

The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism

by David Sedaca

The second half of the 20th century has witnessed the rise of Messianic Judaism, a movement that has finally found its niche in the religious world. Today, Messianic Judaism is rapidly growing in different parts of the world: Israel, North and South America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Because of its history and the impact of such a movement in the light of biblical interpretation, it cannot be dismissed as an experiment to be tested or a fad to be tried out. Any conscious analysis of Messianic Judaism has to be performed against its own historical and biblical backdrop.

What is Messianic Judaism?

Messianic Judaism is the term used to define a form of lifestyle and worship that fully identifies with Jewish customs and traditions while believing that Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth is the promised Messiah of the Jewish Scriptures. At the same time, Messianic Judaism holds most emphatically that it is part of the universal body of Messiah, the church, but claims the right to express itself, both in its daily life and worship style, in a way that agrees with its Jewish heritage. Messianic Jews believe in maintaining a Jewish expression to their faith, therefore, they celebrate all biblical holidays (Passover, Succoth, Shavuot, etc.) which the people of Israel were commanded to observe for all generations. Another characteristic of this movement is its love and support to the nation of Israel. Messianic Jews usually establish congregations for their worship, even though there are many cases in which Jewish believers in the Messiah adhere to a Messianic Jewish lifestyle while remaining formally affiliated to traditional churches. These Messianic congregations are fashioned after the early church of the "Brit Hadashah" (New Testament). Messianic Jewish congregations, which are sometimes called Messianic Jewish Synagogues, have certain characteristics: worship on the Sabbath, Davidic music and dance, and many other Jewish traditions consistent with biblical Jewish traditions. It should be noted that, in full agreement with New Testament teachings, membership is open to both Jew and gentile.

Looking back through the years

The reappearance of Messianic Judaism. Messianic Judaism of today did not develop in a vacuum but it is the logical consequence of a process that began 2,000 years ago, when a young Jewish man began to preach that the messianic hopes proclaimed by the prophets of Israel were fulfilled in Him. Most scholars agree that this man, Yeshua, lived a lifestyle consistent with first century Judaism. From Jewish records and church historians, we know that, even after the first century, when Messianic Jews ceased to be the leaders of the church, there were individual Jews who believed in Jesus. Messianic Judaism of today is the latest expression of a process that is over one hundred years old. The resurgence of this movement can be traced to Great Britain around the year 1850. At that time, there were thousands of Jewish people who converted to Christianity, but the end result of most of these conversions was the losing of their Jewish identity. By the middle of the 19th century, there were many outstanding Jewish believers in Jesus who began questioning the then prevailing principle that the corollary of accepting Jesus was the forfeiture of one's Jewish heritage. Contacts in England between these Jewish believers ultimately led to the formation in 1813 of the first body of believers who recognized both their Jewish ancestry and their faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. The name of this association was "Beni Abraham" Children of Abraham.

But it was only with the formation of an umbrella organization that Jewish believers were united in bonds of heritage, witnessing and relief. This organization was the Hebrew Christian Alliance. The idea was first promoted by Dr. C. Schwartz, of Trinity Chapel, and finally, in May 14, 1867, a resolution was passed to unite all Jewish

believers under the umbrella of the Hebrew Christian Alliance and Prayer Union of Great Britain. The organization of this first national Alliance led to the establishing of similar Alliances in different parts of the world. With the appearance of the first Hebrew Christian Alliance, many Jewish believers in the churches came out to the open declaring their Jewish ancestry. This phenomenon spread like bush fire and, before the turn of the century, there were national alliances of Jewish believers established in many European countries.

Another organization founded in England in 1883 to unite Jewish believers in prayer support and spiritual bonds was the Hebrew Christian Prayer Union. The concept was so well received that in less than seven years since its formation its membership rose from 147 to 600 and they established branches in Germany, Norway, Romania, Russia, Israel (then Palestine), and the United States. These national alliances, although closely related with each other, lacked the international structure that would further unite them in their purposes. This need was finally met when in 1925 all the Hebrew Christian Alliances formed the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (I.H.C.A.) Before the outbreak of World War II there were twenty national alliances affiliated to the International Hebrew Christian Alliance. In the words of Hugh Schonfield "Since 1925, the history of Jewish Christianity becomes in effect the history of the IHCA." Once Jewish believers tested their strength they realized that this was just the beginning of a much important movement. Sir Leon Levinson, first president of the I.H.C.A. wrote in 1927 in *The Hebrew Christian Quarterly*, the official organ of the I.H.C.A. that the numbers of Jewish believers were 97,000 roughly distributed as follows: in Vienna 17,000 accepted Jesus; in Poland 35,000; in Russia 60,000; in America and Canada over 30,000 and in Great Britain 5,000. The next step forward was to establish a church made up of Jewish believers where their Jewishness could be emphasized. There had been at several successful experiences in this regard. One was the Hebrew Christian movement in Kischineff led by Joseph Rabinowitz, a lawyer, who in 1882 founded the first Hebrew Christian community. Rabinowitz took the community of Hebrew Christian believers out of the boundaries of established churches and kept in within the realms of the synagogue. A similar success occurred under the leadership of Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein in Tapio-Szele. Hungary. The first Hebrew Christian Church in Buenos Aims, Argentina, was established in 1936 and similar churches were formed in different European countries. These and similar stories led to the analysis of the question of whether the time had arrived to "rebuild David's tabernacle that is fallen down" by establishing independent Jewish congregations. This question led to the setting up of a committee to study the viability of Hebrew Christian churches. This landmark event took place at the Budapest Conference of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, the last conference before the Holocaust. By then, there were several Hebrew Christian churches in Europe, North and South America. But the tragedy of the Holocaust necessitated Jewish believers to shift gears from establishing indigenous congregations to escaping Hitler's camps and assisting refugees. After Judaism was back on its feet again, the Jewish believers continued developing their own spiritual quest. Thus, the Hebrew Christian movement began slowly to transform itself into Messianic Judaism as we know it today. In some places, it was a sharp breakaway from the Gentile church, while in others, the process was much smoother. Out of the ashes of the Holocaust and with the founding of the modern State of Israel, a new Jewish identity began to develop and the Hebrew Christian movement was not immune to these changes. The term Hebrew Christian no longer properly defined Jewish believers in Yeshua, therefore, a more adequate form of expressing their Jewish identity and beliefs was found in the term Messianic Jew. Unity within diversity.

Today, there are as many forms of Messianic Judaism around the worlds as there are Jewish eople. In most instances, Messianic Jewish congregations are molded after the milieu they are part of. In United States, where the largest number of Messianic Jews reside, congregations tend to adopt more parts of the traditional Jewish synagogue service, with its own Siddur, Torah Scrolls, etc. On the other hand, in Great Britain, where the Hebrew Christian movement was stronger Messianic Judaism did not rapidly adopt traditional Jewish elements. Argentina, with) an European evangelical tradition was slow to changes, but even though the largest number of Jewish believers are part of traditional evangelical churches, Messianic Jewish congregations are well established. In Holland mast Jewish believers adopted the New Testament name given to the early followers of Yeshua, "HaDerech," the Way.

One of the hardest issues that Messianic Judaism is confronted with is the rejection suffered from mainline Judaism, that for the most part, argues that Jews who believe in Jesus have given up their Jewishness. Therefore, one of the things that engages Messianic Judaism is the need to prove that even though it accepts Yeshua as the Messiah, it does not reject Judaism as a lifestyle, a people and a culture. But this is not the case of Jewish believers in Israel, where their Jewishness is taken as a fact. In the State of Israel their struggle is to have the same full rights under the Law of Return as all the other Jews. In Russia and the former Soviet republics, there is true awakening to Judaism and Messianic Judaism. Under the Communist regime, Judaism was suppressed, and millions of Jews were alienated from their Jewish heritage. Now, with a new openness, not only are Jewish people re-discovering their Jewish heritage, but hundreds of them have come to accept the fact that Yeshua is the promised Messiah. Presently, there are Messianic Jewish congregations formed in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev, and the testimony is being carried to other former Soviet republics. ?

By the end of 1993 there were 165 independent Messianic Jewish congregations world-wide, and a similar number of Jewish ministries and fellowships. Most Messianic Jewish congregations are affiliated to a larger association. Among these associations are the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, the international Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues, the Fellowship of Messianic Jewish Congregations, The Canadian Fellowship of Messianic Congregations and Ministries, the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship, etc. In spite of the different backgrounds, the Messianic Jewish movement is quite cohesive. The fundamental fact is not what makes these groups different, rather, what is the bond that holds them together in spite of all. The bond that unites Messianic Jews around the world is the belief that Yeshua is the Jewish Messiah, and that this belief does not make them forfeit their Jewishness. Building bridges or building walls? While many in traditional Judaism have put their trust in a modern Messiah who poorly meets the biblical requirements, Messianic Jews have accepted that the promised Messiah already came, and it was Yeshua of Nazareth. Messianic Jews are in a unique position to build a bridge of understanding between traditional Judaism and the Christian church. Messianic Jews are able to point out to the church the need to reconsider their Jewish origin, and at the same time, point out to Judaism the Jewishness of Jesus, and his message. There are more things that bring Judaism and Christianity together than pull them apart; it is Messianic Judaism an example of both being brought together. This is what the early church was and it would be helpful for both religious groups to look back to their own history.