

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

Vol. VII, No. 3

© Institute for Christian Economics, 1984

Apr./May, 1984

SOME PROBLEMS WITH "MESSIANIC JUDAISM"

by Gary North

For a quarter of a century or thereabouts, I have been aware of a peculiar group of evangelists who call themselves "messianic Jews." Up until about twenty years ago, I had them confused with converts to Christianity who had come out of Judaism. But as I met more converts from Judaism, I realized that my initial assumption was incorrect. Most of the converts from Judaism whom I have met over the years have been indistinguishable from other Christians sitting in the pews. They may have Jewish last names, but they go about their daily lives pretty much the way the rest of the members of the congregation do. They may have better educations, or more personal drive in their callings, but they are basically plain old run-of-the-mill Christians. No doubt they want to see other Jews converted to Christ, in much the same way that Chinese converts want to see Chinese people converted, or Mexican converts want to see Mexicans converted, but they do not argue that there is a need for some sort of *special* mission to the Jews, as distinguished from any other religious or national group.

In contrast to this sort of formerly Jewish Christians are the self-proclaimed "messianic Jews," also known as "completed Jews." They retain what they regard as important remnants of an older Judaism—not necessarily Old Testament Judaism, but rather Talmudic Judaism. Some of them refuse to write the word, "God." They follow the practice of conservative Jews who write, "G-d" or "L-rd." (God's name is not supposed to be written, say some Jews.) They "keep kosher" in their eating habits: no pork, no fish without scales, no lobster, no shrimp, etc. Some of them rest on Saturday and worship on Sunday. They display the "star of David"—a post-Christian symbol which appeared no earlier than the third century, A.D., and which became common in the Middle Ages—on their book covers, newsletters, and letterheads.

People who designate themselves as messianic Jews are usually found in Christian circles that are pro-Zionist, meaning dispensational circles. This pro-Zionism is not based on a careful analysis of the pros and cons of the Middle East foreign policy options available to the United States. These Christian Zionists claim that the national self-interest of the United States in supporting Israel is based solely on Genesis 12:2-3: "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing; And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

The Remnant of Israel

The problem with interpreting these verses in this way is Paul's letter to the Galatians. He calls the church "the Israel

of God." The context of his remarks is significant: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature [creation]. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (6:15-16). He argues specifically that the "seed" to which the promise was made through Abraham was Christ, not the physical descendants of Abraham: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He said not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (3:16). **We inherit the promise through Christ.**

Paul made a distinction between physical (genetic) Israel and the true Israel of biblical faith. As he wrote to the church at Rome, "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel. Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the seed of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Romans 9:6b-7). "According as it is written, God hath given them a spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, unto this day" (Romans 11:8).

This does not mean that the Jews have been cast off forever as a people. Paul's teaching in Romans 11 specifically says that **at some point in the future, the Jews will be restored to the covenant through faith in Christ.** "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy" (v. 11). Their conversion will bring an **era of great blessing** to the Gentile converts to Christ: "Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?" (v. 12). Again, "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" (v. 15). (I recommend John Murray's exegesis of Romans 9-11 in his book, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965].)

So we have to say that God has preserved a remnant of genetic or historic Israel for His own special purposes. Murray writes: "The 'receiving' is contrasted with the 'casting away' and must, therefore, mean the reception of Israel again into the favor and blessing of God. In terms of the whole passage, as noted repeatedly, this must refer to Israel as a whole and implies that this restoration is commensurate in scale with Israel's rejection, the restoration of the mass of Israel in contrast to the 'casting off.' Again the accent falls on the action of God, in this case that of grace in contrast to judgment, and on the changed attitude of God to the mass of Israel. This restoration of Israel will have a marked bene-

ficial effect, described as 'life from the dead.' Whatever this result may be it must denote a blessing far surpassing in its proportions anything that previously obtained in the unfolding of God's counsel" (pp. 81-82).

It is the rediscovery of this interpretation of Romans 11 which has probably been most responsible for the revival of postmillennialism since 1965. A similar exegesis is provided in Iain Murray's book, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), ch. 4. This was a common view among the Puritans in the seventeenth century, and among Presbyterians in the nineteenth, as Hodge's commentary indicates.

For 20 years I have been a believer in the future conversion of large numbers of the genetic heirs of Old Testament Israel. It is basic to my whole worldview. Why, then, am I suspicious about the messianic Jew movement? Why do I disagree with them in their call for a special missionary effort to Jews, when I know that the Jews, biblically speaking, are very special historically, both in the past and the future?

There are several reasons. First, we are not sure just who today is an heir of "genetic Israel." (The problem of the Khazars: see below.) Second, there is no indication that this genetic remnant of Israel is specially connected to the nation-state of Israel. Third, there is no indication in the New Testament that the church was or is to single out any racial or national group as the object of special concern in evangelism. In short, "all souls are equal, and none is more equal than others."

A Market for "Messianic Entrepreneurs"

In "pop" dispensationalism, Jews also have a very special place in the eschatological scheme of things. The problem is, dispensationalists have focused on national Israel rather than genetic or historic Israel. Dispensationalists believe in a millennial establishment of a uniquely Jewish kingdom in Palestine, where the Temple will be rebuilt and the burnt offerings restored (as a "memorial": Scofield's note, *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 890), yet all under the auspices of Jesus, who will live and reign in person here on earth for a thousand years. All the prophecies of Israel will be fulfilled, they say, during this "mixed system" of a Jewish-Christian millennium.

Now, if the character of the coming millennium is going to be uniquely Jewish in character, then don't messianic Jews have a system closer to that which will prevail during the promised age of blessings? Aren't they therefore in a unique position to teach the Christians about the age to come? Aren't they, in effect, the forerunners of a better world? Shouldn't we encourage them to experiment in the creation of a new "Hebrew-Christian" liturgical system? Shouldn't we Gentiles be more jealous of them than the unconverted Jews are about us? The popular interpretation of the "mission to the Jews" is that Jews who are converted to Christ are somehow very special, as agents back into the Jewish community, but also as forerunners.

Why Paul should have discussed the future jealousy of the Jews is a mystery for dispensationalism. At the time of their mass conversion to faith in Christ, the dispensationalist believes, Jews will not be jealous of the Christian Gentiles, who will have been "raptured" into heaven seven years before the millennium begins (or immediately before the millennium, in the posttribulational dispensational scheme). What Jews in the millennial era will more likely be jealous of is not the Gentiles' present version of Christianity, but a worship system which resembles the mixed (or mixed-up) liturgies dreamed up by the messianic Jews of our day.

You can see why "messianic Judaism" appeals to dispensational fundamentalists. And I do mean "appeals." They watch Zola Levitt on their Christian T.V. channel, and see all about modern Jewish practices in Israel. They hear lectures

at their churches by visiting messianic Jews. They attend prayer breakfasts for Israel that are co-sponsored by various messianic Jewish organizations. And occasionally they get hit with "the pitch."

Recently, I was treated to a classic example of "the pitch." Because you may someday receive a fund-raising appeal along the lines I received, I thought it might be useful for you to see my response. If you think Ronald Sider is the master of guilt-manipulation, in the name of the State, consider a letter to me from a "rabbi" from Australia. I will not use his real name. The name I chose for him is a lot closer to the reality.

This particular messianic Jew is "working a new market": the Theonomists, or pro-Old Testament law group within the Christian world (I am a member). So his pitch is not the more familiar one used by dispensational messianic Jews. His appeal to me was also stronger (more blatant) than what you may encounter. But it is illuminating. A reminder: you are a steward of your funds. Don't waste them.

* * * * *

Dr. Joseph ben Hustle
Australia

Dear Joe:

I realize that you sign your name "Rabbi," but I have difficulties in using this term to address you, since you claim to be a Christian. A rabbi is a teacher in a synagogue. Jesus warned His followers: "Be ye not called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matt. 23:8).

You point out that you have written four personal fund-raising appeal letters to me in the last year, but that I have answered none of them. This obviously has disturbed you, as your subsequent comments indicate. You do mention at the very end of your letter that you had sent all four letters to me at the address of another organization. Unfortunately, I haven't been connected with that organization in over two years. I received only your fourth letter, in which you asked my opinions on the sabbath and the quartodeciman controversy of the early church. The quartodeciman controversy over the day on which Passover took place and therefore the day on which Easter should be celebrated, is sufficiently obscure so that I've only read a few pages on it in my life, and have forgotten almost everything. You say you prefer Nisan 14; I prefer not celebrating Easter at all. But I turned over your question about the sabbath to James Jordan, our resident liturgy expert, and he sent you an answer with documentation, which you have yet to acknowledge.

You also asked for free books. I didn't send any. So you let me have it in your letter of March 3:

After writing to you since last year, four consecutive letters, in the name of the [such & such] Messianic Synagogue . . . of which I am the spiritual leader, and having received no answer from you, and further, hearing the comments other Christian brothers make about you, I have finally decided to write a last letter to you, to express our anger and the frustration that we feel in this side of the world towards our wealthier super-spiritual brethren in the U.S.

It's great to know that my reputation has spread to the "land down under." I must be famous (or infamous).

You continue to refer to the coming judgment on me from "G-d" and "L-rd." I am a bit confused about this. When Paul, Peter, and other New Testament writers wrote "theos," they didn't write "th-os." When Old Testament writers wrote "YHWH" and "elohim," they left out no letters. Talmudists leave out letters. Are you a Talmudist? A *Christian* Talmudist-rabbi? My Talmudic Jewish friends would be

amused at all this.

You say that you have been persecuted as a Christian missionary in Spain, even suffering prison. You have therefore done well. You also claim that charismatic Christians "who are reputable members of their churches" in Australia put explosives into your car because you preached a theonomic gospel favorable to God's law. You need to come to America; here charismatics subscribe to ICE materials. I begin to wonder: 1) if "crazy" charismatics really did what you say; and 2) even if they did, it may be because of the way you presented your case. After reading your letter, I might be tempted myself in a moment of weakness to put some explosives in your car.

I know; all you wanted was a little help from me, as you say in your latest letter. Not much—just a few items:

We asked for your help, out of the kindness of your heart and compassion towards poor missionary brethren, to purchase a small second hand word processor, a small second hand photo-copier, and a small second-hand duplicator, so that we could print a small periodical at a very cheap price, to interested people, and all our parliamentarians. And not only this, to launch a small layman college. . . .

Not much for starters, right? But I didn't send you what you wanted, sight-unseen, just because you say that you have two earned doctorates. So now you're outraged—not just with me, but with America. Yes, evil old America, tight-fisted old America—dirty, filthy, rich old America:

We sent as well a couple of letters to Fairfax Christian School, asking for some free literature, but because we can't pay, and can not afford at the present time to pay for anything, we were left as heathen and denied any help at all. No wonder this country is so hostile towards anything that smells American. The common slogan circulating here is "IF YOU CAN'T PAY YOU HAVE NO GOSPIR." My dear brother, have you not read that the Apostles who were all Jewish, by the way, preached the Gospel, lectured from the Torah, all of this free to the Goyim, while heavily subsidized from other Hebrew-Christian Congregations (2 Corinthians 11:8)? Sometimes I ask, when is it, that our Gentile Messianic believers decide to start repaying at least some of the debt that they owe to our Jewish Messianic ancestors who at great expense and with great sacrifice gave the Gospel to you? When are American Christians going to learn and read about sacrifice, about giving, which obviously was the characteristic of the early Jewish Christian believers?

Joe, you may not have read R. J. Rushdoony's book, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* or Chilton's *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators*. You need to. They have a message for you. However, I think you should buy them. It will be good for your soul.

Now, let's look at your specific statements. First, the Australians you know despise America. Could this hatred be in any way related to their socialism, which you criticize? Could this hatred be an aspect of a humanistic culture based on envy? And could it be—just possibly—that some of their thinking has affected your thinking?

As I read my New Testament, I find no mention of any sacrifices made by "Hebrew-Christian" congregations. What I read about in 1 Corinthians 16 is the collection Paul took from the churches in Galatia in order to support desperate Christians in Jerusalem!

Yes, I am happy that Christians who had been converted out of Judaism in the first century took the message of

Christ's gospel to Gentiles who hadn't heard the message. It was because of the **ethical rebellion of the Hebrews** that the kingdom was taken away from them in the first place, as Jesus had warned them (Matt. 21:43). So the converted Apostles were simply doing what they were told, namely, to preach the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:18-20), which is what all Christians have always been told to do. It wasn't that the Apostles were Jewish; it was that **they had stopped being Jewish**, that led them to preach the gospel, and got them in so much trouble with the Jews. It's a good example for you to follow, too, I think.

Now, about this debt which we Gentiles owe your ancestors. First, this business about posthumous debt is beginning to grate on me. I was told back in the late 1960's that I owed the Congress of Racial Equality money, as a white taxpayer, for all the evils of pre-1865 slavery. But I didn't own any slaves. As far as I know, neither did my ancestors. Today some American Indians are trying to get back the state of Maine because whites violated treaties with them 150 years ago. Where does all this end? I know: when this sort of fund-raising appeal stops getting any checks. (It's a good thing that there are no Canaanites around these days, or they would make life miserable for Jews with endless whining about the terrible way Joshua treated them.)

You mentioned your ancestors. **Which** ancestors? Do you mean the genetic Israelites who persecuted the prophets, crucified Christ, murdered Stephen, and whose Temple was destroyed by God by means of the Roman legions in 70 A.D.? No? Well, then, you must mean the early Christian missionaries who were genetically connected to the people who were persecuting them.

Are you a Sephardic Jew? It makes a difference, since the vast majority of Jews today are Ashkenazic Jews from Eastern Europe and unconnected genetically with the Old Testament Israelites. Their ancestors didn't persecute the prophets or early Christians, since they were late converts to Judaism.

Few Christians are aware that most Jews are the descendants of a warlike Turkic-language people, the Khazars, whose national leader converted the whole nation to Judaism sometime around 740 A.D. The story received some attention in the United States in the late 1970's as a result of the book by Arthur Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe: The Khazar Empire and Its Heritage* (New York: Random House, 1976). Other historians who have discussed the subject include J. B. Bury, Arnold Toynbee, S. W. Baron, Paul Eric Kahle, Bonn University's orientalist, until he escaped from the Nazis and went to Oxford University (earning two additional doctorates), and who died in 1965, and his student D. M. Dunlop (Columbia University's orientalist) who wrote *The History of the Jewish Khazars* (Princeton University Press, 1954).

Chapter two of Koestler's book tells of this national religious conversion. Caught between the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Arab Empire, and bordering southern Russia, the Khazars had a problem. Convert to either major religion, and there would be wars with the faithful of the other. As Koestler writes: "What could have been more logical than to embrace a third creed, which was uncommitted towards either of the two, yet represented the venerable foundation of both? The apparent logic of the decision is of course due to the deceptive clarity of hindsight. In reality, the conversion to Judaism required an act of genius" (p. 59). It was a **political** decision.

It was out of the defeat of the Khazar kingdom by the Russians in 965 that the Eastern European or Ashkenazi Jews were born. The Khazars retained some independence until the thirteenth century, but they steadily migrated into Russia, Hungary, and Poland. In contrast, the Sephardic

Jews, who were located in Spain (*Sepharad* in Hebrew) were of the original "genetic stock" of ancient Israel.

You must know all about this, Joe. Since you were in Spain, perhaps you are Sephardic, which makes your claim of being a descendant of the Old Testament Jews more believable. But you must understand that any supposed debt by Christians to most Jews is non-existent; the fact that a nation south of Russia adopted Judaism 1200 years ago really has nothing to do with Christian obligations, real or imagined, to the genetic descendants of the Apostles, let alone their persecutors.

You end your letter with some sort of warning to me:

Don't worry my brother. Someday there will be a judgment before the presence of our Maker, from which nothing is hidden, or excuses made for failure to render aid. You who preach against humanism, finally when it comes to the crunch of the matter succumbs to the very evil you preach against by absolving yourself from any legal obligation to be at least a Good Samaritan. We sincerely pray, that the L-rd All Mighty, take no account of your attitude against us, as the Scriptures state, that "IT IS A FEARFUL THING TO FALL INTO THE HANDS OF THE LIVING G-D" (Heb. 10:31).

We are very sorry, and apologize to you for any inconveniences we may have caused to you, and humbly ask that you forgive us, as we forgive you.

Rabbi Dr. ben H.

Actually, Joe, your letter was no inconvenience at all. After all, I'm getting an issue of *Biblical Economics Today* out of it. And I'm certainly cheered that the "L-rd G-d of Israel" will hear your (plural) prayer that He forgive me. Funny thing, though: when I looked up the verse you cited from the Book of Hebrews, both in English and Greek, there was no mention of "G-d." There was only a reference to God (*theou*). Of course, that's just the New Testament talking. But (strangely enough) we find the same problem with the Old Testament.

Joe, there are other problems. First, I have a problem with your guilt-manipulation. Second, I have a problem with writing checks to people who tell me they have a ministry but who offer no proof of any kind of ministry. Third, I have a problem with your attitude—that I owe you something, or that American Christians owe you something, or for that matter, that American Christian Jews owe you something. I refer here to your complaint: "Of course, our Jewish brethren in the U.S., entangled themselves, up to their noses, with a very arminian and Charismatic Gospel, have refused to support this mission for obvious theological reasons." No, Joe, I don't think your "theonomic" theology is the problem. I think they have detected a problem in your techniques of fund-raising. I know I have.

You should understand that I tithe. This makes me nearly immune to guilt-manipulation. This is one of the most important side-effects of tithing. It eliminates any "legal obligation,"

as you put it, on my part to support your ministry. It certainly removes my "legal obligation" to give, as you put it, *sacrificially*. Sacrificial giving—giving beyond the tithe—is strictly the option of the giver; the beggar has no claim of any sort upon a tither's assets. (See my essay, "Tithers and Beggars," *Biblical Economics Today* [June/July, 1983]; I'm enclosing a copy, since you have asked me to send you free literature.)

It's a strange thing. I get no letters from Chinese Christians telling me I owe their ministries free books, or even free rice. Yet Taiwan is poorer than Australia, and most Chinese ministers don't have two earned doctorates as a capital base the way you do. They can't find employment teaching, the way you can. Instead, they are building independent, self-supporting churches. Japanese Christians never plead with me to repay any debts I owe to them for, say, dropping the atomic bomb. But you write:

Can you imagine Rabbi Paul writing to Jerusalem, asking for some literature, and perhaps a helper, and James answering, sorry, if you can't pay, we can't deliver. Or what about James, asking to Rabbi Saul for some money for the hungry in Jerusalem, and Rabbi Saul, answering: sorry, why don't you do some tents as I have done? My dear brother, isn't this crazy? Isn't this even blasphemous?

This is all so new to me. I was unaware that Paul was a rabbi, or that Saul was, too. But I do remember that Paul stated specifically that he deliberately went out on his first missionary journey for three years without contacting the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:16-18)—or asking for support. Then he stayed away for 14 years (Gal. 2:1). Pretty smart: prove yourself to the skeptics first, and then work with them later on. He *did* work as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Also not a bad idea: retain your independence from any unwarranted pressures from those who are financing you—always a threat. (See my essay, "Sugar Daddies," *Biblical Economics Today* [June/July 1982], also enclosed.)

In conclusion, I would feel a lot better about sending books, a word processor, and a photocopy machine to you—let alone helping you set up a laymen's college—if you would show me that you really have some sort of operating ministry going. Send a brochure, financial statement, or something. It would also impress me if you would stop using a "star of David" on your letterhead, if you would start writing about God rather than G-d, and if you would assure me that you and your congregation are worshipping Christ on Sundays (the day of worship and rest for Christians). I'd also like to know that you no longer celebrate Passover, and that you have dropped all this "rabbi" business. In short, Joe, I help support several Christian ministries, and I also generally get along well personally with Jews. It's this theological halfway house stuff—your "messianic Judaism"—that I think is nonsensical. When you make up your mind to drop your excess theological baggage, let me know.

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