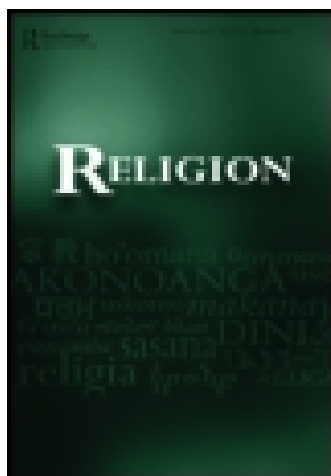


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Born-again seeking: explaining the gentile majority in messianic Judaism

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ABSTRACT Messianic Judaism is an American-born movement of congregations that hold evangelical beliefs and follow Jewish practices. Scholars have viewed it chiefly as a new religious movement (NRM) or a controversial branch of Judaism. As a result, they have downplayed or ignored its largely evangelical Christian base. The first study of 'gentile believers,' this article argues that Messianic Judaism is best understood through the lens of religious seeking, a trend usually associated with alternative spiritualities and still under-theorized vis-à-vis conservative Christians, like evangelicals. First, it traces why Messianic Judaism appeals to growing numbers of North American Christians. Second, and more broadly, it argues that seeking is a spiritually satisfying religious practice that, for evangelicals, reiterates central themes of born-again life. Their experiences also clarify the limits that may constrain religious seeking; they seek to deepen and actualize a biblical worldview in religious sites viewed as proximate to their own.

KEY WORDS U.S.A. and Canada; Christianity; Judaism; ethnography/field-work; anthropology; sociology; phenomenology

He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also to walk even as He walked
– 1 John 2:6.

It is Saturday morning at Beth Melech Israel (House of the King of Israel), a Messianic Jewish congregation in the southern United States. Congregants file in, greeting each other with cheery 'Shabbat shaloms.' Beyond the rows of padded chairs, there is an oversized screen and a low stage where a band is tuning up. Where a cross might hang a banner reads, 'Holy, holy, holy' in Hebrew, flanked by tables with *kippot* (skull caps), *tallitot* (prayer shawls), and *shofars* (rams' horns) in colorful cloth cases. A camera pans overhead preparing for the online broadcast and the band opens with an upbeat praise song. Congregants sway, hands raised – a classic charismatic posture – while others form a Davidic dance circle, executing Israeli folkdance steps. Words flash across the screen: 'You're the

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light that shines in the darkest night, Yeshua Adonai (Jesus my Lord)! You only are my rock and my salvation!’ (Davis 2011).¹

Laurie, 55, sings along. She and her husband, Jack, have attended Beth Melech Israel for nearly three years. Like most Christians there, she recounts a spiritual trajectory where, after years of attending church, reading the Bible, developing a prayer life and experiencing the joy of being born again, she suddenly heard God’s call anew. He told her to worship like Jesus and with his people, the Jews. ‘I’d been *everywhere*,’ she describes:

Baptists, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of God, Vineyard, non-denominational, you name it. I knew there was something missing and I couldn’t put my finger on it. I’d get somewhere and I’d be okay for a time and then I’d start getting a restlessness, like, there’s something more, there’s something more, there’s something more ... And then an article came out in the paper and it was about this [Messianic] congregation. It was like God spoke to me. He said, ‘That’s where I want you to go.’

Since the mid-1990s, growing numbers of U.S. Pentecostal and evangelical Christians have begun to take an interest in, and even affiliate with, Messianic Judaism, a diffuse network of congregations that adhere to the major tenets of evangelicalism and follow many of the practices of Judaism.² The movement originated in North America in the late 1960s among Jews who regarded belief in Jesus as a completion of Judaism, rather than a conversion to Christianity. While Messianic leaders have therefore always described their congregations as by and for ‘ethnic’ Jews (Goldberg 1977, 28), today more than 70 percent of people in the pews are, in fact, born-again Christians like Laurie. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of Christians have come into contact with Messianic Judaism over the last three or so decades.³ Those who then begin to attend congregations are called ‘gentile believers’ (GBs) in the movement. For Messianic leaders, these individuals are both necessary and deeply problematic. Besides the key fact that they are not

¹This is a composite portrait drawn from several services.

²Nearly all Messianics (Jew or gentile) arrive from evangelical and Pentecostal churches. They believe in salvation through Jesus Christ alone, biblical inerrancy, and the importance of being born again, when an adult believer experiences a spiritual ‘rebirth’ (John 3:3). Pentecostals also believe in gifts of the Holy Spirit (e.g., speaking in tongues). I use ‘born again’ as shorthand for these groups and ‘charismatic’ to signal adherence to Pentecostal beliefs without necessarily denominational affiliation. Though admittedly broad, I also use ‘conservative’ to signal how, compared to liberal branches of Protestantism and alternative spiritualities, they firmly reject religious relativism.

³Estimates of the total number of North American Messianics range wildly from 30 000 (Juster and Hocken 2004, 10) to 2 million, according to Joel Chernoff (2013), General Secretary of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA). These numbers are unsubstantiated and it is unclear whether they include non-denominational congregations (the lower count certainly does not) and ‘born-again seekers’ who attend without formal membership. Some leaders I interviewed estimated there are 300 000 Messianic congregants, a number that seems plausible to me. Estimates of the percentage of gentiles in the movement include: 60 percent (Wasserman 2000, 73–76, 159); 40–60 percent (Rausch 1983, 51); 50 percent (Dulin 2013; Feher 1998, 47–50; Harris-Shapiro 1999, 29; Juster and Hocken 2004, 10). Based on this study, I estimate at least 70 percent, and likely more since ‘Jews’ may include people who discover Jewish lineages (see under ‘Genetic’ in this essay). I should note that Rausch conducted the best early study of the movement; it is highly doubtful that his 1983 estimate of 40–60 percent is still accurate today, given the undisputed increase in gentile involvement. Likely the estimate of 50 percent in previous academic studies reflects scholars’ focus on a few flagship (and thus high-count Jewish) congregations.

ethnically Jewish, GBs seem to undermine congregational stability: they often affiliate for short periods, continue attending other churches, and usually arrive with a wide array of ideas from online sources (Feher 2001, 224–225).

Thus far, scholars have focused studies of Messianic Judaism on issues emphasized by the leadership, in particular how the movement positions itself vis-à-vis mainstream Judaism, and the practices and concerns of Jewish-descent members (Cohn-Sherbok 2000, 2001; Dulin 2013; Feher 1998, 22; Harris-Shapiro 1999; Hocken 2009; Shapiro 2012).⁴ This study turns the lens around. The most extensive analysis of GBs thus far undertaken, it asks, what draws gentiles to a movement ostensibly for Jews where leaders are ambivalent about their presence? What does this trend reveal about patterns in North American evangelicalism?

Drawing on a theoretical model in the sociology of religion, I frame these Messianic gentiles as ‘born-again seekers.’ In Protestant circles, the term seeker emerged in 17th-century England to describe heretics (Schmidt 2005, 229). In U. S. sociology, it was first popularized by researchers to explain the emergence of a so-called ‘deviant cult’ in 1960s San Francisco (Lofland and Stark 1965) and then found wide purchase in studies of the ‘spiritual but not religious,’ individuals who privilege personal trajectories over communal norms and institutional authority, producing a pastiche typical of New Age (Ammerman 2013, 275; Fuller 2001; Marty 1993; Roof 1993). Although negative valuations of this trend as post-modern anomie or therapeutic individualism (Bellah et al. 1985, 55, 63–64) are now widely disputed, seeker spirituality, notes sociologist Courtney Bender, still ‘emerges over and over in our collective imaginations as free-floating and individualistic ... a condition of modern life: it has no past, no organization, no clear shape. Studying spirituality thus appears akin to shovelling fog’ (Bender 2010, 182).

Studies of born-again Christianity are hampered by a problem both similar and different. Like New Age seekers, evangelicals are often viewed as individualistic in their religious experiences, yet comparatively rigid (what I call conservative) in their organizational structures: most evangelicals emphasize church-going, pastoral authority, biblical literalism, and believe that ‘only Jesus saves.’ As a result, despite in-depth sociological studies of denominational change in U.S. Christianity (e.g., Wuthnow 1990), and a growing interest among anthropologists in Christian institution-building (e.g., Robbins 2013), there has been comparatively little engagement with conservative Christians who are both ‘free-floating’ and institutionally grounded. The gentile believers profiled here exemplify this trend. They therefore tell us something important about the fluidity of contemporary evangelicalism – and about the limits that characterize seeking in more conservative religious contexts.

My aim, then, is to explore why Messianic Judaism appeals to growing numbers of evangelical and charismatic Christians. More broadly, I argue that seeking provides a useful theoretical tool in studies of conservative religions, alongside those

⁴Messianic Jewish leaders hotly debate the status of gentiles (e.g., see *Keshet: A Journal of Messianic Judaism*, issue 19: 2005). Scholars focus on Jewish leadership/members for a few reasons: to redress Christian supersessionism (Power 2011), to stem the tide of Jewish assimilation (Cohn-Sherbok 2000), or to explore the ‘in-between’ nature of their identity (Feher 1998). Notable studies of Messianics do explore the historic role of Protestant missions (e.g., Ariel 2000, 2006, 2011, 220–251) and the movement’s current Christian worldview (Dulin 2013). Dulin’s study does not focus on gentiles per se but they are certainly present in his analysis.

that track New Age or alternative spiritualities. Certainly, it holds relevance for scholars of U.S. evangelicalism, who know that individuals move across denominations, may attend multiple churches at once, and access information online, yet have often failed to explore these activities as key sites of religious practice.

Born-again seeking in a messianic age: expanding and clarifying a term

Debates about spiritual seeking generally begin with Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart* (1985), which profiled Americans who drew from multiple religious traditions to produce a personalized, individuated faith. Following this example, models of seeking often reiterated implied binaries between individual/institutional, spiritual/religious, and unchurched/churched. In response, a host of more recent studies has argued that spiritual seeking is not a zero-sum alternative to being 'religious' and religious institutions (Ammerman 2013; Marler and Hadaway 2002). Of these, sociologist Wade Clark Roof's survey of baby boomers is especially pertinent, since he explicitly incorporates evangelicals (Roof 1999; see also McGuire 2008, 12, 71).

For Roof, seeking behaviors define baby-boom Americans as a whole, with born-again Christianity as one of five subcultures in his paradigm. He identifies evangelical 'seeker churches' – and the people drawn to them – as adaptable, highly culturally literate, and usually non-denominational. His prototypical example is the California-based Vineyard church movement, which has lately drawn anthropologists' interest as well (Bialecki 2008; Luhrmann 2012). Roof highlights seekers' Internet savvy, which facilitates a do-it-yourself eclecticism that finds its theological basis in how evangelicals prioritize a personal relationship with God over (Roof 1999, 25–26, 38, 189). Akin to Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis's 'quest religiosity' (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993), he also describes evangelical seekers as having spiritual questions or doubts, and being open even to exploring other religions. A contrasting subculture in his schema is the 'dogmatist,' traditionalist Catholics or fundamentalist Protestants whom he regards as focused on outward rituals and thus Pharisaic, formulaic, lifeless, and 'frozen in a nostalgic past.' They are politically conservative, patriarchal, and believe in sin (Roof 1999, 212–213).

This definition of dogmatism, which implies that interior belief is the mark of authentic religiosity, feels out of step with the turn to 'genealogical consciousness' in more recent studies of U.S. religion (Lofton 2012, 384; Masuzawa 2005). Moreover, and more relevant here, Roof's discussion is limited by its reliance on one evangelical case study that is juxtaposed with other ideal types, especially the 'dogmatist' and the 'free-floating' New Ager. While this model suits his broad project, it offers little room for the nuances and variants within evangelical seeking itself. The GBs drawn to Messianic Judaism, for example, share characteristics with dogmatists: they want rituals and rules, they are patriarchal and often politically conservative. Yet they also fit Roof's portrait of born-again (and even New Agers) since they have little reverence for their childhood churches, pursue Christian alternatives, and are very active online.

Using Roof's study as a springboard, I explore born-again seeking as at once more capacious and more firmly grounded in its Christian context. Indeed, seeking has thrived in a newly expanded, more pluralistic, evangelical horizon. Especially since the 1980s, as U.S. evangelicalism has grown among the

churchgoing population (Chaves 2011, 103), it has greatly diversified, embracing non-denominationalism, neo-Pentecostalism, 'secular' cultural forms, televangelism, and Internet teaching. Similar to New Agers, born-again seekers therefore have access to myriad religious options and are *intentional* in their choices. GBs, for example, never seek out a Messianic congregation because it is more conveniently located or offers better children's programming, as might occur with denominational switching (Wuthnow 1990, 88–89). They do so to further their own spiritual growth.

Most GBs come to Messianic Judaism as individuals or as older couples. Of the 56 interviewees in this study, 18 (32 percent) were single or divorced with no children, 11 (19.6 percent) were single or married with grown children but attended services alone, and another 18 (32 percent) were older couples who attended together without their adult children. Their involvement in Messianic Judaism – and in Christian seeking more generally – started after their children had left home.⁵ GBs' siblings, adult children, or church friends may find their choices bizarre ('You're cutting out *ham* on *Easter*?' one man's son asked incredulously) or even disturbing ('Is it a cult?' they are sometimes asked). Former Catholics tend to encounter more resistance from their families than Protestants, who can more easily frame Messianic Judaism within evangelicalism. Fundamentally, however, few GBs find such friction significant enough to hamper a journey that they see as highly personal. Whether they are young(er) and single or older with adult children, others' opinions and needs weigh on them less during this stage than at other points in their lives. They feel freer to explore multiple possibilities beyond the churches in which they were raised or born again.

Seeking is the 'desire to be part of an unfolding process, to negotiate, to be on the road, to experience novelty, and to grow' (Wuthnow 1998, 6, 8). Because the goal is an ever-deepening relationship with the divine, it has no specific end point. Rather, seeking is itself a *spiritually satisfying religious practice*. In fact, most GBs in this study view it as a defining feature of their spiritual selves: they are religious mavericks who heed the authority of God's call (cf. Madsen 2009, 1278), even – perhaps especially – when it leads them into new religious territory. Thus while earlier models of seeker or quest religiosity foregrounded spiritual doubt (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993; Roof 1999), the Christians here are sure of God's existence. This position is reinforced by two factors: nearly all of them are already born again before coming to Messianic Judaism and they are never the focal point for religious change in the movement. It is ethnic Jews, at least theoretically, who are expected to experience a conversion to Yeshua.⁶

There are, of course, always limits to the kinds of practices and identities that make sense to seekers within a particular milieu (Roof 1999, 144) – and these options are more constricted for conservative Christians than for their New Age

⁵Only three (5.4 percent) of the respondents had young families who attended services together. Five (8.9 percent) married couples had teenage children and attended without them; one respondent had young children who attended with her, without her husband. The average age of respondents was 55.2 years old.

⁶'Theoretically' because most ethnic Jews are also already born again through other churches. Although Messianic Jewish leaders generally acknowledge this, they see themselves (and portray themselves to Christians) as ideally bringing 'secular' and even religious Jews to faith in Yeshua for the first time (e.g., Dauermann and Spielberg 1997).

counterparts. Rather than move across traditions to explore completely unknown spiritual vistas (Wuthnow 1998, 6), their aim is to grow more deeply in the tradition they know. Importantly, GBs do not view Messianic Judaism as separate from Christianity (and even from other churches, which they may still attend). From their perspective, it deepens and complements their ongoing commitments to biblical study, prophetic theology, or a relationship with Jesus. It can therefore be likened to anthropologist Simon Coleman's notion of 'continuous conversion,' wherein he notes that Swedish Pentecostals use the rhetoric of sudden change (e.g., Laurie hears God speak) while actually engaging in a series of 'intrareligious shifts in allegiance' as they move between different churches (Coleman 2003, 17).

On that note, whereas New Age seekers are generally anti-authoritarian and dislike formalized rituals (Wink, Dillon, and Prettyman 2007), born-again may be drawn to them. They are churchgoers who want *institutional* and *collective* forms of Christianity. Their pattern of seeking is to access many sources they view as authoritative (including online or TV pastors/rabbis) and even to affiliate with multiple congregations at once. They can be practice-oriented, as per Robert Wuthnow's synthesis between dwelling (maintaining traditional denominational affiliations) and seeking. Practice-oriented seekers, he writes, further spiritual growth by choosing religious 'extras,' such as a prayer circle or meditation, but unlike spiritual seekers, they are committed and disciplined (Wuthnow 1998, 185). Though most GBs share these qualities, they are committed less to a particular practice than to the weighty responsibility of being born-again, which for them means following God's call by adopting new ideas, practices, and joining new congregations. Born-again seeking is thus more continuous, congregationally based, and all-encompassing than practice-oriented spirituality need be. Saying a personal centering prayer each week, for example, could be practice-oriented but would not be born-again seeking.

A final point that bears noting is the role of the Internet. It provides a crucial conduit for information, as Roof highlights, and also flexibility. What I mean is that many GBs stopped attending church at some point, usually for a few months. While this action could be construed as a sign of individuated belief, GBs view it differently: virtual churches and chat rooms provided communities that sustained them while they withdrew from the social pressures of their congregations in order to hear where God was leading them next. According to sociologist Mark Chaves, the Internet may actually change how people choose congregations (Chaves 2011, 59), an observation that bears out for many respondents in this study.

Overview of messianic Judaism and methodology

Scholars have often portrayed seeking as amorphous and universal, a characteristic of post-modernity or of American religiosity writ large. One way to redress this tendency is to offer careful contextualization; we must ask why a *particular* movement or trend has flourished within a landscape of options by exploring its social and historical roots (Asad 2003, 29; Bender 2010; Schmidt 2005).

The Messianic movement originated in fraternal organizations for Jewish converts to Anglo-Protestantism in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Rausch 1983, 44–45; Winer 1990, 9, 11). In the late 1960s, an influx of young North American Jewish believers in Jesus began to organize their own congregations, featuring the emotional forms of worship popularized through the Jesus movement and

charismatic Christianity (Ariel 2000, 224–225, 229; Hocken 2009, 97; Volman, 2010, Personal Interview). Conservative Christian awareness of Messianic Judaism grew in the decade that followed. One reason, as I discuss below, is that evangelicals' interest in Jews soared after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, which many saw as a sign of the apocalyptic End Times. Word also spread because Messianic Jews waged a major publicity campaign: spokespeople regularly wrote into evangelical magazines to correct gentile coverage of Israel or Judaism; they visited churches to play Jewish music or demonstrate the Passover Seder; they produced media to instruct Christians on evangelizing their Jewish neighbors (Hocken 2009, 97, 101; e.g., Rubin 1989; Williman 1979). By the mid-1980s, Christians began to seek out Messianic services; their involvement grew exponentially with the Internet.

Today, Messianic Judaism is broadly familiar to evangelicals. Many GBs first hear about it in their churches, where Messianic speakers come to teach and fundraise. Most Messianic congregations and all missionary organizations (e.g., Jews for Jesus) rely on evangelical donations. Christian popular media regularly features Messianic topics and rabbis.⁷ There is a steady stream of Christian books about Judaism, as well as streamed broadcasts, personal blogs, and Messianic congregations' websites and stores. Beth Melech Israel, for example, reports that they have 160 attendees, 300 online attendees, and 1500 website visitors each week. The Hebraic Roots movement, a diffuse set of teachings that promotes the Jewish context of the Bible, amplifies Messianic output. Hebraic Roots teachers and learning materials have risen in popularity since the mid-1990s, mainly online, and, like Messianics, they often encourage Christians to adhere to Jewish-like rituals.⁸

Messianic Judaism is a more coherent movement than Hebraic Roots, but it is still highly varied. Congregations range from storefronts with fewer than ten members to flagship institutions founded in the 1970s that count at least 200. Some affiliate with Messianic denominations, but many do not.⁹ Nearly all congregations are patriarchal and prefer ethnic Jewish leaders. However, women account for about 60 percent of congregants, which is the norm in U.S. Christianity, and people of color are strongly represented. In my sample set, seeking patterns varied little regardless of gender or race (cf. Madsen 2009, 1279). All Messianic Jews hold services on Saturdays (*shabbat*), followed by *oneg* (food and fellowship). Worship is often lively, including dancing, shofar-blowing, and upbeat music, and while most leaders frown on glossolalia (speaking in tongues), more charismatic adherents may be slain in the spirit (Harris-Shapiro 1999, 10–11). All services include

⁷Major conservative Christian magazines ran initial stories on Messianic Jews in the early 1970s (e.g., Cohen et al. 1974; Hefley 1973; Willoughby 1972). In the 1980s and early 1990s there were a number of cover stories (Benhayim 1983; 'The Jewish Way' 1990). Based on my surveys, almost all of the coverage of Jews from 1985–1990 in major evangelical magazines was in fact about Messianics. See Rausch (1987) for an evangelical critique of this trend.

⁸For the Messianic leadership, the major difference is that their movement is by/for ethnic Jews and Hebraic Roots is not. Further, Messianics strongly disavow 'two house' theology that identifies certain gentiles as the lost tribes of Israel. This idea derives from British Israelism, whose best-known U.S. promoter was Herbert W. Armstrong in the 1930s. The Hebraic Roots movement was influenced by Armstrong, as well as Seventh-day Adventism, though it seems that its current popularity rests in the same trends – e.g., interest in the 'Jewish Jesus' – that undergirds Messianic Judaism. For most GBs, the two movements seem contiguous and even interchangeable.

⁹The two major denominational bodies are the MJAA's subsidiary and the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations. Both were founded in the 1970s.

songs in Hebrew (usually styled on contemporary Christian music), a sermon, scriptural readings, and a Hebrew blessing (*kiddush*) over bread and wine. The amount of explicitly Jewish content varies but all Messianics celebrate Jewish holidays and most reject Christmas and Easter.

Previous ethnographies of Messianic Judaism have focused on a single flagship congregation in either southern California or Philadelphia (Dulin 2013; Feher 1998; Harris-Shapiro 1999). To better capture the scope of this broad movement, I opted for a multi-sited approach. With two research assistants, I conducted 12 months (2012–2013) of participant observation at five sites in three mid-sized North American cities.¹⁰ We attended worship, bible studies, and other activities, where we took detailed notes and recorded sample studies and services. We also gathered 56 long-form conversational interviews with GBs and congregational leaders, each of which was then coded thematically, with the most common patterns informing the analysis below. I supplemented this research with periodical reviews of conservative Christian media (*Christianity Today*, *Charisma and Christian Life*, *Moody Monthly*) and the full run of the Messianic magazine, *Kesher*, as well as a set of six interviews that I conducted with Messianic leaders in 2010.

Because Messianic Jewish congregations are still comparably few, I assigned each site a pseudonym and kept their locations anonymous (see Table 1). In the discussion below I focus on the coherent nature of GBs' personal experiences; that is, born-again seeking played a significant role in all five sites.¹¹ However it is worth noting that at a congregational level, each site differed to some degree in terms of the types of Jewish rituals incorporated, the programming offered, and the pastor's preaching style. Reflecting broader fault lines in the movement, the two most notable differences concerned charismatic worship style and an emphasis on proselytism. On the first point, an estimated 85 percent of U.S. Messianics are charismatic, as are 65 percent of congregations (Hocken 2009, 97). In this study, Kehilat Yeshua was the most overtly so, although all three leaders in the south/southwest were ordained as Pentecostal ministers and incorporated charismatic elements into the service. Regarding proselytism, Beth HaMoshiach was the only congregation that goes door to door in Jewish neighborhoods. Though outsiders often associate Messianic Judaism with the aggressive street evangelism of the missionary organization Jews for Jesus, this type of activity is actually rare for congregations. Very few do formal outreach, mainly because there are no large Jewish

¹⁰Each city has approximately 3 million people and the congregations are located in residential urban or suburban neighborhoods, usually with high Jewish populations compared to the surrounding area. In preparing the study, I identified geographic areas of interest and then contacted congregations which, based on their websites, seemed active and included both Jews and gentiles. For the two northeast congregations, I also received referrals from Messianic leaders I had interviewed in 2010. If the pastor/rabbi responded favorably, I conducted a preliminary interview (in person in three cases, over the phone in two). He then explained the project to his congregants and asked for volunteers or identified individuals he felt would be receptive. Once the study was underway, my RAs and I were also approached by volunteers during *oneg* (after services) and referred to people's friends.

¹¹Seeking behaviors were largely absent in the seven interviews conducted with recent immigrants. For them, switching churches occurred as they physically moved, especially if they had attended independent churches with no precise equivalent in North America. The role and experience of foreign-born people deserves closer study. This population is underrepresented in my sample set, in part because the pastors/rabbis often directed my RAs to congregation members. Recent immigrants tend to be more marginalized and less committed.

Table 1. Based on pastors' estimates.

| Name | Pastor ^a | Place | Date founded ^b | Weekly attendees ^c | % GBs: Jews ^d | % Non-white | % Foreign born | Charismatic | Affiliation or support |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|--|
| Beth Melech Israel | Rabbi Mike | South east | 2002 HC: 1999 | 160 | 65:35 | 70 | 45 | No | Church of God/ Jewish Voice Ministries |
| Beth Tikvah | Rabbi Silvio | South west | 2002 | 115 | 75:25 | 60 | 25 | Yes | MJAA/Assemblies of God |
| Beth Yeshua | Rabbi Eric | South west | 2006 HC: 2005 | 100 | 60:40 | 25 | 10 | Yes/No | Same as above |
| Beit Ha-Moshiach | Pastor David | North east | 2001 HC: 1998 | 100 | 75:25 | 25 | 50 | No | Ariel Ministries |
| Kehilat Yeshua | Pastor Solomon | North east | 2010 | 20 | 85:15 | 60 | 60 | Yes | None |

Notes: ^aLeaders have varying levels of formal ordination through Messianic or Christian seminaries. Leaders choose the title 'rabbi' or 'pastor,' with the former generally reserved for ethnic Jews. I follow each leader's preference; ^b 'HC' stands for house church. Many congregations start as small worship groups that meet in a member's home; ^c Members constitute about half this number. Few congregations insist on formal membership; ^d My RA at Beth Yeshua estimated 70:30 was more accurate. Approximately 10 percent of black and Latino attendees are included as 'ethnic' Jews.

populations nearby and because they concentrate on the day-to-day challenges of growing their own ministries.

Seeking as religious practice: gentile believers' motivations and experiences

Born-again seeking is not merely pragmatic or a product of circumstance; it is a religious practice that holds meaning for believers and reinforces GBs' self-definition as religious mavericks who follow the authority of God's call. Once seeking is understood this way, we are better able to see the religious work it does. In order to clarify this process, I divide GBs' motivations and experiences into four constituent streams: biblical, prophetic, experiential, and genetic. These categorizations are by no means static and most GBs fall into two or three at once, or may shift emphasis from one to another over time. In general, however, it is the confluence of what might be glossed as Messianic Judaism's intellectual side (biblical, prophetic) and its sensory one (experiential, genetic) that makes the movement so appealing to a wide swath of born-again seekers.

Biblical: deepening bible study and finding the Jewish Jesus

Gabriela is a vivacious woman in her mid-30 who works as a financial analyst. She went to college, though her working-class family discouraged it, and then she left her family's tight-knit Portuguese Catholic church to study the Bible on her own, to 'eat it voraciously' she says. 'And I started learning things. Jesus was a Jew. And he didn't have blue eyes and blonde hair like He's painted. And Nazareth is not Rome. And Bethlehem is not in Portugal! So that gave me such a big curiosity for Judaism.' In college, she worked part-time in the home of an Orthodox Jewish family. She was enchanted from the first: 'I walked in and I heard Hebrew and I saw all the candles, the menorah, and everything, I'm like, "Oh, my God! *This is what Jesus' home was like.*"'

Increasingly, U.S. evangelicals have come to see it as self-evident that in order to understand the New Testament one must understand the Old, and in order to understand Jesus one must know his 'Jewish context.' Like Gabriela, GBs view this realization – and their subsequent interest in Messianic Judaism – as the natural outgrowth of years of careful Bible study on their own and in small groups, which, for U.S. evangelicals, is perhaps 'the most consequential form of religious practice' (Bielo 2009, 3). Between college and the time that she joined a Messianic congregation at age 30, Gabriela cycled through a number of such groups. It was through these channels that she was born again and first encountered Messianic Judaism. She also participates in online chats, where Messianics across North America log on at appointed times to pray and study together. With their encouragement, Gabriela has recently begun keeping kosher.

Most GBs view the recognition of Jesus' 'Jewish context' as a new phenomenon. While it has certainly peaked recently, Americans' interest in the person of Jesus developed over the course of the 19th century. Proponents of pietistic Christianity – the emotional, personalized religion most associated with Methodism (Rabinowitz 1989, 200) – increasingly turned away from God the Sovereign towards the loving Son. Historian Stephen Prothero argues that, faced with a proliferation of churches after American disestablishment, successful preachers drew on pietism to present a simplified, attractive Christian message that

forewent theological distinctions in favor of an intimate relationship with Jesus (Prothero 2003, 55).

This shift coincided with an interest in Jesus' earthly life that grew out of enlightenment skepticism about the empirical truth of the Bible. Liberal Christians responded with a hermeneutic centered on the ethical lessons derived from Jesus' ministry. They embellished rich details about his earthly life, evident in novelistic 'life of Christ' books, such as *The Life of Jesus, the Christ* (1871) by famed pastor Henry Ward Beecher. Conservative Christians defended biblical literalism, relying on an intellectual current called Common Sense philosophy, which in part argued that truth could be perceived through the external senses. The context of Jesus' life, revealed through archeological finds and through Palestine's natural and human geography, seemed to provide the material evidence that proved the reality of Divine revelation (Davis 1996, 53–100; Gutjahr 2002, 44–45). Both liberals and conservatives thus laid the groundwork for contemporary Christians' growing interest in the person of Jesus and his historical context – what Messianics call his 'Jewishness.'

For many GBs, Messianic Judaism seems to redress the ambivalent inheritance of these twin antecedents. Today, evangelical churches base their authority on biblical literacy and expertise. Yet, most also promote a therapeutic religion focused on God's intimate love and limit bible reading to a subset of popular passages (a 'canon within the canon'). Although a proven recipe for success in neo-evangelicalism, Christians drawn to Messianic Judaism often object to this disjuncture, especially how it obscures the scripture's Jewish content. Elena, who attends a Pentecostal church on Sundays and Beth HaMoshiach on Saturdays, represents most GBs when she says: 'Our teaching [at church] is more about how to live. Like last Sunday, our pastor talked about jealousy or anger and things that we should be living out daily. And here [at HaMoshich] they teach all the Bible and all the history – so it's deeper.'

GBs commonly say that Messianic sermons are more cerebral or 'deeper' than their evangelical equivalents. They engage lesser-known passages in the Old Testament and offer concrete examples of Judaism in Jesus' life – the historical context that Elena wants. Messianic rabbis then connect this textual exegesis with another form of exegesis, a mediated experience of rereading Jewish rituals. The Passover Seder, mentioned above, is a good example. Each congregation studied here drew at least three times their usual numbers for the annual Seder, which was widely advertised. During the ritual meal, Jewish objects were explained and imbued with Christological significance: the three pieces of *matzah* signify the Trinity; the blood on the lintel (so Death 'passed over' Jewish homes during the plagues in Egypt) signifies Jesus' blood on the cross; the Israelites' physical slavery and freedom signifies redemption. As with biblical archaeology or Holy Land geography, rituals preserved and passed down by the Jews seem to offer a tangible object that can be unearthed to reiterate Christian truth. And, like the Old Testament, these rituals (and Judaism itself) predate Christian events; read through an evangelical lens, they seem to prove the predestined nature of God's plan. These layers of exegesis appeal to GBs as an intellectual endeavor, akin to the search for hidden prophetic messages described below. For most, like Elena, it offers an important complement to the usual Sunday sermons.

A smaller but notable group is drawn to Messianic Judaism as a pointed rejection of the widespread trend in U.S. evangelicalism to picture Jesus as a buddy or

boyfriend (Luhmann 2004, 525). Jed, raised a Presbyterian in the Midwest, recalls: 'Everything was God is your buddy every inch of the way. [But] God *doesn't* just want to be your friend! That sense of awe that I think permeates everything Judaism does and thinks [is] what drew me.' Or Ramón, who grew up Baptist in Texas: 'The churches I was raised in, it was all story-telling time and everything ended up okay. But when you read the Scriptures, there are consequences Israel went through when they fail [to obey] God. They are *consequences* when we decide what is right or wrong.' Without wholly rejecting the intimacy of the loving Son, these GBs also yearn for the alterity of an awe-inspiring Father or a Sovereign Judge, biblical typologies they see in Scripture that are rarely represented in mainstream evangelicalism.

Prophetic: unlocking secrets and preparing for the end times

Apocalyptic prophecy is central to Messianic Judaism. Amid the destabilization of an earlier era – the horrors of the French Revolution and challenges of the enlightenment – 19th-century English Protestants developed new ideas about the apocalypse (Lewis 2009). One facet of this theology, dispensationalism, became entrenched in North America through the nascent fundamentalist movement and then spread to neo-evangelicalism as it emerged after the Second World War. While most Christians had believed that the Jewish covenant with God ended when they denied Christ, dispensationalists argued that Jews still had a key role to play in the End Times. They would usher in the apocalypse by returning to Palestine and rebuilding the Temple. Importantly, a select number would also become believers in Jesus (Boyer 1994). These ideas simmered below the surface until the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Israel gained control of Jerusalem and the 'Temple Mount.' There was a wave of unprecedented prophetic excitement (Anderson 2005, 43; Gibbs 2002; Weber 2004, 189–191).

For the Christians in this study, it is axiomatic that the End Times are happening right now. At some point, nearly all of them were regular consumers of media about the prophetic role of Jews and Israel. Historian Paul S. Boyer likens prophecy-watchers to 'hobbyists assembling a picture puzzle ... [who] painstakingly build from hundreds of Bible verses a picture of the final days' (Boyer 1994, 1). Messianics pore through scriptures and piece together disparate passages, with the help of multiple books, television, or Internet programs, in order to unlock scriptural secrets that remain hidden to others. In her work on Malagasy Adventist Christians, anthropologist Eva Keller describes an analogous process of 'discovering a truth hitherto buried' through intensive bible study. It is, she argues, central to Malagasy's way of being Christian because it produces an enjoyable sense of 'intellectually being in control, intellectually being on top of things' (Keller 2006, 290) that foreshadows the anticipated clarity of the afterlife when the truth of God's existence will be within the human capability to understand (Keller 2005).

For GBs, the pleasurable nature of being intellectually 'in control' is coupled with a deep curiosity about Jews following the 1967 prophetic turn. Hence the popularity of self-styled Jewish rabbis who promise that, by plumbing Hebraic roots, they can unlock even *more* secrets for prophecy watchers. Such rabbis began to appear on the televangelism circuit in the late 1990s and their audience has grown immensely since the mid-2000s. At their least sensational, they parse the Hebrew origin of biblical words in order to reveal their prophetic significance. More fantastically,

they portray Jewish rabbis as imbued with an air of mystery and the keepers of great secrets (Weber [1922] 1963, 47–48), as some recent book titles suggest: *7 Keys to Unlock the Prophetic Mysteries of Israel* (Jonathan Bernis c.2011) or *Shattering the Conspiracy of Silence: The Hebrew Power of the Priestly Blessing Unleashed* (Nehemiah Gordon 2012).

These teachings are often inflected with prosperity gospel, a theology especially popular among Pentecostals that says God wants believers to reap material riches. GBs in this study referred most often to pastors Larry Huch and Perry Stone, authors of respectively *The Torah Blessing* and *Breaking the Jewish Code*, which promise to reveal Jewish secrets in order to ‘release’ financial and spiritual blessings.¹² The overlap between Prosperity Gospel and Messianic Judaism speaks in part to how these trends developed conterminously in the U.S. (Bowler 2013). However, the connection also seems self-evident to many of the Christians it attracts since it rests on stereotypes about Jews being exotic, clannish, and unnaturally wealthy – a problematic restatement through inversion of the most virulent beliefs in anti-Semitism (Karp and Sutcliffe 2011).

In Messianic circles, prophetic and prosperity theologies share a conceptual framework wherein “ethnic” Jews are distinguishable and set apart. As biblical ‘literalists’ who ground their model of reality in the Common Sense philosophy described above, GBs believe that divine truths are revealed through observable reality. In his study of a Messianic congregation in California, anthropologist John Dulin rightly notes that this model ‘limits possible human correlates of biblical references to an objectively discrete kind of person,’ namely Jews. Thus Messianic worship powerfully joins biblical and earthly realities through the observable, physical presence of ‘Israelites’ (contemporary Jews) who worship the Messiah (Dulin 2013, 43). However, by limiting biblical referents to ‘ethnic Jews’ alone, GBs risk writing themselves out of the unfolding drama of salvation. The usual compromise, quoting a well-known Messianic ministry called First Fruits of Zion, is to affirm that ‘the Bible establishes the unique relationship that God has with ethnic Israel – something that will never change. But the prophets also envisioned that myriads of Gentiles would come to the knowledge of the Messiah and connect to the people of Israel’ (First Fruits of Zion 2013). Though ambivalence remains, most GBs come to see themselves as a select group called to be ‘grafted’ to the Jewish people (Rom. 11), entailing a responsibility to support Messianic Jews as their co-congregants and ‘unbelieving’ Jews through proselytism, prayers, and charitable giving.

Experiential: worshipping like Jesus and acquiring ritual expertise

The difference between ‘ethnic’ Jews and gentiles underscores one of the most trenchant debates in Messianic Judaism: who should obey the Law. For Messianics, the Law means adherence to religious practices derived from the 613 commandments

¹²Respondents most often mentioned rabbis Jonathan Bernis (Jewish Voice), Kirt Schneider (Discovering the Jewish Jesus), and Michael Rood (Rood Awakenings). David Jeremiah (who is sometimes mistaken for a rabbi) is also very popular. His ministry couples apocalypticism with therapeutic self-help (e.g., Jeremiah 1997, 2010). A variant on the prosperity theme, called ‘code breaking,’ refers to numerology using biblical passages to uncover coded messages. It was first popularized by Jewish journalist Michael Drosnin in *The Bible Code* (Drosnin 1997).

in the Torah and, more specifically, a few key practices that are symbolically resonant of Judaism in the United States, such as *kashrut* and circumcision. Since his appointment at Beth Tikvah, Rabbi Silvio has discouraged gentiles, 75 percent of the congregation, from adhering too closely to Jewish law and practices. Ron, a bible-study leader, describes how ‘there’s a lot of people saying, “So should we keep the Jewish laws or not?” In fact in my class, I basically said it’s okay if you eat ham sandwiches. One person actually got up and walked out.’ Rabbi Silvio has faced a similar response. ‘Some people left because I said, “If you celebrate Christmas, if you have conviction about that, then [fine].” The Jews [in our congregation] married to Gentiles, they don’t have any problem. It’s the *gentiles* walking around screaming about Christmas trees I tell you, I had sleepless nights about this issue and the people who left.’

From the perspective of Messianic Jewish leaders, there is some irony in this gentile intransigence. In the early 1970s, Protestant missionaries accused the new Messianic movement of ‘Judaizing,’ a heretical form of legalism that denies *sola gratia* (salvation by grace alone). Messianics countered by arguing that they wanted to introduce cultural practices that retained importance for ethnic Jews (Ariel 2000, 232; Rausch 1983, 48). This point ultimately assuaged critics’ fears but offered little justification as to why gentiles would also adopt such rituals and practices. Yet even as these internal discussions unfolded, more Christians outside of Messianism were dabbling in Jewish rituals. For a variety of reasons beyond my scope here, North American Christians largely shed their negative view of Jews following the Second World War. This change dovetailed with interest in the ‘Jewish Jesus’ noted above, producing an unprecedented relish for Jewish ritualization, which continues today (Sandmel 2010). In the 1960s, for example, mainline Protestants and Catholics experimented with holding Passover Seders, which caught on among evangelicals in the 1970s (Kaell 2013). Messianics were a major conduit for such information in evangelical circles. They also introduced Jewish-inflected music and dancing that reflected the emotive style of the charismatic movement (Hocken 2009, 101). Many evangelicals were first drawn to Messianic Judaism through its music.

Once Messianic congregations incorporated more gentiles, leaders compromised by promoting some biblically derived practices to draw them in (such as Seders), while denying them access to others. As a result, there is little coherence on the issue: while leaders like Rabbi Silvio rely on Paul to argue that, for gentiles, grace supercedes the law (2 Cor. 3:7), many others encourage GBs to keep kosher and celebrate Jewish holidays.¹³ In this case, the usual justification is threefold: God never expressly rescinded the law so it is valid in perpetuity; early Christians kept the law as a healthy way to structure their lives; these rituals draw one closer to Jesus because his ministry was built on discipleship – ‘the art of imitating one’s Master’ – so it is incumbent upon all his followers to learn his words and ‘do all things as he did’ (First Fruits of Zion 2013).¹⁴

¹³Other justifications for excluding GBs include: unsaved Jews dislike when gentiles ‘act’ Jewish and this hinders evangelistic outreach; GBs are apt to confuse biblical laws with (meaningless) rabbinic ones; God gave Jews and gentiles separate covenants so GBs who follow Jewish laws unwittingly engage in supersessionism (‘replacement theology’) and thereby negate ethnic Jews’ special status.

¹⁴Some GBs believe that Jesus will institute Judaism globally after his Second Coming, so they will be better prepared and even hasten the End Times. None of the leaders in this study actively promoted

Regardless where they fall on the issue, all Messianic congregations engage in a variety of Jewish-like rituals that can be deemed cultural and therefore skirt the problem, such as singing Hebrew songs and prayers (e.g., the *kiddush* or *sh'ma*), blessing children under the *chuppah*, cooking Ashkenazi foods for *oneg* (fellowship), blowing *shofars*, and performing Davidic dance. Processing the Torah around the room to be kissed is a popular practice since it clearly signifies Judaism. However, it can be fraught because, like Messianic leaders, GBs are chary of 'legalism,' the performance of rituals in the incorrect belief that they are salvific. They make casual references such as, 'At synagogues rabbis they don't believe what they're saying. They just do it out of ritual' or 'Because of knowing about legalism from Catholicism I refuse to become a legalistic Messianic Jew.' Born-again seekers may attend several congregations until they find one where the rituals and practices feel right. As at other points on their spiritual journey, GBs listen for God's voice to guide them. Lana, for example, describes sitting in her office cafeteria after she started attending Melech Israel, staring at her usual sausage breakfast. 'But that particular day,' she recounts, 'I took a bite and I was looking at it and my stomach turned. And I heard, *You're not supposed to be eating this*. It made me stop eating pork. Haven't eaten it since.'

These questions matter intensely because GBs seek the knowledge and bodily rituals that will effect the closest possible relationship with Jesus through mimesis. Leaders in the movement, for whom gentiles are not the target constituency, often treat GBs' desire 'to dance and sing in Hebrew' as a little silly and of secondary importance, or, more problematically, as producing 'copy-cat Jews' (Stokes 1998, 75). GBs, on the other hand, repeatedly describe how such ritualization produces affect. Tony, a truck driver in his mid-40s, first attended a Messianic service two years ago. His initial response was characteristic of many participants in this study:

To be saying the same words and in the same manner as He did, to put on the tallit and to say the Hebrew prayers ... Those traditions generally have only been passed down through the Jewish people so to do it for the first time – it made the hair stand up on the back of neck: 'Wow, Jesus did this 2000 years ago, the way I'm doing it!'

Anthropologists have examined myriad ways that events which 'grip' the body create intimacy with the Divine, 'a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 273; Taussig 1992, 21). This idea, derived from studies of indigenous religions, is less easily associated with Western Protestantism, where anthropological work has focused on the Protestant rejection of things and rituals in favor of intangible belief, creeds, and prayer (Keane 2002; cf. Coleman 2000). These themes resonate with Messianic believers, as the anxieties surrounding 'legalism' attest. However, a growing number of studies have shown how evangelicals and charismatics also strive to 'experience the Gospel in intensely bodily ways' (Luhrmann 2004, 518; Engelke 2010; Meyer 2011 on 'sensational forms'). In the United States, this has

this idea, but it is implied by First Fruits of Zion, a well-known Messianic ministry: 'Begin to obey the commandments of God – for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. You can bring God's rule down to earth through your actions; it is possible to live now for the realization of this Messianic Age' (First Fruits of Zion 2013).

been especially noticeable since the 1970s when charismatic Christianity entered the evangelical mainstream (Luhmann 2004, 2012). Another pertinent, though less prevalent, trend is the growing popularity since the 2000s of ‘ancient-future’ worship, which incorporates aspects of Catholic, Orthodox (or, in this case, Jewish) rituals into evangelicalism (Bielo 2011, 71; Sinitiere 2006).

These bodily, mimetic acts are experientially rewarding. As Tony recalls it, pronouncing the unfamiliar Hebrew words and touching the fringe of the Jewish *tallit* (shawl) literally made the hair on his neck stand up. GBs describe being able to feel Jesus and the scenes from the Bible so viscerally that, to quote Tony again: ‘You can almost touch them.’ Such rituals also appeal to born-again seekers, I suggest, because *the process* of acquiring the necessary expertise is enjoyable. I underline this point because studies of Messianics have generally assumed that gentiles chafe at how, writes ethnographer Carol Harris-Shapiro, ‘no other group ... has to work harder at a Messianic Jewish self than Messianic Gentiles’ (Harris-Shapiro 999, 71). The Jewish minority maintains its dominance in the movement, she argues, because gentiles are invariably cast as ‘learning’ and Jews as ‘teaching.’ My point is that far from making born-again seekers feel inadequate, this level of difficulty draws them to affiliate. Rebecca, a 66-year-old telemarketer, describes her first visit to Melech Israel:

I had never heard Hebrew spoken. And I was just – I was afraid and excited. I can’t describe it. [But] I knew the Holy Spirit had drawn me there for a reason. And I told the Lord, I said, ‘Lord, I’ll never be able to do all of this! But I’m going to try.’ These people were just fluently speaking Hebrew! ... To know that I could speak the same prayers that my Savior had spoken and go through the same service. It was one of the most thrilling moments of my entire life.

Messianic Judaism offers a welcome challenge for born-again seekers, who are already experts at acclimatizing to new religious practices and vocabularies (see also Wuthnow 1998, 180). Congregations generally offer a half-year weekly introductory course for new arrivals (in most evangelical churches such courses are only for ‘new Christians’ who are not yet born again). GBs must literally learn the language of Messianism (Hebrew prayers, etc.) and restructure their lives around Saturday worship and the annual cycle of Jewish holidays. It can cause confusion at work and jeopardize one’s social life. However, these difficulties actually appeal because many people come to Messianism dissatisfied with how previous churches seem to limit faith to Sundays. The more all-consuming the ritual practice, the more a believer is able ‘to strive to have a constant realization of God’s presence,’ as Tony put it in his interview. Gentiles describe thinking about grocery shopping differently now they no longer buy pork, or rearranging their week now that they no longer socialize on Saturdays, or consciously incorporating Yiddish expressions and Hebrew words into their speech. Doing so, they produce a *habitus* similar to what Saba Mahmood has described in the context of Islamic revivals in Egypt: the conscious regulation of thoughts and practices that shape a godly self (Mahmood 2001, 2005).

For GBs, the continual process of incorporating ‘bits of alien culture’ (Feher 1998, 68) also marks them out as experts on Judaism or even *as* Jews, a mistake that they take as a compliment and may subtly encourage. GBs who are in regular contact with Jews often describe this *habitus* as essential to fostering a deep empathy for the Jewish people (Feher 1998, 69) and the key to a more effective witness

(proselytism). However, most GBs in this study, and in the movement, have very little contact with 'unsaved' Jews and view witnessing to them as difficult or even frightening.¹⁵ Thus their real witness is to the *Christians* proximate to them. For GBs, these 'bits of alien culture' reinforce for others the theological importance of Jesus' Jewishness, and simultaneously attest to how GBs have long seen themselves – as religious mavericks who follow God's lead to forge new spiritual paths.

Genetic: tracing a hidden Jewish past

There is a running theme in Messianic congregations about whether gentile believers may, in fact, have Jewish blood. Steve, a white man in his 50s, first began attending a Messianic congregation in Texas. He excelled in his beginner Hebrew class 'and this one fellow was really agitated because I was doing it well. So he says, "Do you have any Jewish blood in you?" And ... my mother's side came from Crimea. And he asked me, what was her name? And I told him. And he goes, well that must be Jewish! *She must have been Jewish.*' Steve recalls it laughingly but, like many GBs, as he became more committed to Messianism, he began to ask his relatives about this possible Jewish lineage (which they denied) and considered doing a DNA test. Even today, after five years in the movement, he leaves it tantalizingly open: 'Personally I don't know but it *is* possible there's some Jewish.'

Gabriela, the Portuguese-American woman described above, first explained to me that she loved the Jews because she is grafted in the theological sense, part of the 'righteous among the nations.' But into the second hour of our discussion she began to describe how her cousin told her that their late aunt – 'this illiterate woman from a village in Portugal' – inexplicably knew a lot about Judaism. Further, Gabriela says, after she began to attend a Messianic service, she remembered how years before she had been told by a Jewish man that Benaim, a common name in her family, was 'very Jewish.' She went online and, using blogs for and by Christians who want to trace Jewish roots, she started reading about the *anusim* (*conversos*) from the Spanish Inquisition. At the same time, she was part of an ongoing discussion in her congregation, much like what Steve described above. She says:

Everyone's asking: do you have Jewish roots? Do you? And duh-duh-duh. I got to tell you, it was a bit of a turn-off. OK, I've prayed: Okay, God, can You please confirm if Benaim is indeed a Jewish name? I got the confirmation, 'Yes.' And even some of my friends have prayed with me, they said, 'yes.' I've asked [God]: Do I have Jewish blood? Am I part-Jewish from way, way back? Does *this* maybe explain my curiosity about Judaism? I don't have yet a definite answer. But I'm curious and I'm inquiring.

As with born-again conversion narratives, these 'roots' stories have a paradigmatic quality (Harding 2001; Stromberg 1993): a relative or a stranger is usually the first to observe that the believer may have Jewish roots; the major clue or confirmation

¹⁵This idea is common. The fear stems from: (1) knowing that Jews are offended by Christian proselytism; (2) a certain exoticization of Jews as the ultimate 'other' and therefore very difficult to convert; and (3) the fact that Jewish reasons for objecting to proselytism (the Holocaust, a legacy of Christian persecution) seem sacrosanct to most Americans, including evangelicals.

comes from a family name; older relatives seem to ‘mysteriously’ know about Judaism but no one asks them why. Yet even GBs who pray about Jewish roots remain ambivalent. Not only are such discussions usually discouraged by congregational leaders, but theologically they are problematic too. Gabriela concludes her detailed story with, ‘Will it change my faith today? It will not!’ GBs may dismiss others who talk just a bit too much about Jewish roots as if, says Gabriela: ‘They need something else other than [Jesus’ sacrifice] to justify the love of God for them.’

Previous studies have explained GBs’ search for Jewish roots as a reaction to the power imbalance that keeps Jews on top (Harris-Shapiro 1999, 73). Based on the multi-sited comparison in this study, however, such an explanation seems inadequate; GBs in more hierarchical congregations were no more likely to discover Jewish ancestors than those in egalitarian ones. Moreover, few GBs actually insist on being recognized as Jews. Instead, they hint at such origins, avoiding forceful declarations that, as Gabriela notes, can open them up to criticism. So why does roots-seeking appeal? Part of the answer lies, I argue, in the affective relationship that is so central to born-again Christianity (Luhmann 2004). For GBs, the deep emotional attachment they cultivate with God spills over into similar feelings for Jews. However, because they understand Jews to be a genetically distinct group to which they do not belong, such strength of emotion can create confusion. For some, being ‘grafted in’ provides an adequate explanation. For others, only a genetic link seems sufficient. Thus Gabriela asks God: ‘Does *this* maybe explain my curiosity about Judaism?’

This explanation overlaps with another one, drawn from ethnographer Shoshannah Feher’s argument that Gentiles want to ‘achiev[e] a special ethnic status that otherwise would have eluded them’ (Feher 1998, 48). She views this impulse as akin to creating what sociologist Mary Waters called a ‘flexible ethnicity’ (Feher 1990) where being ethnic offers Americans the chance to be unique while also cultivating a collective identity. This idea does resonate with Messianic Judaism. By drawing on Waters, however, Feher implies that for GBs finding Jewish roots is on par with how, say, a Scottish-American might discover ‘Scottishness’ (Basu 2007). Yet from the perspective of Messianic theology, it is not one (particularly attractive) ethnic option among many; Jews are the *only* race with a special covenant with God. Thus Gabriela clarifies that she loves the Portuguese people because of a shared culture but ‘the love and the care I feel for the Jewish people is at a completely different level because, supernaturally, the Jewish people were created [as] a testament to the entire plan’ (see also Dauermaun 2008, 51). If Jews’ very existence is a tangible sign of God’s promise to redeem humankind, then to discover Jewish roots is to become a sign for others (and for oneself) that this future is unfolding as promised. ‘Our God does not lie,’ Gabriela concludes. ‘There’s a continuity and a flow.’ To be Jewish is to be inextricably part of that flow – and the continuity and revelation it implies.

Last, but importantly for my overarching argument, tracing a family lineage is a religious practice akin to other seeking activities that appeal to GBs. Like the close study of scripture or unlocking prophetic systems, it requires long hours, poring over websites and lists of family names, digging through family records, and piecing together disparate bits of information (‘my great-grandmother did this ...,’ ‘My cousin used to say that ...’). It is an activity echoed in the biblical text, with its lineages of names through Leviticus and Numbers. It is also an exercise in unearthing hidden family secrets that, many GBs emphasize, are then ignored

or disputed by their relatives. Once more, the born-again seeker discovers, teaches, and in this case may even embody, new and unacknowledged truths.

Discussion: born-again seeking in context

In North America, religious seeking has risen along with well-documented trends over the last half-century, namely the multiplication of religious choices stemming from more access to information, declining reverence for inherited traditions, and a heightened emphasis on personal experience. American evangelicals and charismatics are no exception. They move between churches and access a wide array of online and TV media, as scholars well know, yet they fit uncomfortably with seeking models focused on New Age or alternative spiritualities, which suggest religious relativism and an aversion to institutional authority. When Christian conservatives are included in these studies, sociologists have downplayed the nuances in their seeking behaviors by comparing them with a range of religious groups in order to produce a portrait of American individualism writ-large (e.g., Madsen 2009, 1299; Roof 1999).

My aim, then, has been to produce a close-grained study of seeking within Messianic Judaism that reiterates the fluidity of evangelicalism, while also providing a more comprehensive portrait of (one of) the variants within Christian seeking itself. What becomes evident, first, is that *seeking is a religious practice*. What I mean is that to some degree all GBs see themselves as religious mavericks who engage in disciplined moral labor to slough off what is socially conditioned in favor of that to which God has called them. From a theoretical perspective, this idea shares commonalities with Wuthnow's 'practice-oriented' seekers, who are committed to the logic and rules of a particular practice (Wuthnow 1998, 184–185). However, for GBs it is generally seeking itself that *is* the religious practice and therefore does religious work. From this perspective, it matters less whether seeking is individualistic or not, and whether it is dabbling or deep—abiding questions in sociological studies of seeking. Instead, the salient issue is how for believers such practices produce a coherent whole. For the evangelicals drawn to Messianic Judaism, seeking is inextricable from their ongoing search for ways to heighten their intimacy with God and obedience to God's call; it is contiguous with how they lead a born-again life.

It is thus important that before finding Messianic Judaism, most GBs were already engaged in immersive practices that required expert knowledge of intricate facts and uncovering hidden secrets, such as prophecy watching or intensive bible study. To this, they add learning the laws of Judaism, doing Hebrew-language study, and researching family trees, which are enjoyable, to paraphrase Keller (2006), because they afford a chance to be 'intellectually in control.' Further, all GBs must rearrange their social calendar around Saturday worship and the Jewish liturgical year, and many also opt to keep some degree of *kashrut*. As anthropological studies have shown, religious people may hone an everyday habitus through disciplining techniques – bodily practices, intellectual affirmations – that construct a devout self (Mahmood 2001, 215–217) and serve to keep God's presence continually in mind. However, unlike what is sometimes called 'retraditionalizing,' when Western people 'convert' to orthodox (or traditional) religions (e.g., Davidman 1991), GB seekers may or may not opt to follow the rules of Orthodox Judaism. Some GBs fellowship with Messianic Jews only sporadically or for the

holidays; some are drawn to 'biblical' rituals, others emphasize textual exegesis; some want a Divine Judge, others seek to empathize more fully with Jesus the Jewish man. In short, the commonality lies in the practice of seeking itself; actual outcomes remain fluid and multifaceted, even within a single congregation.

This brings me to my second major point: studying conservatives – and here one could include 'retraditionalists' – fleshes out the kinds of limits that enable and also constrain religious seeking. To be clear, many seekers root their practices in a specific tradition (Wuthnow 1998, 188) and all, even the most eclectic New Agers, ground their choices 'within a horizon of feeling shaped by the rituals of their heritage' (Madsen 2009, 1294; Roof 1999, 144). However, such constraints are heightened for conservatives; the number of referents that make sense to GBs are more limited within a biblically driven framework. Paying closer attention to such limits is essential, both in order to better understand seeking from an emic perspective and to sharpen theoretical constructs of seeker spirituality beyond the academic 'fog' (Bender 2010) – that is, the tendency to view seeking as a universally shared ontology that defines the post-modern self (cf. Lynch 2010, 42).

Responding to a similar set of issues in his work on evangelical emergent churches, anthropologist James Bielo helpfully proposes a dialogic perspective that recognizes how 'new Christian identities are always born into a world of existing and competing Christian traditions, and develop in dynamic interaction with them' (Bakhtin 1934 [1981]; Bielo, 2011, 198). In Bielo's work, U.S. evangelicals adopt facets from Catholicism and Orthodoxy, while here they are drawn to Judaism. In either case, conservatives adapt and appropriate religious traditions where relational links seem self-evident – though they are actually historically contingent. As I have argued, American evangelicals are drawn to Judaism because of theological currents that date back about a century, especially the popularization of the 'Jewish Jesus' and prophetic dispensationalism. Thus, while GBs view their trajectories as based on the Bible or directed by God, from a historical perspective it is not surprising that Messianic Judaism caught fire in the mid-1980s and 1990s, once the prophetic excitement of the 1970s was thoroughly entrenched and believers sought innovative ways to actualize it.

In contemporary Messianic congregations, the negotiation of Jewish/Christian proximity is precisely what can produce differences of opinion between ethnic Jewish leaders and GBs in the pews. For GBs themselves, the tension lies in how to understand Messianic Judaism as an extension of their born-again commitments – it is the religion of Jesus, the Israelites are central in the Bible – and *also* as always different and apart from everyday (evangelical) Christianity. When this tension is kept in productive balance, it deepens and shifts, rather than denies, seekers' key theological concerns. In this case, Messianic Judaism is effective because it unites two strands of Christian pietism, widespread since the 1960s: the charismatic emphasis on bodily ritual and the evangelical emphasis on Bible study that fosters a 'personal relationship' with Jesus. For GBs, Messianic Judaism is the most complete way of merging these seeming opposites – effusive sensory worship and methodical textual study.

Scholars have thus far portrayed Messianic Judaism chiefly as a post-modern 'new religious movement' (NRM) or as a marginal, controversial branch of Judaism. In fact, its growth reflects something rather different: a still under-theorized trend in North American evangelicalism towards religious seeking. Institutionally grounded conservatives, like those profiled here, seek in order to deepen

their commitments in a specific (Christian biblical) framework and in religious sites viewed as proximate to their own. As gentile believers show, seeking may even actualize the driving forces in a born-again life. Understanding its role – and the nuances therein – illuminates how North American evangelicals may move across and through religious traditions without seeing it as a contradiction in terms. We have only begun to explore the uses and limits of religious seeking in contexts such as these.

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