



VITENSKAPELIG
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Messianic Judaism's proximity to the universal Church

What are Israeli messianic Jewish communities views on their relationship to the Church?

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AVH 5065: Thesis for professional study in Theology (30 ECTS), autumn semester 2018

Word count: 17924



For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.
(Rom 11:36)

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Harald Hegstad of the Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society. I am grateful for his patient guiding and being there whenever I needed it. I would also like to thank The Capari Center and all that work there especially to Knut H. Høyland, for the support and guidance in Israel. Without their passionate participation and input, the interviews could not have been successfully conducted. Not list the messianic Congregations I got the chance to interview, thank you for welcoming me and for being open to my curiosity. Moreover thanks are due to Preste foreningen, for economical support.

I would also like to acknowledge MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, not just for this thesis, but also for all the years of graceful and caring support by all staff.

All friends that never stopped believing and continuously encouraged me, like Dr. Solomon Abedom with family in Trondheim, and all church family in Oslo.

Finally, I must express my very profound gratitude to my mother Nighsty (T. A. K) and to my brother Mose, for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would have been difficult without them. God bless you.

Abstract

Messianic Judaism is negotiating the claim that, - faith in Jesus is possible while maintaining Jewish identity - between the gentiles dominated Church and the Jewish world that is reluctant to see faith in Jesus as less than a threat to it.

We examine how the Jewish messianic believers in Israel view their place in relation to the Church. Because this is an ecumenical question, we take that perspective. With the help of an ecumenical theory of unity, we developed from the ecumenical Movements vision of unity, questions about ecumenical proximity to the universal church. Through interviews and participant observations, we posed the theological question to four messianic Jewish congregations in Israel.

The answer to our question is that messianic Jewish believers position themselves in various proximities to the ecumenical vision of the unified church. The messianic Jewish communities in Israel have differing stances and understandings reflecting their different backgrounds. Most of them place themselves well into the ecumenical ideal for unity in praxis. While the one community showed an inclination for disassociation with Christianity, for the sake of re-embedding -faith in Jesus- in Judaism of today.

We also see that a living messianic Judaism today can provides the Church historical opportunity to amend for errors and regain its identity as rooted in the Jewish People. As well, as gain a model for diversity without compromising its unity.

Abbreviations

BJJ	Jewish believers in Jesus
MJAA	Messianic Jewish Alliance of America
MJM	Messianic Jewish Movement
UMJC	Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations
WCC	World Council of Churches

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

“Like a child of divorce, Messianic Jews have shied away from defining our movement because doing so would seem to require a declaration of loyalty to one or the other estranged parent.”¹

The dilemma the Messianic Jewish Movement (MJM) is in—trying to come to a self-understanding between the (predominantly gentile) Church that gave it back the gospel. Whilst staying loyal to the Jewish people and their aspiration.

All believers have ethnic affiliations; Jewish identity is in addition to ethnicity and history knit equally to theology and politics. This makes defining their identity more complex for Jewish believers in Jesus (JBJ). It is obvious that a parent should respect their child’s need to have relationship to the other parent. However how should the “childe” (messianic Jewish believers) build an identity with the two divorced “parents” - the Church and the Jewish community?

Although the foundation and founders were Jewish, Christianity and the Church has been a gentile affair for a long time. Ironically, in the infancy of the Church the question was how the gentiles might join it without becoming Jewish (e.g. Acts 15).

1.2 Why Messianic Jewish Theology?

On study tripe to the holy land Israel/Palestine, in a seminar at the Caspari center² in Jerusalem, we learned about the Jewish messianic believers and their prosecution from the “anti-missionary” faction of Orthodox Jews, and the authority’s dismissal of their Jewish identity, by denying citizenships.

¹ Dr. Richard C. Nichol, “*Messianic Judaism - So What Exactly Is It?*” <http://www.imja.com/about-imja/what-is-messianic-judaism.html>

² www.caspari.com, 2019

On the other side, a messianic pastor lectured us on the messianic Jewish claim to an irrevocable calling of the Jewish people and condemned the supersessionist or replacement theology that he claimed was present in most Western Christendom. The messianic Jewish believers were Jews and had not ceased being Jews by coming to faith in Jesus.

This raises many questions about the messianic Jewish believers in Israel, questions about their background and history and their relation to the first JBJ and the Church at large. Where does the messianic JBJ fit into the theology of the Church today? What would be better than asking them?

1.3 Research question

This thesis is limited to the examination of the final question: Where do messianic Jewish believers place themselves in relation to the universal body of Christ (i.e., the Church)? Furthermore, it is limited to messianic Jewish believers in Israel. Because the research question is an ecumenical question, we will take an ecumenical perspective.

1.4 Purpose and perspective

The purpose of seeking to answer our question is to gain an understanding of and reflect on the place of JBJs in the Church. In addition, to gain an understanding of and reflect better on the question it is important to get their perspective. Furthermore, to understand JBJs well, we will need context and some reflections on unity.

I cannot avoid the influence of my Western evangelical theological heritage, but to assume a perspective that is representative of the universal church, we will take the perspective of the Ecumenical Movement. The Ecumenical Movement works with the Apostolic Imperative for the unity of the divided universal church. The organization is actively working with an ecumenical vision to reach its goal of achieving visible unity in the universal church through the World Council of Churches (WCC). With the help of a theory of unity and diversity, we will glean questions from the Ecumenical movements' documents of vision for unity. This will aid us in measuring the proximity of the messianic Jews in Israel to the Church, that is, how their theological views and practices relate to the central elements of the ecumenical movements vision of unity.

1.5 Other works on the topic

Messianic Jewish theology has not yet been treated in an all-encompassing and systematic way. I believe that this has to do with the nature of its emergence from different backgrounds in the ecclesia and its relatively short life form 1970s. However, some work is been done in the field from inside and outside the movement. One systematic work that is academically sound and wide in scope is Richard Harvey's "Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach."³ Still, this work is not comprehensive, insofar as it does not answer our question about messianic Jewish ecclesiology and the proximity of JBJs to the universal church. However, it does map messianic movement theology concerning questions of the doctrine of God, Christology, scriptures, and eschatology of Israel. It lists eight types of theology among the Messianic Movement/Jewish believers. Our task is much more modest in scope and material.

1.6 Material

1.6.1 Primary sources

Interviews

The primarily data for this thesis was collected from interviews that were conducted in Israel. Two of the respondents were in Jerusalem. One had congregations in both Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, and the other was in Haifa. All interviews were conducted at worship or office locales. The interview were based on prepared questions but not strictly followed. They were conversational in nature, recorded, and transcribed later.

The selection of respondents was possible with the aid of the Caspari Center in Jerusalem, which also provided contact information. The aim was to get in touch with various and representative members of the living messianic Jewish congregations in Israel. All the respondents have some form of leadership status in their respective communities. As pastors, youth-leaders, and teachers, they represent some of the theological reflections in the MJM in Israel.

³ Richard Harvey, "Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach". Studies in Messianic Jewish Theology, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009.

The respondents' identities are anonymized as much as possible, but because they are representatives of official parts of public congregations, their contraptions and associated organizations are not anonymized. All participants were informed about the purpose of the interviews and observation.

Participant observation

Furthermore, because I was on location, I had the opportunity to conduct participant observations in two of the settings and observations through a guided tour in one. That is, I participated in services at two congregations. At the third location, I got a guided tour of the worship area. The fourth interview was conducted in an office setting.

1.6.2 Secondary sources

My secondary materials are from relevant literature and websites. Three of four of the congregations had related websites. One congregation had its own dedicated website while the other two had websites as parts of an umbrella organization. The fourth did not have any known website. In the theory chapter, we look at a theory of unity and use it to read and glean question of inquiry from the ecumenical documents on vision for unity. For this theory, we will depend on Ola Tjørhom's introduction to ecumenical thinking.⁴ Furthermore, refer to the bibliography for all the resources used to research the background of JBJ.

Because our work is minor and qualitative in nature, it only offers some insight and suggestion on the subject.

1.7 Method

We will use a systematic ecumenical approach that includes the use of a qualitative descriptive method. Primarily, we want to listen and understand, and therefore, we will look at some historical background information. However, more than anything, we will give the messianic Jewish community opportunity to position it-self ecumenically. This may benefit

⁴ Ola Tjørhom, "Kirkens Enhet - for at Verden Skal Se Og Tro: En Innføring I Økumenisk Tenkning." Kirkeforum. Oslo: Verbum, 2005.

our understanding of unity and diversity in the Church. The aim of this thesis is limited primarily to description and will not engage in theological debate.

1.7.1 Progress

To identify the modern messianic Jewish believers' place in the universal church we get an overview of the big historical picture of JBJs in Chapter 2. First, we consult some historians to get a glimpse of the whereabouts of the first JBJ. Then we will look at the historical evolution of anti-Semitism in Christianity. Likewise, we will explore the revival of Jewish Christianity and its development to the modern MJM. Chapter 2 ends with short presentation of messianic Judaism in Israel.

Chapter 3 is the theological theory, starting with an overview of one of ecclesiological self-description that the New Testament presents in continuity with Israel as the people of God. We also briefly examine the doctrine of the Church with focus on unity. This leads us to sorting out what unity is, especially, the unity that is sought in and through the ecumenical movement. We will then extract questions from the vision and goals, for probing the messianic Jews in Israel's stance.

In the fourth chapter, will we meet four messianic Jewish communities and listen to their answer to the ecumenical call. The fifth chapter will be a summary and the conclusion that we reached.

2 Brief historical perspective

2.1 *Jewish Believers in Jesus from N. T. to the 4th Century*

Before we come to the revival of the modern Messianic Jewish Movement and its background, we will have a brief look at the estrangement of the “Jewish” from the Church’s life and self-understanding and the emergence of anti-Judaism and its evolution into anti-Semitism in Christendom. Moreover, later new interest for mission to the Jewish people.

2.1.1 Jewish hope fulfilled

There is no ambiguity that Jesus was a Jew and was seen by his followers as the fulfillment of the promises in the Jewish Scriptures: “... the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1, Rom. 1:2, 1.Cor. 15). Likewise, the first of his followers were primarily Jews, perceived to be a Jewish sect called “the way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). Their self-understanding was definitely as those that lived and preached the fulfillment of the Jewish hope (Acts 2:14-39, 26:6-7, 28:20).

2.1.2 Inclusion of gentiles and the church as the new Israel

Paul (the apostle to the gentiles) was at the forefront in the inclusion of the gentiles without the “requirements of the law”. It was for him a sign of faith in the sufficiency of God’s work of grace through Jesus (Gal 2pp).

The success of the inclusion of gentiles without them having to become Jews first i.e. go through the standard in proselytization except for some instructions gave birth to a community (the church) with a self-understanding as the new Israel, leaving behind “Israel after flesh” (Rom. 1:2). In the inclusion of gentiles, Witherington III points out that there were signs of problem between Jewish Christians and the Church as early as the 2nd Century, if not even in the lifetime of Paul (Rom. 9-11)⁵

⁵ Witherington, Ben, and Darlene Hyatt. "Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary." (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2004) 236

2.1.3 The schism between Judaism and Jewish believers in Jesus

When gentiles joined and came in their numbers, especially in the diaspora, they outnumbered the Jewish members fast. After some centuries, as the less than popular minority, the Jesus believing Jewish community was caught up between a growing gentile-dominated Church and a Jewish community trying to redefine itself without the most Jewish thing: the temple. The Jesus believing Jewish community arose from those that did not fit the new rendering of Normative Judaism dominated by the pharisaic school that became The Rabbinic tradition. They were outright condemned as heretics because of their theological stands.⁶ Antagonism with the synagogue was evident already in the New Testament documents (John 16:2-4).

2.1.4 The church and its estrangement from its Jewish roots

According to Kjær-Hansen, the problem arose when “the church began to define itself as the new Israel.”⁷ The gentiles dominated the church except in the Holy Land. The Jerusalem community that we know from Acts was after the destruction of the temple, with the rest of the Jewish people banished from Jerusalem around 70BC. The apostolic fathers knew of a community called Nazarenes that survived up to 4.BC. The apostolic fathers considered this community orthodox in matters of faith.⁸

We will only have a brief historical outline here.⁹ Skarsaune traces the Jewish believers in Jesus, and finds traces of knowledge and evaluation of several Jewish/Hebrew believers in the literature from the church fathers.

Skarsaune writes: “In the middle of the second century, some twenty-five years after the Bar Kokhba revolt, Justin knew of Jewish believers who had two characteristics: (1) They

⁶ Reidar, Hvalvik “A New Sect within Judaism in “*Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus*”, ed. Kjær-Hansen: (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996), 24-25

⁷ Kai Kjær-Hansen, “From Research Object to Living Reality”, in “*Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus*”, ed. Kjær-Hansen: (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996), 41

⁸ Their history and relationship with the church is documented in Ray A. Pritz: “*The Jewish Christian Sect of the Nazarenes*” (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988)

⁹ For more in-depth understanding of the subject you can go to e.g. the work of Oskar Skarsaune, “In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity” (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002)

believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, and (2) they continued to observe the law of Moses without requiring that their Gentile brethren do the same.”¹⁰

This group was seen as “orthodox”, but over time many different forms of Jewish Christianity emerged and disappeared. Two other sects of Jewish believers in Jesus - the Ebionites and Elkesaites - were heterodox.¹¹

The orthodox Jewish believers in Jesus known as Nazarenes witnessed by Church fathers as late as Jerome and Epiphanes in the fourth century, were by then very few and said mainly to be found in the region of Israel and Syria. This is also the times; Skarsaune observes change in attitude from the representatives of the (gentile) church, towards the Jewish believers. The Jewish believers’ perseverance in keeping some of the Jewish Law such as the Sabbath and circumcision offended the gentile church.¹² After the fourth century Skarsaune says, the Nazarenes seemed nowhere to be found as a notable entity.

After the fourth century the Nazarenes—very likely direct descendants of some from the early Jerusalem community who fled to Pella in A.D. 70—disappeared from the record of history.¹³ Likewise, the Jewish members of gentile-dominated communities in the diaspora, with their contribution to the church, were for the most part forgotten or ignored by church historians.¹⁴

2.2 From fraternal critic to anti-Semitism

As we read above the antagonism towards Jewish Christianity came to the surface by the time of Jerome and Epiphanes, around which time the Jewish Scriptures became weaponized against Jews. We must listen to Skarsaune here:

¹⁰ Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 202–203.

¹¹ Donald A. Hagner, “Jewish Christianity,” ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 585.

¹² Skarsaune, 2002, 202–203

¹³ *ibid*, 203

¹⁴ *ibid*, 181

“The ruthless Jewish self-criticism contained in several passages in the Old Testament—unparalleled in the ancient world and one of the finest fruits of mosaic and prophetic teaching—is misused by Justin as if it were some kind of ethnological description of the peculiarities of the Jewish people.”¹⁵

Tragically, also the fraternal and prophetic critique by Jesus and the Apostles in The New Testament becomes distorted as anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Bjørn-Helge Sandvei explains that anti-Judaism emerged first when the internal critique becomes external. He points out that in the New Testament the critique is largely a Jewish internal affair.¹⁶ However, when the gentile-dominated Church used it uncritically, it became malicious. Skarsaune elaborates on this subject in chapter thirteen.¹⁷

2.2.1 From anti-Judaizing to outright anti-Semitism

A brief look at some of the attitude in the church will show how she grew from an anti-Judaizing of gentiles to having a supersessionist theology and even outright anti-Semitism.

C. A. Evans lists quotations¹⁸ from Church fathers. According to him, already in the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch is to have said, “It is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism”¹⁹

A supersessionist outlook is also clearly present in “*Barnabas* 13–14”. Where it is asserted that “God’s covenant with Israel ended when the people committed idolatry at Sinai; God’s covenant is now with the Christian church alone.”²⁰ Evans shows that the antagonism grew harsher: from the ridicule of Jewish practices like circumcision and food laws to outright

¹⁵ *ibid*, 263

¹⁶ Bjørn Helge Sandvei, 2005 <http://www.israelsmisjonen.no/artikkel/article/2279>, 2012

¹⁷ Skarsaune, 2002, 259-276

¹⁸ Craig A. Evans, “Christianity and Judaism: Partings of the Ways,” ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 168p

¹⁹ *ibid*, 168

²⁰ *ibid*

condemnations.²¹ By the time of Chrysostom, it had developed to straight-out demonization. “Indeed, not only the synagogue, but the soul of the Jews are also the dwelling places of demons”.²² This anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism dropped to its lowest with accusations against the Jews for killing God by figures like Milton of Sardis: “The Sovereign has been insulted; the God has been murdered; the King of Israel has been put to death by an Israelite right hand!”²³ This complete damnation of the Jewish people by the Church led to the disappearance of not only Jewish Christianity, but also the Jewish presence in the formative period of Christianity.²⁴

James Parkers uncovered in statements of faith from the middle ages, a Jewish person that came to faith in Jesus was required to renounce his Jewishness altogether and become un-Jewified. By professing “... I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom, and above all I renounce the Antichrist, whom all the Jews await in the figure and form of Christ and God. And I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit...”²⁵

By this process of “un-Jewification”, or a total renunciation of their Jewishness that Jews had to go through to become part of the Church. The Church had not only made it less attractive for a Jewish person to become Christian, but because one “ceased” being Jew when one became Christian, thus the church made being Jewish Christian an oxymoron.

2.3 Reviving Jewish Christianity

2.3.1 The Jewish problem and escaping anti-Semitism

The anti-Semitism in European Christendom treated the Jewish people as second-class at best and, at worst as accursed people, untrustworthy and the cause of all the problems in Europe.

²¹ ibid

²² ibid

²³ ibid

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ James Parkers, 1934, “The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue” in Kai Kjær-Hansen (p42-43), edit. Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus*, Caspari Center, Jerusalem 1996.

To various views of “the Jewish problem”, there were various solutions. Some tried to do away with the Jews by christening them, even with forced baptisms. Others did not believe there was any hope for them, as they considered them doomed.

“The First Crusade (1096) resulted in numerous mass suicides as Jews sought to avoid forced baptism. Toward the close of the Middle Ages, many Jews became homeless wanderers. They were expelled from England in 1290, from France in 1306, and from cities in Spain, Germany, and Austria in the following years.”²⁶

As the anti-Semitism of Europe became unbearable, some started looking to their land of origin in Palestine. After the 1492 Spanish Inquisition and expulsion where thousands were tortured with “burnings at the stake, and forced conversions,” some went back to Palestine where few Jews already resided.²⁷

Many did not see this as a viable alternative, with modernization and the nationalistic turn in European thinking, they hoped to integrate and be as equal citizens. Some even converted to escape anti-Semitism.²⁸

2.3.2 Political Zionism

Between the Russian pogroms in 1881 and other outbreaks of anti-Semitism such as “the Dreyfus affair” in 1894, political Zionism was born with the publication of “*Der Judenstaat*” (“Jewish State”) by Theodor Herzl in 1896.²⁹ Herzl concluded that the solution to the Jewish question was repatriation and the creation of a Jewish state, where the Jewish people could be

²⁶ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 74.

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Karl Marx’s father, Hirschel/Heinrich Marx is said to have converted to escape anti-Semitism. www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/biography/marx.html, 2019

²⁹ D. A. Rausch, In; Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary Of Theology: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 1308.

Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition*, 74.

safe and respected. Some moved from Russia to Palestine while others supported them economically from abroad.³⁰

2.3.3 Protestant pre-millennialist Zionism

The church had been the catalyst in the anti-Semitism like the unjustifiable examples of the great reformer Luther who wrote, “Let us drive them out of the country for all time.”³¹

However, in the 17th century a protestant pre-millennialism developed in the Church. An eschatological understanding that saw a prophetic role for the Jewish people. The physical second coming of the Lord to rule the physical world needed the physical Jewish people in their physical land. So, the need for the restoration of the Jewish people in the land of their origins and therefore of preaching the gospel to them became essential.

2.3.4 Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews

Between the years 1808-1809, the mission society “The London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews” was established. In 1816 the British and Foreign Bible Society sent its first missionary to the Holy Land.³² This newfound love for the Jewish people was promoted all over Europe and flourished with missionary activities among the Jews.³³ In England where Jewish Christians became organized and formed prayer unions and later established the Hebrew Christian Alliance in 1866.³⁴ In 1913, a similar alliance formed in America.³⁵ The Hebrew Christians were concerned with amending the historical divide between the Gospel and the people it originated from. However, they were perceived too Jewish by some gentile Christians and too Christian by the Jewish world.

³⁰ ibid

³¹ ibid

³² Ray A. Pritz, “Bible Distribution and Jewish Evangelism in the Holy Land, 1844-1939” in; *Israel and Yeshua* ed. Torleif Elgvin, (Jerusalem: Caspari center, 1993), 65.

³³ Oskar Skarsaune, *Israels venner: Norsk Arbeid for Israelsmisjonen 1844-1930*, (Oslo: Luther forlag, 1994), 15-21.

³⁴ Gershon Nerel, “Messianic Jews and the Modern Zionist Movement” in; *Israel and Yeshua* Edited by: Torleif Elgvin, (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1993), 76

³⁵ Dan Chon-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, (London and New York: Cassel, 2000), 27

2.3.5 Hebrew Christianity and the Emancipation

Hebrew Christianity was forming in the times of the Jewish Emancipation and the same realization as the political Zionist movement.³⁶ According to Menahem Benhayim, “Many Hebrew Christians, like some of the early Zionist thinkers, sensed the need for a more profound expression of Jewish existence, one which required more than civil integration or social reform.”³⁷ Menahem Benhayim points out the reason for adhering to their Jewish identity was the anti-Semitism they experienced. This led persons like Joseph Rabinowitz – who, according to Kjær-Hansen, is “the Herzl of Jewish Christianity” - to work toward reviving Jewish Christianity.³⁸

Joseph Rabinowitz and the Israelites of the New Covenant

Rabinowitz, a well-known Haskalah Jewish lawyer and journalist, made in 1882 a journey to Palestine prospecting the possibilities of Jewish repatriation on behalf of many in Kishinev. The journey was disappointing, however he found the Jewish Messiah Jesus, the answer to the Jewish question as he saw it.³⁹ This was not well received and he was criticized and viewed as a traitor. He was convinced he had not betrayed his Jewish identity by believing in Jesus, and did everything he could to keep from changing religion.

Rabinowitz started to review and follow “Christian doctrine inasmuch as it was faithful to Biblical concepts...”⁴⁰ whilst evading concepts from later, non-Jewish dogmatic developments. The Israelites of the New Covenant, a movement he started, was a challenge to Jews, Christians and gentiles, as it claimed one could keep one’s Jewish identity as a believer in Jesus.⁴¹

³⁶ B.Z. Sobel, In Menahem Benhayim, “The Emergence of Messianic Jews”, in ed. Kjær-Hansen: “Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus”, (Jerusalem; Caspari Center, 1996), 49-56

³⁷ Menahem Benhayim, “The Emergence of Messianic Jews”.

³⁸ Kai Kjær-Hansen, “From Research object to Living Reality”, in ed. Kjær-Hansen: “*Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus*”, (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996), 43-47

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 44

⁴¹ *ibid*

Kjær-Hansen contends Rabinowitz' helped to re-establish Jewish Christianity as a viable and living option. However, the alternative of integrating into the traditional evangelical church was more attractive at the time.⁴²

2.4 Hebrew Christian Alliance to Messianic Judaism

2.4.1 Alliances for common causes

Certain gentiles wanted Jewish Christianity closer to the Jewish expression deeming full integration in to the Church, as loss of Jewish identity and credibility in the Jewish world.⁴³ Others saw the creation of distinct Jewish congregations and alliances as building on the wall of separation (Eph. 2:14) and even creating elitist sentiments among the most carnal Jewish believers.⁴⁴ While some saw it as their Jewish duty, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.⁴⁵ In England and later in America the Jewish believers continued in diverse Churches and denominations while having alliances for common causes.

The Hebrew alliances grew on the national and international levels. It even reached beyond Europe and America to Israel and South Africa. When criticized, it reiterated that the aim was not a separate church or denomination but reaching the Jewish people.⁴⁶

2.4.2 The confused decade

Before the war, anti-Semitism had stirred and motivated the embracing of Jewish identity. However, Jewish believers felt the war's devastating effect twofold as they fell in the gap. They were Jewish enough to be prosecuted by the Nazis, but too Christian to be helped by Jewish Relief agencies.⁴⁷ Most of them that survived went to America and some to Israel. The

⁴² ibid

⁴³ J. Wilkinson, Israel My Glory, In Menahem Benhayim, "The Emergence of Messianic Jews", in ed. Kjær-Hansen: *"Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus"*, (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996), 49-56

⁴⁴ Dan, Cohn-Sherbok, *"Messianic Judaism"*, (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 31

⁴⁵ ibid 25

⁴⁶ ibid, 31

⁴⁷ ibid, 50

Alliance became stunned and disillusioned by the war. Due to this and other reasons, the years 1945-55 are viewed as the confused decade.⁴⁸

2.4.3 New trend of Hebrew Christian Churches

During the years 1955-60, the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America had awakened itself and the international body and was growing. A new trend was also the emergence of Hebrew Christian churches mostly in America, but also abroad. Jews and gentiles also criticized these churches even though they were just extensions of the Christian churches. While others complained, “Among Hebrew Christians, there was nothing which served as basis for Jewish identity and separateness within the body of Christ.” Therefore had no trust in the movements’ ability to maintain the continuity of Jewish identity.⁴⁹

2.4.4 Youth Movement and Religious Revival

The youth moments of the late 60s and early 70s influenced the Jewish world in different ways: “...orthodox renewal and “penitent” movement, as well *Aliyah* to Israel from Eastern Europe, especially in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War.”⁵⁰ Some Jewish youth were also converted through the Jesus movement into a freer form of Christianity. Groups like the Jews for Jesus, are said to have come out of these times and sentiments. Next to the founding of the State of Israel, the Six-Day War 1967 was one of the influential events.⁵¹

2.4.5 One old question of identity

Thus, one old question of identity in relation to Jewishness and the Church as gentile culture was again awakened.⁵² The Hebrew Christian Alliance had given its large youth assembly admission to vote in the alliance’s congress. This youth, influenced by both the new sense of Jewish national pride and the anti-establishment sentiment of the times, went against what

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 52

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 56

⁵⁰ Menahem Benhayim, “The Emergence of Messianic Jews”, 52

⁵¹ Gabriela Reason, “*Competing Trends In Messianic Judaism: The Debate Over Evangelicalism*”, Article in; Keshet: A journal of Messianic Judaism, Issue 17 - Spring 2004 <http://www.keshetjournal.com>, 2019

⁵² I must recommend article by David A. Rausch, “*The Messianic Jewish Congregational Movement*”, this article appeared in the Christian Century September 15-22, p. 926. Prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock. www.christiancentury.org, 2019

was seen as the “conformist” approach of the older leaders of Hebrew Christianity. The youth used their newfound voting power to change the name of the Alliance from being Hebrew Christian to Jewish Messianic in 1975.⁵³

With the rest of the Jewish world, a more authentic expression of Jewishness was sought. Menahem Benhayim summarizes it thus:

“... Jewish sound and form of worship adapted from traditional Jewish sources and East European and Israeli culture. Similarly, they replaced traditional Christian terminology with Hebraic forms; “Yeshua” for “Jesus,” “Messiah” for “Christ,” “Messianic” for “Christian,” “mikveh” for “baptism,” “Rabbi” for “Pastor or Reverend,” and “synagogue” (or Messianic Synagogue)” for “Church.” Seventh-day Sabbath and festival services became the norm, with Messianic weddings adapting traditional Jewish practices.”⁵⁴

The changed of focus from being Christian to being Jewish, at least in expression, ran crack between those that wanted a more and those that wanted a less radical approach. The group that motioned for the change also suggested the establishment of an official body of Messianic Jewish congregations. This was seen as a step towards the creation of a separate denomination and was voted down.⁵⁵ However, the leaders within the movement that wanted this founded the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) in 1979, and consequently the spilt.

The similarity and difference of UMJC and the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA), is according to Gabriela Reason best seen against their relation to their two parents (Evangelicalism and Judaism).⁵⁶ This is beyond our scope and will now go to the Messianic Jewish Congregations in Israel.

⁵³ ibid

⁵⁴ Menahem Benhayim, “The Emergence of Messianic Jews”, 52

⁵⁵ Gabriela Reason, “*Competing Trends In Messianic Judaism: The Debate Over Evangelicalism*”, Article in; Keshet: A journal of Messianic Judaism, Issue 17 - Spring 2004 <http://www.keshetjournal.com>

⁵⁶ ibid

2.5 Messianic Judaism in Israel

2.5.1 Background

Messianic Judaism, as qualified historically with the Messianic Movement of the 70s in America above, has a very short history and insignificant impact in Israel.⁵⁷ However, if we broaden the term to include all Jewish believes in Jesus, according to a survey from 1999 by Kjær-Hansen and Skjøtt, there was ca. 5000 Messianic Jews distributed in 81 congregations of which 12 were house groups.⁵⁸ Immigrants that came in the 1990s from the former USSR founded most of the Messianic Jewish congregations in Israel.⁵⁹ Majority of them had primarily Baptist or Pentecostal denominational background.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Kjær-Hansen says the Russian congregations had not been influenced much by the “question of theology and identity from pre-1990”.⁶¹ He says that they “turned things upside down” by not joining the mindset that was about being distinct from “gentile” Church and anti-Christian traditions as Christmas celebrations.⁶²

2.5.2 Congregations in Israel

According to Knut H. Høyland, there were about 120 congregations and at least 10,000 Messianic Jews in Israel around 2010.⁶³ Of this over, 50% are Russian immigrants, and considerably less in number but with similar challenges were ca.9 Ethiopian congregations. Høyland further clarifies, the greatest being “immigration”, “natural growth” and “new believers” were reasons for the growth. Furthermore, he states that these also “point us in the

⁵⁷ Meahem Benhayim, ”The Emergence of Messianic Jews”

⁵⁸ Kai Kjær-Hansen and Bodil F. Skjøtt: “*Facts and Myths About the Messianic Congregations in Israel*”, (Mishkan 30-31/1999, Jerusalem 1999)

⁵⁹ ibid

⁶⁰Kai Kjær-Hansen, “*Upside-down for the sake of Yeshua Challenges and pressures on Israeli Jewish believers in Jesus*”, Seventeenth North American Coordinating Committee of the LCJE (Atlanta, 13-15 March 2000), 5

⁶¹ ibid

⁶² ibid

⁶³ Knut Helge Høyland, “*An Update on the Situation in Israel and Opportunities for Cooperation in Europe*” presentation in LCJE- conference (Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism), Krakow, November 2010. <http://www.lcje.net/An%20Knut%20H%20Hoyland.pdf>, 1

direction of three of the main challenges facing the community today: integration, education, and evangelism”.⁶⁴ It therefore becomes important to create unity with room for diversity and cooperation among believers with diverse cultural and theological background says Høyland.

2.5.3 Israel as a context

As pointed out by many, Israel is a different context to do theology compared to America or the diaspora in general. In Israel immigrants that are connected, more to their traditional church backgrounds are the majority and will have dominant role in shaping the theology.⁶⁵ At the same time, Israel is different because it’s “inherently and pervasively Jewish”.⁶⁶ Unlike the situation in the diaspora, in Israel, Hebrew, the Bible (Tanakh), the Sabbath, festivals, and many rabbinic traditions are part of the normal lifestyle of most people.⁶⁷ However, the opposition they meet from the more religious society in Israel complicates their relationship with the rabbinical way of life.⁶⁸

2.5.4 Messianic Judaism “another religion”

The will to accept Jewish believers in Jesus is still a contentious issue in the Jewish world, as a recent incident in the US revealed. Vice President Mike Pence came under criticism for inviting a Messianic Jewish Rabbi to pray in a gathering related to an anti-Semitic shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue.⁶⁹ A New York Times article said Messianic Jews were, according to some Jews, “not to be considered Jews by any of the four major denominations of Judaism.” Belief in Jesus as Messiah was considered even “hostile to their religion because its goal is to persuade Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah, and by doing so convert Jewish people to Christianity.”⁷⁰

⁶⁴ ibid, 2

⁶⁵ Menahem Benhayim, “The Emergence of Messianic Jews” 53

⁶⁶ ibid, 52

⁶⁷ ibid, 52

⁶⁸ ibid, 53

⁶⁹ Matthew Haag, “How a ‘Jews for Jesus’ Moment Backfired for Mike Pence”, *The New York Times*, 30.10.2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/30/us/mike-pence-rabbi-jacobs.html>

⁷⁰ ibid

The article further reminds its readers about Israel's 1989 Supreme Court ruling in relation to a Law of Return called Aliyah, which grants citizenship in Israel to Jews.⁷¹ Under this ruling, "Messianic Judaism was considered "another religion" and that its followers were Christians and not Jews."⁷² Therefore, Messianic Jews were not eligible for citizenship.

Nevertheless, the pressure of not being accepted as genuinely Jewish by the society and authorities has probably given Messianic Jews the motivation and yearning to be seen as authentically Jewish.

⁷¹ <http://www.jewishagency.org/first-steps/program/5131>

⁷² *ibid*

3 Outline of Ecclesiology and Ecumenism

We will briefly look at aspects of ecclesiology through some images and metaphors the church applied to define its identity. Moreover, we will have a brief look at the doctrine of the church in general and the doctrine of its unity in particular. Furthermore, we will look at the ecumenical movement especially in relation to its vision for unity. With the help a theory of criteria for unity, we will extract questions from ecumenical movements' vision. This will help us answer our question on the Israeli Messianic Jewish believers' ecumenical proximity.

3.1 *The New Testament's images of the Church*

In the New Testament and later documents, the community has a Christo-centric view of its identity. That is its self-understanding is centered on Jesus' person, life, teaching, death and resurrection; consequently the name *Christian* is given them very early (Acts 11:26). One of the terms the community of New Testament believers used to describe itself is *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία).

3.1.1 **People of God**

The Greek word ἐκκλησία used frequently in the New Testament is translated “assembly”, “called” or “summoned people” (e.g. Matt. 16:18; 18:17; Acts 5:11; Rom. 16:5; 1.-Cor 1:2; Eph. 1:22; 3:10; Heb. 12:23). In Biblical use it goes back to the Old Testament (Greek translation *Septuagint*, or LXX), referring to the people of God (e.g., Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 31:30).⁷³ The use of this term with its connotation and allusion confirms that the followers of Jesus had a self-understanding interrelated to Israel as the “people of God”.

3.1.2 **Local and Universal**

Moreover, the term *ecclesia* is used for both local and universal body of believers (Acts 1:8 and 9:31).⁷⁴ Paul reminds the Church in Corinth of their call to be saints “... together with all those who in every place call upon the name of Jesus”, and asks rhetorically, “Is Christ

⁷³ Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, et al. “*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*” (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 147

⁷⁴ Luz, Ulrich “On the Way to Unity” in “*Unity of the Church in the New Testament and Today*” Lukas Vischert, Ulrich Luz and Christian Link, Translated by; James E. Crouch, (Michigan/Cambridge; Eerdmans, 2010), 56

divided?” (1.Cor. 1:1, 1:13). The unifying capacity found in Jesus is the fundamental or “basic gift” for the universal believing body, which is in line with the findings of Ulrich Luz.⁷⁵

3.2 Identity in continuity and transformation

A Dictionary lists images and analogies used by the church in the NT. “Some of the most important images cluster around the focal points of past continuity, present identity and future fulfillment.”⁷⁶ This helps us to see that the followers of Jesus saw themselves within the dynamics of continuity and change of the Jewish people.

3.2.1 Images of identity in continuity and change

Some images of identity in continuity with the past are “Israel of God and seed of Abraham” (Gal. 3:29, 6:16). Moreover images of the temple and priesthood (e.g. Exod. 19:6, Mark. 12:10, 1.Cor. 3:16–17, 1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 1:6).⁷⁷ Furthermore the new covenant established by Jesus is seen not only as equivalent to the covenant that established Israel as the nation of God, but also as fulfillment of promise of its renewal (Exod. 19:5-6, 24:8, Jer. 31:33, 32:40, Luke 22:20, 2.Cor. 3:6, Heb. 13:20).⁷⁸

Similarly, the community viewed their present identity as inauguration of fulfillment to promises in the Scriptures, in and through Jesus (Matt. 1:1, 22, Mark 1:2p, John.1, Rom. 1:2-6 also Acts 2:14-38). The church therefore viewed itself as Household or family of God (e.g. 1. Tim. 3:15, Gal. 6:10, Eph. 5:22–6:9, Col. 3:18–4:1).⁷⁹ Notably, the gentiles that came to faith become part of the household of God and heirs together with Israel (Eph. 2:19, 3:6).

The image “body of Christ” emphasized their unity as they viewed themselves joined to Christ and his destiny as a body to its head, and to each other as parts of one body (e.g. 1.Cor. 12:12pp, Rom. 12:3pp, Eph. 1:23).⁸⁰

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, “*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*”, 147

⁷⁷ *ibid*

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ *ibid*

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 148

Their future common destiny in hope of total fulfillment is best illustrated by the image of the church as “bride of Christ” (John 3:29, Matt. 9:15, 25:1–13; Mk. 2:19; Luke 5:34–35).⁸¹ This metaphor depicts the reciprocity of the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:25, 2.Cor. 11:2, Rev. 19:7).⁸²

3.2.2 The people of God transformed

The term *ecclesia* or Church as we also saw in the use of images - through the focal points of past, present and future- identified itself as in continuity with the people of God, i.e. Israel. They do this through the person of Jesus and his work as fulfillment of *past* promises in their *present*, and their joint *future* hope of culmination of salvation in glory.

This gives us a good Biblical grounding, but we must go through another discipline, systematic theology about the church’s ecclesiology. After briefly exploring the relevant parts of that, we will then attempt to understand the ecumenical movement’s discourse on the unity we must seek and how to get there.

3.3 The doctrine about the Church

3.3.1 Gathered in the name of Jesus

Harald Hegstad believes Matthew 18:20 should be understood as a statement about the church.⁸³ The church is therefore “people that come together in the name of Jesus”. We can add because his presence is promised “...always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).⁸⁴

3.3.2 I believe in the Church

Ecclesiology had an essential position already in the ecumenical creeds. According to Hegstad, the declaration of faith “in the Holy Catholic Church” stated in the creeds is not - as

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² *ibid*

⁸³ Harald Hegstad, “*Den Virkelige Kirke: Bidrag Til Ekklesiologien*”, Vol. nr. 19. Kifo Perspektiv (Trykt Utg.). (Trondheim: Tapir akademisk forl., 2009) 19

⁸⁴ *ibid* 17

many theologians have assumed - a faith in an invisible or intangible entity.⁸⁵ Because the Church is not an entity of faith that one has to have trust in, rather a fellowship with Christ one must reckon. The belief in the Church is about believing there is more to the Church than what is seen from a sociological point of view.⁸⁶ The communion it has with the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit makes it more. And consequently all people who gather in the name of Jesus anywhere anytime are in communion with the same Lord Jesus and each other, through The Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-14).

3.3.3 Church as the place of salvation and grace

God deals with the world as a creator and sustainer independently of the church. However, God's work for the salvation of the world from the power of sin is bound to Jesus' life, death, resurrection i.e. the gospel.⁸⁷ The Kingdom being the goal of salvation, the church - where the gospel of salvation is preached – is where it is available. As defined in the Augsburg Confession (CA7), and as Ola Tjørhom points out the Church is the “place of salvation and grace”.⁸⁸

3.3.4 The eschatological dimension

Jesus preached saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15).” Convinced by his bodily resurrection about his authority from God, they went to the ends of the world with his mission (Matt. 28:18). Miroslav Volf says it well: “The all-embracing framework for an appropriate understanding of the church is God's eschatological new creation.”⁸⁹ The gospel reaching the whole world as a testimony to all nations was one of the signs of the end of this age. (Matt. 24:14, 28:19-20, Acts 1:8).

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 9

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷ *ibid*, 77

⁸⁸ Tjørhom, In Hegstad “*Den Virkelige Kirke: Bidrag Til Ekklesiologien*”, 77

⁸⁹ Miroslav Volf, “*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity.*” (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 128

3.3.5 The Church divided

The creed's designation of the Church as "catholic" is about its universality and unity qualified by its apostolicity. Nevertheless all efforts at maintaining the unity of the Church not succeeding the Church became divided. We will now see how the Modern Ecumenical Movement recognizing the imperative of unity is working to make it a visible reality.

3.4 The Ecumenical movement search for unity

Mission societies from different churches, seeking efficiency in accomplishing their task, decided to cooperate and form an alliance in Edinburgh in 1910. This ignited the vision of a united church. In Lausanne in 1927, it became obvious that clear common structures were needed.⁹⁰ However, the World Council of Churches, the organization for this task -delayed by two-world wars - was not established before 1948. Today the WCC has 350 member churches from 110 countries representing over 500 million Christians.⁹¹

"The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit".⁹²

This is the WCC's shortest self-description and the minimum confession needed to be part of the endeavor for a visible unity.⁹³ The details of both the form and constituting criteria for unity they left for discussion. Compelled by the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21 and Apostle Paul's plead in Ephesians 4:3-6, unity is an imperative.

"... That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Vischer, L., U. Luz, C. Link, and J.E. Crouch. "Unity of the Church in the New Testament and Today", (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 19

⁹¹ World Council of Churches, "About us" Retrieved 2019 from <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us>,

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ Vischer, L., "Unity of the Church in the New Testament and Today", 19

⁹⁴ New International Version (NIV),
24

3.4.1 Models of unity

Concept called “organic unity” was discussed and worked out into words in New Delhi in 1986 as “the unity we seek”⁹⁵ The goal set was a “visible unity” around common confession, recognitions and activities. The debate about how this “visible unity” is to be understood and achieved was often around so-called “models of unity”.⁹⁶

Models such as “organic unity”, “conciliar fellowship” and “unity in reconciled diversity” expressed different ways of reaching the “visible unity,” while some believed the recognition and cooperation then achieved in the WCC was sufficient.⁹⁷ On the topic of unity and the principles of it, we will rely on Tjørhom 2005.

3.4.2 Between uniformity and pluralism

In his book of introduction to ecumenical thinking, Tjørhom discusses the different perimeters of unity and diversity.⁹⁸ Keeping the balance between these “seemingly opposite concerns” is needed, says Tjørhom, quoting 1600s philosopher Blaise Pascal, “Diversity without unity creates confusion, while unity without diversity leads to tyranny.”⁹⁹ The tension was, as Tjørhom characterizes it, “between uniformity and pluralism.”¹⁰⁰

Church unity is not uniformity

According to Tjørhom, the tendency to homogenize is too common in the Church. Some tend to demand agreement in everything for unity, while others are too hasty to claim unity.¹⁰¹ Tjørhom believes, as is also the understanding of WCC, that “the unity we seek” is a process with many stages. “At the same time there will be small solutions, provisional unity that

⁹⁵ World Council of Churches, ”*The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling*” - The Canberra Statement, The Faith and Order Commission, 1991, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-unity-of-the-church-gift-and-calling-the-canberra-statement>, 2018

⁹⁶ Ola Tjørhom, “Kirkens Enhet - for at Verden Skal Se Og Tro: En Innføring I Økumenisk Tenkning” 52pp

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 52

⁹⁹ *ibid* (My translation), 53p

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 52p

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 54

reflects the unity we have reached.”¹⁰² Now there is agreement that unity does not mean the absence of diversity. Diversity is a fundamental part of the theology of the many good gifts from God.¹⁰³

Diversity, not “static pluralism”

Diversity promoters also threaten a true unity, conserving the difference by keeping the “*status quo*” and not moving toward unity. This, Tjørhom calls a new form of denominationalism and static pluralism.¹⁰⁴

Balancing unity and diversity

Some models were experienced as too uniform, while others as “static pluralism”. The model that gained approval among many is a New Testament Greek term “*koinonia*,” translated “communion” or “fellowship”.¹⁰⁵ To find a theological balance between “unity” and “diversity” one must recognize both as vital parts of churches’ life and identity.

3.4.3 Principle of centrality and love

Reasoning from the tradition of the hierarchy of truth in the Catholic Church and the Augsburg Confessions’ article seven, Tjørhom presents the criterion of centrality; reciting an old saying: “*Unity in the central, diversity in the peripheral and love in everything.*”¹⁰⁶ Jesus’ teaching of the great commandments is in line with the principle of centrality (Matt 22:40). By this principle, one can sort out the central from the peripheral in what is required for the “visible unity” one is seeking. In addition, what is church dividing and what is not.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² *ibid*, (My translation), 54

¹⁰³ *ibid*. 57p

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ *ibid* (my translation), 65

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, 66

“Koinonia” is the model that keeps that balance and gives the best conditions and elements for "full communion" among churches.¹⁰⁸

3.5 The Unity of the Church as Gift and Calling

The goal “visible unity” stipulated in the Canberra statement in 1991: "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling".¹⁰⁹ We will use this vision of unity for estimating the Messianic Jewish Congregations in Israel’s ecumenical proximity. First, we will present the vision and its perspective on unity.

3.5.1 Koinonia

The unity of the Church defined as “*koinonia*” or in Latin “Communion,” meaning fellowship is understood as an already given “*gift*” to be lived out and actively sought in prayer and action in the life of the Church (Eph. 4:3-6).¹¹⁰ In congruence with the earlier established eschatological aspect of the Church’s identity, the Church is understood to be a foretaste, sign and servant of the reconciled life in communion with God, to which the whole creation is being brought, in the Kingdom of God under the lordship of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1).¹¹¹ The schism among and in the churches is seen as the result of sin and contradicts its nature and frustrates its witness.¹¹²

Diversity is part of the richness and beauty of the unity that springs out of the One God; perfect community of Trinity. Diversity of theological traditions, cultural, ethnic or historical contexts are perceived as part of life in communion.¹¹³ However, as we have established earlier, diversity in unity has limits.

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission>, 2018

¹⁰⁹ World Council of Churches, “*The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling*”

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹¹ *ibid* 1.1

¹¹² *ibid* 1.2

¹¹³ *ibid* 2.2

“Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Savior the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8); salvation and the final destiny of humanity as proclaimed in Holy Scripture and preached by the apostolic community.”¹¹⁴

The core of Christianity being Christology and the soteriology that spring from it, they are the edge of divergence. Furthermore, the document outlines the essentials -the apostolic faith as given in the ecumenical creeds and the ecumenical sacraments etc. - That churches needs to share to reach the goal of visible unity.¹¹⁵ The goal of communion is reached “when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”¹¹⁶ In a Faith and Order paper called “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” or No. 111, the essential criteria’s for unity are laid out.”¹¹⁷

3.6 Searching for unity with Jewish Messianic Congregations in Israel

Therefore, to evaluate the Messianic Jewish in Israel ecumenical proximity, we will ask four different congregations their stand and relation to the list of criterions for unity from the ecumenical documents. Not forgetting these are a part of a vision of unity of the church not yet a reality, but a goal one is working towards. The elements that are essential for unity are the elements that constitute and give the church its identity.¹¹⁸

3.6.1 Is Jesus Christ, confessed as God and Savior?

The principal connecting point is confessing Jesus Christ as God and savior.¹¹⁹ The second paragraph in both ecumenical creeds is the most elaborate paragraph and professes Jesus as eternal God with the Father and his perfect humanity and work for the salvation of the world.

¹¹⁴ ibid 2.2

¹¹⁵ World Council of Churches, ”*The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling*”

¹¹⁶ ibid

¹¹⁷ World Council Of Churches, “*BAPTISM, EUCHARIST AND MINISTRY*” Faith and Order Paper no. 111, Geneva, 1982, http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO1982_111_en.pdf, 2011 2018

¹¹⁸ Ola Tjørhom, “*Kirkens Enhet - for at Verden Skal Se Og Tro: En Innføring I Økumenisk Tenkning*”. 74

¹¹⁹ World Council of Churches, ”*The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling*”, 2.2

Without confession on Christ in relation to his divinity and consequently the Trinity there cannot be unity.

The second core question is soteriological if “the gospel preached purely,” (CA7)?

The affirmation is the most significant part, not the form or language in which it is declared. Question would then be do they advocate salvation or righteousness solely through trust in the works of Jesus Christ?

3.6.2 Are the ecumenical sacraments, recognized and practiced?

Baptism

Of the main sacraments, the sacrament of initiation or baptism is the first test of unity.¹²⁰ In terms of importance, the form in which it is done comes second to its being practiced.

Whether it is a believer’s baptism or infant baptism is not essential for ecumenism, but rather to see it as an initiation into the new covenant life with Jesus and his body the church.¹²¹ The question is therefore, is it practiced as a one-time event of initiation as in the New Testament (Matt. 28: 19-20, Acts 2:38)?

Eucharist

Following the one-time experience of baptism into new life is sharing in Eucharistic communion. This has constituting and continuity element when practiced as commanded and exemplified in the New Testament (1.Cor 11:23-26, Mark 14:22–25, Luke 22:14-23, Matt. 26:26–29).¹²² The community of believers being a sign of the reconciled life the whole creation is invited to. It is a vital sign of new reconciled community of the Kingdom of God. A good pointer in this direction is the question whether a gentile Christian could be a full member and as guest experience “Eucharistic hospitality”?¹²³

¹²⁰ *ibid*, 3.2

¹²¹ World Council Of Churches, “*BAPTISM, EUCHARIST AND MINISTRY*”, 1-7

¹²² *ibid*, 8-15

¹²³ *ibid*, 3.3

3.6.3 Is there acknowledgement of the apostolic faith?¹²⁴

The question about affirmation of the apostolic faith should be on two levels. First, do they acknowledge the apostolic faith expressed in the ecumenical creeds? Secondly, do they use them formally and as a source for their theological reflection?

3.6.4 What are their relations to rabbinic Judaism and the Law?

Contextually it is interesting to ask about their relations to the Law and rabbinic Judaism. Do they distinguish between biblical universally bounding ethical part and ceremonial identity making religious laws? Do they view the rabbinic laws in as authoritative?

3.6.5 Is there recognition of ministry and will to cooperate?

The mutual recognition in faith should be followed with move towards a mutual recognition of ministries and cooperation in common witness to the gospel. Is there recognition of ministry and will to cooperate without discrimination?

3.6.6 Does the gospel create reconciliation and peace?

As Church and the people with responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel of Gods reconciliation with humankind and should lead to reconciliation among men. Does the Gospel then reconcile Jews and Palestinian (Arab) believers, as we should be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9; Ps. 122)?

3.6.7 Do they have explicit ecumenical consciousness?

Do they have explicit ecumenical consciousness and do they practice this somehow? As an expression of the mutual recognition and ecumenical conviction, do they participate in local, nation or global ecumenical activities?

3.6.8 Is it possible to recognizing the one catholic and apostolic Church?

The goal of the ecumenical endeavor as described in the Canberra Statement is that “all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”¹²⁵ This goal would be achieved through being united in the central aspect of

¹²⁴ ibid

¹²⁵ World Council of Churches, *“The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling”*, 3.2

confession and practice of the faith. In addition, having room for diversity while maintaining the unity in love. The sum of answers to the ecumenical questions above would answer whether the One Church of God is recognizable in any community according to the vision.

3.7 Inference

We have seen that the church has a self-understanding as the people of God founded in Jesus Christ as fulfillment of the hope and in continuity with the Jewish people. We have also seen the unity in diversity is a foundational to its essences. Based on the principles of centrality we have listed hierarchy of questions about ecumenical unity to inquire the Messianic Jewish Israeli congregations ecumenical proximity. However, in asking for their situation in relation the ecumenical vision for unity we are not paralleling their proximity against Judaism. There is no reason to see it as zero-sum between the two or identifying with them in principle. This is rather the perspective of the ecclesia as the universal body of Christ. So where do the Messianic Jewish Communities in Israel place themselves in relation to the Church and its ecumenical vision of visual unity?

4 Messianic Congregations answer to the Ecumenical call

Based on the principle of centrality as criteria for unity we gleaned questions from the ecumenical vision for visible unity. In this chapter, we will seek answers to the call for unity from four Messianic community's and congregations in Israel. We will then meet four different communities and congregations presented in the order of proximity to the ecumenical vision of visible unity. The first question is of self-description; this we hope will give us a more direct and free self-description. Afterwards will we present answers to the ecumenical questions in order of centrality.

4.1 *An independent local messianic congregation*

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. (Rom 1:16)

Beit-Eliahu a Messianic Congregation in Haifa founded between 1950-69 by Magne Solheim a Norwegian missionary to the Jews.¹²⁶ It was closely linked to The Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel (NCMI). Now it is independent but has financial support from NCMI. The present Pastor our respondent has education and some pastoring experience from Norway.

Shabbat-school, youth-ministry and weekly Shabbat services are the regular activities. The service was worship songs in Hebrew with modern musical instruments projected up on the wall in front, and preaching style just as any charismatic congregation.

The Pastor described his congregation as an independent local messianic congregation unaffiliated to any denomination. Members are from different backgrounds both those who come from different Christian backgrounds and different Jewish backgrounds. In addition, many that have come to faith here with no religious background at all.

“Some Israeli some are new immigrants, some are ex-Soviet-union immigrants, some North American immigrants so it's quite a mixture.” There was also diversity in age and gender

¹²⁶ <http://www.israelsmisjonen.no/utland/prosjekt/beit-eliahu/artikkel/article/334>

from what in the assembly. It also became obvious that there was some non-Hebrew speaking as the translation equipment was brought forth. “It’s typical, something in the middle of the diverse messianic congregations, between normal congregation and a Synagogue.” Their approach, the pastor says, is Israeli style because that is their focus group.

4.1.1 Is Jesus, Christ confessed as God and Savior?

On their website, we find widely accepted statement of faith authored by The National Conference for Messianic congregation Leaders in 2009.¹²⁷ This statement of faith is very much a contextualized creed.¹²⁸ Its particularity appears in the use of “The Shema” to assert the unity of God and in referring to God as “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”.¹²⁹ This makes it more applicable and familiar for the Jewish society.

The dual nature of Jesus Christ, his divinity and perfect humanity is clearly stated.¹³⁰ Furthermore, after establishing the fall of humanity, the atoning and saving power of his death and resurrection is declared. For “Jew or Gentile who repents” and trusts in Jesus. Salvation is by grace and leads to a life of love and obedience to God.¹³¹

In a discussion on the incongruity of the replacement theology, and on how God didn’t “plant a new tree”, but rooted salvation of all humanity on Jesus the seed of Abraham and David (e.g. Matt 1:1, Rom 1:3, 11:17-24). It was important for him to criticize replacement theology, stressing that God has not forsaken the Jewish people. Nor was he for dual-covenant theology either; that it is the idea of the sufficiency of “old covenant” for the Jewish people. “The New Testament speaks about those who are close and those who are far.” Jews he says are close as with Paul they can turn from being an opponent to a believer. Besides, Gods trustworthiness to us believers in Jesus is on a shaky ground if God cannot be trusted for the Jewish people. Nevertheless, it does not matter how close one is he says, everyone becomes new creation through meeting Jesus. He sees it as an obligation to witness to all and be faithful in that.

¹²⁷ According to Knut Helge Høyland, former International Director, Caspari Center, Israel (via email)

¹²⁸ <http://beiteliyahu.org/en/index/statement-of-faith.html>, 2019

¹²⁹ *ibid*, B

¹³⁰ *ibid*

¹³¹ *ibid*, D

4.1.2 Are the ecumenical sacraments recognized and practiced?

Baptism

With regard to the sacrament baptism, the pastor tells me that they practice believers' baptism usually out by the sea. The impression is that it is not central and seems as secondary to being trustworthy witness reaching the Jewish people with the gospel. This is understandable if one practices believers and not infant baptism.

Eucharist

On the Shabbat, service that Saturday the congregation celebrated the Eucharist. A table with the Eucharist meal with a Menorah lamp¹³² was placed on one side in the front. Except for the menorah, and the absence of any cross in the room, the celebration was similar to service in protestant Low Church.

Their adaptation of the sacraments to fit the Israeli situation and evangelizing the Jewish people is evident in their chose to focus on adult baptism and celebrating the Eucharist in Church rooms with no cross.

4.1.3 Is there recognition of the apostolic faith?

The faith statement was put together by the national leader conference. He is sure that those that worked on it have "seen to the canonical creeds". They are working on a new statement of faith, that is more or less the same as the Nicene Creed.

The difference is the emphasis on the aspect of Jews and gentiles, together being one body in Christ. He clarifies: "As it is said in Christ there is no men or women neither Jew nor gentile (Gal 3:28)". However, there are women and men, and so it does not mean that there are no Jews or gentiles. Therefore, a Jewish person who comes to faith does not stop being Jew. This is a very important theological issue for messianic Jews he tells me. That is, that they remain Jews unlike for example Muslim or Hindu that come to faith. That means, "They don't change religion they just discover that the Messiah they were awaiting, is Yeshua".

¹³² (Seven-branched lamp)

Furthermore, he stresses, not changing religion is important for Jews to come to faith here in Israel. “Their families would say you betrayed us and become Christian.” That is why although the words mean the same, they rather call themselves Messianic and not Christian. He explains: one of the misconceptions is, that “for many Israeli, Christianity is not just un-Jewish but it’s anti-Jewish.”

So they have a contextualized “statement of faith” that affirms the main articles in the ecumenical creeds. However, they have critical points to make about the lack of accounting for the Jewish root of the faith and acknowledgment of Jewish existence in the church.

4.1.4 How do they relate to rabbinic Judaism and the Law?

Referring to his congregation the pastor says it is typically messianic. However, he says of messianic congregations you will have “a different degree” of Jewish (Rabbinic) tradition. Some would be just like any congregation anywhere others would be like a synagogue. They are somewhere in between as they do celebrate all the Jewish feasts. “We kabarat Shabbat (keep Sabbath), sometimes we read from the Torah portions sometimes not.” However, are not legalistic about it because they “don’t think it’s the most important thing”.

The style of teaching is Israeli and is related to Jewish people as they are trying to reach them. He points out that there were about five Jewish nonbelievers in the service that day.

As congregation, there is no requirement of members keeping the Sabbath or any other Law. However, since the members come from various backgrounds they practice different commandments. He says that those that practice some things do in freedom as part of their identity, testimony or both.

4.1.5 Is there recognition of ministry and will to cooperate?

In the building the Congregation occupies there are Arab Baptist, Ethiopian, Russian and Romanian groups and congregations they cooperate with. Furthermore, they have annual national conferences as the one that resulted in the common statement of faith. Furthermore, the congregation and the pastor are still connected their network in Norway where he got his education.

4.1.6 Does the gospel create reconciliation and peace?

At this Messianic Congregation, the Pastor being an Arab Israeli himself, the question of membership of non-Jews was almost superfluous. It is obvious that membership and leadership position are open for everyone. “Of-courses there is not restriction, I’m not Jewish!” was his answer. However, he is clear that they are messianic Jewish congregation. That is, they focus on Jews and Israeli sensibilities. With passion for the Jewish people and their place in the salvation history, demonstrated by pastoring a messianic Jewish congregation. This pastor is manifestation of reconciliation power of the gospel.

4.1.7 Do they have explicit ecumenical consciousness?

The pastor of the messianic congregation I Haifa is clear on that the Jewish messianic believers are part of the believing body around the world. The body of Christ has always been Jews and Gentiles he said. The distinction has been unfortunately absent for a long time; at periods, there has even been (replacement) theology against this distinction.

The Messianic movement is part of the body. It will be expressed in different ways but there is one body of Messiah not two. “The bible doesn’t say to work for our unity, but work to keep the unity. So I have you as my brother even though I don’t know you. As far as God is concerned we are one.”

Unity is given but how to express this unity and live together maybe a challenge he admits. Maybe because of the stigma of Christianity and its negative association with Hitler and the holocausts they have come to distinguish between a saving faith in Yeshua and mere religion.

He is not too well acquainted with the ecumenical movement or the churches involved but he does not feel much unity with these churches. Because he suspects that, much of this ends up in social work and environmentalism, not on evangelizing. “But it is the Gospel that saves, yes or no to Jesus.”

Unity is vital to their witness and in his congregation, there are fifteen mother tongues spoken. Likewise, between the congregations they share place of worship. However, he says we should practice what we preach and start unity locally. “It’s much easier to love my brothers in Ethiopia than the Ethiopian that are here.” The challenge is love, and living with your brother here despite all the differences.

Moreover, they have sense of unity between the congregations and leaders in Haifa. Different leaders pray and help each other, which is a real blessing. Also on a national level, a recent conference in the Galilees of many congregations with different ethnic and languages, gathered to share experiences on evangelism and witnessing. Referring to that conference, he says; the key is dialog and respect. “Jew and Arab issues of unity are not necessarily a problem.”

“Ecumenically I rather work with one from another denomination close by rather than go distances to find a likeminded.” He is sure that Ecumenical conferences may have something good about them but it is locally it should materialize.

4.1.8 Is it possible to recognizing the one catholic and apostolic Church?

God electing Abraham and the promise: “your seed is going to be a blessing to all.” That is Israel call to be blessing to all nation, is central to their testimony, the pastor says.

They confess Jesus as God, and savior both for Jews and gentiles. Not to forget the collaborative work on a statement of faith that emulates the ecumenical Creed. Moreover, they practice the two principal sacraments and engage in ecumenical cooperation.

One can say that the diversity of backgrounds of the members and their willingness to cooperate locally, nationally and somehow also internationally is a witness to their recognition of the one Church.

Although the historical replacement theology and lose of the Jewish roots of the church makes them suspicious of the formal ecumenical movements. This congregation sees itself as part of the One Church and One People of God of Jews and gentiles. Moreover, it is possible to see the one catholic and apostolic Church adapted for the modern Israeli culture.

4.2 *Ethiopian Messianic Jewish congregations*

“Even from distant Ethiopia my scattered people will bring offerings to me (Zephaniah 3:10)”

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Ethiopian Messianic Jewish pastor in Israel said, “Next year in Jerusalem” was a mantra of the Ethiopian Jews for centuries. Their homecoming is fulfillment of prophecies. Reciting Zephaniah 3:10 and Isaiah 11:11 he interweaves his, the Ethiopian Jewish and Biblical history together.

The Ethiopian Jews or Beta-Israel had their exodus in waves between 1973 and 1991. In 1984-85 was the illustrious operation Moses and Joshua where as many as 8500 were brought to Israel and even more later on. Many see this as a modern miracle. In 2010 there was estimate of 120 000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel.

His Orthodox-Jewish family was not open to Christianity. However, through friendship with a Christian in Ethiopia, he came to the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. Coming to Israel 1985 under the “operation Moses and Joshua”, they had to “stay underground” with respect to their faith. Being believer in Jesus in Israel is tough he says and explains the hostility as being of ignorance.

There are about twenty Ethiopian messianic Jewish congregations in Israel now. Every Shabbat (Saturday) the congregations he pastors have service, every second jointly in Tel-Aviv. The service in Jerusalem is at building belonging to the Finish-missions'. At the entry to the chapel are many Amharic and English bibles with cover image of Star of David.¹³⁴ These bibles are special editions with references to prophetic texts about the Jewish people and the Messiah. In the front of the chapel by the pulpit was a table with a small cross and a bigger menorah.

¹³³ American bible society, “The holy bible: the good news translation” (2nd ed.) New York: American bible society. (1992).

¹³⁴ Bible Society (2008) <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/89227636337500413/>

They evidently interpret their identity biblically as part of the end time fulfillment of Gods promises to the Jewish people. Moreover, they see themselves as the beginning of the awakening of the Jewish people to faith in Jesus the Messiah.

This congregation is hard to distinguish from any charismatic Ethiopian congregation. Their language (Amharic), their hymns and preaching style and content of are similar. There is reference and use of Hebrew vocabulary that is more frequent, and teams that refers to Israel and the Jewish people. This is not surprising considering their context.

4.2.1 Is Jesus Christ, confessed as God and Savior?

The congregation is informal in its approach and with charismatic and verbal form. We will therefor relay just on interview and observation.

When it comes to its confession of Jesus as God and savior, it is taken for granted that they share the belief of the mainstream Christianity they cooperate with in ministry. Both by inviting minister from Ethiopia and other Churches and the pastor traveling to Africa to minister. Furthermore they are connected part of The National Conference for Messianic congregation Leaders that authored the statement of faith in 2009.

The pastor is eager about witnessing to the Jewish people. He is very sympathetic of their reluctance, but says that the Messiah came to the Jews first. As result of their rejection, salvation came to all gentiles. “This is a mystery,” he says,” But at the present age, Christ is revealing himself and many Jews are getting saved and we are witnessing a change.”

Underscoring the universality of salvation in Jesus. The pastor says, “He came for the whole world. And all that believe shall be saved.”

Furthermore, he stresses the sufficiency of Jesus work for salvation by sharing his concern and disappointment of some gentile Christian that act more “Jew” than the Jewish. He says he is surprised and shocked by such behavior because “we are all saved by grace and not by religion”. It is all right that they appreciate the Jewish culture, but “what counts is faith in the Messiah” not more nor less.

4.2.2 Are the ecumenical sacraments recognized and practiced?

The Ethiopian Jewish Messianic congregation also is in the same line in their practice of the sacraments. They practice believers' baptism and celebrate the Eucharist in congregation. However, from observation the sacraments were not a focal point of their worship services.

4.2.3 Is there acknowledgement of the apostolic faith?

The congregation refers to themselves as Messianic believers, without denominational affiliation but is part of The National Conference for Messianic congregation Leaders that authored the statement of faith in 2009.

Though not formally stated, they have a Pentecostals charismatic background. The pastor stresses that he came to faith through gentiles that shared the Gospel with him. Moreover, the congregation he leads, in fact was founded and led by Ethiopian Pentecostals now leaders in churches in America and Australia. Furthermore, his continuing contact with charismatic churches and emphasis on miracles and healing as signs in their evangelizing the Jewish people. Leads to the conclusion that by association and observations we can say the congregation acknowledges the apostolic faith.

4.2.4 What are their relations to rabbinic Judaism and the Law?

The Ethiopian messianic have a pragmatic relationship to the rabbinic Jewish religious Law. They being Ethiopian Jews are not rabbinical but rather "Biblical Jews" the pastor says that. Rabbinic Jews have "many extra religious writings" not recognized by the Ethiopian Jews. They have even faced conflict in Israel because of that. Jews from Europe and other places brought with them unfamiliar customs and demanded they practice them.

Then again, he explains the need to contextualize and translate because Jews have very negative associations to words like "Christ". He clarifies that it is "because of the use of Christianity by Hitler, in the Holocaust where 6 million Jews were killed."

Furthermore, he says there are different practices, as there are different understandings. From the conservative that observes the Sabbath strictly, to those that say we can work on the Sabbath, because Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath.

He believes it is good to use the Sabbath day for rest and spiritual activity. However, it is wrong to keep it for the purpose salvation. “The lord has set us free from the bondage of the Law.” Salvation is given through the Messiah by grace once and forever.

For some that were practicing Jews it is just not easy to change their traditions. While others keep their religious practice for witnessing. As some Rabbis he says have come to faith, but stay in their old positions to be a witness secretly.

Overall, they do practice many of the religious laws as keeping kosher etc. because they do not want to be “stumbling block for gospel he says. “It’s not possible to preach the gospel while, eating fermented food and pork.” Furthermore, he points out that many of the festivals are good for exposition the truth. “The truth that Jesus or Yeshua is the Messiah.” Other reasons they practice, things like circumcision is health and because it was “ordered to Abraham”. This seems to be their way of keeping their Jewish identity. They are clear on that they do not look for justification but education and witnessing purposes by keeping the rabbinic laws.

4.2.5 Is there recognition of ministry and will to cooperate?

As we pointed out above, Evangelical and Pentecostal ministers first led the congregation. Moreover, there is still cooperation with International ministers. “What I really admire and respect is that it is through my gentile brothers that I met Jesus.” They have a good relationship with the gentiles because Jesus has no boundary and he came to save all who put their trust in him. He himself travels to Africa to preach in different churches.

The leader confirms there are some gentile members in his congregation. He points out that God saved the gentile’s through the Jews (Jesus and the Apostles) and now God is saving Jews through gentiles. “So I bless those who preach the gospel and are able to reach the Jews. This is a great service and I admire them for the work of God.” They especially have good fellowship with Arab believers in the Messiah (Palestinian Christian). Their unity is expressed by sharing with each other resources and services. They go and preach in each other’s congregations etc.

4.2.6 Does the gospel create reconciliation and peace?

As we said above there is a cooperation and communality with the Arab believers. He believes that a lasting peace in the Middle East between Jews and Arab is only possible

through the Messiah. He points to his good experience of cooperation and unity with many Arab believers in the region (countries like Jordan, Egypt and others). This he believes is a great change and beginning of something great for the region. “Other means of peace accords are temporary and will not last long but the true peace will come through the messiah.” He sees already a big change and he believes and prays that true peace will come in time.

4.2.7 Do they have explicit ecumenical consciousness?

The unity in the faith of Christ and his work is what he believes will bring peace to the region by breaking the wall of hatred. They are working to bring about reconciliation their way. What is sure he says; “for the Jewish and Arab messianic, the true brotherhood will come when they trust each other.” They have meetings and fellowship with believers from Ramallah, Hebron, and Arabs outside of Israel, like Jordan, Egypt etc. When they come together, they pray for the conflicts and the people that are hurting. “This is a great break through that has happened is because we have seen his wounds and it is the messiah that can create a true brotherhood.” By doing so they have a good fellowship and reflect brotherly love and unity. This he believes is a great change that God has made.

Furthermore, he sees it as his mission to bridge between Africa and Israel and travels around in Africa to create understanding about the connections they have. In an interview he points out that, many of the Jewish patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus) have migrated to Africa. There is recognition of the universality of the faith and will to cooperate. In their practice, they cross denomination, ethnicity, culture and nationality.

4.2.8 Is it possible to recognizing the one catholic and apostolic Church?

They identify as messianic Jewish, and see themselves as part of the fulfillment of Gods awakening of the Jewish people to the truth of the messiah is Jesus. Still they see themselves as part of the worldwide body of believers. Though not very formal and charismatic in form, it is obvious that they confess to the central confessions of Jesus being God and savior. They practice the two ecumenical sacraments and adhere to the apostolic faith in effect. The Jewish religious law is held in various degrees for witnessing and identity but not for justification.

There is recognition of the body of Christ as international and Trans ethnical and cultural. Both in acknowledgment of the roll of the gentile church, their willingness to cooperate and serve and be served without discrimination. However, not in a formal way it is possible to

recognizing the one catholic apostolic church as a charismatic Ethiopian Messianic Jewish congregation.

4.3 A Messianic Jewish Israeli congregation

"And so all Israel will be saved." Romans 11:26

In the Center of Jerusalem near the Ben-Yehuda Street congregation Ahavat Yeshua (Love of Jesus) was founded in 2006 as part of an international ministry called Revive Israel.¹³⁵ This congregation is planted said to express their core values as Covenantal Relationships of loyalty and integrity.

Restoration and revival of Israel is seen in relative to the evangelizing the nations and vice-versa (Acts 1:6-8, Rom 11:15 and 11:26). Therefore, the leadership has a dual task of engaging in international speaking, as part of the mandate to be a light to the nations to the ends of the earth.¹³⁶ "For if they're (Israel's) being cast away is reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be, but life from the dead (Romans 11:15)? Nationally the task is starting and multiplying congregations to revive Israel.

The respondent is a student but active youth leader in the congregations. He describes his congregation as "Charismatic Messianic Jewish Israeli congregation." This he explains is result of influence from both the Messianic movement in America (which he sees as charismatic in nature) and because of the body of the messiah in Israel and its sensitivity to Jewish tradition, identity and expression. This combination makes them unique he believes. Their primary goal is revival in Israel through "personal evangelism" discipleship and planting of congregations.

4.3.1 Is Jesus Christ, confessed as God and Savior?

Jesus is the Son of the God of Israel and King and Lord to be obeyed. According to the respondent, the basic of Gospel message is to recognize and obey Jesus as the Son of the God

¹³⁵ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/projects/congregations/ahavat-yeshua/>, 2018

¹³⁶ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/projects/international-ministry/>, 2018

of Israel. He clarifies saying that the bible says even the demons believe that he is the Son of God, but that is not enough. However, obedience to him as King and Lord in your life is the true sign of faith.

Then he adds that there is salvation and forgiveness of sins that leads to a life of discipleship and worship.

To question of doable covenant theology of salvation, he could not give a definitive answer. That is, the possibility for Jews to be saved outside Jesus? “This is too big of a question and only God who is good and righteous is the Judge of who is saved or not in the end.”

Nevertheless, he says that they believe that one should know Jesus and that this will give salvation. Therefore, they work to get people to know Jesus.

On personal note, he said he did not think that not every person that does not formally believe in Jesus would be not saved. He believes that God will judge every man according to his life.

The confession of Jesus as God and savior is adjusted to the salvation that leads to obedience and maybe an obedience that can save without “formal” faith. This is deviant from the pure salvation in and through faith in Jesus in the ecumenical vision.

4.3.2 Are the ecumenical sacraments recognized and practiced?

Yet again, the sacraments are out of center also in this congregation. The question of baptism the respondent answered with a personal testimony. “Yea, when I was eighteen I decided to be baptized. As a symbol as a ritual to say that I am committing to live life according to faith in Yeshua.” That is the practice not infant but a believers or adult baptism, which it is as a confession and testimonial ritual.

The Eucharist is recognized and seen as one of “the two New Testaments rituals”. He confirms that they do practice both. “Yea we do that every once a while in meetings in services”, he answers short and concise. They have light relationship towards the ecumenical sacraments but practice them.

4.3.3 Is there recognition of the apostolic faith?

The young leader from the congregation says that they have no formal faith statements or formal membership. As such, he says they are not good example. The “classical Christian

creeds” are not seen as something they can relate to. They see their roots of identity rather in the first Jewish believers in and not so much the church’s later history.

Even though they do not see the church history as part of theirs, he is certain that the modern evangelical church among others has influence on them. Others influence they get is from the Jewish world to the secular society at large. In between all of these, they try to work out their theological identity.

The influence of the church on them is recognized but is not seen as positive in relation to their need for authenticity. They believe they need to grow and mature to their own identity.

4.3.4 What are their relations to rabbinic Judaism and the Law?

The bible, being the closest to the apostolic authority, is their only authority. However, their view of the bible’s authority is not “as dogmatic and fundamentalist as some can be”. He says they are liberal as example in relation to divorce etc.

They are also open to the rabbinic tradition, though not mandatory. “It’s our tradition our culture and heritage, as believers of the Bible we value it and try to practice it.” However, nobody can do everything in the Biblical Torah he judges.

As example on keeping the Law, he says that he does not keep the Sabbath according to the religious law, but as far he is concerned, he keeps the Sabbath by not going to work and resting. He does not accept the prohibition from driving and use of electricity.

This congregation views the Jewish religious tradition and culture as theirs but give themselves freedom to interpretation and application.

4.3.5 Is there recognition of ministry and will to cooperate?

The members’ background he estimates one of three is a non-Jewish. To question, of if there are Palestinian members in the congregation? He says that they are welcome and there is work done in cooperation Arab congregations. However, fellowship in congregation is not yet a reality here.

The congregation is part of a movement based on a vision of reviving Israel to pave way for the coming and restoration of the Kingdom of Jesus on earth.”¹³⁷ This dispensationalist “revelation” has a work plan, with the nations coming in full, as precursor. Therefore, their ministry includes reaching out to share insight and revelation with nations and establish lasting relationships especially with Arab Christians.¹³⁸

As part in this movement, they are connected to serving and cooperating with international Christians. They see themselves together with these two groups of people as “One New Man”.¹³⁹

4.3.6 Does the gospel create reconciliation and peace?

As we can see from the description of their ministries to which this congregation is part. Evangelization of the world and demonstrating the reconciling power of the gospel (Jesus work on the cross) is important part of their goal.¹⁴⁰

By working together with several Arab Christian evangelists and humanitarian projects. Part of this to be demonstration of the reconciliation that is possible between Jews and Arabs through the forgiveness that in Jesus’ work on the cross.

4.3.7 Do they have explicit ecumenical consciousness?

They believe they can play a positive role and be of inspiration to the rest of the body of Christ. But that it is something, they have to mature to by figuring out their culture and identity. “And on how we see ourselves in relations to the church and the world is not quite clear yet, definitely there is a bunch of people with a bunch of ideas.”

He says that as of now most of the leaders of the congregations are either Jewish immigrants or native Israelis who went to seminaries outside this country. So they are influenced from different Christian culture outside of Israel. However, as they develop he believes they have a lot to give both to the international body and on the national level.

¹³⁷ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/about-us/revival-vision/>, 2019

¹³⁸ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/projects/>, 2019

¹³⁹ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/projects/international-ministry/>, 2019

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/projects/partnership-with-arab-christians/>, 2019

“We have no doubt that the End Time body of Messiah must be Jew and Gentile serving and working together as one New Man.”¹⁴¹

As they share and spread the gospel in Israel he believes, that Jews are preaching the gospel again in Jerusalem and Israel will be encouraging and motivating for the rest of the body of believers. In addition, this will give the messianic he believes, if not a formal authority, a position of influence and leadership by example.

Jewish Israeli in Jerusalem proclaiming the gospel would be reminiscent of the New Testament for Christians and make them look to them in the holy land. So we have responsibility, I hope we can live up to that.”

4.3.8 Is it possible to recognizing the one catholic and apostolic Church?

They see themselves, the body of the Messiah in Israel. “Israel is a Jewish nation; we are the Jewish Israeli national body of believers in Israel.” As the national body, they have international connections with believers from all over the world. “That’s how we think; we are the Israeli Church. Mostly we do not use the term “Church” but still. We are the Israeli body of the Messiah.”

They have the faith in Jesus as Son of God and Savior. However, not wanting to prejudge who is going to be saved the respondent personally would not eliminate the possibility of being saved without “formal” faith in Jesus. With regard to the sacraments, they practice them but not frequently. They do not relate or feel obligation to neither the ecumenical creeds nor the Jewish rabbinic writings. However, they feel connected to them as cultural heritage and inspiration. The one apostolic church is affirmed but not seen as a model to emulate. They rather look to the first Jewish believers for their role as the last days Jewish believers in the Messiah how will come and establish his Kingdom on earth, in Jerusalem.

4.4 A community of observant Messianic Jews

¹⁴¹ <https://www.reviveisrael.org/projects/congregations/ahavat-yeshua/>, 2019

The community of Neshuva¹⁴² is part of Messianic Jewish Theological Institute (MJTI). MJTI founded in 1997 is made up of a school, centers, educational programs and publications. With centers in L.A. and Jerusalem, it provides Jewish Studies.

MJTIs Mission is; “Teaching and living a vision of Jewish life renewed in Yeshua”¹⁴³

Our respondent is the operations director for the Israeli branch of MJTI. The study center is in the middle of Jerusalem. A man in his 30s met me wearing Jewish religious attire, orthodox or conservative Jews wear (‘kippah’ and ‘Tzitzit’). The center has a small synagogue newly furnished with capacity for thirteen persons.

He preferred the term “community” to “congregation” because they see themselves as more attached. The community is founded on the notion that, “the unique and distinct calling of the Jewish people hasn’t changed.” It is made up of mostly “observant Jewish” followers of the Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus). Observant is one that keeps the religious commandments as in various forms of Judaism.

The unique and distinct calling of the Jewish people he says has not changed or been replaced by the coming of the Messiah. “The work of messiah has rather enhanced and greatly blessed but not replaced the calling of the Jewish People to be a set apart people.” Therefore, the center promotes Jewish believers to be observant Jews. This must be understood as polemic against the replacement theology and the anti-Jewish history of the church.

Describing the distress that Jewish believers in Jesus suffered, on one side made to choose between Jewishness and Christ by the church. On the other, side the Jewish world that did not have room for the belief in Jesus as Messiah. “And so we try to confront that reality, we believe that Jewish people can live and practice a faithful Judaism and be followers of the Messiah.” He declares.

¹⁴² “Neshuva” means returned or retuning it refers to the return of the Jewish people back to their homeland and back to God.

¹⁴³ <https://www.mjti.org/about/>, 2019

4.4.1 Is Jesus Christ confessed as God and Savior?

Jesus as the Messiah and his divine nature are evidently accepted. On the divinity of Jesus Christ, they believe him to be “more than just a man”. Therefore is “The Shema”¹⁴⁵ important for them as Jews “... stressing the oneness of the God of Israel and the mystery that exist there (Deut. 6:4–9).” When confessing their faith not to be accused of not being monotheist. Nevertheless, the understanding and application of Christ’s saving work are more of in conflict with the traditional understanding.

The coming of the Kingdom of God to transform the world, through the Messiah, is anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures and Israel is called to be a light for the nations. This transformation of the whole world is greater than the “...saving of individuals from hell “. The work of the Messiah is something that is to bring “a corporate transformation.”

They believe that Jesus brought the “salvation” ultimately but sees it differently in implication and application. So the “box” in which the church has placed “salvation” is seen as misguided.

“In other words, I believe that the grace of the God of Israel is much greater in desiring to draw near people, definitely the Jewish people but also care for the nations of all mankind and desire to draw them near.”

He continues saying that the outworking of it is to be left to God. Furthermore, we are also to make room for those who are being saved unconsciously. “The Jewish people are not without faith.” He says defending the Jews that do not believe in the Jesus to be the Messiah. Moreover, he insists referring to James 2:17 that faith alone is not sufficient work should follow. The saving work of Jesus reinterpreted to include more than the confessing community especially the Jewish people.

¹⁴⁵ **SHEMA, THE** most fundamental expression of the Jewish faith, rendered שְׁמָעָה (*shema'*) in Deut 6:4. Huffman, D.S. & Hausherr, J.N., 2016. Shema, the J. D. Barry et al., eds. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*.

4.4.2 Are the ecumenical sacraments recognized and practiced?

Baptism or Mikvah

With regard to baptism, they believe that the original Jewish context is lost. The 'Mikvah bath' a Jewish religious cleansing ritual, that everyone coming to the temple practiced, he says was the origin of baptism. As it is Jewish concept, they want people to relate to it as something Jewish and not as something opposed to it. Because baptism has been a symbol, to which the Jewish people have said, "If you are baptized to this plurality of god or something like that you have left the Jewish people".

However, he admits that there is difference between the regular Mikvah baths in Judaism. Moreover, the baptism that New Testament describes as one-time event. Nevertheless, he says that he does not believe that they have concluded on how it should be practiced. Some believe that it is not a requirement for all. He says, maybe some are supposed to go through "a baptism of fire?"

In the messianic communities, no one practices infant baptism. However, he says, for us in the Jewish community, we have ceremony in the eight-day, the circumcision. For the girls there is a dedication called "simchat bat". This he says has certain parallel to the infant baptism "...recognition of this life that is going to be preserved and set apart." This he present as a potential alternative to baptism.

He concludes by saying, there is plenty that appeal in the Jewish context. However, the messianic Judaism is still young so many just translate in to Hebrew what is done in church. As an example, the baptism in water and fire is something he believers should be consider.

Eucharist or feast of the Messiah

On Eucharist, which he terms "sudat messiach" and translates as "feast of the messiah" he says there are various traditions. In his community, this is remembered ones a year at "Pesach" or Passover week. In old Jewish tradition in the last day of the week, there is this "feast of the messiah" witch "consists of the bread and the matsa; the unleavened bread and the wine." This is part of re-contextualizing of the sacrament to make it edible for the Jewish public. However, is it recognizable as the one that is celebrated in the ecumenical vision?

Even though his community only practices it in connection with the traditional Jewish Passover. He says that he will not have problem taking part in other communities. “I don’t have a problem taking it with them out of sign of a unity. But our community doesn’t do it like that in that sense every week.”

4.4.3 Is there acknowledgement of the apostolic faith?

The classical creeds like the Nicene they find disagreeable and lacking because they are “to universalist”. Not recognizing “neither the Jewishness of the Messiah nor of the continuing unique calling of the Jewish people; “a covenant people that are called to be the people of the book that would spread forth the light.” The argument is that the Jewish root of the faith is lost. With no reference explicitly to the historical people of God, it is seen as alienating.

Within the community he says creedal statements of the Jewish community like the “The Shema” is something they connected with much more. In other words, they emphasize the Ones of God using the “Shema Israel” and make it clear to the Jewish world of their monotheism. It is obvious that the main object of concern of this community is the Jewish public one can say.

He also points to the collection of messianic communities’ discussion about the need for statements of faith and how to relate to the classical creeds. Aspects in creeds that are problematic for the messianic communities have been in understanding and explanation of the Trinity. Moreover, the Creeds he says was used to build fences rather bringing people closer.

4.4.4 What are their relations to rabbinic Judaism and the Law?

The Church and the Jewish rabbinic tradition are imperfect so they question both equally. Nevertheless, he believes that “Jesus the Messiah “ultimately is present within the history of the Jewish people and within their writings.” That is that the Jewish religious writhing or the rabbinic traditions that has survived and evolved parallel to the Christian church and tradition is indeed inspired by Christ. Therefore, Christ is to found within it too. Furthermore, the Jewish people -that do not believe in Jesus- are believers in Messiah, though they do not identify him to be Jesus.

The community intends to have Jesus as model for the life as an observant Jew in fidelity to “the covenant and commandments that has been given to the Jewish people, to set them apart.” However, gentiles are not expected to do or practice this.

“The Messiah said in Matthew, that he has not come to remove it even one bit of it.” Matt 5:17-18. Therefore, it is their conviction that keeping the commandments is something that Jewish followers of Jesus must do. Not as self-justification but as “covenantal fidelity”. Keeping the Law has never been ultimately about being justified by it before God. Messianic Jews that do not keep all the commandments are not considered outsiders but as erroneous and in sin. They are further down the line in the process.

The respondent does not believe that there should be distinction between commandments. The food prescription (“kosher and no-kosher”) is not less important than adultery etc. So the moral law and the ritual law are seen as equally imperative. However it is ultimately God that can judge our intentions, he qualifies.

4.4.5 Is there recognition of ministry and will to cooperate?

There was not any restriction for membership in the community but gentiles can’t participate in all liturgical proceedings. Because there are some things, only a Jew can say and do. Prayers that refer to the salvation of Israel from Egypt are one example he mentions. So the distinction between the Jewish and non-Jewish goes as far in to liturgical rolls.

4.4.6 Do they have explicit ecumenical consciousness?

Bilateral ecclesiology is the type of unity with the church they practice he says. The community of the Messiah the ecclesia is made of two communities: one Jewish and one from the nations”. They are united in the work of the Messiah but differ in how they practice the faith.

The center is as center for studying amongst other things Judaism and the Messiah and to bridge between the Jewish world and the Christian world. The challenge is he says “...with the universal church that would abolish the fact that there are differences amongst us.” He says that they believe that it should be possible to have unity with peculiarity. “You can have unity without uniformity.” The unifying and dividing aspects are on bout sides of the divide, where they are situated in the middle of the Jewish and Christian worlds.

“Messianic Judaism is Judaism and not a Christianity. Yet, it is Judaism, in which we recognize the work of the almighty amongst the nations. In addition, we draw near with a common Messiah. But that we practice a Judaism within Judaism of our fathers.”

The question on Ecumenism he answered by talking about bridging between Judaism and Christianity. I later learned of something called “bridge theology” that is thought by Mark S. Kinzer taken from Lev Gillet. The idea of finding the hidden presences of the Messiah in both and connect them. “...the theology of the Body of Christ should be linked with a theology of the mystical body of Israel.”¹⁴⁶ This community places itself within Judaism, with all the religious/theological consequences, to find the hidden Messiah in Judaism to bridge over to the Christian world.

Coming back to the topic of unity and ecumenism, he says, it is the element where the distinction between Jews and gentiles is eliminated they will have most problems with. In addition, the part of the universalization in Christianity which they find insufficient and undermining. Universalism is one aspect; but it should not come at the cost of the particular context. He elaborates that it was given within the context of a people and a place: Jewish people and Israel.

4.4.7 Is it possible to recognizing the one catholic and apostolic Church?

This community though they confess to the divinity and saving faculty of Jesus more or less in classical terms. They distance themselves from orthodox Christian theology viewing it at times even as hostile to Jewishness. They want to rethink and redefine the meaning and implication of the saving work of Jesus Christ (the Messiah).

Their view of the irrevocable and therefore still in effect calling of the Jewish people is not different from any of the other Messianic Congregations. However, as to what it means and how to relate to the Rabbinic Judaism that grows in parallel to Christianity is more radical. This radical insistence of imbedding in “Jewish existence” is something that puts them in a state of negation towards the ecumenical call for unity in professing and practicing the common ecumenical apostolic faith and sacraments.

They are aware of their experimenting theology and are willing to take the risk. It is difficult to see the one catholic and apostolic church. However, that is maybe the point. They want to live the faith in Jesus as Jews inside Judaism and rather play role of bridging from Judaism towards Christianity.

¹⁴⁶ Lev Gillet, quoted Richard Harvey in MMJT, 128

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary

In the first chapter, we established our goal of understanding the self-positioning of messianic Jews in proximity to the universal church. Furthermore, we narrowed our scope to messianic Jewish communities in Israel and decided to conduct qualitative research from an ecumenical perspective in systematic theology.

In the second chapter, to get better understanding of their background, we had a concise look at JBJ in church history. Particularly, we glanced at the first JBJs, their existence, adversity, and disappearance from history. We had also a look at theological history in relation to the development of anti-Judaism that made being both Jewish and Christian an oxymoron and later nourished anti-Semitism that had gruesome consequences.

We also saw that, despite all the atrocities, a new interest in mission toward the Jews revived Jewish Christianity anew. Furthermore, we considered the birth of the modern messianic Jewish Movement with the founding of Israel and a newfound pride and sensitivity toward identity expressions in the 1970s. We ended the chapter with a look at the context of the Israeli messianic Jewish congregations.

In chapter three, we established first the self-understanding of the NT community as the people of God in continuity with Jewish people in and through Jesus—the Jewish Messiah. Likewise, we went through the doctrine of the Church with particular attention paid to the imperative of unity. Furthermore, we saw that unity does not mean uniformity or static-plurality. Rather, it involves striking a balance between unity and diversity with principles of centrality and love.

Through this principle of centrality, we gleaned a hierarchy of question from the Ecumenical Movement documents about vision and the goal of visual unity.

In chapter four, we have met four messianic Jewish communities in Israel. They presented themselves and their theological understandings of the questions we had.

Two communities leaned to the center of the ecumenical goal and vision. That is, they expressed their commitment to most of the central ecumenical criteria's for unity in praxis

and statements. Although they are sharp in their condemnation of the replacement theology associated with anti-Semitism in church history and the need to recuperate the place Jewishness had in the foundation of the Church, they are clear about their communality with the Church and see unity as given.

The third community also sees itself as part of the universal body of Christ and acknowledges the most central component of faith as the divinity of Christ and the two ecumenical sacraments. Nevertheless, it is drawn toward a less exclusive soteriology being for salvation without conscious faith in Christ. Moreover, they do not value or recognize the ecumenical creeds. Rather, they look to emulate the first JBJs in the end times and, thus, revive Israel.

The fourth community gave us the impression that it wishes to distance itself from the Church and Christianity. Although the divinity of Christ is recognized as a mystery, it seems to question most of the central aspects of the Christian faith and its confessions and tradition. The community looks to Rabbinic Jewish spirituality, when interpreting the ecumenical sacraments and its liturgy. This community goes beyond contextualization towards adopting rabbinic Judaism. They want to exchange the Eucharist with Passover dinner, baptisms with Mikvah baths, and so on. However, because our study is minor in scope, in the future, researchers could conduct wider and deeper studies and engage in dialog at various levels with the messianic Jewish community.

5.2 Concluding Remarks

The goal of the Ecumenical Movement of a visible unity will be achieved by uniting around the central aspect of the faith. As we make room for diversity at the peripheral, and letting love dictate everything.

The answer to our question is that messianic Jewish believers position themselves in various proximities to the ecumenical vision of the church. With different backgrounds and understandings, the messianic Jewish in Israel have differing stances. Most of them place themselves well into the ecumenical ideal for unity in praxis, but they do not do so completely. While the last community we met represents a tendency in some, of disassociation with Christianity, for the sake of re-imbedding -faith in Jesus- in Judaism.

We are reminded by messianic Jewish believers that the Church has been too uniformist without room for diversity that could allow for the existence of authentic Jewish faith in Jesus. The Church's history of hostility toward the Jewish identity has made faith in Jesus not only lose credibility in the Jewish society but also appear suspect and threatening. Moreover, in not keeping the Jewish–gentile distinction, the Church lost an excellent model of unity in diversity.

Beyond tolerance, there should be an enthusiastic welcoming of Jewish messianic communities and congregations as this would enrich and anchor the Church to its history in continuity with the Jewish people. Furthermore, it would demonstrate love and appreciation for the Jewish people. As it is difficult to appreciate and understand the New Testament without the Old Testament, so it is with the Church without the Jews as people of God.

Furthermore, we must learn from the mistakes of un-sympathetic interpretations of text and history that led to anti-Semitism in the Church and fueled dreadful events in history.

Our response to the churches' historical mistakes must not lead to overcompensations that lead to the other side of theological ditch. That is, we must accept that the elements that are essential for unity are the elements that constitute and give the Church its identity.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, there are essentials -confessions and sacraments- that cannot be compromised, without dissolving identity. Agreement on the central aspects of the faith is vital; tolerance is necessary in the periphery, and love in everything.

¹⁴⁷ Ola Tjørhom, "*Kirkens Enhet - for at Verden Skal Se Og Tro: En Innføring I Økumenisk Tenkning*". 74

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