

# **The Development of a Messianic Jewish Theology — Affirmations and Questions**

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The very existence of Messianic Jewish congregations is in itself an important fact. There have been many examples through the centuries of Jews accepting Jesus as Messiah and Savior, but such acceptance has often led to assimilation into a non-Jewish environment. The convert — or at least his children — lost their Jewish identity and instead became Christian. For the first time since the early church, we now find groups of Jews regarding themselves as followers of Jesus, while maintaining their Jewish identity. To become a believer in Jesus does not mean one ceases to be a Jew. As David Stern states: “Believing in Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah, is one of the most Jewish things a Jew can do.”<sup>82</sup> This conviction has led not only to individual Jews becoming members of gentile churches, but also to the founding of congregations with a Jewish identity. And it has led to a movement which calls itself “Messianic Jewish” in order to stress its Jewishness.

In my opinion the very existence of Messianic Jews and their communities as well as the self-understanding of this movement represent an important challenge for the Christian church and Christian theology. It is important because it challenges the church's understanding of the Jewish people, as well as fundamental aspects of the traditional self-understanding of the church.

In its thinking about its relation to the Jewish people the church has traditionally been dominated by replacement theology: the conviction that the church has replaced Israel as the chosen people of God. Following that developed the opinion that being a Jew has no theological meaning anymore, no more than being a Norwegian or an Englishman. Although this opinion still exists within the church, it has been much harder to maintain in recent decades. Through the Holocaust the church had to open its eyes to the anti-semitic consequences of replacement theology and it has discovered the importance of the Jewish people as a present reality, not only something to be read about in the Bible.

More recently, replacement theology has been supplanted by two-covenant-theology. If the church hasn't replaced the Jewish people as the people of God, then Jews should be recognized as possessing a means to salvation equal to that of Christians. The Jews are saved by the law, the gentiles by faith in Jesus. As a consequence the Christians should stop evangelizing the Jews, and instead relate to the Jews in religious dialogue.

For both replacement theology and the two-ways/dialogue-theology the existence of Messianic Jews and of a Messianic Jewish community is a most disturbing fact. This group

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<sup>82</sup> David Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto* (Jerusalem: 1988), p. 24.

simply does not fit into the scheme in either way of thinking. During the last years a great number of books have been written about the relationship between Jews and Christians, but it is striking that in these books the Messianic Jews are almost ignored. They do not fit for more liberal-oriented theologians nor for the more conservative (as represented by the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, among others). The Messianic Jews are not fitting in, which is a sign that these theologies that exclude them do not fit the New Testament either.

The present challenge is to give a theological interpretation of the reality the Messianic Jewish movement represents. This includes the burning question of an adequate self-understanding for the Messianic Jews, but also what this means for the self-understanding of the church. In my opinion these two fundamental challenges should not be treated as two different and separate challenges, but as two aspects of one basic challenge, common for Messianic Jews and for gentile Christians. I am inclined to believe that David Stern is right when he states that “without Messianic Judaism ... both the Jewish people and the church will fail to achieve their proper and glorious goals.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Contextualization and Restoration**

In the following I will take as my point of departure David Sterns distinction between contextualization and restoration applied to the relation between the Jews and the gospel.<sup>84</sup> The concept of contextualization has for some time been a key concept in theological debate and thinking, especially related to the proclamation of the gospel in a cultural setting different from one's own. What is often forgotten is that also one's own theology is a result of a contextualization, also in its European and North American fashion. That should make us more humble when preaching in other cultural settings, and eager to go to the *sources* for our faith and theology.

One fundamental aspect of this source is that it is *Jewish*. It is the good news about a Jew who is talking in the name of the God of Israel, an event that has been witnessed to us by the Jewish apostles. The existence of Messianic Jews and a Messianic theology reminds us that the gospel is not originally Greek, German or Norwegian, but was originally expressed in a Jewish setting. To preach the gospel today in a Jewish setting is therefore something other than preaching the gospel in any other setting. Because the gospel is Jewish in its origin, it has to do not primarily with contextualization, but with a restoration of the Jewishness of the gospel. As a restoration and not only a new contextualization, this process is of great interest for every other process of contextualization. Perhaps we could propose as a criterion for any formulation of Christian doctrine in any context, that it might be communicated and understood in a Jewish-Messianic setting. If not, it is doubtful that this theological idea can be regarded as an expression of New Testament faith.

A couple of examples might illuminate this: Both the Bible as well as Jewish tradition recognize *saints*: heroes of faith that serve as examples for the believers of today (cf. Heb 11). In parts of gentile Christian tradition this idea has been elevated to consider the saints mediators

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<sup>83</sup> Stern, p. 3

<sup>84</sup> Stern, pp. 239ff.

between God and man, and the saints have become objects of veneration. In my opinion this idea — and not least the practice that follows from it — would be very difficult to formulate as a genuine expression of a Messianic-Jewish faith.

While my first example is taken from primarily a catholic/orthodox context, the other is primarily a Protestant phenomenon. In the Bible as well as in Jewish tradition the questions of ethics and morality are linked to the idea of divine commandments. Modern Protestant theology has instead often based its ethical thinking upon general *principles*, expressed by philosophical concepts. Although these principles often are ascribed with Biblical legitimacy, the question of the concrete morality often is disconnected from explicit Biblical commandments. (This method is today leading to a widespread acceptance of homosexual relations within Protestant churches). In my opinion this method as well as its consequences are very difficult to unite with a New Testament faith expressed in a Jewish context.

### **Jewish or Rabbinic Traditions?**

Even if I agree with the perspective of a restoration of the gospel in a Jewish setting, I think it is important to recognize that preaching the gospel to Jews today also should include contextualization. A basic reason for this is the fact that today's Judaism is not identical with the Judaism of the first century. Not only Christianity, but also Judaism has undergone a development, and neither of them have developed independent from each other. From being one of many rival factions in first century Judaism, Pharisaism became the dominating Jewish tradition, and found its normative expression in the Talmud. During this development Judaism changed, and in some aspects in opposition to the Christian interpretation of the Scriptures. One might for instance interpret the rabbinical emphasis on the Torah at the expense of other aspects (for instance the Messiah) as an expression of this tendency.

This signals a problem for the restoration project which must be taken seriously: When using concepts and habits from contemporary Judaism, Messianic Jews are running the risk of including in their thinking and practice elements both unknown and maybe also incompatible with the thinking of the first-century Jews which we meet in the New Testament.<sup>85</sup> When Stern in his book is talking about Torah as the rallying cry of the Messianic movement, it is appropriate to ask if the model for this is to be found in the New Testament, or rather in the rabbinical tradition.<sup>86</sup> However, I totally agree with Stern that the concept of Torah will be an important issue in the project of restoring the Jewishness of the gospel. Here it is clear that the thinking of the New Testament represents a corrective both vis-a-vis the antinomism of the church and vis-a-vis the nomism of the synagogue.

The main point of the preceding has been to stress that the Jewish context of today's Messianic Jews is not identical with the Jewish context of the first believers. This insight should have consequences for the restoration project. But today's Messianic Jews are also part of another context, which should not be ignored: They are — even if they do not always admit it —

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<sup>85</sup> This question is discussed in A. Boskey's article "The Messianic Use of Rabbinic Literature", *Mishkan* 8&9, 1988, pp. 25-64.

<sup>86</sup> Stern, p. 187. Cf. T. Elgvin: "Torah of the Messiah and Torah of the Rabbis", in *Israel and Yeshua* (Caspari Center: Jerusalem 1993), pp. 143-152.

dependent upon gentile Christian tradition. Their faith in Jesus as the Messiah has not been handed over to them directly from the Jewish believers of the first century, but through church history, of which today's Jewish believers are a part. I think it is important to be aware of this fact, and to draw its consequences.

Especially striking for a Norwegian Lutheran are the links between the Messianic Jewish movement and Anglo-Saxon (especially American) left wing protestantism/evangelicalism (in spite of the declared will of the Messianic movement to be independent of all gentile confessional traditions). I think it a paradox that I first learned the concept of dispensationalism from discussions within the Messianic Jewish movement in Israel! A recent American school, a fringe phenomenon in the history of theology, has received a remarkable attention in discussions of Messianic Jewish theology.<sup>87</sup> Another example is the strong influence of Brethren theology upon the preaching in Messianic congregations in Israel. These trends reveal a de facto Christian-confessional background for Messianic theology which should not be ignored. It seems this dependence upon American evangelicalism is found in various shades both in those Israeli congregations which mainly are Hebrew editions of Western relatives, as well as those congregations which maintain a more Jewish flavor.

A common weakness in this left-wing protestantism has been the idea of the possibility of an easy return to New Testament Christianity without sufficient consideration of the history in between. I fear that this might be a danger for the Messianic movement as well. When Stern in his books lists elements in a curriculum for educating Messianic Jews, why is Jewish history included, but not church history?<sup>88</sup>

An aspect of this anti-traditionalist attitude has also been a very negative evaluation of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. I have the impression that some of this left wing Protestant perspective is typical at least for parts of the Messianic movement. Especially in the Middle Eastern setting where the majority of the indigenous Christians belong to Catholic and Orthodox churches, this is an important issue. It is also a fact that the liturgical traditions of many of these oriental and orthodox churches have included many Jewish elements from the liturgy of the early church. It is also worth mentioning that in the veins of Arabic-speaking Christians in Israel and its neighboring countries probably runs a great portion of Jewish blood, due to the historical links of these communities with the Jewish-Christians of the early centuries. I think it is important that the gentile-Christian counterpart of Messianic Jewish theology should not be only the American Protestantism, but also these local Christian communities.

In Jewish thinking tradition plays a great role. Not only the holy scriptures, but also the history of interpreting these scriptures is important. It is a paradox if a Jewish-rooted movement takes an anti-traditionalist position in the relation to Christian tradition and classical Christian texts, including the creeds from the old church.<sup>89</sup>

It is evident that also these texts should be understood as contextualizations of New

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. the articles by D. Juster and J. Schulam about "Covenant and Dispensation", *Mishkan* 2, 1985, pp. 24ff.

<sup>88</sup> Stern, p. 209.

<sup>89</sup> Regarding the Jewish and biblical basis for the Nicene creed, cf. O. Skarsaune, "The Christological Dogma of Nicea — Greek or Jewish," *Mishkan* 1, 1984.

Testament faith, and of course these expressions of dogma have been formed by their context. In a Messianic-Jewish setting the same biblical truths should of course be formulated in new (both Jewish and contemporary) ways. As attempts to formulate the one Christian faith in a given setting, they have to be taken into consideration when trying to formulate the same faith in a new setting, even if this setting is the Jewish one. The reason for this is that of ecclesiological character. As creedal basis for the majority of the churches of the world, one at least has to answer the question of the relation between these creeds and one's own faith. Being conscious of confessing the same Lord, we can also have community with each other as brothers and sisters in this Lord.

As parts of the one body of the Messiah, Jewish and gentile believers should be willing to give each other an account for what they believe and how they formulate this belief. That might mean a greater Messianic Jewish sensitivity toward classical issues from the Christian tradition. I think that could help our Jewish brothers in the faith in the development of their own expression of faith in the Messiah. It also suggests a challenge to the traditional churches not only to rethink its understanding of the Jewish people, but also its own theological tradition in the light of its Jewish origins and its indissoluble bonds to the Jewish people, which our Messianic Jewish brothers and sisters embody.

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