity into the heart of their worship life. The messianic synagogue provided for a corporate expression of Jewish heritage and freed Jewish believers in Yeshua from church structures and customs that often seemed alien to them.

The Book of Acts provides the model for the messianic synagogue; a first century Jerusalem congregation that was thoroughly Jewish and firmly connected to the Jewish community. Before the temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., Judaism comprised many different sects: Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots are all mentioned in the New Testament; the Essenes are described by the ancient historian Josephus.⁷ The Messianics, or Nazarenes, were one more sect in this dynamic mix of first century Judaism. As such, they enjoyed a degree of acceptance by the Jewish community:

Continuing faithfully and with singleness of purpose to meet in the temple courts daily, and breaking bread in their several homes, they shared their food in joy and simplicity of heart, praising God and having the respect of all the people. And day after day the Lord kept adding to them those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47, CJB).

Where did these early believers go to worship and study Scripture? To the temple along with other Jews in Jerusalem, because they were part of the Jewish people (Acts 3:1; 5:42). Despite the opposition of the religious leadership, the Jerusalem congregation thrived in the Jewish homeland:

Meanwhile the Messianic community throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (Acts 9:31 NRSV)

The messianic assemblies in Israel had suffered persecution and would suffer it again, but there were also times when they met, worshiped, promoted Yeshua among the Jewish people, *and had peace*.

James, or Yaakov, the leader of the Jerusalem Messianic Jewish community (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18) was the first of fifteen Jewish bishops (or overseers) of Jerusalem, all of whom lived in the Jewish capital among the Jewish people and oversaw the flock of Messiah. Yaakov

-

⁷ Josephus. *The Wars of the Jews*. Book II, Chapter VIII, Section 2. Trans., William Whiston. Grand Rapids, MI: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., N.d.

⁸ Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, IV, 3, 5. Cited in Rausch, Messianic Judaism, p. 10.

himself was widely accepted by the Jewish people. Josephus writes that when Yaakov was killed by the priestly faction, the mainstream population rose up in protest.⁹

Another evidence of the Jewishness of the first Yeshua-believers is the New Testament itself. It is a Jewish book. This does not just mean that all the authors of the New Testament (with the possible exception of Luke) were Jewish, but that the Jewish background of the New Testament is vital to understanding it properly. Apart from the Jewish background it will be misunderstood and misinterpreted.

For example, many critics portray the New Testament as the source of Christian anti-Semitism. Tragically, there is some truth to this claim, because the New Testament is so often misrepresented. If you accept the New Testament as a Jewish book, however, you understand its criticisms of Jewish people as an internal debate; one group of Jews is criticizing another group of Jews. You cannot use it as an anti-Semitic tool. For example, John writes of Yeshua, "He came to his own, and his own did not receive him" (1:11). You might think this is saying that the Messiah came to the Jewish people, and the Jewish people did not receive him. Later, however, John shows that many Jewish people *did* receive him, despite the many that did not. Yeshua commends one of these Jews, Nathanael, for recognizing him: "Behold an *Israelite* indeed, in whom is no guile!" (1:47). Nathanael in turn praises Yeshua by calling him the King of *Israel*. John shows that Yeshua, despite his disagreements with the Jewish religious authorities, remains firmly connected with his people. The New Testament Yeshua does not promote anti-Jewishness; rather he reminds his followers that "salvation is of the Jews" (4:22).

The Messianic Distinctive

Some of the Jewish members of the 70s Jesus movement began to apply the Jewishness of the New Testament to themselves. If the early messianic believers remained fully Jewish, why couldn't *they*? This position seemed natural to young people who had come to faith in Yeshua but remained a bit suspicious of institutional Christianity. Such an idea had its detractors, of course. Some conservative Christians warned their Messianic Jewish friends against re-erecting what they called the "wall of division" (Ephesians 2:14), or going back "under the Law." Charismatic Christian friends worried that these Jewish followers of Yeshua were choosing mere tradition over the flow and power of the Holy Spirit. The Jewish world accused them of deception. If you believe in Jesus, they said, you have converted to Christianity and should simply admit it.

During this period, my wife, Jane, and I met Eliezer Urbach, an older Messianic Jew working with the American Board of Missions to the Jews. He was of our parents' generation and had fled his homeland in Poland just ahead of Hitler's invasion in 1939. He survived the war years in Russia, including time in prison where he lost his brother, and served in the Red Army. At the war's end, Eliezer returned to Poland to find his home and family destroyed. He emigrated to Israel just before the outbreak of its war for independence. Finally, in the mid-50s, Eliezer and his wife Sara migrated to Brazil, where they came to faith in Yeshua.

When we met him, Eliezer was living in Denver, and coming monthly to Albuquerque, where we lived, to establish a Hebrew-Christian fellowship in our city. He quickly took us under his wing, and became a grandfather figure to our young sons Luke and Danny, and our daughters Sarah and Anna. When this man with his long gray beard entered the house, one of our little girls became frightened and began to cry. Eliezer pulled some candy out of his pocket and won her over; he remained "Grandpa" until his death. Soon after meeting our children, he confronted me

_

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book XX, Chapter IX, Section 1.

with the question: "Will they have a part in the Christmas pageant or the Chanukah play? You have to choose."

This sort of choice, which many young Jewish followers of Yeshua were considering, led to the idea of separate Messianic Jewish congregations, which writer David Rausch rightly calls "the Messianic distinctive." As Messianic Jewish congregations began to multiply in the late 70s and into the 80s, however, the questions remained. Was it legitimate to establish new congregations for the express purpose of maintaining a distinct Messianic Jewish element within the larger Body of Messiah? What about the wall of division, or going under the Law? What had Paul meant when he said there was no longer Jew nor Gentile in Messiah?

Hebrew Christians or Messianic Jews?

We can capture some of the debate over Messianic Judaism by considering the terms "Hebrew Christian" and "Messianic Jew." Hebrew Christian was an older way to describe a Jewish believer in Yeshua (or really Jesus, since Hebrew Christians shied away from the more Hebraic terminology). It arose in the nineteenth century as Jewish Christians became more positive toward their Jewish roots, and desired to maintain some sort of visible Jewish identity. The first Hebrew Christian Alliance was founded in Great Britain in 1866. It is members, unlike most Jewish converts of previous centuries, were proud of their heritage, and sought to affirm it in the context of New Testament faith. They were also careful to affirm their allegiance to the larger Gentile Church, and to the conservative, evangelical theology of the time. Hebrew Christians were pioneers who confronted institutionalized anti-Jewishness within the Church with their own testimonies of faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. But they were cautious pioneers who firmly aligned themselves with the Church despite its tendencies toward anti-Jewishness. The Hebrew Christian label signified that Jewishness (or "Hebrewness") modified one's commitment to Christ, which had the priority.

"Messianic Jew" is a newer term, although it appeared as early as 1917, as a topic of controversy within the Hebrew Christian Alliance. One Alliance member, Rev. John Mark Levy, had proposed a resolution stating that Hebrew Christians were free to affirm and observe those Jewish rites, including circumcision of their children, which are consistent with faith in Yeshua as Messiah. This position, termed Messianic Judaism, was soundly denounced by the Alliance:

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. To venture into such compromises [as keeping Jewish traditions] would not only prove weakness, but our whole Christian testimony would be endangered.¹³

The defining difference between a Messianic Jew and a Hebrew Christian is the messianic synagogue, because this is where faith in Yeshua could be joined with Jewish practice. As we saw in the Introduction, Allen experienced this difference first-hand. He grew up in an observant home. As a teenager he prayed with a minyan¹⁴ early every morning, and put on tefillin, or

¹¹ Rausch, p. 26.

¹⁰ Rausch, p. 88ff.

¹² Ibid., p. 33ff.

¹³ Ibid., p. 33-34.

¹⁴ A quorum of ten men, required by Jewish law as the minimum number for congregational prayer.

phylacteries, daily in obedience to Torah. Even after he started having early classes at school, and had to give up being at the synagogue at 6:30 AM, he retained a strong Jewish identity. Allen says that he remained "very pro-Israel and pro-Jewish; I considered myself Modern Orthodox." 16

Allen completed high school in New York City and, wanting to experience mountains, sky, and nice weather, decided to attend college in the West. There he made friends with some Christians who started talking to him about Yeshua. He mocked their faith and argued that they did not know Hebrew and had a corrupted Bible. Allen's friends persisted, and showed him messianic prophecies in the Tanakh, such as Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, and Daniel 9. (Allen never read the New Testament until after he became a believer in Yeshua). He checked their references in his own Bar Mitzvah Bible, and slowly came to believe that Yeshua was Messiah. At first his faith remained theoretical: "I believe this is true and I really should do something about it sometime." Allen's friends helped him come to a point of surrender. In a freshman Psychology class, the students took a psychological evaluation. One of the questions asked, "Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" Allen says, "I automatically checked 'no', then snapped: 'Wait, I believe I do!'"

For a year or so after this surrender, Allen says, he felt like a "lost soul." He never felt comfortable in any church, though he tried many, from Catholic Charismatic to Baptist. He finally heard about a monthly meeting sponsored by a Hebrew Christian group. The leader was very Jewish, and Allen attended every month, then started meeting with other Jewish believers for a bi-weekly Bible study. This group had a Jewish perspective, but without much knowledge of the Jewish traditions so familiar to Allen. He recounts that the Hebrew Christian group's "posture toward Messianic Judaism was 'what would the Church say?' I didn't care anymore what the Church would say. I thought, 'I am going to live once and then die; I don't want to look over my life and say I wish I had done things more Jewishly. I am going to live this way; this is what I want.' My whole life has been a gradual return to what I had before, but now with the missing piece of the equation, Yeshua. He was what was always missing in my Jewishness." About this time he began to hear about messianic synagogues. After college, Allen moved to Chicago and finally began attending a messianic synagogue there.

The idea of distinct Jewish congregations would have been anathema to the old Hebrew Christians, and it remained suspect to most of their modern counterparts until recently. Along with theological concerns, there are other, more subtle issues worth considering, not to undermine the doctrinal integrity of either side, but to underscore the complexity of being Jewish and believing in Yeshua.

The Challenges

Some Hebrew Christians seem to avoid a stronger Jewish identity because of negative memories of the synagogue, or of religious Jews. Many Jewish people, like people of other religious backgrounds, consider their religious upbringing to be oppressive and irrelevant, and are glad to leave it behind. The very practices of a messianic synagogue meant to attract and serve Jewish people may be bitter or repellent to some of them. For others who come to faith in Messiah, the accusation of abandonment or betrayal by the Jewish community is so intense that they no longer want to have anything to do with Jewishness. Messianic Judaism keeps a door open to the Jewish

-

¹⁵ See, for example, Deuteronomy 6:8. "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

¹⁶ Personal conversation, April 8, 1996.

world, and reminds them of the opposition of Jewish family and friends. It may be simpler to close the door, move in the direction of assimilation, and take on a whole new identity as a bornagain Jewish Christian.

On the other hand, Messianic Jews sometimes seem to make a fetish of their Jewishness. They can become more concerned with matters of Jewish tradition or culture than with the core issues of Scripture. Or they can handle such matters in a superficial way, without the background necessary to understand and apply them properly. They can fall into the externalism that Yeshua opposed so strongly. Jewishness can become an excuse for elitism or separatism, as Messianic Jews reject anything that smacks too heavily of "goyishness". Paradoxically, it is often the Gentile members of messianic synagogues who seem most fascinated by Jewish tradition and practice. This fact suggests that leaders may at times elevate Jewishness to the point where Gentile believers desire to be Jewish somehow, and to worship in a way that is "more Jewish" than the ways they learned at church.

Despite such pitfalls, Messianic Judaism reflects the biblical pattern evident especially in the Book of Acts, in which the early Jewish Yeshua-believers remained connected with the Jewish people, Jewish customs, and the temple service. Messianic Judaism helps Jews draw upon the riches of their heritage, even as they explore the riches of Messiah Yeshua. One of the early arguments in favor of a Messianic Jewish identity was that it would help communicate New Covenant faith more effectively to Jewish people. The purely cultural barriers to faith in Messiah would come down and Jewish people could consider Yeshua in a new and fresh light. The Hebrew Christian approach still seemed to raise the barrier of switching to a new religion, Christianity, even if it was a Hebrew branch of Christianity. This was not what many young Messianic Jews felt they had done, nor what they wanted to communicate to families and friends. Finally, Messianic Judaism provided an alternative to an institutionalized and westernized Church that seemed uprooted from its own biblical soil. Messianic Judaism appeared to have a prophetic role, not only in bringing Jewish people to faith in Messiah, but also in helping the Church to rediscover some of its own spiritual riches.

Many young Jews found the Messianic Jewish label to be liberating. It said that they were still fully Jewish, that faith in Messiah could thrive in the heart of Judaism, and that they were not going to lose themselves in the larger Christian world. It also said that the Messiah Yeshua was, and had always been, an integral part of the Jewish people, foretold in the Jewish Scriptures from the very beginning.

My own story includes some of this struggle with the Messianic Jewish vision. In the early 80s my closest friends, those who shared our hippie background and had come to the Lord at the same time Jane and I had, were becoming involved in messianic congregations around the country. Even Eliezer dropped his reservations, and was instrumental in founding a messianic congregation in Denver. These were the people I was closest to, and trusted most in the world; shouldn't I go with them on this issue?

In the summer of 1983, things came to a head for Jane and me. One of our commune friends had gone to medical school in Philadelphia, and became involved in the dynamic messianic synagogue in that city. We had numerous friendly arguments over the validity of Messianic Judaism. Finally in his exasperation, our friend offered to fly us to Messiah '83, a major messianic conference in Grantham, Pennsylvania, where we could see things for ourselves. At the week-long conference we were thrilled to see so many Jewish faces lifted up to the Lord in praise, and we felt ourselves being drawn into the messianic vision. The main question remained,

however; was this movement really from God, or was it just the great idea of a bunch of creative Jewish believers?

With this question on our hearts, we went to the Wednesday night service of the conference. This was Talent Show night, when various amateur musicians, actors, and stand-up comedians would try out their talents on a friendly and tolerant audience. Between the acts, Messianic Jews from all over the world gave their testimonies. The stories were similar: "When I came to faith in Yeshua, I thought I was the only Jew in the world who believed the way I did. Eventually I found some other Jewish believers and we started to fellowship together. We said, 'Let's get together on Friday night for Erev Shabbat and say some of the prayers together.' Eventually this grew into our messianic congregation in France (or England or Australia)." Somewhere in the midst of these testimonies, Jane and I looked at each other and knew: This was of God. Messianic Judaism had not been invented in Philadelphia or Chicago, or anywhere else. It was springing up at a grass-roots level all over the world, as the Holy Spirit moved upon Jewish believers. That night we received our most powerful sense of God's calling since we had accepted Messiah. We were to give ourselves to the Messianic Jewish movement.

The UMJC

The Messianic Jewish congregations that were springing up all around the world were evidence of God's work among the Jewish people. In 1979 nineteen congregations in North America came together to form the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC), the first congregational association among Jewish followers of Yeshua. Its original five objectives continue to guide the organization today:

- To further the initiation, establishment, and growth of Messianic Jewish congregations worldwide
- To be a voice for Messianic Jewish congregations and Messianic Judaism worldwide.
- To provide a forum for the discussion of issues relevant to Messianic Judaism and Messianic Jewish congregations.
- To aid in the causes of our Jewish people worldwide, especially in Israel.
- To support the training of Messianic leaders.

Today, the UMJC hosts an annual international conference, regional conferences, and events for young adults, leaders, women and other groups. In pursuit of its objective of training Messianic leaders, the UMJC has developed educational programs over the years, as well as a process for licensure and ordination of Messianic leaders, and is recognized for maintaining high standards in these areas. The Union has also helped to initiate new congregations in a number of cities in the United States, and has maintained a supportive relationship with the Messianic Jewish community in Israel as well as other parts of the world.

In 2002, in response to changing dynamics in the Messianic Jewish movement and the growth of various Torah and Jewish roots movements among Gentile Christians, the UMJC delegates approved a statement "Defining Messianic Judaism," which was revised in 2005.

Basic Statement

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) envisions Messianic Judaism as a movement of Jewish congregations and groups committed to Yeshua 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.

Messianic Jewish groups may also include those from non-Jewish backgrounds who have a confirmed call to participate fully in the life and destiny of the Jewish people. We are committed to embodying this definition in our constituent congregations and in our shared institutions.

Expanded Statement

Jewish life is life in a concrete, historical community. Thus, Messianic Jewish groups must be fully part of the Jewish people, sharing its history and its covenantal responsibility as a people chosen by God. At the same time, faith in Yeshua also has a crucial communal dimension. This faith unites the Messianic Jewish community and the Christian Church, which is the assembly of the faithful from the nations who are joined to Israel through the Messiah. Together the Messianic Jewish community and the Christian Church constitute the *ekklesia*, the one Body of Messiah, a community of Jews and Gentiles who in their ongoing distinction and mutual blessing anticipate the shalom of the world to come.

For a Messianic Jewish group 1) to fulfill the covenantal responsibility incumbent upon all Jews, 2) to bear witness to Yeshua within the people of Israel, and 3) to serve as an authentic and effective representative of the Jewish people within the body of Messiah, it must place a priority on integration with the wider Jewish world, while sustaining a vital corporate relationship with the Christian Church.

In the Messianic Jewish way of life, we seek to fulfill Israel's covenantal responsibility embodied in the Torah within a New Covenant context. Messianic Jewish halakhah is rooted in Scripture (Tanakh and the New Covenant writings), which is of unique sanctity and authority. It also draws upon Jewish tradition, especially those practices and concepts that have won near-universal acceptance by devout Jews through the centuries. Furthermore, as is common within Judaism, Messianic Judaism recognizes that halakhah is and must be dynamic, involving the application of the Torah to a wide variety of changing situations and circumstances.

Messianic Judaism embraces the fullness of New Covenant realities available through Yeshua, and seeks to express them in forms drawn from Jewish experience and accessible to Jewish people.

This statement makes two points that have at times been controversial, but are essential to the vision of the UMJC. First, it portrays Messianic Judaism as a movement for Yeshua within the wider Jewish community, a movement that maintains a deep connection with Jewish life and tradition, even as it develops its distinctive practice that draws upon the New Covenant as well as the Hebrew Scriptures. The UMJC builds on the conviction of many Jewish people that they can be completely loyal to Yeshua as Messiah and loyal to the Jewish people as well. Second, it recognizes that Messianic Judaism is not an exclusively Jewish movement, but includes a subgroup of uniquely called Gentiles who share in the life and destiny of the Jewish people. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine today's Messianic Jewish community apart from the faithful and visionary participation of many non-Jewish leaders and members. Nonetheless, Messianic Judaism is not an alternative religion alongside Judaism and Christianity, but a movement among the Jewish community, rooted in the history and tradition of Judaism, and spiritually connected to the larger world of Yeshua's non-Jewish followers, the Christian church.

Since the UMJC delegates stated, "We are committed to embodying this definition in our constituent congregations and in our shared institutions," let's consider some practical implications:

- 1. We strongly affirm the uniqueness and centrality of Yeshua as Messiah, but we avoid defining ourselves in contrast with traditional Judaism. We maintain a supportive stance toward Jewish history and the current Jewish community, even as we disagree with it in our view of Yeshua. We encourage learning Jewish history and values.
- 2. We support a continuing Jewish identity for Messianic Jewish children and young people and work against their becoming isolated from the wider Jewish community. Along with point 1, this means that our congregations will seek to promote Jewish community events and causes in their locality and to participate in such events as they are able to.
- 3. We do not portray ourselves as an ideal restored first-century community. We are not offering an alternative to the supposedly "pagan" Christianity around us. Rather, as the expanded statement says, we want to sustain "a vital corporate relationship with the Christian Church." We do not indulge in church bashing, nor do we encourage Christians to leave their church in order to attend a Messianic congregation.
- 4. We seek to advance the gospel, the good news of Messiah, among our Jewish people in ways that respect and support Jewish identity. We recognize that the gospel has often been proclaimed among the Jewish people in harsh, oppressive, and insensitive ways, and that we need to develop proper, biblically based alternatives. At the same time, we cannot abandon our responsibility to bear witness to Yeshua among our people.

The Defining Messianic Judaism statement seeks to not only express internal UMJC values, but also to advance a vision for the entire Messianic Jewish community. We believe that this is the vision that gave birth to the Messianic Jewish movement in past decades, but that it has become obscured with the passage of time. To understand this vision more clearly, we can contrast it with two more recent trends that overlap with Messianic Judaism, but also have critical differences.

1. Jewish roots and Torah movements that advocate an identical relationship to the Torah for Jews and Gentiles. There is a universal aspect to the Torah, or Five Books of Moses, as part of the word of God, but there is also an aspect that is specifically for Israel, the historic Jewish people. Some pro-Torah Gentiles rally around the phrase "One Law," claiming that the Torah applies to all believers in the same way.

This stance is problematic theologically, ignoring the clear distinction that the Torah itself makes between the circumcised (i.e. Israel) and the uncircumcised.¹⁷ The One Law position also tends to deny the unique role of the Jewish people as portrayed in the Torah. Some One Law groups go so far as redefining Israel to mean, not the historic Jewish people, but those who keep the Torah, whether Jewish or not, or those who believe in Yeshua and keep Torah. Such redefinition, of course, is a form of replacement theology, denying the ongoing chosenness of the Jewish people. It also denies the passages in Torah that define Israel and its role in distinction from the rest of the nations—that is, the Gentiles.¹⁸ The New Covenant continues to make the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, between Israel and

¹⁸ See for example (one from each of the Five Books of Moses) Genesis 12:18, Exodus 19:5-6, Leviticus 23:1-2, Numbers 23:9, and Deuteronomy 33:28-29.

23

¹⁷ See for example Exodus 12:43-49, where the phrase "one law" first appears: "One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you" (Ex. 12:49). This passage begins by restricting the observance of Passover, saying that "no foreigner shall eat it" (vs. 43), and continuing, "And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised . . ." (vs. 48). The "one law" of verse 49 applies to native-born Israelites and to those Gentiles who have joined Israel through circumcision, not to all people in general

the nations, throughout its writings, and never envisions a third group made up of Gentiles who keep the Torah. However one may interpret its conclusion, Acts 15 assumes different responsibilities toward Torah among Jews and Gentiles, even within the community of Yeshua-believers, as does Paul in Galatians. Note that Paul tells Gentiles that if they accept circumcision, they will become obligated to the whole Torah (Gal. 5:3), implying both that Jews, who are circumcised, are so obligated, and that non-circumcised Gentiles are not.

There is certainly a place for Christians to learn the riches of Torah and of Jewish tradition. Jewish Roots movements that have a proper understanding of Israel can help to heal the breach between church and synagogue. The proper understanding of Israel as a people recognizes that the Jewish people throughout history constitute Israel and that Israel remains God's elect, chosen to bring his blessing upon the rest of humankind.

2. One New Man movements that seek to redefine Messianic Judaism as a Jewish-Gentile unity movement. The UMJC certainly affirms the unity of all believers in Messiah Yeshua, as *Defining Messianic Judaism* states: "Together the Messianic Jewish community and the Christian Church constitute the *ekklesia*, the one Body of Messiah . . ." And, of course, we affirm Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:14-16:

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. (NKJV)

In contrast with some of the One New Man teachings, however, we see the entire body of Messiah, rather than a specific movement, as the venue for this Jewish-Gentile unity. *Defining Messianic Judaism* states that the body of Messiah is "a community of Jews and Gentiles who in their ongoing distinction and mutual blessing anticipate the shalom of the world to come." One new man does not mean that the distinction and mutuality between Jews and Gentiles are obliterated. Instead, it means that Jews as Jews and Gentiles as Gentiles, with their differences and distinctions, live in unity and mutual blessing in Yeshua. Just as husband and wife have distinct roles within God's ideal of a unified, joyful whole, so it is with his calling of Israel and the nations.

Some commentators believe the phrase "one new man" in Ephesians 2 would be better translated "one new humanity." This translation conveys the idea that Jews and Gentiles, who are portrayed throughout Scripture as the two components of humanity, come together as a new sort of humanity in Messiah. The old enmities and misunderstandings between the two groups are obliterated in Messiah so the two groups can become truly unified, yet they do not become a new generic, uniform humanity. They are still Jews and Gentiles, renewed in Messiah but with distinctive callings.

In recent years the UMJC has captured this unique vision with the tagline, "Welcoming Messiah Home." This phrase looks back to the model of the early Messianic Jewish community and forward to the Messianic Jewish future.

• It looks back to Jerusalem as portrayed in the Book of Acts where "many thousands of believers . . . among the Jews" (Acts 21:20), continued in their traditional way of life and

_

¹⁹ This is how the phrase is translated in the widely used New Revised Standard Version.

- in loyalty to the Jewish people. Just as Yeshua dwelt among that Jewish remnant of the first century, we welcome him to dwell among us today.
- It looks ahead to the time when the Jewish remnant speaks the words of welcome to Messiah from within "Jerusalem"—the heart of the Jewish world. Yeshua said to Jerusalem, "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:37-39). As we promote and strengthen congregations where Jewish people serve Yeshua as Messiah, we help prepare for this future welcome.

Many individuals, Jewish and Gentile, experience a sense of coming home when they first find Messiah. For Messianic Jews this homecoming means a return to the God of Israel and a return to our Jewish people. But this return is not the end of the story—we want to see Messiah return home to his own people as well. Just as Yeshua first appeared among the Jewish people, so the movement for Messiah began among the Jewish people. Today, this indigenous Jewish movement for Yeshua is being reborn, and Yeshua is again establishing a place among the Jewish people, as well as in many individual Jewish hearts. Taking part in the Messianic Jewish adventure means participating in this vision for the restoration of all Israel, and ultimately the redemption of the entire world.

UMJC Mission and Core Values

At our founding in 1979, we listed five organizational objectives:

- To further the initiation, establishment, and growth of Messianic Jewish Congregations worldwide.
- To be a voice for Messianic Jewish Congregations and Messianic Judaism worldwide.
- To provide a forum for the discussion of issues relevant to Messianic Judaism and Messianic Jewish Congregations.
- To aid in the causes of our Jewish people worldwide, especially in Israel.
- To support the training of Messianic Leaders.

We summarize these objectives in a simple statement of our mission:

To establish, strengthen, and multiply congregations for Yeshua within the house of Israel.

In pursuing this vision, and the more specific objectives and standards articulated in our by-laws, we hold to these core values

1. Unity in diversity

The UMJC represents diverse congregations united in our commitment to the authority of Scripture as the Word of God, the ongoing significance of the Torah for Jewish life, and the centrality of Yeshua as Lord and Messiah. Deference and respect are key elements in our fellowship.

2. Community relationships

- As a movement for Yeshua within the house of Israel, we stand in solidarity with the larger Jewish community, including the state of Israel. We are committed to the continuity of the Jewish people and to participation in our common tradition.
- As a movement for Yeshua, we also value and affirm our place within the entire community of Messiah and are committed to its genuine unity.

3. Congregational success

The local congregation is foundational to Messianic Judaism. Therefore, we are committed to the success of our member congregations as places where Jewish people can encounter Yeshua as Messiah and live for him as Jews.

4. Organizational integrity

We seek to develop and apply biblically rooted standards of integrity and accountability in all that we do as an organization, and to foster them in the polity of each of our member congregations.

5. Dignity and inclusion

- We recognize that all people are made in the image of God and therefore will endeavor to treat them with respect.
- We warmly welcome into our midst all who embrace our vision and core values and are committed to the success of our efforts.