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Straddling the Boundary: Messianic Judaism and the Construction of Culture

by
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ABSTRACT

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Messianic Jews assert that one can be Jewish and also believe in Jesus Christ. They claim a continuous tradition originating with the disciples of Jesus, who were all practicing Jews and believers. However, a survey of the development of Messianic Judaism shows that there is no continuous tradition. Messianic Judaism is more accurately considered the result of social forces such as Protestant missions to the Jews, the counterculture movement, and the resurgence of Jewish ethnic identity after the 1967 war.

In mixing Jewish heritage and Christian belief, Messianic Jews obscure the Jewish/Christian boundary. This thesis analyses the construction of culture within the framework of that boundary. Field methods were employed to gain insight into two Messianic communities. In considering these groups, particular attention is given to the roles of history and ritual in the mediation of ethnic boundaries and the shaping of a viable Messianic Jewish identity.
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INTRODUCTION

We recognize that Jewish people (physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob) who place their faith in Israel's Messiah, Yeshua, continue to be Jewish according to the Scriptures. We observe and celebrate the Jewish Holy Days given by God to Israel, with their fulfillment in and through the Messiah Yeshua. We believe that true "Biblical Judaism," the faith of first century believers, which we seek to practice, acknowledges the continuity of faith in the one true God, revealed throughout the Scriptures, and ultimately manifested in God's Son, Yeshua the Messiah.¹

Messianic Jews affirm that one can be Jewish and at the same time believe that Jesus is the true Messiah. In asserting this conviction, Messianic Jews deny the existence of the boundary that, for so many people, categorically divides Judaism and Christianity into two distinct religions and peoples. Can one retain Jewish ethnic identity in light of Christian belief? Messianic Jews would like to stand on both sides of the Jewish/Christian divide. How do they legitimate this position? How do they build and maintain a genuine Messianic Jewish identity?

This study assumes a constructionist view, i.e., that individuals and groups make choices in the ways in which they define themselves so that "ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures, are negotiated, defined, and produced

through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities. We are constantly renegotiating our "models of and for reality." Newer religious groups are especially concerned with negotiating their ethnic models as they seek to legitimate their novel system of culture. Newer groups reveal the fact that ethnic options are not limitless. The ability to select from the array of cultural resources is limited by the categories dictated by external forces. In other words, the construction of identity has a dual nature: it is created internally and also imposed by others. Between these two designations of identity, we find the boundary.

The boundary encloses elements, which for certain purposes are considered more like each other than different. Consequently, it defines who is a member and who is not. We can see then, why boundaries are so important in retaining a cohesive identity. Where boundaries are indistinct, we are not sure with whom we are allied. Groups maintain strong boundaries in a variety of ways that help to reinforce distinctions. Boundaries are, in any case, communally constructed.

Boundaries help us to classify the external world. When this system of classification is made unclear, i.e., when an item or person does not fit neatly into one category or another, our social order is threatened. Mary Douglas

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6 Nagel, 154.
explains that such entities blur the line between the pure and the impure.\(^7\) Marginal roles can be very powerful and society reacts to subdue that ambiguous power. Where society sees ambiguous roles as dangerous, groups react by strengthening their boundaries.

How do groups construct boundaries and the cultural material that they encircle? How do groups legitimate the identity they fashion? To answer these questions fully is beyond the scope of this study. However, we will use them as guides in understanding the construction of culture in a particular social phenomenon known as Messianic Judaism.

**Introduction to Messianic Judaism**

A vital messianic hope has always existed as a current within the Jewish religion. Countless messianic movements have emerged from the depths of this dynamic expectation. Messianic Judaism is a largely American phenomenon that has developed out of such messianic drives. Messianic Jews claim that their origins can be traced back to the emergence of Christianity as a sect within Judaism. That Jesus and his disciples all practiced Judaism legitimates, for Messianic Jews, the belief that one does not need to stop being Jewish in order to believe that Jesus is the true messiah. Although the founding of Christianity surely provides the legitimation for the Jewish Christian movement, as we will see, there is no direct link between the first Jewish Christians and the modern organization of Messianic Judaism. Messianic Judaism is more accurately seen

as the result of various social forces including Protestant missions to the Jews, the ethos of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, and the resurgence of Jewish ethnic identity during that same decade.

The history of Messianic Judaism’s development reflects a constant struggle with identity. As the messianic movement became institutionalized into organizational forms, members were ambivalent about the connection that Messianic Judaism would have with established denominations. Moreover, uneasiness with the Jewish/Christian boundary resulted in a constant indecisiveness concerning how Jewish Messianic Judaism should be. These dilemmas, spanning the history of Messianic Judaism, are apparent in the ambivalence that still marks the Messianic Jewish identity today.

The first Jewish Christians were the disciples of Jesus. They were born Jewish, practiced Judaism, and believed that Jesus was the Messiah. At the time, believing that Jesus was the Messiah did not remove one from the Jewish community.⁸ A decisive break between Judaism and Christianity did not occur until around 70 CE, and possibly as late as the Bar Kochba revolt in 135 CE.⁹ Until this schism, an individual of Jewish descent could accept Christian doctrine without necessarily having to withdraw from the Jewish community. Even after the two groups split, there were still those who straddled the boundary between Judaism and Christianity. Early church writings tell of various Jewish Christian

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groups such as the Ebionites and Nazarenes.\textsuperscript{10} These groups, however, had largely disappeared by the seventh century.\textsuperscript{11}

Here we find a gap in the historical chain. Some evidence of sporadic attempts to organize a Jewish Christian faith exists. In Spain, for instance, some Jews who were converted to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries tried to merge their Jewish background with their Christian faith. Other groups in Italy and Germany attempted similar combinations of the two religions. None of these, however, provides a direct link between the original Jewish Christians and modern Messianic groups.

The development of Christian humanism and the Protestant Reformation brought more positive evaluations of Jews and Judaism into the Christian discourse. Protestant leaders developed a renewed interest in Hebrew language and Jewish custom. Christian scholars used Hebrew in their quest for accurate translations of the Old Testament and also, surprisingly, they used rabbinic sources to interpret the New Testament and to examine central Christian doctrine.\textsuperscript{12} With this new appreciation of Judaism, conversion by force was replaced with non-violent efforts to evangelize the Jews through the word.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica III 27, 2 and Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho the Jew 46, 1.
\textsuperscript{11} A.G. Fruchtenbaum, Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 1983), 47.
The organized effort to evangelize the Jews was heightened in the
nineteenth century by a variety of forces. For one, these efforts were tied to a
larger undertaking to “Christianize” the world in the nineteenth century. In
addition, the nineteenth century saw many new Jewish immigrants coming into
the United States. This new immigrant population provided a plentiful field for
missionary endeavor. The traditional missions approach, offering job training
and schooling as a prelude to salvation, was attractive to these new immigrants
who were seeking a better life in America.

The widespread acceptance of premillennial dispensationalism among
conservative evangelicals was a driving force to the new missions’ effort.
Formulated by John Nelson Darby in Great Britain and popularized in the United
States by C.J. Scofield in his *Reference Bible*, dispensationalism theorized a
pattern of historic change that informed Biblical interpretation and placed all of
human history under the supernatural hand of God. Each dispensation, or age,
was characterized by a mode of relationship between God and humanity, one
which humanity failed to keep. At the end of each epoch, humankind
disappointed a loving God. According to the dispensational map, the time from
Abraham to the year 70 CE constituted the “Times of the Jews.” After the Jews
rejected Jesus and the Second Temple was destroyed, God turned to the
Gentiles to bring them into relationship with Him through Jesus. This shift

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postponed indefinitely Jesus’ Second Coming. However, ancient Biblical promises would be fulfilled. The people of Israel would begin to come back to Israel in “unbelief,” signaling the beginning of the Last Days. Soon the Antichrist would grip the world in the Great Tribulation, culminating in a decisive Middle Eastern battle between the forces of good and evil and resulting in Jesus’ Second Coming, the coming of the Jewish people to faith in Jesus, and to the Jewish rule of a peaceful world from Jerusalem for a one-thousand-year reign.

The Bible schools and conferences based on this theology supported Zionism as a harbinger of the End of Days. Jews were certainly more open to a salvation message that affirmed the central role of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. Timothy Weber noted, “Eventually, nearly every major American city that had a substantial Jewish population had some kind of evangelical witness to the Jews, most of whom were either founded or at least heavily supported by premillennialists.” Those Jews who converted to Christianity became exemplars of the saved Jew who would take the lead spiritual role during the Millennium.

These missions mark the first stage in the direct line of the development of Messianic Judaism. In this stage, the Messianic movement was spawned by the established evangelical churches seeking to convert the Jews. An important figure in this movement was Joseph Frey, who founded the ASMCJ, “The

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16 Weber, 141-2.
American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews.” Although the
ASMCJ only lasted for a few decades, it had a lasting impact on the missions to
the Jews. Frey set up missions in Jewish neighborhoods, using Jewish converts
almost exclusively as the missionaries and agents of the ASMCJ. This approach
encouraged Jews to retain elements of their own culture. Jews who accepted
Christianity under Frey’s missions were referred to as “completed” rather than
“converted,” a distinction that is still used in Messianic Judaism today.18

As its development progressed, Jewish converts began to organize the
Jewish Christian movement, although still under the control of the established
denominations. At the end of the nineteenth century, Leopold Cohn, a Jewish
convert, founded the “American Board of Missions to the Jews.” Cohn followed a
similar approach to that of Frey and estimated that he converted over one
thousand Jews.19 In 1898, Cohn also began publishing a periodical, The Chosen
People, which is still in circulation today. Both Cohn’s and Frey’s missions, as
well as the other similar organizations at the time, were aimed at routing Jewish
converts into the network of established Christian churches. In other words,
there was no attempt to create an organization of Jewish Christian groups apart
from these established churches.20 This reality was due, in large part, to the fact
that these missions were funded by fundamentalist churches that disapproved of
rebuilding such a partition in the body of believers.21

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20 Daniel Fuchs, How to Reach the Jews for Christ (New York: American Board of Missions to the
21 Eph. 2:14, “For he is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in
his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the barrier of enmity which separated them.”
Although the Christian establishment frowned upon the idea of a distinct Jewish Christian organization, the lack of such a group posed problems for the complete conversion of Jews. Because of hostility directed at the Jewish converts from both the Christian community, in the form of anti-Semitism in the churches, and the Jewish community, who viewed the converts as traitors, Jewish converts to Christianity perceived that they could not integrate fully into either established churches or synagogues.  

Moreover, the Christian missions often used Jewish Christians as missionaries within the Jewish community. In order to be most effective at witnessing to the Jews, the leaders often asked the Jewish Christians to retain their Jewish identity.

Jewish Christians felt the need to stand separate and in 1915, the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America (HCAA) was formally established. Originally, this alliance was associated with traditional missions to the Jews, but the focus gradually shifted toward a unique Hebrew Christian identity. One explanation for this shift is that during this time, the 1920’s, Jews were wealthier and therefore less responsive to the approach of traditional missions which focused on providing social services such as job training, schooling and medical care.

Of central concern within the HCAA was the extent to which they should adhere to Jewish practice. Early on, the movement struggled with the Jewish Christian identity. How Jewish should a Jewish Christian faith be? In 1917,

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22 Fruchtenbaum, 91.  
Mark John Levy, one of the founders of the HCAA, presented a paper in which he called for Hebrew Christians to observe some of the Jewish holidays. Levy believed that Protestant denominations were restricting Hebrew Christian religious worship. Practicing certain Jewish traditions, infused with the appropriate Christological interpretation, according to Levy, would result in a more unified Hebrew Christian identity. At the HCAA conference, the members rejected Levy's proposal by an overwhelming margin. While the founding of the HCAA reflected the desire to stand apart from mainstream Protestant denominations, the rejection of Levy's proposal reflected the uncertainty with the "Jewishness" of the Jewish Christian identity.

The ambivalence toward creating a Jewish Christian identity apart from the mainstream Protestant denominations is evident in the development of Jewish Christian congregations. In 1922, John Zacher founded the Hebrew Christian Synagogue of Philadelphia in order to gain Hebrew Christian independence from Gentile denominational control. In the 1950's, the Presbyterian Church gave permission for the founding of three Hebrew Christian congregations: First Hebrew Christian Church of Chicago, Beth Messiah in Philadelphia, and Beth Emmanuel in Baltimore. While presumably attempting to gain independence from Protestant churches, these early Hebrew Christian

27 Winer, 106-112.
congregations maintained an essentially Protestant form of worship. The Jewish influence in these groups was seen primarily in the use of iconography such as the seven-branched menorah and the words Yeshua Ha-Mashiach (Hebrew for “Jesus the Messiah”) written on the walls and podiums. The use of limited Jewish symbolism alongside a form of worship comparable to the established Protestant churches reflects the members’ continued struggle with the Jewish Christian identity. Wanting to be unique, they end up creating something ostensibly indistinct from that which they separated.

The members were attempting to create a Jewish Christian identity, but were still uncomfortable with “Judaizing” the faith, especially given that these groups were funded and overseen by mainstream church authorities who would certainly frown on anything that seemed “too Jewish.” Harris-Shapiro suggests that it is also important to understand that in the 1950’s and 60’s, the majority of the people involved in the Hebrew Christian movement were second generation immigrants. She explains that in the history of American Judaism, the second generation has often been more assimilated than the first. The Hebrew Christians, like their Jewish contemporaries, bought into the “melting pot” philosophy that it was good to be Jewish, but not too Jewish.\(^{30}\)

The counterculture movement of the 1960’s marks the turning point in the development of Messianic Judaism. The counterculture had a major impact on

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\(^{29}\) Winer, 23.

the face of American religion. Many young people found themselves attracted to unusual religions such as the Hare Krishna, Maharaja, etc. One of these groups was the Jesus people, who combined fundamentalism, evangelism and countercultural style. Rausch explains that a factor in the upsurge of the Jesus people movement was the evangelical response to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. For many evangelical Christians, Israel's victory confirmed their prophetic expectations about Israel. It seemed as if it were time, as foretold by Scriptures, for 144,000 Jewish evangelists to come forward and actively work to convert the Jews. Thus, among many evangelicals, there was a new dynamic interest in the Jewish people. This interest, tied to end-time prophesies, was part of the Jesus people revival.

The events of 1967 also had a profound impact on the American Jewish community. The war encouraged new loyalties toward Israel and the Jewish people. Many American Jews began to search for religious meaning and to reconstruct an ethnic Jewish identity. It was within this atmosphere of evangelical commitment amongst Christians and a search for meaning amongst Jews that the group Jews for Jesus emerged. Its founder, Moishe Rosen, himself a Jewish convert and a former missionary with the American Board of Missions to the Jews, adopted the evangelistic style of the Jesus people to reach out to Jews in the counterculture hotbed of San Francisco. Rosen was very

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32 Rausch, _Messianic Judaism_, 73.
successful at getting youth involved in the Hebrew Christian movement, which had previously been comprised of mostly middle-aged people.\textsuperscript{34}

This youth revival began to spread throughout Hebrew Christianity. Groups that had once been organized by the established churches were now being revitalized and thoroughly changed by a grass-roots movement from amongst the people. Beginning in 1965, a youth branch of the HCAA saw rapid growth and brought many young converts into the movement. This youth movement sparked the development of Jewish style in the congregation as the counterculture interest in ethnicity caused many of the young converts to reexamine Jewish ethnic identity. At a meeting of the Young Hebrew Christian Alliance in 1970, members used the word “Yeshua” rather than “Jesus.”\textsuperscript{35} The move toward more Jewish practice made Christian denominations uncomfortable, which in turn added an impetus to create a more autonomous movement.

Because of this more aggressive stance toward Jewish culture, the youth in the movement sought a name change that would reflect their strong identification with Judaism. In June 1975, the name change was passed and the organization was to now be called the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA).\textsuperscript{36} The name change reflected a definite desire to be free from denominational control. The movement, now called Messianic Judaism had

\textsuperscript{34} Harris-Shapiro, \textit{Messianic Judaism}, 24.
\textsuperscript{35} Harris-Shapiro, \textit{Messianic Judaism}, 26.
\textsuperscript{36} Winer, 56.
developed into something entirely different from the Protestant worship services sprinkled with Jewish symbolism that had marked the initial stage of the HCAA.

Starting in the 1970's, Messianic synagogues began to flourish. This growth provoked the formation of a congregational group known as the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations. The size of these congregations varies, as does the composition of the membership. Messianic Judaism, while originally meant to serve Jewish converts to Christianity, is also home to many Gentile Christians who enjoy expressing their belief through Jewish ethnic practice and symbolism. The presence of a large Gentile population has been a major problem for Messianic Jewish identity because it limits the extent to which they can claim the "Jewishness" of the movement. As we will see, this has led to a social structure in which those who were born Jewish are given a higher status than the Gentile membership.

Torn between Jewish ethnic ties and Christian faith, Messianic Jews work to find a balance. The way in which Messianic groups achieve that balance varies from synagogue to synagogue. In some Messianic groups, much more traditional Jewish symbolism is found than in others. Each group engages in its own struggle with the Jewish Christian identity.

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38 see Schiffman, *Return of the Remnant*.
40 Feher, 61.
Dilemmas of Ethnography

In order to gain insight into Messianic Judaism, I employed ethnographic methods of analysis in two Messianic synagogues – Congregation Beth Yeshua in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Beth Yeshua Hamashiach in Houston, Texas. Recently the ethnographic method has come under much criticism. Researchers who spent time amongst a people, collected data, and when safely settled back at home, wrote up the data as narrative, have been criticized for masking the subjective and aspiring for an unattainable scientific neutrality.41

The concept of ethnography has had to change in order to be sensitive to the influences of subjectivity and cultural setting on research. This new understanding, sometimes called the postmodern ethnographic approach, leads to substantive challenges of the validity of ethnographic study. The ethnographer is called upon to deconstruct his assumptions about reality. Truth becomes a relative term, as there is not one truth, but rather many truths.

In light of such criticisms, why do I still choose to use an ethnographic method? Participant observation is still the only real method of inquiry that allows the researcher to get close to a community of people. As Messianic Jews are a relatively unknown group of people, I felt it necessary to interact with them and to experience their community in order to comprehend their distinctiveness. However, I am aware that my version of the “truth” behind Messianic Judaism may be very different from the “truth” that another researcher might discover.

do not think that this awareness invalidates my research; truth can be additive rather than exclusive.

Participant Observation

In order to avoid both ethical\textsuperscript{42} and logistical problems with covert investigation, I informed both congregations of the fact that I was conducting research. The nature of the groups that I studied eliminated many of the problems that result when groups know they are being studied. Although the members were aware of the fact that I was conducting research, nevertheless, the evangelical character of Messianic Judaism led many to witness to me and treat me as if I was a potential proselyte. One member of the Philadelphia congregation said to me, "You may think you have come here to do research, but we know God brought you here." As Richard Mitchell has noted, "Qualitative researchers . . . may seek to represent themselves in one manner or another . . . , but subjects can and usually do reinterpret, transform, or sometimes altogether reject these presentations in favor of their own."\textsuperscript{43}

Buford Junker has proposed four possible roles for the researching who conducts fieldwork: complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer.\textsuperscript{44} These roles describe the extent to which the researcher interacts with the group being studied. Whenever an outsider

\textsuperscript{42} For instance, Martin Baumer, Social Research Ethics (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982).
\textsuperscript{44} Buford Junker, Field Work: An Introduction to the Social Sciences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
goes into the field, it is nearly impossible to be a complete participant or a complete observer. One cannot be a complete participant precisely because of the outsider status, and one cannot be a complete observer because if the researcher is in the field, a total lack of interaction is virtually unattainable. In most cases, the researcher will fall between these two poles as a participant-as-observer or an observer-as-participant.\textsuperscript{45} My role as a researcher would best be described as an observer-as-participant. While I did interact with the communities by attending group functions, my participation was limited by my lack of faith in Messianic Judaism. It would be unethical, I felt, to participate in any activities in which my participation would be viewed by the group as an act of belief.

In addition to attending worship services and other congregation events, much of the information that I gathered was accumulated through what Lofland and Lofland refer to as “intensive interviewing.”

Intensive interviewing, also known as “unstructured interviewing,” is a guided conversation whose goal is to elicit from the interviewee (usually referred to as the “informant”) rich, detailed materials that can be used in qualitative analysis. In contrast to “structured interviewing” (such as opinion polling), where the goal is to elicit choices between alternative answers to preformed questions on a topic or situation, the intensive interview seeks to discover the informant’s experience of a particular topic or situation.\textsuperscript{46}

On rare occasion did I actually sit down and formally interview group members, however countless informal conversations elicited valuable information.


In light of postmodern ethnography's demand for awareness of subjectivity, it is important to reflect on how my individuality as the researcher may have shaped this study. I do not doubt that the fact that I am Jewish and have a Jewish-sounding name played a part in my being accepted as a researcher in these two communities. Had a non-Jewish researcher attempted this project, the same acceptance probably would not have been granted. Moreover, my Jewish background certainly shaped my observations and assumptions. I was more likely to notice the appropriations of Jewish ritual and Jewish history than the Christian correlate. While I tried to be conscious of this bias and made efforts to study the Christian elements, I cannot say that I was able to give them equal weight.

In my conversations with group members, I employed David Gordon's notion of "empathic disagreement." I did not openly disagree with congregants, probably for fear of confrontation, but instead probed them on their beliefs. Of course, my beliefs or disbeliefs were probably obvious in the questions that I asked and in my inability to participate fully in congregation life.

The Present Study

The Messianic Jewish identity, like all cultural identities, is an intricate combination of historical claims, ritual behavior, ethnic symbols, and religious

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beliefs, aggregated by the struggle to maintain uniqueness. Particular to Messianic Judaism is the attempt to construct a unique identity within the context of historically explicit boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. How this cultural construction is accomplished and the consequent difficulties are the subject of the present study.

Chapter One will look at the role of history in collective identity, especially in the Jewish collective identity. Messianic Jews use history and collective identity both as means for identifying with dominant institutions and as grounds for dissension. A shared history is an important part of an ethnic group’s identity and therefore, in order to maintain connections with both Judaism and Christianity, Messianic Jews must somehow incorporate Jewish and Christian history into their own. In identifying with some aspects of Jewish and Christian history, and distancing themselves from others, Messianic Jews attempt to create a tradition that legitimates their religious beliefs and breaks down the Jewish/Christian boundary. However, as we will see, the ambivalence that marked the development of Messianic Judaism still endures today and the construction of the Messianic Jewish identity is not without its inconsistencies.

Chapter Two looks at the subject of ritual. Observations from fieldwork that I conducted in two Messianic communities will be presented, along with analysis of what these observations reveal about the role of ritual in the construction of culture. Ritual is a salient part of any community; it binds the individuals together. Ritual, in Messianic synagogues, reflects the desire to connect with the Jewish community by appropriating Jewish ritual forms.
However, as we will see, the significance that permeates the Jewish form is replaced with Christian or Messianic meaning. Can a ritual be Jewish if its meaning is transposed? These altered rituals serve as religious and communal boundaries; they reflect a limit in the identifications with Judaism and Christianity.
CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY, COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND BOUNDARIES

In establishing a unique community, Messianic Jews appropriate components of the collective memory and ethnic identity of traditional Judaism, particularly in its modern American manifestation. In addition, Messianic Jews construct boundaries in order to distinguish themselves from the culture whose elements they adopt. Before looking at how and why this is accomplished, understanding what we mean by the terms “collective memory” and “ethnic identity” is of considerable usefulness.

“Collective memory” in its simplest sense, is the social context for individual memory; it suggests that memory, though a mental act, is not entirely personal. Members of a society share notions about the past that in turn shape their present condition.48 As Amos Funkenstein writes, “No memory, not even the most intimate and personal, can be isolated from the social context, from the language and the symbolic system molded by society over centuries.”49 The context of collective memory and shared notions about the past forms the fabric

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of our beliefs about our community and ourselves; therefore, it plays a fundamental role in group identity. For instance, we often hear of generation identities such as that of "Generation X" or the "Baby Boom Generation" formed as a result of shared notions about the experience of their youth.\footnote{Irwin –Zarecka, 54.} Collective memory is not formed only by common experience but also implies a shared sense about the meaning and relevance of those common experiences.\footnote{Stephen C. Craig and Stephen Earl Bennet, eds., After the Boom: The Politics of Generation X (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).}

"Ethnic identity" refers to the attributes that an individual shares in common with other individuals along with whom he is set off from yet other individuals. As George De Vos explains, "Ethnic identity requires the maintenance of sufficiently consistent behavior to enable others to place an individual or a group in some category, thus permitting appropriate interactive behavior."\footnote{George De Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1975), 374.} Here "others" are defining the ethnic group. However, we know that ethnic groups also take part in defining their own identities. Ethnic identity has another dual nature in that it refers to a group’s identity and also the individual’s identification with that group. These are not necessarily synonymous. One’s identification as a member of the Jewish people is not necessarily coterminous with the identity of the Jewish people at large. Fluidity is also a central aspect of ethnic identity, as social interaction can affect the degree to which certain attributes set individuals apart. In other words, the placement of ethnic boundaries can shift.\footnote{Frederick Barth, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries.}
Who is a Jew?

A problem in the delineation of ethnic identity is determining which definition is appropriate. In other words, who decides who is a member of a given ethnic group and who is not? For the Jewish people, this has been a constant dilemma. Defining group membership is crucial for the maintenance of clear boundaries. Because Jewish people have almost always lived as a minority group, the need for clear boundaries is imperative to the struggle against assimilation into the majority culture. So, who is a Jew?

The first place to look for such an answer must come from the definitions provided by Jewish religious law ("halacha"). The definition provided by halacha is the reference point in considering all other varying definitions. Simon Herman suggests that all other definitions, no matter how liberal or innovative, inevitably refer to the extent to which they approximate or diverge from the halachic definition. According to Jewish law, a person is a Jew if born to a Jewish mother or if one has converted to Judaism under the prescribed procedures. Identification with the Jewish people or faith in the Jewish religion is not enough to make a person Jewish. But also note that one does not cease to be Jewish through identifying with another religion or from a lack of faith in Judaism. If a person is born to a Jewish mother, he is a Jew regardless of his belief system.

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Clearly, the halachic definition is problematic in a pluralistic society. A child of a Jewish mother who is detached from anything pertaining to the Jewish religion is considered to be more Jewish than the child of a Jewish father and Gentile mother who is an observant believer in Jewish law. Acknowledging this problem, denominations that are more liberal have recognized someone as Jewish if they are the child of at least one Jewish parent, whether that parent is the mother or the father.\textsuperscript{57} More important to the present study are modifications to the premise that one does not cease to be Jewish by identifying with another religion.

In 1963, the Israel Supreme Court rendered a decision that would have profound effects on the subject. Oswald Rufeisen was the son of two Jewish parents in Poland and was raised and educated as a Jew. Pursued by the Nazis during World War II, he found refuge in a convent and while there, converted to Christianity. After the war, he desired to live in Israel with his monastic order. The question facing the Court was whether Rufeisen could be considered a Jew under the Law of Return.\textsuperscript{58} The Court recognized that Rufeisen’s conversion did not obliterate his Jewishness. Under certain circumstances, he could be considered Jewish, i.e., if he were to eventually regain faith in Judaism, he would not need to convert back to Judaism in order to be considered Jewish. However,

\textsuperscript{57} Rabbi’s Manual, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1961, 112.
\textsuperscript{58} The Law of Return affirms the right of all Jews to settle in Israel without having to make special application. The decisions regarding to whom this law applies have been central in defining Jewish membership.
the decision went on to say that, “a Jew who has become a Christian is not
deemed a Jew.” 59 Justice Landau continued:

A Jew who, by changing his religion, severs himself from the national past
of his people, ceases therefore to be a Jew . . . . He has denied his
national past, and can no longer be fully integrated into the organized
body of the Jewish community as such. By changing his religion, he has
erected a barrier between himself and his brother Jews. 60

Noteworthy in Landau’s words is the centrality that history and community play in
the notion of the Jewish people. The national past is continuous in the Jewish
people, and severed by those who convert. Moreover, Landau recognizes that
where there is conversion, there is a crossing over of boundaries, thereby
placing the individual on the other side of a wall that protects the Jewish identity.

**Jewish Identity and the Role of History**

History is an important part of any communal identity. The notion of
belonging to a people has a horizontal or communal component and also a
vertical or historical dimension. History is especially important in Jewish life; the
imperative to "remember" is repeated throughout the Bible. 61 The uniqueness of
the Jewish people has always been grounded in Divine-Jewish encounters that
took place, not in a mythical realm, but in history. In the nineteenth century,
according to Yerushalmi, history takes a most crucial role in the Jewish identity.

59 A.F. Landau and P. Elfman, eds., *Selected Judgements of the Supreme Court of Israel*
(Jerusalem: Ministry of Justice, 1971), 11.
60 Landau and Elfman, 22.
He writes, "history becomes what it had never been before – the faith of the fallen Jews. For the first time history, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism."62 The survival of the Jews through the ordeals of the Middle Ages and the terrors of the Holocaust designate a special destiny that serves as a secular substitute for choseness. Jews could find a transcendent meaning to their lives in the history of their people.

Amos Funkenstein also asserts the central role of history in the identity of the Jewish people. He argues that Jews have never taken themselves for granted. Any group in such a precarious situation has to be self-reflective. A concern with their own history, Funkenstein suggests, is the form of Jewish self-reflection.63

Messianic Judaism and Jewish Collective Identity

In affirming their Jewishness, Messianic Jews identify with many aspects of Jewish history. Because history is such an integral part of the modern Jewish identity, Messianic Jews must integrate this history into their communities in order to legitimate the Jewish components of their ethnic identity. However, as we will see, some aspects of Jewish history are easier to integrate than others. The boundaries that have traditionally separated Judaism and Christianity have been built largely through historical events. Messianic Jews struggle to affirm

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61 For example, "Remember the days of old, consider the years of age past" (Deut. 32:7) and "Remember these things, O Jacob, for you, O Israel, are My servant; I have fashioned you, you are My servant; O Israel, never forget Me" (Is. 44:21).

their ties to Jewish history in a world in which Jewish history and the belief in Jesus are often discordant.

The Role of Israel

Ever since the disbursement of the Jews in the Diaspora, the longing for the return to Israel has served as a crucial theme in Jewish religion and peoplehood. Messianic hopes have almost always accompanied the desire for the homeland. Today, Jews are nearly unanimous in their pro-Israel sentiments. After the Holocaust, Jews see the existence of Israel as a necessity. The condition of Jews in the Diaspora, culminating in the Holocaust, proves the essentiality of Israel for Jewish survival. While most American Jews do not intend to move to Israel, there is no shortage of interest in visiting Israel, supporting Israel financially or involvement in Israeli political matters. While many Jews would not claim to adhere to staunch Zionist ideology, being pro-Israel is a prominent element of being a modern Jew.

Israel also plays a central role in being a Messianic Jew. For Messianic Jews, Israel is symbolic of God’s power in history. Like the Zionism that created the State of Israel, Messianic Jews see their religion as an attempt to pioneer a return of the people to their roots. Zionism and Messianic Judaism are then two

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62 Funkenstein, 3.
66 Bershtel and Graubard, 134.
parts of a whole and are therefore profoundly bound to each other. As Harris-Shapiro writes:

If Israel is weakened or destroyed, if the physical side of the revival fails, the spiritual side, Messianic Judaism, could become vulnerable. Thus, more so than evangelicals, even more so than many American Jews, Messianic believers need a strong, healthy Israel to sustain their identity. ⁶⁸

While Messianic Jews and American Jews view the role of Israel quite differently, their ensuing actions are fairly similar. Messianic Jews often travel to Israel, support Israeli institutions financially and integrate Israeli culture into their own. The gift shops at Messianic synagogues abound with items from Israel and Messianic newsletters often print articles about Zionism and Israel.⁶⁹

While the understanding of Zionism as a revolution in Jewish life is quite congruent with Messianic belief, there are parts of Zionism that are problematic. Zionism certainly reflects a revolution in that it liberated Jews from the chains of the Diaspora, but Zionist ideology also stresses continuity. Zionism centers around one people, the Jewish people, with a common history and destiny.⁷⁰

Although Messianic Jews would like to say that they share in the common history of the Jewish people, their own beliefs contradict such a contention. Messianic Jews must reject much of the history of the Jewish people. When formal boundaries developed between Judaism and Christianity, believers in Jesus

⁶⁸ Harris-Shapiro, Messianic Judaism, 129.
⁷⁰ Herman, 122.
went on one path through time and Jews went on another. By identifying with Zionist ideology, Messianic Jews are identifying with a continuous tradition of which they cannot fully be a part.

The Holocaust and Christian Anti-Semitism

The problem of historical discontinuity is nowhere more apparent than in the attitudes that Jews and Messianic Jews hold regarding the Holocaust. Along with the founding of the State of Israel, the Holocaust has been one of the most important historical events to shape the modern Jewish identity. Many Jews alive today know someone who lost family in the Holocaust; many are themselves descendants of Holocaust survivors. However, regardless of their direct relationship to Holocaust survivors, most Jews identify with those who died in the genocide and affirm the profound need to remember the Holocaust. Moreover, Hitler's desire to wipe out the Jewish people leads Jews to reaffirm their Jewish identity. As Emil Fackenheim suggests, we are not to grant Hitler posthumous victories. A quick survey of articles in Jewish journals and topics of Jewish lectures will reveal the central role given to Holocaust in the Jewish community.

Messianic Jews also identify with those who died in the camps.

Shoshanah Feher reports that several of her Messianic Jewish interviewees

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spoke of the Holocaust as central to their identity in that if they were alive at the
time, they too would have been shipped off to the gas chambers.\textsuperscript{74} Here we see
a clear ethnic identification with the Jewish people. This strong connection is
contradicted by the fact that Messianic Jews do not identify with the Holocaust as
an important event. Harris-Shapiro revealed that the congregation that she
studied did not commemorate the Holocaust in any formal way. Moreover, the
Holocaust was not taught in any of the educational programs for children or
adults.\textsuperscript{75}

How can a group that so strongly identifies with the Jewish people not
connect with the profound nature of an event such as the Holocaust? The
problem for Messianic Jews is that the Holocaust does not fit into their
theological framework in the same way as it does for American Jews. Many
Messianic Jews uphold the belief that the Holocaust served as punishment for
Jewish rejection of Jesus.\textsuperscript{76} Moreover, Messianic Jews believe that a person
who dies before being saved is damned to hell.\textsuperscript{77} It would be difficult to view
Holocaust victims as martyrs under this light.

Holocaust rhetoric is often used in the dialogue between Messianic Jews
and the American Jewish community. Jews who see the Holocaust as a direct
result of Christian anti-Semitism cannot understand how Jews could turn to a

\textsuperscript{73} Emil Fackenheim, \textit{God's Presence in History} (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997).
\textsuperscript{74} Shoshanah Feher, \textit{Passing Over Easter}, 77.
\textsuperscript{75} Harris-Shapiro, “Syncretism or Struggle,” 255.
\textsuperscript{77} John 3:36, “Whoever puts his faith in the Son has eternal life. Whoever disobedys the Son will
not see that life; God's wrath rests upon him.”
religion so antithetical to their own. To believe in Jesus, for them, means siding with the perpetrators. In addition, the Jewish community has often claimed that by attempting to convert Jews and thereby wiping out the Jewish religion, Messianic Jews are “finishing Hitler’s job.” Messianic Jews use Holocaust imagery as well. Harris-Shapiro explains that Messianic Jews use the yellow star image to suggest that they are cut off from Jewish society just as Jews were cut off from European society during WWII.

The Holocaust, as the climax of anti-Semitic trends, symbolizes the strong boundary between Jew and non-Jew. All Jews become victims and all non-Jews perpetrators. At times, Messianic Jews identify with the victims, but their own theology dictates that the victims are damned. With this loosened identification, the Messianic Jews inevitable cast themselves as perpetrators. It is no wonder, then, that Messianic Jews cannot identify with the history of the Holocaust. The combination of mixed feelings about the victims and negative claims from Jewish communities leads Messianic Jews to detach themselves from this central aspect of Jewish identity.

Immigrant Culture and Symbolic Ethnicity

One area of the modern Jewish experience with which Messianic Jews can comfortably identify is that of the immigrant experience and the romanticizing

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of the "old country." Films such as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Yentl* have made this appropriation easier because they present a picture of Eastern Europe in which the hostilities between Jew and Gentile are all but omitted. Thus, this segment of Jewish history is unproblematic for the Messianic Jew and they can readily incorporate it into their Messianic identity. Many Messianic Jews fill their homes with "old country" artwork and often speak fondly about their grandparents' experiences in the shtetls of Eastern Europe.

The most obvious way that Messianic Jews identify with the shtetl culture is through their use of the Yiddish language. Speaking with Messianic Jews, one often hears "Yiddishisms" sprinkled throughout their speech. Yiddish words are often scattered in Rabbis' sermons. For instance, in one sermon that I heard at a Messianic congregation in Houston, the rabbi spoke of the need to attract more people to the group by appealing for the members to get more *tuchises* (rear ends) into the empty seats. Even Messianic Jews of Sephardic descent use Yiddish rather than Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) in their conversations. Many scholars have pointed to language as the most effective attribute for maintaining ethnic group solidarity. Eric Hobsbawm writes, "What of language? Is it not the very essence of what distinguishes one people from another, 'us' from 'them.'" Anya Peterson Royce has noted that when a group is attempting to strengthen or recreate their identity, one of the first strategies is to revive an ethnic

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81 Feher, *Passing over Easter*, 77.
language. An example of the use of this strategy is the revival of Hebrew as the language for the State of Israel.

There is no question that a common language is effective in unifying a group, but Messianic Jews do not use Yiddish as their principal language. For them, the use of Yiddish is more congruous with the theory of Mary Waters who noted that for the generations born in America, the use of foreign language does not represent a linguistic tool, but rather evokes nostalgic memories. Often what remains of the ancestors' foreign language are the silly phrases that are found sprinkled in with English speech. Here, the use of Yiddish as a link to the past is an example of what Herbert Gans refers to as "symbolic ethnicity." Symbolic ethnicity is a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation or that of the old country. It is a desire to return or appeal to this imagined past conveniently cleansed of its complexities. Here, the experience of the shtetl is removed from the context of Gentile/Jewish hostilities and remembered joyfully through the use of "Yiddishisms."

**Messianic Judaism and Christian Collective Identity**

Messianic Jews identify ethnically with Judaism, however they also identify with Christians through what they refer to as the Body of the Messiah.

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Christian theology makes the unity of all believers in Christ a central tenet of its belief system\textsuperscript{66} and Messianic Jews subscribe to this notion. Part of the identification with Christian communities stems from their part in the development of Messianic Judaism.

The most obvious way in which Messianic Jews relate with the larger Christian community is in their theological perspective. Messianic Jews are biblical literalists and believe in a "normal" interpretation of the Bible. That is, one must regard the words of the biblical text, just as they stand, as the correct and sufficient sense of the passage unless the context demands another interpretation. Unless the context suggests otherwise, all events recorded in the Bible are seen as literal historical occurrences. Miracles actually occurred; predicted events will take place.

Like the mainstream of the Fundamentalist-Evangelical Movement, most Messianic Jews are "pre-tribulation" premillennialists. There are some Messianic Jews, however, that ascribe to "mid-trib" or "post-trib" eschatology in which believers live through all or part of the tribulation period. David Rausch suggests that these views result from the emphasis on association with the Jewish people. If the Jewish people will suffer through the tribulation, so too will Messianic Jews. Whatever the cost, they are willing to assert their "Jewishness."\textsuperscript{67} The variance between "pre-trib," "mid-trib," and "post-trib" views, reflects an uncertainty as to with whom Messianic Jews should be most solidly aligned. Where does the

\textsuperscript{66} Galatians 3:28, "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus."

\textsuperscript{67} Rausch, \textit{Messianic Judaism}, 131.
boundary lie: between believers and non-believers or between Jews and Gentiles?

Because of the ideological associations with Gentile Christianity, it is not surprising that Messianic Jews have trouble seeing Gentile Christians as the "other." Carol Harris-Shapiro conducted a study in which she asked various Messianic Jews the following question: "We are Messianic Jews, they are _________." Many respondents were reluctant to give clear answers. Nevertheless, while many filled in the blank by opposing themselves to traditional Judaism, none explicitly cited Gentile Christianity as being opposed to Messianic Judaism. One respondent resisted the opposition of Gentile Christianity saying, "Anybody who’s a believer, I mean he might not be a Messianic Jew, but we’re brothers and sisters in the Lord. It’s not like we’re better or worse or similar or different."90 Here the respondent draws a boundary around believers in the Lord; the unity that arises from being a believer is stronger than the differences that demarcate one denomination from another.

Socially, Messianic Jews are also connected with Evangelical Christianity. This fact is reflected in the education of members' children. Most Messianic Jews either homeschool their children or send them to Christian schools associated with evangelical churches." Connections are also seen through the use of Christian devotional and popular culture. Many of the study guides used

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90 Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*, 87-88.
91 Feher, *Passing over Easter*, 87.
in Messianic groups are produced by Christian publishing companies such as Bethany House, NavPress, and Tyndale House.\textsuperscript{92}

Anti-Semitism and the Rejection of Jewish Roots

While they identify theologically, politically and socially with Evangelical Christianity, Messianic Jews need to draw a boundary between themselves and the larger evangelical community if they desire to remain a unique entity. The changing of the name from "Hebrew Christianity" to "Messianic Judaism" was originally a declaration of independence from the larger Christian context. Today the name still marks the difference that signifies the Messianic Jewish community. Messianic Jews distance themselves from what they see as the "Pagan trappings" in Christianity. A woman at the congregation that I studied in Philadelphia explained to me that the symbol of the cross and the veneration of saints amounted to idol worship.

The long history of Christian anti-Semitism and the rejection of Christianity's Jewish roots are two themes that divide Messianic Jews from the Christian mainstream. Affirming the Jewish roots of the belief in Jesus and the rejection of anti-Semitic imagery are both expressed in the concealment of obvious Christian imagery and terminology. Messianic Jews accomplish this, in part, through the use of Hebrew terms.

\textsuperscript{92} Feher, \textit{Passing Over Easter}, 88.
The use of Hebrew terms serves two purposes; first, both Jews and Protestants view Hebrew as a language of Jewish authenticity. By referring to Jesus as “Yeshua,” Paul as “Rabbi Shaul,” and the New Testament as “Brit Chadasha,” Messianic Jews affirm the Jewish roots of their faith. In addition, the use of Hebrew also allows the Messianic believers to eliminate conspicuous Christian terminology and symbolism. Central to the Messianic ideology is a disdain for Christian symbolism; Christian symbolism reminds Messianic Jews of centuries of Christian rejection of Jewish ethnicity. Messianic Rabbi Yeshayahu Heiliczer writes, “the inclusion of paganism, anti-Jewishness and anti-Semitism by most of the "Church Fathers" ever since Constantine proves that it is the work of HaSatan (Satan), not YHVH (God).” As Heiliczer notes, it is not just the rejection of Jewishness but also a history of blatant anti-Semitism in the Church that offends Messianic Jews. David Rausch writes, “When we consider that church Fathers wrote letters tilted with hatred, that Hebrew Christians were forced to persecute the Jewish community to prove their allegiance to Christianity, and that Crusaders marched around a mass of burning Jews in a synagogue and sang ‘Christ We Adore Thee,’ the word ‘Christian’ takes on a tearful connotation.” For these reasons, one will almost never find a cross hanging in a Messianic synagogue, nor around the neck of a Messianic believer.

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The use of Hebrew terms is not supposed to be just a replacement, but rather serves to inject the term with Jewish meaning that displaces the Christian meaning. But one must wonder how effective this is, given that the rabbi at Beth Yeshua Hamashiach seemed to use the names “Jesus” and “Yeshua” as if they were interchangeable, rather than affirming the value in using the Hebrew name. Harris-Shapiro astutely reflects on the issue when she says, “Certainly, anyone familiar with standard Christian terminology would hear in the word ‘tree’ instead of ‘cross,’ and ‘B’rit Hadasha’ instead of ‘New Testament,’ that underlying struggle with identity.”

The Saving Remnant and the Rejection of History

In order to reconcile identifications with Jewish and Christian concepts of history, Messianic Jews look to the first century believers. The early church serves as a governing metaphor to create a sense of historical continuity. Tracing the early church and noting Jewish Christians that may have lived through the centuries, Messianic Jews attempt to create a contiguous lineage with roots in antiquity. Although the historical evidence for a continuous Jewish Christian past, as we have seen, is sketchy at best, Messianic Jews rely on the notion of the “saving remnant” to complete the chain.

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96 Harris-Shapiro, “Syncretism or Struggle,” 296.
97 Chernoff, 3.
The Prophet Isaiah first pledged that a “saving remnant” of Jews would forever persist to assure Jewish continuity. Messianic Jews have appropriated this concept, applying it to themselves. The notion of Messianic Jews as the remnant is evident in the title of a book well known in Messianic circles, Return of the Remnant: The Rebirth of Messianic Judaism, by Michael Schiffman. Schiffman argues that around the fifth century, pressures from both Judaism and Christianity “squeezed out Messianic Judaism as a viable option.” However, Messianic scholars believe that a small group of Hebrew Christians always existed. Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a popular Messianic scholar, argues that it was because of this Hebrew Christian remnant that God did not permit the success of the many attempts to wipe out the Jewish people. The remnant is the part of the nation of Israel that is faithful to the revelation of God; it is the minority of Jews who truly believe.

It is through this notion of the saving remnant and its foundation in antiquity that Messianic Jews attempt to create continuity and historical authenticity. Eric Hobsbawm refers to this “attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past” as the “invention of tradition.” He writes that, “insofar as there is such a reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious.”

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98 Bershtel and Graubard, 4.
99 Schiffman, Return of the Remnant, 25.
100 Fruchtenbaum, 30-31.
102 Hobsbawm, “Inventing Tradition,” 2.
However, this is not just true for Messianic Jews. Hobsbawm suggests that any group that claims an unbroken tradition has created a “fiction.” Here “fiction” does not mean that the tradition is false or fabricated, but rather that there is no such thing as an “unbroken tradition.” Many Jewish scholars have dealt with this issue. Jacob Staub and Rebecca Alpert, two Reconstructionist Rabbis, have made the following statement:

We adamantly reject the version of Jewish history that suggests there has always existed a normative, halakhic Judaism that has survived unchanged despite the challenges of Jewish heretics in every generation. A careful look at Jewish history reveals the fact that Jews have been divided in every generation. Every period of our history has been witness to competing interpretations of Judaism, whose advocates condemned one another. It has never been possible, in advance, to determine which groups would emerge victorious to tell the tale.

It is problematic to point to one version of history, the Messianic version, and say that it is false – a fiction - when we do not have one authentic version of history from which to argue. If all claims at historical authenticity are fictions, we must simply look at how a specific version of history might meet the needs of a given group. In the case of Messianic Jews, the version of history to which they subscribe serves to legitimate the claim to Jewish roots. Moreover, society tends to give priority to traditions that can lay claim to a remote origin. The more ancient the roots, the more valid the tradition. By claiming a link to the believers of the first century, Messianic Jews strive to validate their present community.

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105 Cohen, 99.
Much of this discussion has focused on ethnic identification and boundaries. What boundaries are drawn between Messianic Judaism and American Judaism or Christianity? It is interesting to note that in identifying with the first century church, Messianic Jews are drawing another boundary – this one drawn on history itself. Especially when considering the history of the Middle Ages, Messianic Jews take a very negative stance. Jewish and Christian history, they believe, created an artificial division between Judaism and Christianity. Harris-Shapiro quotes a member saying:

You had the rabbis going off this way, the Greek-speaking church going off this way, and what Messianic Judaism is, to my mind, is the repudiation of the medieval period, just forget the medieval period and get the people back to the Word of God.  

By locating their historical roots at a point before this “artificial division” occurred, Messianic Jews hope to blur the boundary. They assert that there is no reason, other than the illusory rupture in history, that one cannot straddle the boundary, drawing from the cultures of both Judaism and Christianity. It is possible, they assert, to be Jewish and believe in Yeshua the Messiah.

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CHAPTER TWO

RITUAL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURE

Ritual has a profound role in the construction of culture and ethnic boundaries. Ritual provides groups with the stuff that pervades the cultural space and also marks distinction.\textsuperscript{107} We can look at a set of rituals – perhaps birth rituals – and reflect on the manner in which they are performed in this group and that group. In addition, we can also differentiate between groups, based on small differences in the ritual form. However, we must also realize that ritual is a symbolic form, needing interpretation. It is therefore, imprecise and can mean different things to different people. As Anthony Cohen writes, scholars “were long ago cautioned against confusing similarity of form with similarity of its substance.”\textsuperscript{108} This warning is crucial in the study of Messianic Jewish ritual. As we try to ascertain how the Messianic identity is constructed through ritual, we must not be too quick to seek direct referents in Jewish or Christian ritual without first examining the significance of the ritual for the believer.

Role of Ritual in Jewish Collective Identity

Ritual, like history, is a principal component of the Jewish collective identity. In fact, the roles of ritual and history are interrelated. It is through ritual

\textsuperscript{107} Cohen, 50-63.
\textsuperscript{108} Cohen, 42.
that Jews adhere to the commandment to “remember.”¹⁰⁹ In ritual, participants reenact the past and make it present. The Passover Seder is a helpful example of ritual’s ability to invoke history. Central to the seder ritual is the retelling of the Exodus from Egypt. While the story is narrated, each Jew is to look upon himself as if he had come forth from Egypt – the Exodus of the Jews is his Exodus.¹¹⁰ The ritual of the seder, performed every year by Jews around the world, serves to commemorate the original event, linking the past to the present in a symbolic text.¹¹¹ Messianic Jews understand the importance of ritual in the maintenance of communal identity and unity. Through these performative acts, they endeavor to connect themselves with the Jewish world, past and present. The following sections present the observations from my fieldwork at two Messianic synagogues – one in Philadelphia and the other in Houston - in which I focus on the ritual performed at Shabbat worship services.

**Congregation Beth Yeshua**

Congregation Beth Yeshua is located in Overbrook Park, a community on the Western side of Philadelphia. The neighborhood is mostly low-income and the houses in the area show the effects of years of neglect. Beth Yeshua is the largest and best kept building in the vicinity. The congregation is unusual in that

¹⁰⁹ Yerushalmi, 7.
¹¹⁰ Mishnah *Pesahim* 10:5.
it owns its own building. Most Messianic congregations gather in rented spaces, often spaces owned by local churches. That Beth Yeshua has its own building is evidence of the fact that it is one of the more established congregations. The following are my observations of a typical Shabbat service at Beth Yeshua.

Upon entering the building, I find myself in a small lobby where two men are chatting as they hand red booklets to the men and women who have come for services. I follow the others into the sanctuary, a large hexagonal room in which about two hundred people are milling around, greeting one another. Many rows of black chairs are facing the bimah (stage). On the bimah, a lectern sits adorned with a large golden Star of David. I notice, beside the bimah, a set-up for a band: drums, keyboard, microphones, amplifiers, etc. Above the band set-up, a mural hangs on which the words “Possessing the land” appear above an embroidered skyline of the Old City of Jerusalem. All the other walls are bare, just painted white.

Eventually, four men and two women make their way over to the band set-up and begin tuning their instruments. At about the same time, a young woman with dark brown hair picks up one of the microphones and announces the beginning of the service. She then yells out “Praise the Lord” and the room fills with loud, joyful music. The woman calls out the name of a song and everyone begins to sing. Most seem to know the tune and words by heart, although a few are intently looking at the screen on which the words are projected. All around me, men and women are swaying back and forth with their arms raised to the ceiling. A woman who had been sitting a few rows in front of me kicks off her
shoes and begins to dance in the area between the front row of seats and the bimah. One by one, women (only women) join her in dancing. They perform an intricate dance that appears to be in the style of modern Israeli dance. When this song is over, another song begins and the women perform another dance. Each song seems to have its own dance with complex steps.

The band plays song after song. Some have a very Jewish sound to them although they are all sung in English with only a few Hebrew words here and there. Some of the other songs sound like the gospel songs one would hear in a typical Southern Baptist church. When the congregation sings these songs, no formal dancing occurs and the women who had been dancing return to their seats. At their seats, they do continue to dance in place and raise their hands in the air. Many have their eyes closed with intense looks on their faces, while others are smiling and laughing.

The succession of songs lasts for a good portion of the three-hour service. When that section of the service is finished, the rabbi speaks for a few moments about the blessing that comes from tithing, and ushers pass around a basket for the offering. I notice that almost everyone puts an offering into the basket and a few busybodies look to see who is giving and who is not.

When the congregants have placed all of their envelopes into the basket, the rabbi calls a couple up to the bimah. The woman lights two candles, circles the candles three times with her hands, covers her eyes and recites, "Baruch ata adonai, eloheynu melech haolam, asher kidshenu bidvaro v'natan lanu Yeshua mishichenu, v'tzivanu 'hiot or leolam. Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the
Universe, who sanctified us by your Word, given us Yeshua our Messiah and commanded us to be a light to the nations.” The man then recites, “Yeshua stood and cried out, saying ‘If man is thirsty, let him come and drink. He who believes in Me,’ as the Scripture says, ‘from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’” He then sings the tradition Hebrew Kiddush (sanctifying the Sabbath over the wine). The man then rips a piece off a hallah and says, “Yeshua said to them ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.’” He then consumes the bit of hallah.

The rabbi begins his sermon. The sermon consists of verses from the Old Testament and New Testament (they refer to it in Hebrew as the Brit Chadashah) woven together to form a theme. Typical themes are the importance of prayer and spiritual growth, the coming revival and the urgency of sharing the word with unsaved Jews. Members of the congregation come to services with their own copy of the Bible and during the sermon, many of them highlight certain passages and also take notes in a separate notebook.

The sermon lasts for about forty-five minutes. After the sermon, the rabbi or another congregation leader makes announcements about upcoming events, members of the congregation who are ill, or anything else that is pertinent. He then asks the congregation if any other announcements or news need to be shared. This is the invitation for testimonies. Members of the congregation, if they choose, stand up and speak about their experiences as a believer in Yeshua. Sometimes a member will speak about his recent experience with
finding Yeshua. Others speak about how their belief in Yeshua has enriched their lives. One week, a woman spoke about her husband who had been given three months to live. Their doctor had made this prognosis over ten months before the day she spoke and she felt that it was their prayers that had given him this extra time. After the announcements and testimonies, the rabbi concludes the service with a short prayer.

Shabbat at Beth Yeshua Hamashiach Messianic Synagogue

Beth Yeshua Hamashiach is located on the grounds of the Sharpstown Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. As I walk from my car into the synagogue, a white pick-up truck pulls up to the entrance. On the back of the truck is a bumper sticker that reads: “My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter.” From the truck, a man and a woman emerge, both dressed in T-shirts and jeans. I follow them into a room attached to the main church building. Inside, ten or fifteen people are greeting one another. Two young girls are running around and hiding under the chairs. Approximately one hundred chairs are facing the pulpit. A lectern sits at the front of the room. To the left of the lectern, three microphones are set up along with a keyboard. Above the lectern, two brightly colored pieces of fabric adorn the wall. The fabric is decorated with Hebrew letters that spell out the words “Yeshua” and “Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh” (Holy, Holy, Holy). I notice that the room must have been a gym at one time because the parquet floor still displays the lines of a basketball court. As the beginning of the service draws
near, quite a few more people arrive, including about eight African-Americans, and sit down amongst the chairs.

I look around and notice that some people are dressed quite casually while others are more formal in their appearance. A man sitting a few rows in front of me is wearing a T-shirt with the words “Ask me about the Messiah” written on the front and “www.chosenpeople.com” on the back. One of the African-American women is wearing a traditional African ensemble. The two rabbis are both wearing formal shirts and ties and their wives are dressed up in formal skirt and blouse outfits. Many of the men are wearing kippot (skullcaps) and tallit (prayer shawls).

The worship service begins with the sounding of the shofar. A short woman with blonde hair approaches the lectern and welcomes the congregation. She talks for a few minutes about her commitment to Yeshua and about resting in the joy of the Sabbath. She then asks us all to greet our neighbors. At this time everyone gets up and walks around the room saying hello and “Shabbat Shalom.” The young children in the congregation seem particularly to enjoy this time as they run around giving hugs to all the adults.

After about fifteen minutes of greeting each other, four men walk to the front of the room. The rabbi asks that the children also make their way to the front of the room for the Blessing over the Children. The four men each take a

112 The shofar is a ram’s horn that makes a deep blare when blown into like a trumpet. In traditional Jewish synagogues the shofar is sounded during the High Holy Days but is not sounded if one of the holy days should fall on the Sabbath. Here, on the Sabbath, the shofar is blown every week as a call to worship.
corner of a large tallit and hold it above the heads of the two blonde girls and two African-American boys. The congregation recites The Blessing over the Children, which appears on an overhead projector. When the congregation has finished reciting the blessing, four women stand by the microphones and one begins to play the keyboard, while the others sing in beautiful voices. The song is an adaptation of the "Blessing over the Children" from Fiddler on the Roof. "May the Lord protect and defend you..." The congregation sings along and the children standing under the tallit are beaming.

The children rejoin their parents and the rabbi asks us all to rise and face east toward Jerusalem. He asks us to turn to page 47 in the Messianic Shabbat Siddur (prayer book) and recite the Sh'ma. "Sh'ma yisrael adonai eloheynu adonai echad. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The Sh'ma is followed by two other prayers, the V'ahavta and Vishamru. Both of these prayers, as well as the Sh'ma, are identical to the versions that one would be find at a traditional Jewish synagogue; the congregation even chants the prayers in the traditional tune. The congregants seem to know these prayers as they chant them loudly. I cannot help but finding it a bit odd, having grown up in a traditional Conservative synagogue, to see a woman in African dress, reciting the Sh'ma.

A reading called "The Messiah Yeshua" follows the three traditional prayers. The congregation reads the prayer in English and the rabbi follows in Hebrew. At this time, the rabbi asks the congregation to give the tradition tithe of ten percent of one's income. The same four men that held the tallit earlier now
pass wicker baskets up and own the aisles to collect the offering. Approximately half of those present put an envelope into the basket.

The worship continues with the torah service, which appears to be modeled after a traditional Jewish torah service. This begins when the rabbi takes the torah out of the ark and proceeds around the room, holding the torah. Each person touches the torah either with his hand or with the fringes of his tallit. Here, however, unlike the traditional Jewish version, a man holding the Christian Bible, or Brit Chadashah, also proceeds around the room. The woman standing in front of me has a look of awe in her eyes as she watches intensely the sacred scriptures circling the room. The two men, having completely circled the room, return to the front of the room. The rabbi calls his wife up to say the traditional blessing before the recitation of the torah portion. She chants the blessing fluidly in Hebrew and reads the portion in English. The rabbi then reads the portion in Hebrew. They do the same for the reading from Judges, and for the Brit Chadashah portion, except that the Brit Chadashah portion is read only in English. When he and his wife have completed the three portions, the rabbi prays extemporaneously, thanking God for the words of the scripture. He holds his hands up to the sky and says, “In the name of Yeshua, the Messiah, Amen.”

When the torah service is finished, the congregation begins praise singing. The four women who stood at the microphones earlier return and lead the group in song. All of these are in English and use the name “Jesus” rather than the name “Yeshua” that one more often hears used in the congregation. The women lead us in about five songs. While the congregation is singing, a
group of about ten men and women are at the front of the room dancing, Israeli style, in a circle. They seem to be watching the steps of one particular woman who is very adept with the dance moves.

The rabbi then stands at the lectern and gives his sermon. He directs our attention to passages in the Bible and then reflects on the meaning of these passages. Everyone comes with his or her own Bible and marks it up with pen as the rabbi speaks. I notice that the rabbi uses the names “Jesus” and “Yeshua” rather interchangeably. As the rabbi speaks, men and women sitting behind me yell out phrases such as “hallelujah” and “thank you Lord.” The rabbi seems moved by these outbursts and gathers momentum as he stirs up the congregation. The sermon marks the end of the service, which is followed by lunch and socializing in an adjacent dining room.

Jewish/Gentile Ritual Expression

Many of the rituals that I witnessed at Congregation Beth Yeshua and Beth Yeshua Hamashiach were quite similar. The overall theme seemed to be a blend of Jewish and Christian ritual. Shoshanah Feher, in her study of a Messianic congregation in California, suggests that the congregants are “recoding Jewish ritual and infusing it with Christian meaning.” I think that is only half of the story. As I pointed out earlier, the Messianic movement is home to a large Gentile population. For them, it seems more accurate to say that Christian meaning is expressed through Jewish ritual. Messianic Jews coming
from Jewish backgrounds were probably already familiar with many Jewish rituals. For them, the rituals take on new meaning in the context of Yeshua. For the Gentiles, though, the Jewish rituals are new and thus serve as a way to communicate the Christian faith.

To more fully comprehend the issue of Jewish/Gentile ritual expression, it is crucial to note that the two groups are quite different with regard to their Jewish and Gentile populations; the Philadelphia group has a much higher percentage of members from Jewish backgrounds, while the Houston group is made up mostly of Gentile practitioners. This population difference sheds light onto many of the rituals I observed. I think this goes a long way to explain the presence of many more traditional Jewish rituals in the worship of the Houston group. At first, it seems as if the reverse would be the case, i.e., that a group with a more traditional Jewish background would use more traditional Jewish ritual. However, we must remember that Messianic groups are extremely concerned with Jewish identity regardless of the “Jewishness” or “Gentileness” of the members’ upbringings. The Philadelphia group, for the most part, grew up Jewish; they have Jewish names and Jewish families. For them, a Jewish identity comes naturally and there is not as great a need to build a Jewish identity through ritual. In contrast, the members of the Houston group come mainly from Christian backgrounds. For them to identify as Jews, they need to construct a Jewish identity through acting Jewishly. For this reason, we see very traditional Jewish prayers, the Sh’mi and V’ahavta, and symbols such as the

torah and tallit incorporated into the Houston service, while we do not find these at the Philadelphia service. To say that the Houston service features more Jewish ritual is not to say that the Philadelphia service lacks such ritual.

Jewish Form, Christian Content

Noticeable examples of Jewish ritual at Beth Yeshua include the blessings said over the candles, wine, and hallah. One will find the blessing over the wine and candles recited in most Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath. The blessing over the hallah is typically said in a different context - at home before the meal - but is nonetheless a Jewish ritual. The inclusion of these blessings at Beth Yeshua evokes a sense of “Jewishness,” although clearly the spiritual meaning is quite Christian.

During my research in Philadelphia, I had the opportunity to attend a Passover Seder at Beth Yeshua. Passover is one of the most important holidays in Messianic communities because it is integrated with the Christian commemoration of the Last Supper, the crucifixion and the subsequent resurrection. The seder was filled with the typical rituals and symbols found in any Jewish seder, however the Christian meaning could not go unnoticed. For instance, the three pieces of matzah (unleavened bread) that are a central symbol on the seder table are, in traditional Jewish belief, thought to symbolize the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or the three households: the

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Cohens, the Levites and the people of Israel.\textsuperscript{15} The Messianic Haggadah,\textsuperscript{16} however, explains that the three pieces of matzah symbolize the tri-unity of God: the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, later in the seder, when the matzah and wine are consumed, there is a salient Christian meaning incorporated into the familiar Jewish ritual. Before eating the matzah, the leader of the seder reads the following words:

\begin{quote}
It was then that the Messiah added the words. “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19) Let us now eat matzah, meditating on the broken body of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Let us allow the taste to linger in our mouths.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

And before drinking the wine, the leader recites:

\begin{quote}
This is the cup of redemption, symbolizing the blood of the Passover lamb. It was the cup “after supper,” with which the Messiah identified himself. “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20) Just as the blood of the lamb brought salvation in Egypt, so Messiah’s atoning death can bring salvation to all who believe.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

The Jewish form of the Passover Seder, and the ritual of eating matzah and drinking wine, is fused with the Christian content of Holy Communion. As the seder, for Jews, makes the past of the Exodus present, for Messianic Jews the seder serves to make present the Last Supper. Moreover, as the seder binds the individual Jew to the entire Jewish people, the

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Haggadah} literally means “the telling” and refers to the book that is used to tell the story of Passover.
\textsuperscript{17} Barry Rubin, \textit{The Messianic Passover Haggadah} (Baltimore: Lederer, 1989), 13.
\textsuperscript{18} Rubin, 27.
\textsuperscript{19} Rubin, 28-29.
incorporation of Communion into the seder ritual binds the Messianic Jew to the entire community of believers.

**Orthoprax/Orthodox**

One way to appreciate the fusion of Christian content with Jewish form is to understand the nature of Jewish and Christian religions with respect to the emphasis that they place on ritual acts and doctrinal matters. In her discussion of ritual density, Catherine Bell distinguishes between two styles of religion: orthoprax and orthodox. "Orthoprax" comes from the Greek words *orthos* (correct, right) and *praxis* (action, practice), while "orthodox" from the Greek word *doxa* (belief, thought) means "correct belief." Bell explains that religions tend to be orthopraxic when they are more closely tied to culture and ethnic identity. We find orthodox religions, on the other hand, where religion transcends cultural boundaries, achieving a cross-cultural community of the faithful.\(^{120}\)

Consequently, we can expect that Judaism, so strongly tied to nationhood and ethnicity, would be an orthopraxic religion while Christianity, which is not strongly tied to any one cultural identity, would be orthodoxic.

Bell explains that being a Christian has meant, for most of Christian history, the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is not enough to be born of a Christian mother or to be raised Christian. One must have the right belief. On the other hand, we have seen how the ascribing of Jewish membership is based

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on one’s parentage. Bell argues that although to be a Jew one need only be
born of a Jewish mother, to be a good Jew, one must observe the Jewish
customs that bind one to the traditions and community of Judaism.\footnote{121}

If Judaism stresses ritual and Christianity stresses belief and doctrine, we
can see how Messianic Jews do not find it problematic to imbue Jewish custom
with Christian meaning. The ritual stills seems Jewish, because the form is
directly related to the traditional Jewish form, and the ritual also appears to be
Christian because the interpretation of the ritual is in direct accord with Christian
doctrine. The emphases of both religions are maintained, as they do not, for the
believer, appear to be in contradiction.

**Messianic Dancing**

Messianic dance is central in the worship services of both of the
congregations that I studied and is an important part of Messianic Jewish life.
Almost every Messianic synagogue that I encountered stresses the importance
of its Dance Ministry.\footnote{122} Messianic artwork and brochures depict dancing figures
and dance is the highlight of many Messianic conferences and special events.

Dance is a powerful tool in ethnic solidarity. Firstly, as Dvora Lapson
writes, “every ethnic group during the course of its cultural development has

\footnote{121} Bell, 194.
produced its own folk dances. In addition, dance can serve to break down barriers as individuals perform bodily movement together.

There is no question that Messianic dance is modeled after Israeli folk dance. Young Jewish believers in the late 1960's and early 70's, a generation raised with Israeli dancing as part of their cultural Jewish experience, chose to include this form as an expression of their Jewish identity. Some of the dances that I observed in Messianic synagogues are step-for-step the same as Israeli dances in which I have participated.

Messianic Jews are verbal about the strong connection that their dancing has with Judaism. Doing Jewish dance proves ones Jewish authenticity. However, again, the Messianic setting completely alters significance of Jewish dancing. One will rarely, if ever, find American Jews doing Israeli dance as part of their religious services. Dancing is a cultural practice, performed at weddings or at youth group meetings. For Jews, Israeli dance has no religious significance. Here we see another example of Gans' symbolic ethnicity. A nostalgic memory of doing Israeli dance as a child is invoked through the performance of the ritual. However, the ritual is removed from its context and performed merely as a symbol of ethnic allegiance.  

Moreover, Jewish dance stripped of its original context, sets Messianic Jews apart from the American Jewish community. In reinterpreting Jewish

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dance, they are creating a unique ritual. A boundary between Jewish ritual and
Messianic ritual is erected as Messianic Jews construct something unique.

Kashrut

Ritual boundaries, setting Messianic Judaism off as unique, are evident in
the special dietary laws practiced by Messianic believers. When I attended a
Friday night dinner at the home of Debbie Finkelstein, the wife of the assistant
rabbis at Beth Yeshua, she explained the Messianic notion of “Biblical kashrut
(dietary laws).” Biblical kashrut\(^{125}\) involves the avoidance of the unclean foods
listed in the Bible, but is not concerned with other aspects of kashrut,\(^{126}\) such as
the proper slaughter of animals and the separation of milk and meat, which
Messianic believers find to have no biblical basis. Some aspects of kashrut are
maintained, so that Messianic Jews separate themselves from Gentile
Christians, however the full kashrut of traditional Judaism is rejected, thereby
also separating Messianic Jews from the larger Jewish community.

Mary Douglas has shown that certain foods and eating habits, including
dietary restrictions, function as symbols of identification with a particular
community.\(^{127}\) This biblical form of kashrut symbolizes Messianic identification,
setting Messianic Jews apart from both Judaism and Christianity. However, in
some ways, Biblical kashrut also allows for identification with both. Keeping

\(^{127}\) Mary Douglas, Natural Symbols (New York: Routledge, 1996) and Purity and Danger (New
some form of *kashrut* allows Messianic Jews to identify with Jewish ritual and custom. Additionally, the limited form permits Messianic Jews to eat in the homes of non-Jews and consequently allows for full social interaction with Gentile believers.\(^{128}\) Biblical *kashrut*, thus, creates boundaries while at the same time serves to obscure them.

**Circumcision and Internal Boundaries**

Boundaries reflect divisions in society, setting one group apart from another. Boundaries determine who is a member of a given group and who is not. As such, boundaries have a great effect on group and individual identity.\(^{129}\) This is also true for boundaries that separate members within the same group. We have looked at some of the boundaries that divide Messianic Jews from Judaism and Christianity, but there are also boundaries that classify certain factions within the community of Messianic Judaism.

The ritual of circumcision, *brit milah*, symbolizes the continuation of the covenant God made with Abraham and subsequently with the Jewish people.\(^{130}\) It is a social ritual in that it serves to bind the individual to the people of Israel. As a rite of initiation, *brit milah* determines group membership. However, wherever there is a ritual of inclusion, there is also exclusion, i.e., those that

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\(^{128}\) Feher, *Passing over Easter*, 83.

\(^{129}\) See Barth; Nagel; and Royce.

\(^{130}\) Gen. 17:12-13, "Every male among you in every generation must be circumcised on the eighth day, both those born in your house and any foreigner, not a member of your family but purchased. Circumcise both those born in your house and those you buy; thus your flesh will be marked with the sign of my everlasting covenant."
cannot partake in the ritual are symbolically excluded from the group. In the present example, *brit milah* serves to exclude the Gentile members of Messianic groups. The *mohel* (circumciser) at Beth Yeshua and other Messianic *mohelim* as well, absolutely refuse to ritually circumcise the sons of Gentile believers, even upon their desperate requests. According to the *mohel* at Beth Yeshua, the covenant of Abraham applies only to the Jewish people and thus, circumcision, as well, is only for descendants of the Jewish people. Despite vigorous attempts on the part of the Gentile Messianic community, the rule remains. Clearly, despite claims of equality in the Lord, the Jewish segment of Messianic communities is given a privileged status.

The fact that Messianic Jews do not recognize conversion to Judaism reinforces the superior status of the ethnically Jewish population.\(^{131}\) As we saw earlier, the *halachic* definition of a Jew recognizes either a child born to a Jewish mother or someone who converts under the proper procedures. Messianic Jews are willing to extend the definition of a Jew to one born of a Jewish mother or father, but simply do not recognize the possibility of conversion. In order to legitimate assertions of belonging to the Jewish people, Messianic Jews want to keep a strict Jewish bloodline. This regulation functions to keep the Gentile/Jewish boundary immutable.

CONCLUSIONS: BOUNDARIES REVISITED

Ethnic groups, as we have seen, have a dialectical nature. Like Hegel's notion of the self, which exists only in that others recognize it,\textsuperscript{132} ethnic identity is shaped by the outside world. The identity of Messianic Jews does not exist in a vacuum, being shaped and defined only by internal forces. The context that American Judaism and Christianity impose cannot be ignored, as they have a fundamental role in shaping the nature of Messianic Jewish communities.

Boundaries Maintained by American Judaism

In the discussion of Jewish identity, it became clear that the Jewish community maintains very strict rules concerning membership. One must either be born to a Jewish mother or convert to Judaism. However, Messianic Jews are ethnically Jewish under this rule, because they are born to Jewish mothers. We looked at the case of Oswald Rufeisen who converted to Christianity and saw that he was no longer considered a Jew because of his conversion. However, Messianic Jews maintain that they have not converted to Christianity. They insist that believing in the messiahship of Jesus does not mean that they are no longer Jewish. It is not surprising to find that Jewish authorities have
trouble with the Messianic self-definition. Shoshanah Feher asked various Jewish authorities in Los Angeles about whether or nor Messianic Jews could be considered Jewish. Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center responded: "The fact remains that Christianity is another faith and Judaism is both a faith and a peoplehood. Hebrew Christians were obviously initially not accepted by the mainstream Jewish world. They eventually started their own faith, didn’t they?" Rabbi Cooper obviously does not accept the notion that Messianic Judaism is not Christianity. For Cooper and the majority of the Jewish community, faith in Jesus is equivalent to Christianity. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you leave the Jewish people and join another faith.

According to the 1990 census of the Council of Jewish Federations, only 62 percent of the U.S. population who were born Jews currently identify as Jews. The Jewish boundary is not containing its membership. Clearly, if the Jewish community desires to keep its identity vital, a response to such numbers as those found in the 1990 census is crucial. One response has been to develop an anti-cult movement. Jews for Judaism (named to counter ‘Jews for Jesus’) is one of these active anti-cult and counter-missionary organizations that seeks to bring Jews back to their religion and their people.

Another way in which Judaism has responded to the boundary threat of Messianic communities is by reaffirming the exclusiveness of the Law of Return.

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132 Funkenstein, 5.
133 Feher, Passing Over Easter, 30.
Recently, the Supreme Court of Israel made a ruling that specifically pointed to Messianic Jews as being outside of the Jewish boundary. According to the State of Israel, Messianic Jews are not Jews.  

In addition to these large-scale efforts, the Jewish community has mobilized local efforts to respond to specific Messianic communities. For instance, the Philadelphia Jewish community has made a variety of attempts to counteract Beth Yeshua. Local synagogues have offered counseling and Judaism classes to Jews who have shown an interest in Beth Yeshua. In 1984, when Beth Yeshua moved into their present building, the Jewish community increased their efforts. They organized a series of demonstrations in the Overbrook Park neighborhood that culminated in a 900-person protest rally in which some individuals became rather violent. Additionally, when the leader of the synagogue passed away in 1985, his family wanted him to be buried in the local Jewish cemetery. The cemetery refused, affirming their boundary.

**Boundaries Maintained by Christian Communities**

The Jewish community is not the only group that is threatened by the ambiguous role of Messianic Jews. Christian communities have also reacted. During the controversial demonstrations in Philadelphia, some mainline churches reacted in disagreement with the Messianic approach. In an open letter to the congregation, signed by various high officials in regional mainline denominations, the community reacted by saying:

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Beth Yeshua cannot be considered a part of Judaism or legitimately represent itself as such . . . . The vague references to bread and wine, the lack of the symbol of the cross, the total anonymity of the building indicate to us a manufactured religion of human invention which misuses Christian symbols and attempts to create good feelings though the irresponsible use of Jewish and Christian symbols and customs in whatever way the leadership may determine.  

The Christian community had come full circle; the groups that at one time funded and supported Hebrew Christianity were now condemning the organization that sprung forth from what they had encouraged.  

The reaction in the case of Beth Yeshua was probably a result of pressures on the Christian establishment, from the Jewish community, to react. In most cases, Christian authorities have not been so negative in their appraisal of Messianic Judaism. In fact, some have tried to view Messianic Judaism as just another case of Christianity being incorporated into local culture as has happened throughout history when a new culture is converted. Following their own creed to be one in Christ, Christians have a hard time drawing a boundary on Messianic Jews. Ethnic variations aside, Messianic Jews believe in Jesus Christ, and this is enough to include them in the boundary that encircles the body of believers.

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137 Harris-Shapiro, Messianic Judaism, 39.
Messianic Judaism and Boundaries

We should not be surprised that Christian communities have found it easier to include Messianic Jews than have their Jewish counterparts. Christianity is, after all, the fulfillment of Judaism. Jews can legitimately say, "our religion has nothing to do with Jesus," but Christians cannot say, "our religion has nothing to do with Judaism." Moreover, being the majority religion, Christianity need not be as concerned with maintaining boundaries. The threat of assimilation and cultural annihilation is just not the same for the two religions. The Jewish situation has always been one in which uniqueness must be maintained lest the Jewish people perish.\(^{140}\)

However, it is not only that Messianic Jews blur a Jewish boundary; they blur the Jewish boundary – that between Judaism and Christianity. When other boundaries are obscured, the reaction is not as disturbing. For instance, the recent phenomenon of Jews practicing Buddhist religion does not provoke the same kind of disdain that Messianic Jews draw. In his book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, Rodger Kamenetz tells of a Jewish delegation of rabbis who traveled to Dharamsala to meet with the Dalai Lama. The rabbis were concerned that they would not have a *minyan* (quorum of ten) for prayers and when someone suggested that the Jewish Buddhists residing in Dharamsala could be counted in the *minyan*, even the most religious of the rabbi greeted the idea

\(^{140}\) Funkenstein, 1-2.
enthusiastically. The Jewish Buddhists had also left Judaism for another religion, but were not excluded from the community as Messianic Jews are. I cannot imagine the rabbis enthusiastically welcoming Messianic Jews into their circle of prayer. A shift in the Jewish/Buddhist boundary is clearly not as threatening as an ambiguity in the Jewish/Christian distinction.

The modern situation has made Jewish boundaries much more of a dilemma than in the days when Jews could easily point to the Christian as the enemy. Today, the persecution that created such a strong Jewish/Christian boundary is largely not an issue. Moreover, the high rate of Jewish intermarriage has gone a long way to obscure the once solid boundary. The metaphor of the melting pot is becoming a reality for American Jews as they seemingly dissolve undistinguishable into the mainstream population. If Jews cannot define themselves by who they are, then they must define themselves by who they are not. For traditional Jews, to be a Jew, certainly does not entail believing in Jesus. As weak as this definition may be, this one boundary – the Jewish Christian boundary – is imperative for Jews to maintain lest they blend completely into the dominant culture.

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142 Some rabbis have even gone so far as to say that Buddhist practice can enhance Jewish practice. I cannot imagine a Jewish authority ever saying the same for Christian practice.
143 Bershtel and Graubard, 65-67.
Concluding Remarks

Although Christianity began as a movement within Judaism, the two religions developed into distinct and rather dissimilar religious systems. Because of a variety of factors, including Christian anti-Semitism and cautions against "Judaizing" the church, barriers have been erected between Judaism and Christianity. In order to claim allegiance to both sides, Messianic Jews must tear down these walls. Through their identifications with elements of Jewish and Christian history, Messianic Jews attempt to share in the collective memories of both groups. However, in identifying with the first century church, they also seek to deny the validity of the historical divide. By looking to a time when it was not "un-Jewish" to believe in Jesus Christ, Messianic Jews hope to revive that sentiment.

Ritual, as was discussed in Chapter Two, is tied integrally to the construction of community. Jewish ritual form is appropriated in Messianic Judaism, in order to identify with this most crucial element of Jewish religion. The Jewish form is infused with a new Christian meaning that places the ritual into the Messianic theological framework. The resulting ritual marks identification with Judaism and Christianity and also highlights the limitations of that connection.

So, are they Jewish or are they Christian? On which side of the boundary do Messianic Jews belong? American Judaism will certainly not move their boundary to accommodate Messianic Jews. Some Christians might welcome

Messianic Jews onto their side, but this would result in Messianic Jews denying the Jewishness of their faith. Perhaps the Jewish or Christian question is just the wrong question to ask. Clearly, as they limit their connections with Judaism and Christianity, Messianic Jews do not seek to stand completely on either side. Messianic Judaism is an attempt to straddle the boundary, to deny that the wall dividing Judaism and Christianity must be erected so high or stand at all.
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