



What is Messianic Judaism?

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What is Messianic Judaism? Depending on whom you ask, this question may receive several different answers. It is easier to define what Messianic Judaism is not. Although some Christian denominations have Messianic congregations, Messianic Judaism is not a denomination. There is not one belief system common among all Messianic congregations, nor is one liturgy style consistent in all Messianic congregations. It is not a single unified organization.

Asking the question “What is Messianic?” is like asking “What is Judaism?” or “What is Christianity?” The term “Messianic” is closer to terms like “contemporary” or “traditional” in that it is more descriptive of a worship style than of a religious belief system. Within Judaism there is a lot of variety. There are Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform groups. Within those groups are variations of liturgy styles and beliefs. Some believe

the Bible to be the infallible Word of God while others believe it is a nice collection of fables providing some moral guidance. Then there are those who have strict regulations for staying kosher and keeping Sabbath holy, while others are not concerned with these commandments. In one Jewish synagogue they will sing “Oseh Shalom” with one melody while another synagogue will use a different melody. It is the same within Christianity. Among the many various organized denominations and unorganized non-denominational churches, there is a wide variety of beliefs, teachings, practices, and worship styles. Messianic congregations are almost as different as all the various groups of Judaism and Christianity combined.

Today’s Messianic Judaism is a result of several factors, including the gradual unearthing of biblical truths started by the Protestant Reformation, attempts of Christianity to evangelize Jewish people, the Zionist movement, the foundation of

Israel as a nation, fundamentalist beliefs concerning the future of the nation of Israel, and the general tolerance for differences of lifestyles and beliefs. Because of these factors and others, modern Messianic Judaism is very diverse in its beliefs and liturgies. Some Messianic congregations have a liturgy that is similar to an Orthodox synagogue. Others are more like a combination of a Jewish wedding and a Christian concert. And, of course, there is everything in between. Some members dress like Orthodox Jewish people; some wear kippas and tzit-tzits all the time; some only wear kippas, tzit-tzits, and talits during services; and some don’t dress in any way distinctly Jewish. Some congregations hold to the beliefs of the denomination they are associated with or from which they came. Others follow many of the traditions of Judaism. And still others pick and choose a menagerie of beliefs from various Christian and Jewish sources. One belief that Messianic congregations have in common is

that Y'shua is the Messiah (though even on that topic there are some individuals who are starting to question what "being the Messiah" means). "...[I]t should be clear that there is no founder or spokesperson for the terms 'messianic,' 'messianic movement,' 'messianic Jew' or 'messianic Judaism.'"¹

In the first century, tens of thousands of Jewish people accepted Y'shua as their Messiah. Early "Christians," as they were called, continued to worship in their traditional Jewish manner and held to common Jewish beliefs. They continued to live like the Jewish people around them. For the most part they were just another sect of Judaism. "In the pre-70 C.E. period most Jewish Christians were still part of the Jewish community. They believed that not only was Jesus the Messiah but that Torah observance was incumbent upon all Jews."² When difficulties arose concerning doctrine or caring for members, they had a central Jewish council that helped in resolving the differences. They were organized, structured, and united.

This lasted for the first century. However, many changes were taking place in the world and among believers. Their services and beliefs gradually began to look less and less like Judaism and more and more like the pagan religions that surrounded them.

During the Dark Ages over the next seventeen to eighteen hundred years, there were few Christians worshipping or believing like Jews. Certainly there were some Jewish people who became believers in the Messiah. (We are not referring to those who converted at the edge of a sword). It is during that immensely long

sad period that the first part of the Bible began to be referred to as "old" and was considered irrelevant and done away with. Eventually the entire Bible was treated this way and it became a crime for anyone other than clergy to even read the Bible. Paganism slowly made its way into Christianity during this time in that people were praying in front of statues, Sabbath worship and rest were replaced by Sunday services, and pagan holidays became Christian ones. With the first part of the Bible being declared "old" and the entire Bible being forbidden reading by the common people, biblical instruction regarding kosher food choices, for instance, were forgot-

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ten or ignored.

In the 1400s, after several hundred of years of darkness, the Protestant Reformation slowly took root. The downward spiritual spiral into the Dark Ages began to be reversed. The Bible began to be read again by the masses and more and more Bible truths began to be realized. With each renewed Bible truth a new denomination was formed. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Methodists, and others each added additional biblical truths to the understanding of the people.

Then in the mid 1800s, some Christians of various denominations began to look at the Bible

differently. Instead of focusing primarily on the last third of the Bible, the New Testament, they accepted the entire Bible as being given by the inspiration of God. For these Christians, both the Old and the New Testaments were profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. As this group of believers studied the Bible as one unit, they affirmed their belief in Y'shua as the Messiah and they also began living like Jewish people. They worshiped and rested on the biblical Sabbath, ate only what the Bible says was given as food, and understood the significance of the yearly holy days such as Yom Kippur and Passover. Like the early Christians, they believe in Y'shua as the Messiah and yet have preserved many other beliefs similar to Judaism. These Christians are known as Seventh-day Adventists (see "The Jewish-Adventist Connection" in our previous issue).

In the early and mid 1800s, Christian missionaries of various denominations began traveling around the globe to share the Bible with people who did not know about God. As the missionary emphasis grew, some denominations began to seek ways to teach Jewish people about the Messiah. In the late 1800s and early 1900s a few of the Protestant denominations, such as the Presbyterians, began what was called "Hebrew Christian congregations." These congregations worshiped somewhat like Jewish people, but other than the Adventist Hebrew Christian congregations, they had their services on Sunday, ate traif, and followed other traditions. For the most part, the Hebrew Christian

congregations were maintaining their Jewish cultural identity but not their Jewish religious beliefs or worship style.

In the early 1970s, Moishe Rosen, an ordained Baptist minister, formed “Jews for Jesus” as a missionary outreach to Jewish people. “Jews for Jesus” used a Jewish image and Jewish music to reach Jewish people. “Jews for Jesus” encouraged their Jewish contacts to attend a local church that they felt comfortable with and that taught biblical truths. People such as Martin Chernoff and John Fisher began to establish congregations that actually worshiped like Jews. It was about this time that the term “Messianic” began to be adopted. Initially, not all Messianic congregations worshiped on Sabbath. Over time, however, nearly all were worshiping on Sabbath, some as a result of it becoming their biblical belief and others because of the Jewish identity associated with Sabbath.

This brief historical review is not meant to be exhaustive nor is it meant as an exact time line. Rather, it helps us see the process over the last 2,000 years that has taken us the long road back to having congregations that worship in a manner similar to that of Jewish people, that hold similar beliefs with Jewish people, and that in many ways live like other Jewish people, while believing that Y’shua is the Messiah.

All the diversity within Messianic Judaism has its pros and cons. One advantage is that it has given Messianic Judaism the ability to grow rapidly. Many Jews have come to accept Y’shua as the Jewish Messiah. Others, who in the past wrote Jesus off as being only for the Gentiles, have been

willing to take a look at who He really is.

Messianic Judaism has also had a big impact on Christianity. Many of the Messianic Jewish programs air on Christian stations. Many of the people who attend Messianic congregations are Christians. Many Christians who at first rejected biblical teachings such as the Sabbath and dietary restrictions are taking another look at these teachings in light of the whole Bible.

“While many Messianic Jews are ethnically Jewish (and as such would be considered Jews even by Orthodox Jewish standards), Messianic Judaism is not seen as a legitimate form of Judaism by any recognized Jewish organization

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or leaders, apart from a handful of dissenting voices among the Reform and Reconstructionist Jewish movements.”³ “Jewish Christians, whether labeled Hebrew Christians or Messianic Jews, have encountered much opposition over the years, from both Jews and Christians.”⁴

What does the future hold for Messianic Judaism? Several possibilities exist. Messianic Judaism may continue to grow in the biblical truths that were lost during the Dark Ages and still witness to both Jews and Christians. Or, like other groups that came out

of the Protestant Reformation, it can say, “We have grown enough. We are stopping where we are.” It could also desire to assimilate into traditional Judaism and give up the Messiah. Messianic Judaism may also feel pressure to return to Christianity and become “Messianic Christianity” instead of “Messianic Judaism.” In actuality, all of these scenarios have come to pass in individual Messianic congregations.

So what is Messianic Judaism? Messianic Jews could be said to be “Jews who have come to know Y’shua as their Messiah and who continue to embrace their Jewish identity. This identity is manifested in a religious and cultural context.” Therefore a Messianic congregation could be defined as “Jewish people and non-Jewish people who believe that Y’shua is the Messiah and who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in a Jewish contextual manner.”

¹Rich Robinson, “The Challenge of our Messianic Movement,” n.p. [cited October 30, 2005]. Online: http://www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/havurah/6_2/challenge1.

²Gerald Sigal, “Is the Christian Movement Called ‘Messianic Judaism’ a Form of Judaism?” n.p. [cited October 30, 2005]. Online: <http://www.jewsforjudaism.org/web/j4jlibrary/messianicjudaism.html>.

³Encyclopedia [cited October 30, 2005]. Online: <http://www.encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com>.

⁴William Greene, “The Ascendance of ‘Messianic Judaism’ in the Context of ‘Hebrew Christianity,’” n.p. [cited October 30, 2005]. Online: http://mccu.edulpapers/mess_jud.html.