

CONTEXTUAL ISSUES FOR ISRAELI  
AND AMERICAN MESSIANIC CONGREGATIONS

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by

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CONTEXTUAL ISSUES FOR ISRAELI AND AMERICAN MESSIANIC  
CONGREGATIONS

I want to preface my remarks by saying that although I am a Jewish believer, I come at the subject of Messianic Jewish Congregations for the most part as an outsider. Except for my recent research into this subject, I have not been involved in the life of Messianic congregations. In addition, I want to make it clear that I am an advocate for and supporter of the Messianic Congregational movement wherever and in whatever form it is found. I have some questions to ask of the Messianic movement, hard questions which some may find unwelcome. But let this in no way lend the impression that I am opposed to the Messianic contextual expression of life in Messiah. I firmly believe and assert that any indigenous, national, linguistic, or ethnic grouping has the right to assert itself in a manner which is expressive of its own internal dynamic. For Jews especially, this right exists.

My father once told me the story of a Jewish man who visited a Baptist church. Among the many activities which

were strange to him, he took a special interest in the procedures that surrounded the collection of multiple monetary offerings. On leaving the church service on that occasion the Jewish man asked his Gentile friend a significant theological question: "If Jesus was Jewish, the apostles were Jewish, and the early Church was Jewish, then who sold this business to the Gentiles in the first place?" It therefore follows that since Christianity was born out of Judaism, if any group has the right to its own contextual expression of life in the Messiah, Jewish believers do.

The questions with which I wish to deal in this paper have to do with context and especially the context of the Messianic Jewish congregation as it relates to Jewish evangelism. Of course, fulfilling Yeshua's Great Commission is not the only reason for congregational life. Congregations also serve to provide a sense of identity and community and become the source of discipleship and spiritual growth for believers. Certainly this should be understood in Yeshua's commission to "make disciples" and to teach those disciples "all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20 NASV). But entrance into and participation in Messianic congregational life depends on the proclamation of the Gospel and the extension of the offer of Kingdom living to Jews and Gentiles alike. So, for us as believing Jews,

we must first be concerned with Gospel proclamation as it impacts others from our own Jewish context.

### What Context?

It seems to be the "thing to do" in missiological circles these days to speak of contextualization and indigenization. Modern pioneers of contextual and indigenous models like Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson would undoubtedly be thrilled with the current literature on people groups, homogeneous units, and base communities. Another modern pioneer, Roland Allen once remarked to his grandson concerning his own writings on contextual and indigenous missions, "Oh, yes, you can read them by all means—but you won't understand them; I don't think anyone is going to understand them until I've been dead ten years."<sup>1</sup> Certainly Allen would be much encouraged to see the issues concerning which he wrote in 1912<sup>2</sup> being taught in Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth curriculums in our contemporary seminaries.

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<sup>1</sup> Hubert J.B. Allen, *Roland Allen: Pioneer, Priest, and Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962, 1995).

Another pioneer said it this way, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22b). So then, successful evangelism depends on becoming something to some one. This means that we must first correctly identify the context we seek to reach before accommodating our message to reach that context. The first issue is then correct identification of the context. The second issue which follows is adaptation of the message to the context. In international missions this means learning to communicate in the heart language of the people group one desires to reach. In Jewish evangelism, this means learning to communicate in culturally sensitive and appropriate forms which speak to the Jewish heart.

Those who seek to do evangelism out from Messianic congregations must then face two questions:

- 1.) Have we correctly identified the context?
- 2.) Is our communication speaking to the Jewish heart?

It is my suggestion, based on my own research, that for the most part, both these questions can be affirmed in Israeli Messianic congregational life, but not necessarily in American Messianic congregational life. My research suggests that Israeli believers have both correctly identified their context and have successfully accommodated

themselves to that context as reflected in their rapid numerical growth. I would further suggest that many American Messianic congregations, have to a great degree, lost track of the actual nature of the Jewish context in their communities and have become occupied with demonstrating their own Jewishness rather than seeking communication with the Jewish heart.

Someone might ascribe these suggestions to my being an outsider, not really having a good grasp of the Messianic congregational panorama. As I mentioned above, I am an outsider. Being an outsider, however, may allow me a view that others enraptured with the Messianic panorama cannot see. It is in a spirit of concern for effectual witness to my own Jewish people that I present this research, my conclusions, and these hard questions.

### Research Methodology

Beyond general background reading on Messianic Jewish history, I have conducted my research both in person and by means of written surveys. In the United States I have conducted more than twelve personal interviews, visited six congregations, and received back 60 out of 210 surveys mailed out to the leaders of known American Messianic congregations. In Israel, I conducted 18 interviews and

visited five congregations. In both cases, I have made every effort to be exposed to a wide sampling of Messianic life and doctrine, encompassing the issues of Torah observance, spiritual gifts, congregational polity, liturgy, rabbinic authority, and leadership. I realize that what I have seen is only a partial reflection of Messianic reality, but it is a view that any outsider might see. Since it is the outsider that we seek to reach in evangelism, this partial reflection becomes significant.

#### Differences in Contexts

The most significant contextual questions which we might ask about Messianic congregational life in Israel and America revolve around Jewish identity:

- 1.) Who is a Jew?
- 2.) How does a Jew live?
- 3.) What does a Jew do?

The answers to these questions should issue in a contextual Messianic congregational expression in each setting.

In Israel a Jew is just about anyone. Except for those who are of Palestinian background or who are tourists, both of which groups have some obvious characteristics, it is assumed that everyone is Jewish. One does not ask the

question as is common in among Jews worldwide, "You look Jewish and that sounds like a Jewish name; are you Jewish?" It is assumed that if you are living in Israel, it is likely you are a Jew. After all, "Who else would want to live here in this tension and traffic?" This means that the issue of Jewish identity is settled in Israel. Although rabbinic authorities would question the Jewish identity of those who believe in Yeshua, Israeli believers are confident in their identities as Jews. As a number of them said to me,

The rabbis try to tell people that when you believe in Yeshua you are no longer a Jew. But we know we are Jews. We live in Israel. What else could we be? We participate in everyday Israeli life. We speak Hebrew. We celebrate the national Jewish holidays. We serve in the Army. We pay our taxes. We do what all Jews here do, except follow the rulings of modern rabbinic Judaism.

This identity issue is not as clearly defined in the American context. Jewish believers, especially those in Messianic congregations, often find themselves embattled over accusations of the abandonment of their Jewishness. For American Jews, being Jewish is expressed by participation in the life of the synagogue and the Jewish community. American Jewish believers are challenged to prove their Jewishness over and over again. It could be said that for those of us living in America, we have to reprove our Jewishness every time we meet another Jew with whom we desire to share the Gospel.



In America the result is that Messianic Jewish congregations must spend a considerable amount of time and energy in asserting and proving Jewishness. Much of what is done in our congregations is done to symbolize our Jewishness as existing in tandem with our Christianity. One often meets Jewish believers who are much more "Jewish" in their lives as believers than they ever were as non-believers. For many who did not wear them in their youth, the *tallit* and *kippah* have become the symbols of their Jewishness. In my surveys, 70% of the respondents said that keeping kosher, Sabbath observance, and "keeping the Mosaic Law" were *mandatory* for Jewish believers. This was in contrast to those in Israel where only a minority of Jewish believers even mentioned these issues. (Believers who are the most dogmatic about Torah observance in Israel are transplanted Americans.)

For American Jewish believers, it is easy to get the impression that it is Jewish identity as believers which is the focus in evangelistic effort, rather than the identity of Yeshua as the Messiah. I am NOT saying that American believers do not communicate Yeshua as Messiah, but that often the emphasis is on Jewish identity rather than on Yeshua's identity.

How does the Jewish community respond to these two contextual expressions? For the most part, in Israel, as the 1988 Dahaf poll survey revealed, Messianic believers are accepted by most Israelis as Jews and full-fledged members of Jewish society. This is not the case in America. My surveys indicated that where the American Jewish community was aware of the existence of Messianic congregations they were disdained at the worst and ignored at the best. Michael Schiffman's survey showed that only 2% of American Messianic believers had come to faith as a result of Messianic congregational life.<sup>3</sup> My own surveys by 60 Messianic congregational leaders confirmed a similar figure.<sup>4</sup>

The responses I received on my surveys indicate that there is some confusion among Messianic leaders with regard

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Schiffman, *Return of the Remnant: The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism* (Baltimore: Lederer Messianic Publishers, 1992), 163.

<sup>4</sup> I recently did some statistical analysis of 5000 surveys of individual Jewish believers gathered by Jews for Jesus during period from 1986 to 1991. A representative sampling of 300 of these surveys indicated that 6% of Jewish believers came to faith through the agency of a Messianic congregation. Since these surveys were distributed through the Jews for Jesus organization and also through Messianic congregations in communication with that organization, there may be some bias in these numbers in favor of Messianic congregations. Nevertheless, the number of those who have been evangelized through Messianic congregations is small.

to the American Jewish communities they seek to reach. Most indicated that the Jews in their communities were, for the most part secularly oriented and that more religiously oriented Jews would not pay any attention to their Gospel proclamation. The confusion is exhibited in the increasing fealty to rabbinic Jewish observances. Stuart Dauermann, in his recent article in *Missiology*, says that even secular Jews respond to guilt with regard to Jewish observance.<sup>5</sup> He insists that this validates his approach to worship in a Jewish manner. The purpose would appear to be to make faith in Yeshua attractive to the religiously guilt-motivated secular Jew.<sup>6</sup> This makes little sense to me. Doesn't it confuse the legitimate need for Jewish forms of faith expression among Jewish believers with the need for a Gospel hearing for non-believers? Furthermore, is it advisable to base evangelistic method on religious guilt?

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart Dauermann and Fana Spielberg, "Contextualization: Witness and Reflection, Messianic Jews as a Case," *Missiology: An International Review* 25, no. 1 (January 1997): 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. He implies that the purpose of adopting a Messianic style is evangelism, and therefore, we should model our worship on that of the synagogue. But, in the same article he notes most Jews are won through Gentiles in regular churches. One might wonder then if the best way to reach Jews for Yeshua is through the Messianic congregation or through the larger Church as it already exists.

If, as my surveys indicated, the majority of Jews are secular, what is the value of a religiously oriented approach, traditional or otherwise? It seems to me that when Yeshua and his disciples presented the Gospel in a Jewish context that they were interested in communicating life rather than ritual, truth rather than tradition, and love rather than dry orthodoxy. Is this what our American Messianic congregations reflect? To the contrary, my research shows that there is a growing interest in and demand for traditional rabbinic interpretation and observance in Messianic congregations. Can stricter Torah observance lead to life? I doubt Yeshua would answer in the affirmative. Not surprisingly, my research also suggests that the greater the focus on Torah observance and Jewish symbolism, the less evangelistic success is experienced.

Who then is being won to our American Messianic congregations. For the most part, we must admit that the majority of members and leaders of American Messianic congregations are Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> Many of these have little or

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<sup>7</sup> The respondents to my survey confirm this. A 1996 study by Dutch researcher Leon Meier catalogued twenty-three Messianic congregations in Israel with memberships of thirty-five and above. Total membership of the twenty-three congregations was 2,526 with 1,472 (58%) of whom were Jewish by background. According to Meier, of the twenty-three

no formal training in Judaism nor even a rudimentary understanding of Jewish culture. I am NOT saying that Gentiles are not welcome in our congregations. (Far be it from me to build up the walls of partition!) What I am saying is that if we hope to reach Jewish people, we need to be culturally educated and sensitive to the Jewish population we hope to reach. This applies to Jewish and Gentile Messianic believers alike. We need to understand the context and frame our evangelism sensitively within it.

Have you ever turned on television on a Sunday morning and flipped through the various religious broadcasts and come upon the worship of a vibrant African-American congregation? They might be singing and dancing to soul-inspiring music. Certainly your foot begins to tap along with the music. But have you ever seen some big white guy like me up on the platform trying to dance along with them? If looks kind of silly doesn't it? I wonder if sometimes our American Messianic congregational practices don't look silly to those who are genuine members of the Jewish tradition? As Israeli Messianic leader Yosi Shulam says,

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leaders, there were fourteen born Jews, five converted Jews, and four Gentiles.

"Jews see this stuff and they can smell the bacon!"<sup>8</sup> Could it be that we are missing the context, or that we are trying to affect a Jewishness in which our contextual group has no interest?<sup>9</sup>

Am I saying that we shouldn't try to be "Jewish" in trying to reach Jews? Of course not. We must continue to adapt our methods and the vehicle for our Gospel message to contexts. But we must do it in such a way that it can receive a hearing and may facilitate a positive response.

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<sup>8</sup> Yosi Shulam, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 30 January 1997.

<sup>9</sup> A related question is whether a Gentile affecting Judaism for evangelism is contextualization or packaging. Who should determine what is contextual, the preacher or the recipient? Shouldn't we be concerned to allow the recipients of the Gospel message to determine and shape the contextual expression. How contextual is it for a Western Caucasian to go to Africa to explain to Africans how to "do church"? When I went to Africa as a zealous young missionary a wise African pastor said to me, "Don't try to be like us Africans. We don't want you to live like us. We want you to be yourself and tell us about the Jesus you know. We will make him our own, you don't have to do that for us."

Our mission is to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God and then let the recipients worship and "do church" out of their own context. Essentially, what I am advocating is allowing Jewish believers to develop their own worship out of their own faith. But other believers who are used by God as apostles should not shape that context for them. It would be especially odd for Gentiles to tell Jews how to worship as Jews. This is my major objection to the written works of Phil Goble and James Hutchens. They are Gentiles telling Jews how to be Jews!

What is the Problem?

Why is it that Messianic congregational evangelism is working in Israel but not very well in America? I asked that question of a number of Israeli believers familiar with the American scene. Without exception their answer was that the American Messianic congregations were not expressing themselves in a genuinely Jewish manner. They told me that American believers seemed to be so occupied with proving they were still Jewish that they had adopted Jewish mannerisms and practices which were just not "natural" for them. The issue it seems for Americans is not as much being a believer as it is being Jewish as a believer.

Yeshua often prefaced his proclamation with the phrase, "Verily, Verily." We know that this is the translation of the transliterated Hebrew phrase which expresses veracity, faith, and belief. I believe it could be translated "genuinely." What Yeshua communicated was genuinely from the very depth of his being. It was not a costume he wore on Saturday mornings. It was not religious language that he spoke on religious occasions. Yeshua expressed himself with a genuineness that none, not even the religious scholars, could refute.

I believe that if the American Messianic Jewish community could focus on genuinely and forthrightly giving

expression to that which is real, that which comes out of their faith encounter with Yeshua deep within their beings, then whatever form, symbol, or style which was adopted would carry with it the genuine power of God to salvation.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom 1:16 NASV)