

Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 2

6-13-2020

A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

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Recommended Citation

Herrmann, Zachary (2020) "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," *Relics, Remnants, and Religion: An Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/relics/vol5/iss1/2>

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Introduction

Both Judaism and Christianity acknowledge the existence of a messiah. In Judaism however, this messiah will rebuild the second temple rather than provide followers with a place in heaven. In Christianity, Jesus Christ is identified as the messiah. While Christianity originates in Judaism as 'the Jesus movement,' both religions develop their identity by differentiating from the other's understanding of Jesus's divinity and obligations of ritual laws (Halakha). While both Jews and Christians alike agree on their separation, a small demographic known as "Hebrew Christians" has continued to attempt reintegration of the two faiths since as early as the 1800's.¹ Early Hebrew Christians believed in Jesus Christ while retaining their Jewish identity, but did not face backlash because at the time, they did not seem to want to be considered a Jewish sect. In 1973, however, the latest attempt at creating a Messianic Jewish sect began, calling itself, "Jews for Jesus."² Jews for Jesus continue fighting to be classified as Jews while the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and other conventional Jewish communities reject their integration into the Jewish faith in order to preserve unity within Judaism's core traits. Mary Douglas's religious theory explains why Jewish texts, commentary, and Jewish organizations place the Jews for Jesus' movement and Messianic Judaism beyond a classification within normative Jewish sects to preserve the system of order established within the faith.

Background

Messianic Jewish faith lies outside the traditional order established by consensus of conventional Jewish faiths. To be classified as Messianic Judaism, the sect must "enable its followers to retain their Jewish identity while acknowledging faith in Jesus."³ In *New Religious*

¹ George D. Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements* Blue Ridge Summit: Scarecrow Press, 2011. 215.

² Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 180.

³ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

Movements, George Chryssides summarizes the earliest of these groups as Hebrew Christians, whose movement prioritized Jewish identity while acknowledging faith in Jesus under his Hebrew name “Yeshua.”⁴ Hebrew Christians justified their identity with their understanding of Jesus’ “original message” being for Jews as opposed to Gentiles.⁵ Consequently, Messianic Jews today understand themselves to be those who have “completed” their faith by affirming “the advent of Yeshua.”⁶ This self-proclaimed title provides a serious problem in classification for Jews and Christians alike.

While one cannot delegitimize Messianic Judaism as a religious movement, Jews for Jesus presents a serious problem by fighting to be classified as Judaism. The “Hebrew Christian organization” known as Jews for Jesus was founded in 1973 by Moishe Rosen with the aim of converting Jews to “fundamentalist Christianity.”⁷ At one point, Rosen actually sat on the American Board of Missions to the Jews (ABMJ), an organization whose focus was converting Jews to the Protestant faith, but was dismissed immediately upon founding Jews for Jesus.⁸ The ABMJ thought Jews for Jesus would fail, but by 1996, over 50,000 Americans had joined the movement.⁹ The way these individuals define their identity intrudes directly on the core principles of the Jewish faith and risks disruption of order within normative Judaism.

Rosen was compelled to fight for his own belief in Jesus to be legitimized by the Jewish community, but his true motives were never openly stated. Rosen led a branch of the Jewish Missions of America (JMA) but felt that the organization did not acknowledge “ethnic needs,”

⁴ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

⁵ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

⁶ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

⁷ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

⁸ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

⁹ Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*, 215.

perhaps due to guilt from his own “gentilization.”¹⁰ To accommodate his own belief in Jesus alongside his Jewish cultural identity, Rosen created the Jews for Jesus movement to be a “one-to-one missionary outreach” and was promptly fired from the JMA.¹¹ While Rosen was initially rejected by Hebrew Christians for categorizing his new religion as Judaism, only five years after the Jews for Jesus movement was created, the “Hebrew Christian Alliance of America”(HCAA) changed its name to the “Messianic Jewish Alliance of America.”¹² This name change marks the transition where Messianic Judaism became problematic as it attempted to imitate the identity of normative Jewish faith. This quick modification of the HCAA’s name following the success of the Jews for Jesus movement suggests that perhaps this Christian organization is more concerned with infiltrating a Jewish category of potential converts, rather than creating a new identity among Jews. Although Jews for Jesus and Messianic Judaism are distinctly separate organizations, their approaches and beliefs appear nearly synonymous.

Methodology

The Jewish fixation with the preservation of order throughout the Torah can be applied to support Messianic Judaism's dismissal. In Mary Douglas’ book *Purity and Danger*, she explains the significance of the Torah’s commandments as a way to “create order.”¹³ Douglas identifies “the command to be holy” throughout the Torah and asserts that there must be an opposition between “holiness” and “abomination.”¹⁴ In the Torah, God’s blessing provides “all good things” for the Jewish people who uphold their “covenant with God” and “observe all His precepts and

¹⁰ Patricia A. Power, “Blurring the Boundaries: American Messianic Jews and Gentiles.” *Nova Religio* 15, no. 1 (August 2011): 78.

¹¹ Power, *Nova Religio* 15, 78.

¹² Power, *Nova Religio* 15, 79.

¹³ Mary Douglas, “*The Abominations of Leviticus*,” *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge Press, 1992): 50.

¹⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 50.

ceremonies” to continue leading a holy and blessed life.¹⁵ While Douglas acknowledges that many of the Torah’s commands can be associated with “justice and moral goodness,” she asserts that holiness encompasses a larger meaning.¹⁶

Douglas believes that within the Torah, holiness is represented by wholeness within a category. Since holiness is considered to be an “attribute of the Godhead,”¹⁷ Douglas explains it has a root definition in being “set apart.” By differentiating from the mundane world, Douglas suggests that holiness exists as “wholeness and completeness.”¹⁸ The idea of wholeness is reflected in commandments of “physical completeness” as well as a “completeness in a social context.”¹⁹ To Douglas, this explains many Jewish commandments such as refusing to defile the body, and rejecting interfaith marriage. When looking at the kosher dietary laws, one can see how holiness integrates “species” and “categories.”²⁰ The horse, for example, while not directly mentioned by name within Leviticus, is excluded from the kosher diet because it is not “cud-chewing” or “cloven-hooved” like other cattle.²¹ In Douglas’ understanding of the Torah’s philosophy, “hybrids and other confusions” are rejected.²² Since holiness can be connected to the idea of being “set apart” from other things, Douglas suggests that “holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.”²³ By applying Douglas’ framework to Jewish text, religious commentary, and organizations, a clearer understanding of why normative Judaism rejects Messianic Judaism’s inclusion can be revealed.

¹⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 51.

¹⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 52.

¹⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 49.

¹⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 51.

¹⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 52.

²⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54.

²¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 55.

²² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54.

²³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54.

Jewish Texts

The Jewish understanding of the messiah throughout traditional Hebrew scripture sets a foundation that forbids Messianic Judaism's entry into the category of conventional Jewish faith. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides references a Jewish messiah in his "Thirteen Principles of Faith," explaining the necessity for belief in a messiah to help Jews return to a "full observance of Torah Law" and "gain sovereignty" over Israel.²⁴ While the Jewish faith does recognize a messiah, they understand him to be a new ruler for the Israelites and a descendant of King David rather than the resurrected son of God. The Christian misinterpretation of Jesus metaphorically fulfilling the Jewish messiah's attributes allows for Messianic Jews to mislead their followers into believing the reasons for their exclusion are completely subjective.

The original Jesus movement derived from Judaism in the first century, but quickly became differentiated from Judaism by its followers' belief in Jesus as the messiah and their inclusion of Gentiles within the movement. Proselytization is usually associated with Christians for their missionary trips and recruitment of any individual. Unlike Jews, Christians and Muslims proselytize because the religious authority asserts that one must be devoted to their respective faiths fully to reach salvation after death. In the Talmud however, Sanhedrin explains that "righteous gentiles" have a place in the "world to come", implying there is no need for them to convert in order to be valued by the Jewish God.²⁵ As the Messianic Jewish movement expanded to include Gentiles, it further excluded itself from conventional Judaism by radically reinterpreting explicit commandments against the act within the Jewish texts.

²⁴ Joseph Telushkin, "Jewish Concepts." *Jewish Literacy*, (Jewish Virtual Library, 1991).

²⁵ "Sanhedrin 105a", *The William Davidson Talmud*.

Religious Scholars

In her essay, *Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity*, religious historian Pauline Kollantai explains how Jews for Jesus follow the basic principles of many Messianic Jewish sects before them. Kollantai classifies the sect beyond the “boundaries of normative or traditional Judaism.”²⁶ While Messianic Jews practice living “within the framework of the Torah” by following the commandments, practicing ceremonies, and observing the sabbath on Friday night, they are “strongly committed” to teaching “conservative evangelical principles.”²⁷ Today, Messianic Jewish sects, such as Jews for Jesus, consider themselves a “renewal movement” in Judaism similar to the original Jesus movement in the first centuries.²⁸ The difference between this sect and the original Jesus movement, however, lies in their dogmatic commitment to being classified as Jews. While the Jews for Jesus movement is marketed towards “ethnically Jewish” individuals, the modern Messianic Jewish communities are frequently made up of Jews and Gentiles.²⁹ This presents a crucial problem for the Jewish faith: if non-Jews can join the movement and be classified as “fulfilled Jews,” the preservation of Jewish identity will be obstructed.³⁰ By ignoring the Jewish conversion ritual, proselytizing the Jewish faith, and asserting that Jews who have not embraced Jesus are unfulfilled Jews, Messianic Jews threaten conventional Jewish identity with their presence. Messianic Judaism’s integration into the Jewish religion would fully circumvent the system of classification established by the Jewish religious authority making belief in Jesus’ divinity the irrefutable priority to remain holy rather than practice and ritual.

²⁶ Pauline Kollantai, “Messianic Jews and Jewish Identity.” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3 (2004): 195.

²⁷ Kollantai, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3, 197.

²⁸ Kollantai, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3, 196.

²⁹ Kollantai, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3, 203.

³⁰ Kollantai, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 3, 197.

Conventional Jewish sects easily reach consensus when classifying Messianic Jews outside of Judaism but continue to face opposition from uninformed non-Jews. This idea is shown in Rabbi Carol Harris Shapiro's book, *Messianic Jews as a Mirror*, in which she explains that while Jews continue to reject Jews for Jesus, normative Judaism has "inadequately answered [Messianic Judaism's] challenge."³¹ Rabbi Shapiro argues that the Rabbinic authority must clarify what defines a Jew. She explains how Rabbinic commentaries reject Jesus as "God and man," arguing that his fulfillment of prophecies within the Hebrew bible is distorted.³² Since Messianic Jews possess "shared peoplehood" with Christians through Christ's divinity, they cannot be considered Jewish.³³ To Rabbi Shapiro, Judaism should not be interconnected with other faiths in any form. While Judaism acknowledges Jewish identity through both ethnicity and faith, Rabbi Shapiro explains that Jews who have chosen a new spiritual identity are considered "heretics" and "infidels" when they assert that they are "still in the tradition" while holding quite different beliefs from the normative group.³⁴ Unlike Jews who turn to "practice eastern religions" and are welcomed back to the faith, Messianic Jews are rejected because they attempt to merge distinctly different religious categories.³⁵

All conventional Jewish sects reject the act of proselytization within their faith while the Jews for Jesus movement embraces it. In her book, *Blurring the Boundaries: American Messianic Jews and Gentiles*, Patricia Power reclassifies Jews for Jesus as an "overtly missionizing form of ethnically Jewish Evangelical Christianity."³⁶ She sees Messianic Jews as having "exploited the space" between two religious faiths who have historically stood in

³¹ Carol Harris-Shapiro, "Messianic Jews as a Mirror." *The Reconstructionist* 59 (1994): 36.

³² Harris-Shapiro, *The Reconstructionist* 59, 40.

³³ Harris-Shapiro, *The Reconstructionist* 59, 39.

³⁴ Harris-Shapiro, *The Reconstructionist* 59, 41.

³⁵ Harris-Shapiro, *The Reconstructionist* 59, 41.

³⁶ Power, *Nova Religio* 15,69

opposition.³⁷ She explains that even in Paul's epistles, he understands Christ's "Judean rejection" as the will of God to permit Gentiles to join in "Israel's salvation."³⁸ Since both Judaism and Christianity reject Messianic Judaism, Powers encourages her readers to ask how did this "Gentile Protestant missionary project" evolve into an "ethnically Jewish movement" aiming to create a new sect of Judaism?³⁹ Powers sees Jews for Jesus as a Christian movement in disguise, with the goal of converting Jews to Christianity. The faith encourages its followers to embrace Jesus Christ as their lord and savior rather than the singular almighty God of the Hebrew Bible which remains the firm belief of the Jewish people.

While being denied by Judaism, Messianic Judaism rejects a Christian identity, leaving it out of place on the religious spectrum. One might argue that Rabbi Shapiro is being too generous to the Jews for Jesus movement by dismissing them as heretics rather than possessing ulterior motives. In his work *A New Approach to Jews-For-Jesus*, Orthodox Jewish writer Dennis Prager states that Messianic Jews ought to be ostracized from the Jewish community and classified as a cult. Prager argues that Jews for Jesus are "former Jews who converted to Christianity," and that denying themselves as Christians would be considered an insult to Christianity and suggest they feel shame in seeing Christ as their savior.⁴⁰ If Jews for Jesus are proud of their belief in Christ, they should take pride in being considered Christians. The reason they do not is that it would limit their ability to recruit ethnically Jewish individuals to their cause. In addition, both Jews for Jesus and Messianic Judaism allow for individuals to join the community who have no Jewish heritage whatsoever, thus violating yet another expectation clearly established by Jewish ritual

³⁷ Power, *Nova Religio* 15, 69.

³⁸ Power, *Nova Religio* 15, 72.

³⁹ Power, *Nova Religio* 15, 69.

⁴⁰ Dennis Prager, "A New Approach to Jews-for-Jesus." *Moment*, 06, (2000).

law. While this malicious intention has never been openly admitted by the religious authority of Jews for Jesus, their actions reinforce this supposition.

Objections

Messianic Jewish individuals have spoken out, arguing that the rules preserving order within the Jewish faith are completely arbitrary, never addressing why they are restricted from classification as a form of Judaism. The self-proclaimed Messianic Jew, Alison Madar, shares her story on MessianicPublications.com, explaining how her rejection by conventional Judaism was made “painfully clear” after being refused a “right of return” from Taglit-Birthright Israel.⁴¹ She shows her application within the article and appears to be in accordance with all of the requirements. Her father's side of the family was orthodox. However, she stated that her mother had converted to Messianic Judaism, thus violating normative Judaism's standards for Jewish identity. A response to Madar from Taglit-Birthright stated that: Messianic Judaism is classified beyond the “accepted parameters” of “Jewishness in contemporary Jewish society.”⁴² The response goes on to state that “it is simply an agreed-upon formula that certain acts categorically separate individuals from what are agreed-upon parameters of Jewishness in this age.”⁴³ Regardless of an individual's own belief about their identity, Messianic Judaism is rejected by the normative Jewish consensus and perpetuated by Jewish organizations.

Taglit-Birthright Israel sends Jewish young adults to Israel with no costs to the individual, making the program fiscally invested in the rejection of Messianic Judaism. Madar herself admits she finds “nothing wrong with Christianity” since she worships Yeshua, but sees

⁴¹ Alison Madar, “Denying That Messianic Jews Are Really Jews: My Rejection from Taglit-Birthright Israel”, Messianic Publications, (5 Feb. 2018)

⁴² Madar, Messianic Publications.

⁴³ Madar, Messianic Publications.

her “Jewish culture” as the defining difference.⁴⁴ Taglit-Birthright explains that Madar’s exclusion is not a “denial of [her] origins” and bears no implications about the “quality of [her] beliefs.”⁴⁵ They have no qualms with accepting ethnically-Jewish individuals to Birthright but reject Jews who identify with another religious sect because, according to normative Judaism, they have abandoned the faith. While she defends her Jewish identity stating that her great-grandparents fled from the Holocaust, she ignores Jewish commandments which reject any belief in individual possessing literal attributes of God and resurrection. Messianic Jews cannot be considered Jewish because they reject the normative Jewish interpretation of holiness; cultural identity does not entitle one to obstruct a religion’s established categories.

Application

The Jewish faith’s rejection of Messianic Judaism can be understood in terms of Mary Douglas’ perception of its classification. If a system of order is established, there will inevitably be obstructions that must be rejected to preserve order. Douglas explains “dirt” as a “by-product” of creating a system of order.⁴⁶ The dirt is symbolic of “defilement” in a “systematic ordering of ideas.”⁴⁷ Douglas gives the example of shoes being “dirty” when placed on a table, but ordinary when on the ground.⁴⁸ Douglas’s understanding of Torah commandments as “rituals of separation” provides an understanding of one of the many reasons why Jews reject Messianic Judaism today.⁴⁹ By this definition of “holiness as order,” Douglas rules that “contradiction” and

⁴⁴ Madar, Messianic Publications.

⁴⁵ Madar, Messianic Publications.

⁴⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 56.

⁴⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 56.

⁴⁸ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 42.

⁴⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 54.

“double-dealing” oppose holiness.⁵⁰ Since the Jewish prerogative is to remain holy, the community becomes passionate in their preservation of order.

Likewise, Messianic Judaism's exclusion in Jewish source texts is perfectly depicted by Douglas' theory of wholeness of category. Douglas originally applies her model to the kosher dietary laws in Leviticus, but it can be seen throughout primary Jewish texts. Using Douglas's model, Jesus cannot be classified as the Jewish messiah because he did not fulfil the prerequisites of the messiah which Jews have depicted. Furthermore, the Talmud's recognition of “righteous Gentiles” explains why Jews feel it unnecessary to alter the wholeness of shared identity within the community.⁵¹ Douglas' theory depicts how Jews reject Christian ideals directly addressed through sacred texts and midrash to remain in God's space of holiness.

Normative Judaism rejects Messianic Judaism because the movement exists outside the categories of Jewish movement attributes established by the religious authorities. Rabbi Shapiro sees the incorporation of a new Jewish sect whose members identify as “fulfilled Jews” to be incompatible with the Jewish system of order already established.⁵² Prager reclassifies Messianic Jews as members of a Christian sect, denying their self-identification with Judaism due to their belief in Jesus. Prager follows Douglas' theory by keeping Messianic Judaism within a Christian system of order so that the two faiths can be kept distinctly separate. Since Messianic Judaism's dismissal is clearly depicted in Douglas' model but cannot be considered proof against the sect's belonging, Douglas' thinking must be reflected in scholars and modern sources as well.

While the entirety of Messianic challenges to Rabbinic authority cannot be rejected in a blanket statement, Jews for Jesus and the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America are rejected

⁵⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 55.

⁵¹ “Sanhedrin 105a”, *The William Davidson Talmud*.

⁵² Dennis Prager, "A New Approach to Jews-for-Jesus." *Moment*, 06, (2000).

because of their clearly Christian roots. Despite Messianic Judaism fighting to be categorized within normative Judaism, applying Douglas' model would reclassify the sect separately, merely imitating Jewish rituals on a different system of core ideological beliefs. The exclusion of Messianic Jews is upheld through Jewish organizations like Taglit-Birthright in order to prevent Jewish rights from being distributed to individuals outside the Jewish category. The preservation of these Jewish privileges are not based on exclusivity, but rather an attempt to leave a clear differentiation between religious categories. Rather than an internal shift within Judaism dividing the faith, Jews for Jesus attempts to infiltrate Judaism from outside the faith, providing a necessity to uphold the boundaries established by Douglas's theory.

Conclusion

Douglas' analysis of how ritual laws preserve order within Judaism is displayed in the faith's rejection of Messianic Jewry due to violations of fundamental attributes of Judaism's understanding of divinity. Regardless of one's self-proclaimed cultural identity, a non-Jewish individual cannot obstruct the religion's established categories. The consensus reached by all other forms of Judaism in rejecting Messianic Judaism as a type of Jewish identity represents the onset of identifying a limit to the subjectivity of interpretation identified throughout postmodern literature. Judaism rejects the Jews for Jesus movement from a place within normative Judaism because it exists in a liminal space between categories with the intention of blurring boundaries. Acknowledging the sect would threaten the limits which the Jewish people have defined for themselves. Jews for Jesus can be clearly declassified as Jewish because its Christian origins highlight an intolerance for any denial of Christ's divinity. At first glance, one may not see why the Jewish people feel compelled to resist this reevaluation of the boundaries they have defined, but Douglas explains how the phenomenon of aversion to change is reflected in all of humanity.

The Jewish people are especially likely to hold a resistance to change and feel much more compelled to preserve their community due to previously faced oppression and genocide throughout history. With new insights provided by Douglas' theory, a fragment of truth is revealed in the pursuit of understanding the role of religion, identity, and inclusion in contemporary society.

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