In the Eye of the Storm: Messianic Believers in Nazi Germany[1]

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This year, *Ariel Magazine* published an article by the president of Chosen People Ministries, Dr. Mitch Glaser. In the article, Dr. Glaser answered the question whether Polish Jews had someone – anyone – who would have told them about their Jewish Messiah. This question has haunted me ever since. What about the Jewish people in the eye of the storm, in Germany itself? What was their spiritual condition going into the Holocaust? Was there someone – anyone – in the "slaughterhouses" of Europe who would have shared the good news of Messiah Jesus with them?

To answer the question, I undertook a trip to Germany and, accompanied by my 19-year old son, started my research in Berlin. Above the rooftops of the city's center shines once again the golden dome of the New Synagogue. The history of this building has been a powerful mirror of Jewish life in Germany for the last 150 years. Built in the second half of the 19th century, the synagogue allowed up to 3,200 people to come together and worship their God. Because of its Moorish style and resemblance to the Alhambra in Spain, it was an important architectural monument, until fanatical thugs set fire to the beautiful building in the Kristallnacht of 1938. Two years later, the Nazis confiscated the rooms that were still usable. Finally, in 1943, the synagogue took a near fatal blow during Allied bombings. After the war, the district of Berlin that is home to the New Synagogue fell into the hands of the Soviet occupying forces, who only kept the main façade of the building as a memorial. The rest of the structure was torn down. Today, the rebuilt synagogue houses Berlin's *Centrum Judaicum* and is open to visitors. Next to it is a famous Jewish restaurant, called "Hummus and Friends." My son and I ate lunch there after visiting the synagogue, and when I asked him what he thought, his answer was short, but oh so true: "All I can think is, 'In your face, Hitler! You didn't win.'"

The New Synagogue is one of many impressive signs of Jewish life in Germany. Yet, there was another good reason to start my research in Berlin: The most prominent ministry

[1] This paper was first published as an article by Ariel Ministries in Ariel Magazine, #33, December 2019. The article is available for download at https://www.ariel.org/pdfs/magazine/winter-2019.pdf.

whose goal it was to share the gospel with the Jewish people was headquartered in that city. Called *Gesellschaft zur Förderung des Christentums unter den Juden* ("Berlin Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews"), this ministry began its work in 1822. Sanctioned and financially supported[2] by King Friedrich Wilhelm III, the work among German Jews, especially in the eastern provinces of Prussia, was sincere. It went beyond the attempts of the "forced" conversions one of my ancestors and innumerable other Jews underwent. In order for this ancestor of mine to be able to become a professor of one of Germany's most renowned universities, he had to be baptized. So, he chose "the lesser of the two evils,"[3] as he wrote in his memoirs, and became a Protestant. He was baptized by the queen of Bavaria, Caroline of Baden, and took on the surname Neumann ("Newman") because he felt it adequately expressed the fact that he had successfully freed himself of the "shackles" of religion and ancestry.

This sentiment was typical for German Jews. Many of them wanted nothing more than to assimilate into the culture around them. Many Jewish people killed in the Holocaust were surprised that they would be counted among this people group. Having served in World War I, they saw themselves primarily as Germans, and then as Jews.[4]

In any case, the newly founded Berlin Society was not interested in nominal conversions. Its goal was to indeed share the good news of the Jewish Messiah with the Jewish people and to "win them to the truth by teaching them as the Lord and His apostles have taught."[5] Hence, the focus of the ministry was on tools that had proven to be successful in the past, namely, "the distribution of the New Testament and those religious writings that are useful to bring them to the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, promised and prophesied by the Old Testament."[6] Missionaries, on the other hand, were only to be sent if these texts, distributed in German, Yiddish, and Hebrew, didn't achieve the goal.

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[2] Christopher Clark, "Missionary Politics. Protestant Missions to the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Prussia." in *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, Vol. 38 (1993), 33.
[3] The word "evils" is referring to Catholicism and Lutheranism.
[4] See "Frequently Asked Questions." *Shoah Research Center*, yadvashem.org. Accessed 9/5/2019.
[5] Friedrich Weichert, "Die Anfänge der Judenmission," in Hans von Arnim, Walter Delius, *Jahrbuch für Berlin-Brandenburgische Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. 38 (Berlin, Germany: Christlicher Zeitschriftenverlag, 1963), 113.
[6] Ibid.

The first baptisms orchestrated by the society in Berlin took place in 1822 with 60 German Jews publicly declaring their faith in Messiah. This was followed by 19 baptisms in 1830; 73 in 1831-34; 32 in 1836; 39 in 1837; 22 in 1838; 13 in 1840, and so forth.[7]

Why are these numbers even important, considering how small they were? According to the Berlin Society, there was a noticeable burden on the Jewish community of the day. On December 24, 1837, an anonymous author published 28 elegies that reflect Jewish forebodings of the darkest kind. Only a few sentences from his writings will demonstrate this sentiment:

> The epitaph shall read: Here rests a Jew on foreign soil. He had a longing, he was afflicted, and he endured. His suffering and his sorrow are his trophies . . . I heard anxious moaning, the sound of lamentations, a woe. A frightened whimpering, a muffled groaning, such pain-stricken noise! . . . A fearful whisper seems to rise from the soil, met with dullness coming from heaven. The winds bring to me the lamentation, and the trees pass on whispered woes . . . The fire that you have lit will devour you. But they will finish their acts of destruction because the old world is doomed for ruin. A building will be erected; it is the high court. One man will know his duty; it is the hangman. Then a new generation will rise and will only find graves, for heaven will be a grave where they have buried God and the saints. Then a terrible lamentation will fill the earth.[8]

It is hard not to recognize the eschatological undertone of these elegies. However, with hindsight, it is equally hard to not recognize the foreboding of the horrific mass extermination that the Jewish people would suffer in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

Historically, most baptized Jews in Germany joined the Lutheran Church. There, even those who were true believers in Yeshua were mostly met with indifference; sometimes with suspicion; or worst, with anti-Semitism. In order to avoid this treatment, some Jewish believers started looking for places of worship where they could stay among themselves. In 1901, the Berlin Society purchased a property in one of the most urban boroughs of the city, called Prenzlauer Berg. The ministry not only moved its headquarters to the building, but soon started

[7] Ibid., 132-33.
[8] Ibid., 135-36.

construction work of what became known as the *Messias Kapelle* ("Messiah Chapel"). Three days before Christmas of 1902, the chapel opened its doors to the Jewish believers of Berlin.

While the goal of the Berlin Society had been to offer a haven for Jewish believers, its work was closely affiliated with the Lutheran Church. In fact, the chapel officially belonged to the union of Protestant churches that also included the Confessing Church, whose most famous member was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. However, in 1930, the Lutheran Church revoked its support of the work of the Berlin Society and withdrew its pastors from the chapel. From then on, the Messias Kapelle was run by laymen.

In 1935, the Lutheran Synod forbade the baptizing of Jewish people. One of the pastors in Berlin expressed the general sentiment: "One family told me that it would be a terrible thought for them if a priest were to lay the same hand on their child that had baptized a Jew. I am convinced that this family is not isolated."[9]

Yet, not everyone obeyed the new directives of the Synod. The Messias Kapelle at this point separated itself completely from any state-run institution and in turn became the most important place of Messianic baptism in Berlin. According to the baptismal records of the time, over 700 German Jews got baptized there in the years between 1933 and 1940.

On November 11, 1938, during the Kristallnacht, the Messias Kapelle and the seat of the Berlin Society were trashed by the Nazis. Still, it would take until January of 1941 for the ministry and the chapel to be officially closed permanently. Ten months later, the first deportation of Jewish people began in Berlin. Records prove that of the 700 Jewish believers who had been baptized in the Messias Kapelle after 1933, 86 were hauled off to the ghettos of Lodz, Riga, Minsk, and Warsaw. Only two of them survived the Holocaust. It is unknown what happened to the rest of the congregation.[10]

Today, the Messias Kapelle is a rare memorial of the work of ministries such as the Berlin Society. The chapel is hardly visible from the outside. In fact, the building is

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[9] Hildegard Frisius, *et al.*, *Evangelisch getauft – als Juden verfolgt* (Berlin, Germany: Evangelisches Landeskirchliches Archiv in Berlin, 2008), 374.

[10] "Die Messiaskapelle in Berlin- Prenzlauer Berg, Kastanienallee 22. Ein Gedenkort Für Deportierte Christen Jüdischer Herkunft." *Evangelisches Landeskirchliches Archiv in Berlin*, Evangelische Kirche, 2019. Accessed at: landeskirchenarchivberlin.de.

inconspicuously nestled between other houses that look very much the same: painted light grey, or maybe beige, with tall windows and large wooden entryways that lead into dimly lit foyers. Only a modest plaque above the door notifies the passerby that this house is different and that behind its walls hides a historical treasure of courage and faith.

Unfortunately, the chapel has not been turned into a museum, nor is it accessible to tourists. When I stood in front of the building on a beautiful sunny day in May of this year, it was quite early in the morning. Mothers were hurriedly walking their kids to school, baristas were serving steaming cappuccinos, and street cleaners were washing away the dirt of the previous day. A construction worker came and opened the door to the building. I stepped inside behind him, driven by the desire to see what had happened to this place that once served my brothers and sisters in the Lord as a place of worship during history's darkest time. I quickly realized that I had no way of getting past the entrance door. This was not a public place. Just when I was about to give up, a young woman came in, pushing her bicycle past me. I stopped her. "Excuse me," I said, "would you know anything about the Messias Kapelle? I have come from the United States to see it. Is there any way to get inside?" The request surprised the woman, but she quickly said, "Certainly. Please follow me."

It turned out that the company she worked for—a marketing and PR firm—now owned the place. The lady led me past a few beautiful rooms, flooded by warm sunlight, through a door and into the worship hall. Words cannot express the emotions that overcame me. The gorgeous room, maybe three stories high, still had an altar and behind it, the ark, which resembles the marble relief of a Temple. Above it, I read the German words: *Heilig, heilig, heilig, Javhe Zebaot* ("Holy, holy, holy *Yahweh Zebaoth*"). Like a golden crown, the Hebrew letters *YHWH* rest on this quote from Isaiah 6:3.

An old typewriter was decoratively sitting on the plain altar. The lady quickly removed it, noticing the camera dangling from my neck. She said, "I think there is something else that should be placed on the altar instead," before taking off. A few minutes later, she returned, obviously struggling under the surprising weight of a small wooden box. I quickly came to her aid and

realized she was carrying what might have been meant to remind the Jewish worshipers of a portable *Aron Kodesh*.[11]

The very large windows let in a lot of light, and while the modern furniture and office tables, the computers, and the cow hides on the floor were supposed to create a hip ambiance, I could still see them—the Messianic believers, huddled together in their pews, anxiously listening for the sound of heavy boots storming the building. They would worship their God and sing praises to Him for sending His Son to save their souls, all the while knowing that their faith in Messiah would not save their physical lives. Some of these people carried the gospel message, the good news of the atoning death, burial, and resurrection of Yeshua, into the ghettos and concentration camps. They would have continued to worship their God wherever they were, for He alone offered words of truth and comfort in a time when being one of His chosen people could cost you your life. To these unsung heroes, I imagine the Lord saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." (Mt. 25:21).

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[11] "Holy Ark."

Part 2

The following text is the translation of an excerpt of a thesis written by Stefanie Pfister and published in 2007 under the title *Messianische Juden in Deutschland - Eine historische und religionssoziologische Untersuchung* ("Messianic Jews in Germany - A Historical and Sociological Study of Religion").[12] The excerpt summarizes the history of the outreach of believers to the Jewish people of Europe, beginning in the 17th century. It is meant to supplement the paper "In the Eye of the Storm: Messianic Believers in Nazi Germany" by providing some additional background information of the work done over the centuries in Europe.

Puritans and Pietists

As early as the 17th century, theologians continued with Reformation ideas and increasingly engaged with the Jewish community in order to communicate the gospel to them. Universities such as Leipzig, Wittenberg, Strasbourg, Basel, Altdorf, and later especially Halle and Helmstedt were engaged in rabbinic theology and Talmudic and Hebrew language studies. In connection with the Puritan movement in England and the Pietist movement in Germany, both of which emphasized the enduring narrative of Israel, there was a completely new awareness of the existence of Jewish believers.

Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633-1705), professor at the University of Altdorf, was the first Protestant missionary to the Jews. In his publications, he advocated that Christians should lead a life pleasing to God in order to interest the Jews in the Christian faith. Wagenseil's friendly connections to the Jewish scholar Menasse Ben Israel (1604-1657), who in turn enabled contacts with Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), led to the return of formerly expelled Jews to England in connection with the reform movement of Puritanism (16th-18th century). Cromwell revoked the Edict of Expulsion of 1290. The Puritans taught that Messiah would rule in

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[12] Stefanie Pfister, *Messianische Juden in Deutschland - Eine historische und religionssoziologische Untersuchung* Volume 3 of *Dortmunder Beiträge zu Theologie und Religionspädagogik* (2nd edition; Berlin/Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2016; ISBN 978-3-8258-1290-4; https://www.lit-verlag.de/publikationen/religionswissenschaft/60767/messianische-juden-in-deutschland).
Translation by Christiane Jurik published in this paper with minor edits. All footnotes have been removed, and certain passages have been omitted (for the sake of conciseness). For the full German text, please see the above source.

Jerusalem before the Last Judgment and the end of the world in the millennium (chiliasm/millennialism). But before this could take place, the Jewish people must return to Jerusalem. For this reason, beginning in 1649, the English puritan churchman, Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603), organized ships for the return of the Jewish people to Palestine. For the first time in Europe, Jews in England experienced full religious freedom, although Cromwell tried to win them over to Christianity by treating them kindly.

Pietism is described by J. Wallmann as the most important piety and religious renewal movement of Protestantism after the Reformation. The Pietist movement began with the so-called conventicles (*collegia pietatis*). The concept was first advanced in the 16th century by the German Protestant Reformer Martin Bucer, an early associate of John Calvin in Strasbourg. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) adopted the idea around 1670 in Frankfurt am Main. In these meetings, the Pietists interpreted the Bible in a communal way, and like the Puritans, they also represented chiliasm. The gospel was to be proclaimed to all people, Gentiles and Jews alike. Furthermore, the Pietists emphasized a personal faith and that a believer must repent in order to receive salvation. Spener understood conversion as a selective event that determines the course of one's life and distinguished between "the great repentance," i.e. conversion, and "the small repentance," i.e. the daily repentance in discipleship and sanctification. He advocated a friendly witness and example of Christianity among the Jews, without forcing the Jews to convert.

Spener sent his students, including A. H. Francke, to Esras Edzard (1629-1708). Edzard lived as a private scholar in Hamburg and devoted himself to the mission to the Jews, gave Hebrew lessons and regularly held Sabbath services for Jews in the *Proselytenhilfswerk* he founded, with the result that numerous Jews were baptized there.

In 1727, Count von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) founded the brotherhood in Herrenhut, which, in addition to the ministry among the Gentiles, also organized an outreach to the Jews. Johann Heinrich Callenberg (1694-1760), who had studied under Francke, founded an *Institutum Judaicum* in Halle in 1728. This institute sent out many theologians who talked with the Jews about their faith in Messiah Jesus, but also explicitly condemned anti-Semitic behavior of Christians towards the Jews. It is therefore fair to claim that Pietism challenged and partially removed anti-Judaism from the church. For the first time since Christianity had become a state religion, Christians and Jews met on the same social level. As a result, many friendships

developed between Jews and Christians, and a new interest in the Jewish community arose in the Christian denominations.

Revivalist Movements and the Evangelical Movement

Pietism experienced its peak in the 1720s. Then the rationalist theology of the Enlightenment increasingly displaced representatives of the Pietist movement from the seminaries and universities. Beginning in 1800, however, there were local revival movements that were directed against the Enlightenment ideas in theology and the church and that helped Pietism to regain its momentum. Until 1815, the revival movement was limited to small circles. Between 1815 and 1830, however, numerous Bible and mission societies were founded. In addition, there were pockets of revivalists in Switzerland and England. An influential revival movement developed from Puritanism and Methodism in Great Britain, which was spread in the USA by the Great Awakening of 1735 and 1792 and continues to influence evangelicalism today. But to what extent could the revivalist movements promote the emergence of Jewish-Christian groups?

The representatives of the revival movements in the 19th century particularly emphasized the justification of sinful man by his acceptance of God's saving action on the cross and the pietistic features of conversion, mission, and the ideal of community. The latter was done practically through regular participations in conventicles, societies, conferences, and alliances.

Students and professors of theology were also caught up in the revivalist movement and developed a great interest in Judaism and in witnessing to Jews. Especially Franz Delitzsch (1813-1890), professor of theology in Erlangen and Leipzig, saw it as his duty to protect the Jewish community from anti-Semitism and founded an *Institutum Judaicum* in 1886. The institute was to provide truthful knowledge of Judaism among Christians and truthful knowledge of Christianity among the Jews. It prepared theologians for missionary work among Jews and informed the academic public about Judaism.

The revivalist movement led to the rise and growth of evangelical churches throughout Europe. Evangelical believers emphasize the Great Commission to all people, including the Jews. They understand that the number of people who have accepted the Jewish Messiah in faith

is small, but they also know that God has not declared the covenant with Israel to be invalid. Rather, He has continued to preserve Israel so that His plan of salvation may be fulfilled, and all Israel may be saved at Jesus' return. Then the believing Jews will play a leading role in the Messianic kingdom. From an evangelical point of view, it is therefore important to preach the gospel to Jews and to support the position of Jews who already believe in their Messiah.

The Evangelical Alliance, which was founded in London in 1846, represents an institutionalization of the evangelical movement. The German Evangelical Alliance (DEA) with its headquarters in Bad Blankenburg has been active since 1851. Further milestones of the evangelical movement are the foundation of the World Evangelical Alliance in Holland in 1951 as well as the First World Evangelical Congress in Berlin in 1966 and the International Congress for World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974. In addition, there is the "Lausanne Movement German Branch - Coalition for Evangelization" and since 1969 the "Working Group of Evangelical Missions."

Conclusion: The revival movement in the 19th century revived pietistic doctrine (being born again, faithfulness to the Bible, fellowship etc.) and evangelism among all peoples. The revival movement had an impact on the development of today's evangelicalism, the Pentecostal movement, and the charismatic movement. Evangelical believers preached the gospel to Jews in many places in the hope that all of Israel would become believers in Jesus as the Messiah. German evangelicalism is thus shaped by the native tradition of Pietism and the revivalist movement and by later influences from America.

Mission to the Jews (19th century)

Many individual missionaries to the Jews, especially in English-speaking countries, were the driving force of the Protestant missionary movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 1809, Joseph Frey (1771-1853), who came from the missionary seminary of the Berlin Brotherhood, founded the "London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews" (LSPCJ). This was followed in 1822 in Berlin by the Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, which was built on the basis of the London model. In 1871, the Evangelical Lutheran Central Association for Mission among Israel was founded in Leipzig under the initiative of F.

Delitzsch as an umbrella organization for several associations in Germany and Norway. The Elberfelder Missionsgesellschaft, founded in 1799, also did missionary work among Jews. The London ministry was the impetus for the great missionary movement among the Jews in Europe during the 19th century, the missionary century. From then on, Jews who accepted faith in Jesus as the Messiah joined either a Lutheran Church or one of the Pietist fellowships.

In addition to numerous other ministries, the Basel Society for the Dissemination of Christianity among Jews, founded in 1820, is interesting for the present study as the first major organization on the continent. After this ministry disbanded in 1830, the Society of Friends of Israel was founded, from which the Swiss Protestant Jewish Mission (SEJ) developed. As the SEJ rejected the missionary mandate among Jews after the Second World War, the Evangelical Service for Israel (EDI) was founded in 1971. This service currently plays an important role in the work among Messianic Jews in Germany. There was no closer cooperation between the various ministries and organizations; in most cases, the Protestant outreach to the Jews remained a matter for individual organizations or persons and their circles of friends.

Conclusion: The revival movement promoted the emergence of Jewish missionary works, so that many Jews voluntarily accepted faith in Jesus for the first time in centuries. The Jews who believed in Jesus remained in the Protestant churches or congregations.

Hebrew-Christian Movement (19th century to about 1970)

Many revivalists expected that believing Jews would become missionaries to their people. However, this was only possible if they maintained and cultivated their Jewish identity, yet more often than not, the local churches did not encourage them to keep their Jewish identity by observing the holy days and biblical feasts and thus denied them their own culture. Many Jewish believers felt uncomfortable with the pagan Christian symbols displayed in the churches and sometimes experienced latent or overt anti-Semitism. In other words, the Messiah-believing Jews recognized the need for an independent form of organization.

The first independent Hebrew-Christian groups were established in 1813. One of these fellowships was *Beni Abrahams* in London. Over forty believing Jews met there on a regular basis to celebrate the Sabbath and to pray. Also in the 19th century, a short-lived but impressive

community of 150 Jews was founded in Moldova. These believers called themselves “Israelites of the New Covenant.” Joseph Rabinowitz (1837-1899) became the heart of Jewish Christianity in Kishinev. As a pioneer in the Messianic Jewish movement of modern times, Rabinowitz helped to re-establish Jewish Christianity as a viable and living option. He founded a community of Jews who believed in Messiah Jesus in 1884. These believers observed Jewish traditions such as the Sabbath, circumcision, and the holy days.

In 1885, Rabinowitz was baptized in Berlin by the Methodist pastor and professor C. M. Mead from Massachusetts on a confession of faith formulated by him in Hebrew, whereby it was important to him to belong only to the universal community in Jesus without losing his Jewish identity. The lasting significance of Rabinowitz’s activity lies first and foremost in his stubborn insistence that his faith in Jesus had not turned him onto an ex-Jew; his baptism had not uncircumcised him. After Rabinowitz' death in 1899, the work continued at first, although many Jews were hostile to his movement. However, the outbreak of the First World War put an end to the congregational work. A. Gaebelein (1861-1945), a Methodist preacher and missionary to the Jews in New York City, met Rabinowitz personally in 1894 and—probably inspired by Rabinowitz—took the view that a Jew who believed in Messiah should not live as a Gentile but according to the Mosaic Law. In 1895, Gaebelein used the term “Messianic Judaism” for a short time in the subtitle of the evangelical magazine *Our Hope* of the Hope of Israel Mission. This subtitle was: *A Monthly Devoted to the Study of Prophecy and to Messianic Judaism*. But at this point, the designation “Messianic Judaism” was not widely accepted.

Conclusion: The Jewish people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah were able to live out their Jewish identity in individual, mostly smaller Hebrew-Christian groups. But since these groups were not attached to a national or international network, they were very much on their own and could not establish themselves in the long term.

Hebrew-Christian Alliances

In the 19th and 20th centuries, a number of significant Hebrew-Christian alliances (1865: Hebrew Christian Union – HCU; 1892: American Board of Missions to the Jews – ABMJ; 1915: Hebrew Christian Alliance of America – HCAA) emerged, which enabled the individual

Messianic Jews in the various churches to form a common bond. Through the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (IHCA, 1925), an international network of Hebrew-Christian alliances was also established. Common to all alliances was that while they emphasized the Jewish identity of Jews who believed in Jesus as their Messiah, they were less supportive of independent Judeo-Christian groups, so that Jewish believers often integrated further into existing church congregations. It was not until the 20th century that the first congregations were established that were exclusively for Messianic Jews.

Since the end of the Second World War, Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah have become increasingly aware of their Jewish identity, especially after the Holocaust. This sense of identity was strengthened by the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 and the surprising victory of Israel in 1967. In America, it was the time of the new religious movements such as the Jesus People and organizations such as Jews for Jesus, which also had an influence on young Jewish people and thus prepared the emergence of the Messianic-Jewish movement.