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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW: THE MESSIANIC CONGREGATIONAL MOVEMENT

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SYNOPSIS

Although the first Christians were Jews organized into Messianic congregations, we have no record of a specifically Jewish Christian congregation after A.D. 400. Subsequently, the *ekklesia* (church) was predominantly Gentile for 15 centuries, but since 1967 there has been a rapid growth of Jesus-believing Jews, who have organized themselves into Messianic congregations. Most of these new Messianic congregations, although clearly Jewish in their identity, are within the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy. Others emphasize Jewishness more than Jesus and the New Covenant, and still others are cultic. The *ekklesia*, still predominantly Gentile, is challenged to understand new biblical emphases in this movement, such as the celebration of traditional Jewish festivals and the practice of circumcision — and to affirm that God has not abandoned His covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who indeed as a nation (not every individual) will ultimately embrace Jesus as their Messiah and so enter the *ekklesia* (Rom. 11:23–26).

“Jews for Jesus!” shouts from the pages of that ancient Jewish book that we call the New Testament. “Jews for Jesus!” is also a slogan that seems new in the past 30 years. Something old, something new — Jesus-believing Jews. The Book of Acts records Jews by the thousands coming to faith in Jesus as their Messiah and informs us about that first Messianic congregation in Jerusalem — its first deacons, struggles, and persecutions.

Today Messianic congregations are growing rapidly worldwide. The *Messianic Times*,¹ a quarterly newspaper reporting on the movement, lists Messianic congregations by state. For example, the Spring 1999 issue lists 34 in Florida and 33 in California. One observer states, “In 1967, there were no Messianic Jewish congregations in the world. Today there are 350.”² We might define a “Messianic congregation” as an assembly of believers in Messiah Jesus — Jew and Gentile — that publicly affirms its Jewish identity. By historic Christian standards, some of these congregations are orthodox, some heterodox, and some may not be Christian at all.

The Messianic congregational movement also raises other issues, whose resolution is crucial to the health of the body of Messiah. Who is Israel? Has the church replaced Israel? Is Israel still a chosen people? Are Jewish believers obligated to keep the kosher laws and celebrate the Jewish festivals? Should Jewish believers be circumcised?

YOU CAN'T CHANGE A FISH INTO A CHICKEN

Recalling his childhood, one Jewish believer remembers his father saying repeatedly, "You can't change a fish into a chicken!" He said that to affirm the myth that Jews cannot be Christians. Sadly, Christians first used this falsehood in the fourth century to express anti-Semitism, insisting that Jewish converts must renounce their Jewishness in order to join the church.³ As the centuries progressed, *judenrein*, a "cleansing" from Jewish influences, became the standard. The New Testament Letter of Jacob, for example, became the Letter of James, even though the Greek *Jacobus* cannot truly be translated as "James." As the church abhorred things Jewish, the Jewish community found the "no-fish-to-chicken" myth useful in protecting itself against Christian evangelists. If a Jewish person converted, he or she was no longer considered Jewish, but rather a *mushummed*, a traitor to Jewish people.

Even though in postapostolic times the last specifically Jewish congregation died out about A.D. 400,⁴ there have always been Jewish believers in Jesus.⁵ Nevertheless, the recent roots of the Messianic congregational movement are found in the work of Joseph Rabinowitz, a Russian Jew who in 1882 traveled to Palestine to consider settling there. His original purpose was classic Zionism, but instead he found Jesus on the Mount of Olives.⁶ He returned to Kishinev in southwestern Russia as a Jewish believer in Jesus and initiated the Messianic congregational movement there, which slowly grew for many years but has exploded since 1967. That was the year the Jews recaptured Jerusalem from the Jordanians in the Six-Day War. Apart from the normal purpose of Christians under the direction of Scripture and the Holy Spirit to gather into groups, which we usually call "churches" or "congregations," what was the motivation for Rabinowitz and other Jewish believers who imitated his ministry to gather in Messianic congregations?

The Messianic congregation helps the Jew affirm his or her Jewish identity concurrently with an affirmation of his or her trust in Messiah Jesus. Because the term *Christian* has traditionally connoted *Gentile*, some Jewish believers in Jesus will go so far as to say, "I'm not a Christian; I'm a Messianic Jew," even though the terms essentially refer to the same faith in Jesus as Savior. A corollary phenomenon is that Jewish believers prefer to use the word "Messiah" to the linguistically identical term "Christ" — primarily because of the perpetuation of the calumny that the Jews were and continue to be Christ-killers.

The Apostolic Council (Acts 15) dealt with the issue of Gentile believers in Jesus and concluded that they did not have to become Jews to be brothers and sisters in the Messiah. Rabinowitz and others speak for a corollary conclusion of the Apostolic Council: Jews do not have to become Gentiles to be brothers and sisters in the Messiah.

JEWISH IDENTITY: BASED IN GOD OR IN ETHNIC PRIDE?

The issue of Jewish identity is crucial to the issue of the Messianic congregational movement and to the broader issue of bringing the gospel to the Jews. We will later discuss the Abrahamic Covenant, but at this point we must reiterate that Israel — the Jews — originated with God's unconditional promise to Abram (Gen. 12:1–3, 7) that was repeated to his son Isaac (Gen. 26:1–5) and to his grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:1–17). In fact, God changed Jacob's name to Israel (Gen. 32:28; 35:10). Exegetically, the word "Israel" in Scripture means either the man, a.k.a. Jacob, or his descendants. The word "Israel" is also linked to geography in that it occurs 21 times as "land of Israel," including twice in the New Testament (Matt. 2:20–21). Although the term appears to be used with reference to the church once in the New Testament (the "Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16), such a spiritual usage does not generally replace a more physical understanding of the term. Rather, Paul used "Israel" to mean Messiah-believing physical descendants of the man Israel (Rom. 9:6–8), which is consistent with the frequent Old Testament use of the "remnant" of Israel. Paul set forth the same truth in a different way in Romans 2:28–29 when he said that a real Jew is one who has been circumcised in his or her heart by the Holy Spirit.

Clearly, Israel, the people, has a divine origin and were chosen in grace (Deut. 7:7–9). But did God ever reject them, and if so when? The prophet Jeremiah answered this question: "'Only if the heavens above

can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,' declares the LORD" (Jer. 31:37). Paul also posed and answered the question: "I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means!" (Rom. 11:1). We should not, however, hold to a "two people of God" view — Israel and the church. According to Romans 11 the people of God constitute one "olive tree" rooted in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, onto which believing Gentile "branches" are grafted and off of which unbelieving Jewish "branches" are broken. Thus we should not confuse God's choosing of a people with individual election. It would not appear that individual members of Israel, like Korah (Num. 16) and King Ahab (1 Kings 21), experienced personal salvation, and certainly not Judas, "the one doomed to destruction" (John 17:12).

Regardless of an individual Jew's eternal destiny, saved or damned — Paul or Judas — Israel, the Jewish people, have not been rejected by God as a people and maintain their identity. Here is no ordinary ethnic pride but a divinely designated identity that keeps bubbling up through the turmoil of history. And so the Messianic congregational movement is not just good missiological practice, good gospel contextualization, but also a living reminder that God keeps His promises.

Before examining today's Messianic congregational movement, it is important to lay a theological foundation for evaluating the movement. Christians must dare to evaluate, in love, whether the submovements within the movement are orthodox, heterodox, or even heretical. Such an evaluation does not call us to deal with different theologies of the sacraments or views on the Millennium, but rather with the core issues of Christology, the gospel, and unity with the body of Christ. Pursuant to this aim, it is helpful to briefly examine five biblical covenants because they are frequently confused.

The *Noahic Covenant* was made with the world and is unconditional. Its sign is the rainbow. In this covenant God promised that He would never again destroy the world with a flood.

The *Abrahamic Covenant* was made with the world, through the mediator Abraham, and is also unconditional and everlasting. Its sign is circumcision of the male descendants of Abraham (Gen. 17:9–14). Circumcision is not called a requirement, but an *ot* (sign). The Abrahamic Covenant promised:

1. Abraham would be made into a great nation.
2. Abraham would be personally blessed.
3. The name of Abraham would become great.
4. Abraham (and his descendants) would be a blessing to others.
5. God would bless those who blessed Abraham (and his descendants) and curse those who cursed him (them).
6. All peoples on earth would be blessed through a descendant of Abraham.
7. Land would be given to Abraham's descendants.

Through the centuries, Christians have properly identified as a Messianic prophecy the promise that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). That was clearly affirmed by Paul as part of God's unconditional promise: "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Gal. 3:8). We cannot pick and choose which of the unconditional promises given to the world through Abraham we will believe. All of the promises are a window through which we can see history through God's perspective.

Some 430 years later (Gal. 3:17), God made a covenant with Israel at Mt. Sinai through Moses. This *Mosaic Covenant* had conditions: 10 commandments, five festivals, animal sacrifices, kosher food laws, Sabbath-keeping, and so on. Paul valued this covenant (Gal. 3:21) but said that its purpose was to lead people to the Messiah: "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). Hebrews 8, drawing on Jeremiah 31:31–34, reveals that Messiah Jesus has fulfilled the Mosaic Covenant, which is now obsolete. The author of Hebrews is unknown, but the audience is not. The Greek text says: *pros ebraios* — to Hebrews. Jewish believers were told that the Old Covenant, dear to them for 15 centuries, was now fulfilled by the Messiah.

The *Davidic Covenant* is unconditional. It ratifies and elaborates on portions of the Abrahamic Covenant — notably that God will establish a kingdom “forever” through a descendant of David (2 Sam. 7:4–17). Matthew began his Gospel with the words, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). This ties the Davidic and Abrahamic covenants together, leading us to the Jesus Covenant.

At the Passover *seder* immediately before His crucifixion, Jesus proclaimed His *New Covenant*: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Jesus, the Jew, gives the New Covenant to the world in the context of Jewish believers. This alone suffices as a rejoinder to those who say that the Old Covenant is for the Jews and the New Covenant is for the Gentiles, the so-called “Two Covenant Theory,” which Joseph P. Gudel has biblically refuted in a previous edition of the *CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL*.⁷

MESSIANIC CONGREGATIONS TODAY

“All of the first Christians were Jews, either by birth or by conversion, and yet within a hundred years of the report that tens of thousands ‘from the circumcision’ had believed in Jesus as Messiah, there remained only small, despised pockets of Jewish Christians, and of these a large percentage seem to have been adherents to various late-blooming hybrids of Christian teaching with that of some free-thinking individual.”⁸ Are today’s Messianic congregations “from the circumcision” those who continue in the Apostles’ doctrine, or are they later-blooming hybrids of Christian teaching with that of some free-thinking individuals?

In his book, *Return from Exile: The Re-Emergence of the Messianic Congregational Movement*, Michael Schiffman explains the understanding of Messianic congregations held by the Fellowship of Messianic Congregations (FMC): “Messianic congregations are part of the ekklesia as are all other congregations that follow the Messiah, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. Along with the rest of the body of believers, Messianic congregations embrace the concept of union between God and one another in the ekklesia.”⁹ Schiffman prefers not to use the word “church” because Jewish people associate “church” with numerous acts of anti-Semitism throughout the past 1,500 years.

The constitution of FMC further identifies Messianic congregations as having the following specific emphases:¹⁰

- (a) expressing Jewish cultural forms at regular worship services,
- (b) observing the feasts and holidays of Israel in a Messiah-centered manner,
- (c) identifying with the Jewish people at large,
- (d) rekindling the understanding of the inherent Jewish roots of faith in Yeshua, the promised Messiah of Israel,
- (e) witnessing to the Jew first and also the non-Jew.¹¹

No missiologist would quarrel with “expressing Jewish cultural forms at regular worship services.” We have come a long way since the pioneering days of Daniel Landsmann, a Jewish Christian evangelist who worked alongside Lutherans in New York City in the late 1800s. After Landsmann led a Jewish person to Christ, the convert had to learn German before he or she was baptized and integrated into German Lutheran parish life.¹²

Today’s Messianic congregations use Hebrew, altered forms of the Jewish *siddur* (prayer book), Davidic dance, Torah scrolls, *talitoth* (prayer shawls), and *kippoth* (skull caps) in their worship. Some are quite traditional in their worship; others utilize a freeform type of liturgy. All attempt, to a greater or lesser degree, to affirm their Jewish identity.

Concerns about “Judaizing” (binding Messianic believers to the Mosaic Law) are raised by some Christian observers regarding Messianic congregations’ worship on the Sabbath — on Friday evening or Saturday morning. If they are truly Christians, they ask, why don’t they worship on Sunday mornings like other Christians? Actually, Scripture does not specify which day on which to worship, but most

Christians exercise their freedom and choose the first day of the week to honor the day Jesus rose from the dead. Schiffman comments succinctly about Mosaic Law: “While believers are not obligated to keep the Law, they have the freedom to do so.”¹³

Circumcision once again raises the issue of “Judaizing.” Did not Paul excoriate the Galatian Christians, “I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (Gal. 5:2)? Epiphanius (ca. 315-403) commented on the Nazoraioi (Nazarenes), said to be descendants of those Jerusalem believers who fled to Pella before the destruction of the city in A.D. 70. He seemed to affirm their Christology as orthodox, but he still called them heretics: “These have also erred in boasting of circumcision, and such are still ‘under a curse’ not being able to fulfill the Law.”¹⁴ Jerome in his letter to Augustine said of the Nazarenes: “They believe in Christ, the Son of God, born of Mary the virgin, and they say about him that he suffered under Pontius Pilate and rose again.”¹⁵ We do not know how the ancient Nazarenes viewed circumcision. Heresy was introduced when circumcision came to be viewed as a self-justifying “work,” not as merely a sign of an unconditional covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham. If circumcision is required, even in a Jewish context, it becomes a work of self-justification.

Abraham was the first to be circumcised, and the Scriptures say, “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Paul had his coworker, Timothy, circumcised because Timothy’s mother, Eunice, was Jewish and because affirmation of Jewish identity would be helpful in the missionary work (Acts 16:1–3). Circumcision done as a sign of God’s grace in the Abrahamic Covenant and as a mark of Jewish identity is God-pleasing. But when circumcision is claimed as a “work” or a “pedigree” to be applauded by God, that makes Christ of no value. Paul’s strong words to the Galatians concerning their observance of circumcision was in response to their seeking justification through keeping the Mosaic Law (e.g., Gal. 5:4).

Some have called the contemporary movement of Jesus-believing Jews “Messianic Judaism,” and they have said it is “the fastest growing branch of Judaism.” Baruch Maoz, a leader of the Messianic congregational movement in Israel, and pastor of Grace and Truth Congregation, warns against positioning Messianic Judaism alongside Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism. “Such a claim puts Reformed [sic], Orthodox, Conservative and other branches of Judaism on an equal par with our faith in Christ, each as being various branches of the one and same religion.”¹⁶ Jewish people who resist the Christian faith, be it Messianic Judaism or conventional Christianity, say that Christianity as the daughter of Judaism should be respectful to her mother. Schiffman exposes this argument as fallacious: “Messianic Judaism is a branch separate from the others, growing out from the root and trunk of Biblical Judaism. We are a branch parallel to the main branch of the other three, yet separate from them. We did not grow out of Pharisaic Judaism. We grew out of the Biblical Jewish faith of the prophets of Israel.”¹⁷

ASSOCIATIONS OF MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

A quick search on the Internet will reveal hundreds of Web sites representing Jesus-believing Jews. One site gave 177 links, including the Fellowship of Black Messianic Hebrews, Jews for Jesus, and the Society for the Advancement of Nazarene Judaism. It is at once exciting, heartening, and alarming to see such a variety of Messianic expression. Yet how well are all these ministries and organizations “devoted ... to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship” (Acts 2:42)?

The Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism (LCJE) is a “benchmark” organization for Jewish missions. It defines itself as “an association of agencies, congregations and individuals who are in substantial agreement with the Lausanne Covenant and are committed to Jewish evangelism worldwide and to cooperating and networking with others who share that commitment.”¹⁸ LCJE was formed in 1980 at a meeting of the Lausanne Consultation on World Evangelism (LCWE) in Pattaya, Thailand. It has grown steadily since that time and is organized into seven regions: Australia/New Zealand, South Africa, South America, North America, Japan, Europe, and Israel. LCJE publishes the *LCJE Bulletin*, which includes papers and worldwide Jewish evangelism news, and *Mishkan*, a scholarly journal.¹⁹

The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) is an organization of 70 Messianic congregations located in North and South America and around the world. Their Web site (www.umjc.org) affirms that “G-d” is moving mightily among the Jews to bring them to faith in Messiah Yeshua. UMJC emphasizes a unity with Gentile Christians, citing Jesus’ words in John 17:23. The organization’s doctrinal statement includes the following:

We believe the Bible is the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of G-d; We believe that there is one G-d, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; We believe in the deity of the L-RD Yeshua, the Messiah, and His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory; As Jewish followers of Yeshua, we are called to maintain our Jewish biblical heritage and remain a part of our people Israel and the universal body of believers; This is part of our identity and a witness to the faithfulness of G-d.

In a position paper, titled “Why the Union Requires Shabbat Services,” UMJC states that its members “do not require Shabbat observance as a test of salvation, or as a signification of the legitimacy of a group as a New Covenant congregation.” The paper indicates, however, that Shabbat (i.e., Sabbath) services are necessary to affirm Jewish identity in the world, and as “a unique covenant sign of Israel’s place as a chosen people of G-d.”²⁰

Founded in 1915, UMJC deemed it necessary in 1986 to organize an association of Messianic congregations, the International Association of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS). One of the largest congregations in IAMCS is Congregation Beth Yeshua in Philadelphia. Its doctrinal statement stands in the mainstream of Christian orthodoxy and adds, “We believe in G-d’s eternal covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We, therefore, stand with and support the Jewish people and the State of Israel and hold fast to the Biblical heritage of our forefathers.”²¹

Recently UMJC has organized a “Yeshiva Institute,” which grants ordination to the Messianic rabbinate after successful completion of 17 core courses, recommendation by other recognized leaders, and proven success in a UMJC congregational setting. The Yeshiva (Jewish counterpart of seminary) has its headquarters in Omaha, but it holds courses in various places around the country.

Another important organization is the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA), based in Springfield, Pennsylvania. Membership is open to both Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus). There is no formal doctrinal statement, but their Web site indicates certain belief expectations for Gentile Christians: “You recognize the need and importance of the specialized Jewish testimony of the MJAA. You stand in unity with your Messianic Jewish brothers and sisters all over the world and endorse this great Messianic revival as a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. Not only do you support this Jewish revival with your prayers but you also recognize the need to do your part financially. You love the Jewish people and endorse the nation of Israel as a fulfillment of end-time Biblical prophecy.”²² MJAA does considerable work in Israel, from planting trees to supporting Messianic believers financially. The organization strongly asserts that *Eretz Yisrael* (Land of Israel) belongs to the Jews and also teaches that Romans 11:25–32 is to be understood as the conversion of the Jews in the end times. Neither of these two interpretations of Scripture violates historic orthodox Christianity, although they may conflict with traditionally held views in some denominations.

A third association is the Messianic Israel Alliance, formed by Messianic Israel Ministries of St. Cloud, Florida, also known as “House of David.” A key person in this group is Batya Ruth Wootten, and in her book *Who Is Israel?* she strictly identifies “Israel” as the *ekklesia*, which she defines as “the true believers in Messiah Jesus,” but comprised solely of Ephraim and Judah.²³ She says the phrase “Gentile Christian” is an oxymoron.²⁴ The context of Romans 11 is ignored, and “Gentile” becomes simply a now-identified Ephraimite, that is, a person from one of the 10 lost tribes of ancient Israel. This is not only theological elitism but also heresy — ignoring Isaiah 56:6–7 and the Holy Spirit-guided work of the Apostolic Council (Acts 15), which concluded that Gentiles (i.e., non-Israelites), too, can be part of the *ekklesia* when they believe in Messiah Jesus.

The Messianic Israel Alliance “places no doctrinal demands or practice requirements on member congregations, fellowships or home groups. However, the alliance does encourage the observance of the Sabbath and of the Feasts of Yahveh as the Spirit leads.”²⁵ Their Web site lists a membership of 87 groups in the United States and eight overseas.

House of David not only appears to exclude Gentiles but also hints that in the end times the Messianic believers can expect an organized “church system” to persecute true believers.²⁶ Wootten’s theology appears to be legalistic and focused more on ethnic purity than on the Messiah. Although the Messianic Israel Alliance asks no doctrinal commitment, “membership” opens groups up to the influence of House of David’s mixture of biblical and unbiblical teachings.

CULTS AND “LOOK-ALIKES”

Space prohibits a comprehensive examination of Messianic cults and “look-alikes” — groups that purport to be Jewish but are not. It is helpful to examine three such groups, which are really not in the mainstream of the Messianic congregational movement. These new groups can be compared with something old: the Ebionites, a Judaistic cult of post-Apostolic times, which emphasized the humanity of Jesus and the keeping of the Law.²⁷ Contrasting the Nazarenes, previously mentioned, with the Ebionites, Ray Pritz writes: “Ebionism was not the direct heir of the Jewish apostolic church; it was at best only third generation, and to reconcile its doctrines with those of the New Testament requires no small amount of mental gymnastics.”²⁸

The **Assemblies of Yahweh** out of Bethel, Pennsylvania, gives the appearance of being Jewish, but it gives little evidence that Jewish people are part of the group. Their statements on keeping the Jewish festivals of Leviticus 23 go beyond the conviction of today’s Messianic believers into legalism: “We affirm that obedience to the commandments of Almighty Yahweh includes observing and keeping holy His commanded observances of Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28–29.” The Holy Spirit is defined as “the mighty power from the Heavenly Father and the Messiah dwelling with us,” and, “We find the Trinitarian doctrine to be foreign to the inspired Scriptures.” Jesus is called the Son of YAHWEH, Savior and Messiah. The Assemblies of Yahweh affirm “that He pre-existed with the Father,” that he is a man who lived a sinless life, and that he was raised from the dead on the third day. It is unclear whether they believe Jesus is Deity, equal to the Father. Among numerous laws that must be kept are “clean meats” and the use of “anointing with oil in the Name of Yahweh and in the Name of Yahshua the Messiah for healing of illness.” The Assemblies of Yahweh adulterate the gospel: “Yahweh has extended grace (unmerited kindness or mercy) to all who keep His law.”²⁹

The group **Twelve Tribes** (not to be confused with the “Twelve Tribes” sect of Rastafarianism, see *Effective Evangelism*, p. 8) has a core teaching of unity, as expressed in its name, which is taken from Paul’s testimony before King Agrippa (Acts 26:7). According to their Web site’s “Who We Are” page, “We are a spiritual brotherhood whose love for one another stretches across the boundaries of nationality, race, and culture.... We sometimes speak of ourselves as Messianic communities, for we live in the hope of Messiah and are being made ready for Him.”³⁰ I phoned their toll-free number (888-893-5838) and spoke with one of the members. He said their identity and heritage is Jewish and that one or two of the leaders are Jewish.

Their doctrinal statements appear to be Trinitarian. The Messiah is Yahshua (a.k.a. “Jesus” by denominational churches), who is eternal Creator, the Son of God, who lived a sinless life for us, died for our sins, and was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit. The call for a holy life appears to be gospel-motivated: “It is out of love for Him who first loved us that we live as we do, no longer for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose again for us (2 Cor. 5:14–15).”³¹

As with many exclusivist sects, their emphasis on unity seems to be on their terms only. They teach that communal living is an essential feature of Christian faith, and there is a high degree of antidenominationalism in their literature. Yet it is their view of man’s eternal destiny that casts the biggest shadow of heterodoxy on this group. Their exegesis of Matthew 25:31–40 portrays three

categories of humankind: the wicked (the “goats,” cast into the lake of fire), the non-Christian righteous (the “sheep” who will have a kingdom based on their merits), and Yahshua’s brothers (the Holy City has been prepared for them).³² This teaching on eternal destiny distorts Scripture, adding a category that is not there, teaching the heresy of justification by works for the second group, and possibly blunting attempts to share the gospel — if we decide that we are speaking to one of the “sheep” of Matthew 25:31–46. And if Jesus Himself said that these righteous “sheep” have eternal life, why should they bother to trust the Messiah? The Twelve Tribes’s exegesis of this passage fatally compromises the gospel of grace.

Lion and Lamb Ministries of Norman, Oklahoma, does not appear to be a “look- alike,” but a Messianic Jewish ministry with the following as its mission statement: “To teach the Torah and strengthen our faith and obedience in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To present the Messiah Yeshua as the King of Israel and ourselves as his Bondservants. To encourage the believers of Messiah Yeshua by the observance of the Sabbath and the Biblical festivals. To provide prophetic insight and understanding concerning the return of Yeshua the Messiah to the earth. To prepare the saints of God both Jew and Gentile for the events of the Great Tribulation and the last years of this age.”³³

Although presenting Yeshua (Jesus) as the biblical Messiah, this group has strong legalistic tendencies, and its focus does not appear to be on the gospel, but on end-time events, such as the Anti-Christ, the tribulation, and the millennial kingdom. Their leader, Monte Judah, falsely predicted that the Abomination of Desolation prophesied in the Bible would occur by March of 1997, for which he apologized. Monte Judah suggests today that Prince Charles of Wales may be the antimessiah. Their monthly newsletter is *Yavoh*, which means He is Coming. On the recommended books list of their Web site is *Who Is Israel?* previously mentioned in this article. Lion and Lamb Ministries should not to be confused with Texas-based Lamb and Lion Ministries.

FORWARD INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The religious Jewish community views with increasing alarm the growing numbers of Jewish people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Believing a falsehood (that Jews who become Christians are no longer Jews), they see Jewish evangelism as an intellectual holocaust. Antimissionary organizations such as Rabbi Tovia Singer’s “Outreach Judaism” have been formed in order to counter Christian evangelism.

The Christian community welcomes the newly revived movement of Jesus-believing Jews, but it is necessary to raise several cautionary flags. For one thing, some Messianic groups may be cults, and others — to a greater or lesser degree — may emphasize Jewishness more than the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. A particularly egregious example is the position of Mr. Tsvi Sadan, a member of the International Coordinating Committee of LCJE. Sadan has publicly denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus — contrary to the doctrinal position of LCJE.³⁴

Moreover, Christians (who are mostly Gentile) may improperly react to some new biblical emphases in this movement:

1. Celebration of traditional Jewish festivals and the Sabbath may be followed, not because of law, but because of choice in order to contextualize the Gospel and affirm Jewish identity.
2. The practice of circumcision by Messianic believers may be done validly not as an act of obedience to law, but as an expression of God’s sign associated with the Abrahamic Covenant and Jewish identity.
3. The Church has not abrogated physical Israel’s identity, which is permanent and based on the Abrahamic Covenant.
4. Individual Jewish people are not saved by being members of a chosen people. Like everyone else, they need to hear the good news of Messiah Jesus and experience regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14:6). The gospel must be proclaimed to the Jews.

Messianic congregations are indeed “something old.” Jesus-believing Jews were the major players in the New Testament, and continued until Nazarene Christianity disappeared about 400 A.D. Almost dead for

centuries, the “something old” has been renewed today in “something new” — the Messianic congregational movement. And so the hope of the ancient Nazarene Christians, that Jews would one day turn away from tradition and towards Jesus, as expressed in their “Isaiah Commentary,” has been realized: “O Sons of Israel, who deny the Son of God with such hurtful resolution, return to him and to his apostles.”³⁵

NOTES

1. Circulation is approximately 30,000, a nonprofit ministry supported by the monthly gifts of readers.
2. Although 1967 marks the beginning of a worldwide escalation of Messianic congregations, David Sedaca points not only to Joseph Rabinowitz’s work in Kishinev, Moldavia, at the turn of the century but also to the first Hebrew Christian church in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1936. See “The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism,” *The Death of Messiah*, ed. Kai Kjaer-Hansen (Baltimore: Lederer, 1994), 108.
3. Michael Schiffman, *Return from Exile: The Re-Emergence of the Messianic Congregational Movement* (Bay Terrace, NY: Teshuvah, 1991), 40–41.
4. Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem-Leiden: Magnes, Hebrew University, E. J. Brill, 1988), 53.
5. Jacob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (London: SPCK, 1962).
6. Kai Kjaer-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 18.
7. Joseph P. Gudel, “‘To the Jew First’: A Biblical Analysis of the ‘Two Covenant’ Theory of the Atonement,” *Christian Research Journal*, July–September 1998, 36-42.
8. Pritz, 10.
9. Schiffman, 38.
10. *Ibid.*, 39.
11. *Ibid.*, 39-40. Jewish people resent being targeted, and it is better to say they are “not being discriminated against” in that Messiah Jesus is for Jew and Gentile alike.
12. F. Dean Lueking, *Mission in the Making* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964). The chapter “One Man’s Labor among the Jews,” 159–73, describes how Landsmann led 37 Jewish people to the Messiah in 13 years in behalf of the denomination, which is now known as The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.
13. Schiffman, 90. “*Shabbat* can be observed in a way that lifts up Yeshua, the Lord of *Shabbat*. Yom Kippur, the day of Atonement, becomes a day of thanksgiving for Messianic Jews because there is full atonement in the sacrifice of Messiah...Likewise, circumcision is practiced by Messianic Jews, not because it imputes righteousness but because we are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and this is the sign of God’s promise for all generations.”
14. Pritz, 34. Acts 24:5 describes how the Jewish hierarchy brought charges against Paul. The prosecuting lawyer, Tertullus, told Governor Felix: “We found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect...” Epiphanius locates the Nazarenes in Beroea, Syria, the region of Pella, and in Basanitis.
15. *Ibid.*, 53.
16. Baruch Maoz, “Jewish Christianity: Whither and Why?” *Israel and Yeshua*, ed. Torleif Elgvin (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1993), 124.
17. Schiffman, 43.
18. *LCJE Bulletin*, no. 51 (Feb. 1998).
19. *Ibid.*, 23. Contact with the International LCJE Coordinator, Kjaer-Hansen, by e-mail: lcje-int@post3.tele.dk; postal mail: Mishkan at POB 116, Jerusalem 91000, Israel.
20. Web site: www.UMJC.org/documents. Frequently in Jewish writings the English words “God” or “Lord” are spelled as “G-d” or “L-rd.” As a way of keeping the commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Exod. 20:7) religious Jews have traditionally hesitated to pronounce the authentic name of God — and have substituted names like *Adonai* and *HoShem* (“The Name”). In the last few decades a new practice has come into vogue — that of not writing out in full the English names for “God” or “Lord.”
21. Web site: www.cby.org.
22. Web site: www.mjaa.org.
23. Batya Wootten, *Who Is Israel?* (St. Cloud, FL: Key of David, 1998), 213.
24. *Ibid.*, 93.
25. Web site: www.mim.net.
26. Wootten, 42.
27. Jocz, 194-200.
28. Pritz, 9.
29. Web site: www.assembliesofyahweh.com.
30. www.twelvetribe.com.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *The Twelve Tribes Free Paper*, 3ED#6, 9–10.
33. Web site www.lionlamb.net.
34. Personal correspondence, Rev. Joseph Gudel. Members of LCJE must be in agreement with the Lausanne Covenant that identifies Jesus Christ as “the only God-man” and that says: “We affirm our belief in the one-eternal God, Creator and Lord of the world, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”
35. Pritz, 110.