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A Closer Look at Messianic Judaism

By Tal Davis

When I was in college I became acquainted with several students who were from Jewish backgrounds who had become involved in various Christian organizations. I learned, however, about one of the strongest customs held by most Jewish people over past generations. It is that if a Jew converts to Christianity (or any other religion), then he or she will no longer be regarded by other Jews as Jewish. This traditional idea is that Judaism and Christianity are two different incompatible religions, and if a Jew comes to believe in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, he or she is therefore leaving Judaism behind.

Unfortunately, this has been the cause of many painful family divisions and disputes when young Jewish men and women announce to their traditional Jewish parents that they have decided to become followers of Christ or marry outside their faith. In some cases, the Jewish families will cut off all communication or even consider them as dead. Thus, for a Jew to convert to Christianity has always been a difficult and costly choice for anyone to make.

The strange thing about this Jewish tradition is that for many, if not most Jews, the religious aspect of Judaism is not very important to their lives. In fact, many prominent Jews are unapologetically atheists. The irony is that Jews have a difficult time even defining what makes a person a Jew at all. According to a 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center: “U.S. Jews do not have a single, uniform answer to what being Jewish means. When asked whether being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, ancestry, culture, or some combination of those things, Jews respond in a wide variety of ways, *with just one-in-ten saying it is only a matter of religion.*”

“Many American Jews prioritize cultural components of Judaism over religious ones. Most Jewish adults say that remembering the Holocaust, leading a moral and ethical life, working for justice and equality in society, and being

intellectually curious are ‘essential’ to what it means to them to be Jewish. Far fewer say that observing Jewish law is an essential part of their Jewish identity. Indeed, more consider ‘having a good sense of humor’ to be essential to being Jewish than consider following *halakha* (traditional Jewish law) essential (34% vs. 15%).” <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/>

This is an increasingly important issue in light of the growing antisemitism on many American university campuses and in some European countries. Evangelical Christians need to oppose any and all attacks on Jewish people regardless of how they identify themselves.

So then, this seems to mean a person from a Jewish family can always identify as a Jew except if he or she converts to Christianity. Then, he or she is not a Jew any longer. That being said, however, apparently the state of Israel does recognize Jewish Christians who want to immigrate there under their “Law of Return” if they come from historically Jewish backgrounds. It is estimated as many as 30,000 Messianic Jews reside in Israel, many of whom serve in the Israeli Defense Force. Recently two Israeli diplomats were assassinated in Washington, DC. One of them, Yaron Lischinsky, was reported to be a Messianic Jew.

(To learn more about the history and beliefs of Judaism go to these links: <http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/04/what-do-you-know-about-judaism-part-1-tal-davis/> ; <http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/04/what-do-you-know-about-judaism-part-2-tal-davis/> ; <http://www.marketfaith.org/2023/05/what-do-you-know-about-judaism-part-3-tal-davis/>)

All that being said, I was for 23 years on the staff of the Interfaith Evangelism Team of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC).

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On several occasions I met with a group of people who called themselves Messianic Jews. They are the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship (SBMF) and they meet annually. Their last conference was June 7th of 2025 in Houston. These are mostly people from Jewish backgrounds, but also Gentiles who are drawn to the traditions of Judaism but with the fulfillment of the New Testament with Jesus as the Messiah. They have established many Messianic Jewish congregations nationwide that are loosely affiliated with the SBC. The SBFM is just one of a number of Messianic Jewish movements in the United States, around the world, and, most notably, in Israel.

So how did Messianic Judaism begin? The answer requires we go back to the 19th century. The late 1800s saw a large immigration from Europe of Jews to the U.S. It was estimated that between 1870 and 1900 as many as 4,000 Jews were baptized in American Churches. In 1903, Louise Meyer, a German Jewish immigrant, tried to organize Jewish converts to present their concerns to the various Christian churches. His efforts were limited. However, in 1915, a group of Jewish Christian organizations formed the Hebrew Christian Alliance (HCA) to better evangelize Jewish people and aid in strengthening young Jewish believers.

Later, in the 1960s, many young Jewish people were looking for spiritual meaning for their lives. Many had tried the existentialist and anti-establishment scene of that decade and found it wanting. So many listened to what Jesus had to say and realized that He (who they called by His Hebrew name *Yeshua*) was indeed the Messiah. They saw that by accepting Him they did not have to renounce their Jewishness. Like the early disciples, they could continue to practice their Jewish traditions enhanced by their new understanding of just who *Yeshua* was for the Jewish people and all others.

In 1975 a conference was held and the name of HCA was changed to the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA). Four years later, thirty-three leaders founded the Union of Mes-

sianic Congregations, a loose association of churches that hold more traditional Judaistic forms of worship and culture.

So just what do Messianic Jews believe? Is it any different from what most evangelical Christians believe? The website of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (mjaa.org) contains an extensive Statement of Faith. Below is a condensed version of its statement. It is pretty indicative of what most Messianic Jewish organizations and people adhere to in their doctrines.

- We believe that the BIBLE, consisting of the Tenach (Holy Scriptures) and the later writings commonly known as the B'rit Hadasha (New Testament/Covenant), is the only infallible and authoritative word of God.
- We believe that the Shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), a united one, a composite unity, eternally existent in plural oneness [He exists forever in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), however because of disobedience, mankind fell from the first state and became separated from God.
- Our only hope for redemption (salvation) is through the atonement made by the Messiah, resulting in regeneration by the Holy Spirit, which is the new birth. For by grace we are saved through faith, it is a gift of God.
- We believe that God wonderfully and immutably creates each person as male or female. These two distinct, complementary genders together reflect the image and nature of God.. Rejection of one's biological sex is a rejection of the image of God within that person.
- We believe the term "marriage" has only one meaning: the uniting of one man and one woman in a single, exclusive union, as delineated in Scripture (Genesis 2:18-25).
- We believe any form of sexual immorality or perversion, including adultery, fornication, homosexual or bisexual behavior, transgender

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association, transsexual orientation, bestiality, incest, or use of pornography is sinful and offensive to God.

- We believe in the resurrection of both the redeemed and the lost: the former to everlasting life and the latter to eternal separation from God, a state of everlasting punishment.

Two other Messianic Jewish organizations that deserve a mention in this article are Chosen People Ministries and Jews for Jesus. Chosen People Ministries was formerly known, from 1924-1984, as the American Board of Missions to the Jews. It's world headquarters is located in Brooklyn, NY, with offices in 16 countries. It's President is Dr. Mitch Glaser. The ministry includes an accredited seminary associated with Talbot Theological Seminary, a highly respected evangelical seminary at BIOLA University in Pasadena, California.

The other prominent ministry is Jews for Jesus. This group was started in 1970 in San Francisco by the late Moishe Rosen, and is now led by Aaron Abramson. We mention this group mainly because it has been the target in the past of allegations of being a cult. Some anti-missionary Jewish organizations have accused its staff and volunteers of deception and mind control in trying to convert young Jews to Christ. They have even been sued (unsuccessfully) for distributing evangelistic literature. About twenty years ago, I visited the San Francisco headquarters of Jews for Jesus and met with Mr. Rosen and their staff. I know the accusa-

tions that they engage in unethical proselytizing tactics are false. The accusations are basically just reactions to the success of the movement to winning some Jewish people to Jesus as the Messiah. Theologically Jews for Jesus is compatible with historic evangelical Christianity and simply focus their evangelism in ways that appeal Jewish culture.

I would offer one word of caution at this point. I once encountered some "Messianic Jews" who have an unbiblical theological perspective. They seem to take the position that though Jesus is the Messiah, He is not equal to God (*Yahweh*). In other words, they are essentially Arians who deny the full deity of Jesus – something like Jehovah's Witnesses. I think these are very few in number.

In conclusion, the Messianic Jewish movement has been for decades a positive and growing part of the overall body of Christ. Messianic Jews generally regard themselves as believers in Christ saved by grace through faith in

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Him. However, they still see their identity as Jews having a special place for them personally and in the overall plan of God. This is especially true in eschatological terms. Most regard the return of the Jewish people to Israel as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy and a key sign of the last days. Consequently, they believe that it is their duty to share the Good News of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah to their fellow Jews. Evangelical Gentile Christians should pray for their congregations and ministries.