

Contemporary Judeo-Christian Communities in the Jewish Diaspora

David J. Rudolph

Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities in the contemporary Jewish Diaspora are synagogues that believe in Jesus the Messiah and 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 Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities are significant in the contemporary Jewish Diaspora in part because they serve as a bridge between the synagogue and church and help to meet the unique needs of intermarried (Jewish-Christian) couples and their children. This entry will focus on how Diaspora Messianic Jewish congregations express their Jewishness and Messianic distinctive.

The Messianic Shabbat (Sabbath) service is more upbeat than the traditional synagogue service. Modeled after worship described in the Psalms of David, Messianic Jewish services commonly incorporate song, dance, and instrumental music, along with traditional Hebrew liturgy. Readings from the Torah and the New Testament are also typical. "Messianic services are joyful; singing and dancing are part of the experience, and there is an effusive vitality that is rarely felt in mainline synagogues or churches" (Feher 1998, 139). Although the average Messianic synagogue service has exuberant singing and dancing, some Messianic congregations follow a more classic synagogue model, based on the siddur (prayer book). High Holy Day services in Messianic synagogues also tend to be more traditional and replete with Hebrew liturgy.

Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities observe all of the major Jewish festivals and distinguish themselves from other Diaspora Jewish communities by interpreting festival tradition in light of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah. This is in keeping with their philosophy that "Messianic Judaism is Judaism, in all facets of its teaching, worship, and way of life, understood and practiced in the light of Messiah Yeshua" (Kinzer 2001, 11). Rather than creating a new festival tradition, their philosophy is to enter into conversation with the present tradition and adapt it as needed to reflect their distinct Messianic beliefs. On Yom Kippur, liturgy from the mahzor (prayer book for the High Holy Days) is included in their services as well as other prayers that thank God for sending Yeshua (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 118). The Sukkoth service typically includes the special parashoth (Torah readings) for the festival in addition to readings from the New Testament. Blessings are recited over the *lulav* (palm leaves as well as other species) and *etrog* (a citrus fruit), and Yeshua's celebration of Sukkoth is recalled (John 7; Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 110–111). On Hanukkah, Messianic rabbis encourage children to recall the story of the Maccabees and the lesson it holds for resisting assimilation in the present day. It is emphasized that Yeshua also celebrated Hanukkah (John 10:22). Messianic synagogues usually do not celebrate the birth of the Messiah during Christmas time (Harris-Shapiro 1999, 147). More commonly, his birth is remembered as a community event during Sukkoth, when

the symbol of the sukkah (booth) reminds Messianic Jews of how God took on human form (as a Jew) and dwelled among his creation. Christmas is a “holiday that is sometimes celebrated at the individual level but is not part of the congregation’s communal festivities” (Feher 1998, 109).

In a Messianic synagogue, Passover is filled with Messianic meaning. Haggadoth (handbooks used at Passover Seders to guide families through the order of the ritual meal) focus on the Exodus of Israel from Egypt as well as the Exodus of humanity from sin and judgment through Yeshua the Messiah. Messianic Haggadoth compare the sacrificial role of the Passover lamb to the sacrificial role of the Messiah, and New Testament references to Yeshua’s celebration of Passover are highlighted. During Passover, Messianic Jews remove all leavened products from their homes and eat matzo (unleavened bread) in keeping with the Torah commandment. During this festival, Messianic Jews recall the words of the *shaliach* (apostle) Paul, “Don’t you know the saying, ‘It takes only a little *hametz* (leaven) to leaven a whole batch of dough?’ Get rid of the old *hametz*, so that you can be a new batch of dough, because in reality you are unleavened. For our *Pesach* (Passover) lamb, the Messiah, has been sacrificed. So let us celebrate the *Seder* not with leftover *hametz*, the *hametz* of wickedness and evil, but with the *matzah* of purity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:6–8 in the *Complete Jewish Bible* [CJB], a Messianic Jewish Bible translation). Easter Sunday is not celebrated in Messianic synagogues. The Messianic Jewish celebration of Passover emphasizes the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

At Messianic Jewish life cycle events, readings from the New Testament are almost always incorporated. In the *b’rit milah* (covenant of circumcision) ceremony, reference is made to Yeshua’s *b’rit milah* on the eighth day (Luke 2:21). At bar/bat mitzvahs, a Messianic rabbi will typically remind the community that when Yeshua was 12, he was brought to the Temple where he amazed Jerusalem’s teachers by the questions he asked (Luke 2:41–47). At Messianic Jewish weddings, marriage under the chuppah (canopy) is often concomitant with an exhortation to Messianic Jewish husbands to selflessly lay down their lives for their wives in the same way the Messiah laid down his life for his congregation (Ephesians 5:25). Messianic Jewish funerals incorporate readings from the New Testament and emphasize the resurrection/eternal life that comes through believing in Yeshua the Messiah.

A common misunderstanding about Messianic (Judeo-Christian) congregations is that they put on a veneer of religious Jewish practice in order to missionize Jews. Although this is largely true of Hebrew Christian missionary organizations such as Jews for Jesus Messianic synagogues regard Torah observance as a matter of covenant responsibility and participate in their traditional Jewish heritage independent of their *kiruv* (outreach) efforts. Messianic congregations are committed to Jewish continuity because they believe God is committed to Jewish continuity. Contemporary Messianic rabbis, like their mainstream counterparts, recognize the dangers of assimilation and labor to convey Jewish identity to the next generation of Messianic Jewish families.

Messianic Jewish use of Hebrew expressions (even for New Testament terms) is in keeping with this spirit of resisting assimilation pressures in order to preserve Jewish identity. Jesus and the *shlichim* (apostles) were first-century Jews who taught

in Hebrew. New Testament teaching was originally Hebraic. Messianic synagogues, therefore, see the use of Hebraic New Covenant terminology, such as the name “Yeshua” instead of “Jesus,” as the restoration of something that is historically accurate. It links Messianic Jewish families to their first-century roots. In her study of Messianic Judaism, Shoshanah Feher observed that “restoring the original” is a central focus of Messianic (Judeo-Christian) congregations:

Believers use the early church as a governing metaphor to reconcile Jewish and Christian symbols and to create a sense of historical community. Messianic Judaism has combed the past in order to create a new form of tradition . . . They make use of early texts, reading the Gospels and other first-century works, as well as tracing Jewish Christians through the centuries, in order to establish a symbolic social cohesion with roots in antiquity . . . Messianic Jews use ritual to create a sense of continuity. (Feher 1998, 112)

Additionally, like Reform and Reconstructionist communities in the Diaspora, Messianic synagogues engage in ritual formation by inculcating Jewish traditions with New Covenant meaning to express their distinct values:

Messianics are not the only ones to legitimate their Jewishness with religious ritual. Because ethnicity has been wrapped up in a religious container, one of the only ways to express Jewish ethnicity is through religious language . . . This would explain the use of Jewish ritual by groups who transform the meaning of the very rituals they use. The presence of the ritual confirms the Jewish ethnic orientation of the group, but the original meaning of the ritual has been altered to express the core values, not of traditional Judaism, but of the group utilizing the ritual . . . Liberal Jewish seders regularly transform the meaning of the traditional service from emphasizing the saving acts of God to the courage of humanity, as in the Reconstructionist Haggadah, which sharply elevates the role of humanity in the Passover story so too when Messianic believers sought to express ethnic continuity, they chose to infuse forms of Jewish life with new, Christological meaning. (Harris-Shapiro 1999, 174–175)

Many intermarried couples are drawn to Messianic synagogues because the Jewish-Christian gap is bridged (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, xii). Inter-marriage tends to blur the traditional boundaries between Judaism and Christianity within the average family so that a quasi-Messianic Jewish religious expression naturally arises. Intermarried couples find common ground in Messianic synagogues. Children of intermarriage find a home where they can integrate their identities (Rudolph 2003, 56–59, 111–114). Messianic synagogues challenge the “law of excluded middle” by asserting that children of Jewish-Christian intermarriage can be simultaneously Jewish and believers in Jesus. For these reasons, Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities are a very attractive option for intermarried couples and their children.

Today there are between 400 and 500 Messianic synagogues in the Jewish Diaspora. Rabbinic ordination is conferred primarily through two international umbrella organizations: the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations and the International Association of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues. In addition to Messianic synagogues, there are established Messianic Jewish seminaries,

Messianic day schools, Hebrew schools, and summer camps. There are Messianic Halachic councils, mohels (covenant surgeons), and benevolence organizations that work directly with the Israeli Knesset (national parliament). The Messianic (Judeo-Christian) community is one of the fastest-growing segments of the contemporary Jewish Diaspora.

Judeo-Christian Communities as an Internal Church Lobby

Diaspora Jewish leaders have long viewed Messianic (Judeo-Christian) synagogues as a threat to Jewish survival. But a compelling case can be made that Messianic synagogues are the most effective resource Diaspora Jewish communities have to influence Christians toward a love for Jews and Judaism, which indirectly reinforces Jewish continuity. Messianic Jews are regularly invited to teach seminars in the local church about the history of Christian anti-Semitism and the Jewish roots of Christianity. They impress on Christians that Jesus and the apostles were Torah-observant Jews who remained faithful to their people. They remind Christians of the Abrahamic promise that those who bless Israel will be blessed. Messianic synagogues are arguably Diaspora Judaism's front line of defense against church policies that arise from punitive and structural supersessionism. Because Messianic Jews are de facto members of Diaspora Jewish communities and members of the worldwide body of Jesus believers, they have influence and connections in places where non-Christian Jews lack clout. Loyal to the Jewish people and committed to Jewish causes (unlike Jewish converts to Christianity in the Middle Ages), Messianic Jews are the Jewish lobby within the church. Is it not in the interests of Diaspora Judaism to have a Jewish voice within the church? Christian recognition of the validity of Jewish existence within the church paves the way for Christian recognition of the validity of Jewish existence outside the church. Diaspora Jewish communities strengthen their voice within the church when they validate Messianic (Judeo-Christian) synagogues in their midst and weaken their voice within the church when they invalidate Messianic Jewish existence. Members of the Israeli Knesset have begun to work openly with National Messianic Jewish organizations in the recognition that Messianic Jews are a pro-Israel lobby within the church (e.g., the 2006 Knesset Project of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations). A day will come when Diaspora Jewish leaders will similarly recognize that Messianic (Judeo-Christian) communities uniquely serve *kol Yisrael* (all Israel) as the Jewish lobby within the church.

Selected Bibliography

- Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. 2000. *Messianic Judaism*. London: Cassell.
- Feher, Shoshanah. 1998. *Passing over Easter: Constructing the Boundaries of Messianic Judaism*. London: AltaMira.
- Harris-Shapiro, Carol. 1999. *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journal through Religious Change in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kinzer, Mark. 2001. *The Nature of Messianic Judaism: Judaism as Genus, Messianic as Species*. West Hartford, CT: Hashivenu Archives.

- Kollontai, Pauline. 2004. "Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3 (2): 195–205.
- Kollontai, Pauline. 2006. "Between Judaism and Christianity: The Case of Messianic Jews." *Journal of Religion and Society* 8. <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2006/2006-6.html>.
- Rudolph, David J. 2003. *Growing Your Olive Tree Marriage: A Guide for Couples from Two Traditions*. Baltimore: Lederer Books.

Jewish–Islamic Mutual Influences

Esperanza Alfonso

By the time of the rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, the Jews had long been a people in Diaspora. In the 620s and 630s, the Jewish communities living on Arabian soil were firsthand witnesses to Muhammad's activities and to the early success of his supporters. After the Prophet's death in 632, the Islamic conquests would bring about a large-scale encounter between Jews and Muslims. In fact, within a few decades, and as a result of the remarkably speedy success of the Muslim armies far beyond the limits of the former Persian and Byzantine empires, about 90 percent of the Jewish communities in the world, including the most renowned cultural centers in Iraq and Palestine, found themselves under Islamic rule. Since its inception in the early 19th century, critical comparative scholarship in the fields of religion and culture has considered the Judeo-Islamic interaction to be one of the most fascinating instances of cross-cultural fertilization in premodern times.

Given its highly speculative nature, the inquiry into religious and cultural influences between Jews and Muslims is always elusive and at times controversial. Certainly this holds true in the case of the Judeo-Islamic encounter. In matters of religion, today's traditional Muslim scholars, for instance, look at the Koran as containing the original, authentic and uncreated divine revelation, regardless of the temporal precedence of the Bible. In their view, the question of influence is hardly meaningful. With respect to the modern critical study of religion and culture, the difficulty lies, on the one hand, in the scarcity of sources at the scholar's disposal and the quandary posed by those that are extant. In this regard, the problem is particularly acute for the formative period of Islam, as only snippets of information have come down to us from the first century after Muhammad's death. Moreover, authors of early materials, both Jewish and Muslim, were not historically minded and rarely concerned themselves with issues of religious or literary origins.

On the other hand, the difficulty in assessing religious and cultural influences between two or more groups relates to the scholarly understanding of the concept of influence itself. Beginning with Abraham Geiger, 19th-century Western scholars interested in the Judeo-Islamic world put forth a paradigm based on the ideas of "debtor" and "creditor" and the notion of direct influence from Judaism to Islam and vice versa. A first phase was customarily established in which Judaism was said to have exerted a strong influence on the emerging Islamic faith and culture.