

Modern Jewish History and the Making of Messianic Identity

Alan M. Shore, PhD

Abstract: Dr. Alan Shore is a Jewish believer who serves with Chosen People Ministries. His work emphasizes the Jewish roots of Christian faith. In “Modern Jewish History and the Making of Messianic Identity,” he discusses

This paper will focus upon some of the elements that form modern Jewish identity and particularly Messianic Jewish identity. I came to this interest not only because I am a Jewish believer, but also because of a lengthy relationship with a variety of Christians during a period of over four decades. I have an immense debt of gratitude toward my non-Jewish brothers and sisters in Messiah who have nurtured and encouraged me these many years. But over time, I have noticed that in many instances their philosemitism is based on a constructed image – a generous dollop of Christian Zionism topped with a sprinkling of dispensational theology and quite often not based on relationships with actual Jews. I see this particularly on trips to Israel that I have helped to escort over the years. Christian travelers to Israel sometimes treat the modern state like a vast outdoor biblical theme park, God bless them, and often exhibit next to no interest in contemporary Israeli society. It is as though nothing has happened in the intervening two thousand years between the first and twenty-first centuries.

But as I began to examine myself, I became equally critical of my own ignorance regarding the forces that have shaped modern Jewish identity, especially in Europe, from where most of us Jews in America trace our roots. I began to ask, for all our talk about the Jewish roots of the Gospel, right enough, what have been the more recent forces that have been, in truth,

much more relevant in preparing modern Jews to encounter and hopefully embrace the Gospel? These concerns compelled me to pursue further study.

My academic field of research is in the area of modern Jewish history and culture, Yiddish language and literature, and the modern Jewish encounter with Jesus and Yeshua in scholarship, art and history. I say Jesus *and* Yeshua for a specific reason in this context, because for many Jews they are actually two distinct figures.

Jesus we know – the Christian Jesus with whom we feel no heartfelt connection. This continues to this day, where images of a blond-haired, blue-eyed white man Jesus pervade the church and popular culture. Essentially, a goy. Someone it is therefore easy to place on the other side of a well-defined Jewish border separating us and not-us. A distant figure, whose distance has nonetheless served us as a survival mechanism that has enabled Jews to maintain a distinct identity, long after so many of us abandoned religious faith, defined quite frequently as simply “not Christian.”

Yeshua, the Jewish Jesus, we don't know so well – and for good reason. He is a much more dangerous figure for Jews and Christians alike, although in different ways. He calls into question the comfortable assumptions of both sides. Perhaps most unforgivably, He destabilizes the border that Jews and Christians have attempted to delineate in order to define and preserve the identities they have constructed in relation to each other.

My goal is to explore the terrain of this border and the nature of the border patrol that works from both sides – Jewish and Christian – to keep the Christian Jesus from becoming the Jewish Yeshua, if you will, each for their own reasons. And here's an odd thing. The reason the border patrols from both sides have to work so diligently is that the border is much more porous than either side cares to admit. The modern era that emancipated the Jews from the ghetto also

left them exposed to influences from which their alienation had shielded them. The possibilities engendered by the greater proximity of Jew and Christian in the modern era play a greater role in the making of modern Messianic Jewish identity than many of us suspect.

For this reason, I want to begin first with a brief overview of how the greater proximity of Jewish people to Christian culture that began to emerge in the modern era, beginning in the late 1700s, led to the modern encounter of Jewish scholars, artists and popular writers with the Christian Savior and their reclamation of Him as Yeshua of Nazareth. Although they would not, as we shall find, go the whole way to acknowledging Him as Messiah, their work nonetheless is essential, as I hope to demonstrate, to establish the groundwork for the making of our Messianic identity as Jewish believers took the further step of accepting Him as our Redeemer.

If the resurrection, if you will, of Jesus as a Jew may be attributed to the advent of modernity, the first question is, what do we mean by the modern era? How is it different from what went before? What challenges does this so-called modernity pose to the Jewish world and to the Christian world, for that matter? What are its effects and how has it shaped us? So, to begin, I would characterize modernity as a period when the intellectual universe began to change in specific ways under the influence of various forces that were at work in Europe and that were gathering steam.

The change that was in the air that would affect the circumstances of Western European Jews starting sometime in the middle of the 1600s. The Peace of Westphalia, the acknowledgement that the bloody religious wars that had wracked Europe for decades could not be decisively won, gave birth to the concept of interfaith toleration among Christian denominations. This novel attitude began to be gradually, haltingly and inconsistently extended to Jewish populations

The Modern Era represented other new ways of thinking as well. The keystone concept of Modernity is that it is not enslaved to the past. It is not afraid to find new directions, even if they go against tradition. Earlier beliefs and traditions may still have a voice, but they no longer set the agenda. The modern outlook thinks itself freer to form its own definitions of society. The arrival of the age of Modernity and its opening of previously locked doors holds the key to a new, previously unexplored terrain of Jewish-Christian encounter which contained some surprises for both sides of the equation. Whereas previously the Jews had been treated, in the words of historian Kenneth Stow, as an “alienated minority,” there now came the glimmer of a possibility that Jews might become more fully integrated citizens in the newly emerging nation-states of Western Europe.

Much of this shift in attitude is in keeping with what we have come to call the Enlightenment. In a nutshell, this is its creed: humanity, guided by the light of reason, would throw off the shackles of religious superstition. Science would unlock the mysteries of the universe. The result? Scientific revolution would certainly reshape people’s view of the universe and nature. Political revolutions would reconfigure the map. This transformative time would affect the development of Jewish culture and the Jews’ political position from the mid-18th century and forward. If the Enlightenment was characterized by humanism, rationalism, and other isms that redefined the landscape in a myriad of ways, this vast sea of change would have a profound effect upon the Jewish world, beginning in Germany in the 1770s in what is termed the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment.

The proponents of the *Haskalah*, the *maskilim*, promoted Jewish integration into the modern centralized state and full participation in modern society. The father of the *Haskalah* is generally considered to be Moses Mendelssohn. The career of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786),

a leading figure of the Berlin Enlightenment, illustrates both the rewards and dangers of a Jewish penetration of non-Jewish culture and public life. As the recipient of a major prize awarded to him by the Berlin Academy of Science in 1763, he was a figure who enjoyed the respect not only of the Jewish community, but also that of the wider society that he was determined to enter on behalf his co-religionists. His home became a salon visited by Jew and non-Jew alike.

I won't stop to dwell on Mendelssohn's life, except to say that he looked at traditional Jewish life and found it wanting; in danger of being left behind in light of the momentous, progressive program of Enlightenment thinking. He wanted to save Judaism from itself. He wanted to reform the religion and open Jewish life to the new possibilities the brave new world that Enlightenment thinking seemed to offer.

The question arose, "What aspects of Jewish religious faith and practice, which had served for centuries to preserve a sense of Jewish separateness deemed essential to Jewish survival, needed to change with the times." One of the governing principles of Reform Judaism is that Judaism can be shaped to meet the needs of Jews from generation to generation. To what extent? It is a debate that continues to this day.

The last piece of this puzzle I'll mention that sets the stage for the modern Jewish encounter with Jesus and Christianity is what was known as the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – the Science of Judaism – a movement arising in early 19th century in Germany that promoted "the study of Judaism by subjecting it to criticism and modern methods of research." Just as Reform Judaism sought to acknowledge and respond to the outside world with an altered religious perspective that could serve to anchor Judaism in the here and now of modern society, the agenda of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was to raise Judaism's stature by meeting the highest standards of European scholarship, and thereby win its approval and recognition.

It was the genesis of what we would later call Jewish Studies – Bible criticism, Talmud, Jewish literature of all periods, religious philosophy, archeology and so forth, and it came about only because of the great desire that brilliant Jewish scholars had to sit at the table with their Christian counterparts in the academic world. Jews, for the first time in their history, began to employ the tools of Christian historical scholarship to tell their own story. As we shall see, this had some surprising and complicated effects.

Who among us has not known the piercing pain of unrequited love? Especially when you have been led to believe that someone you so deeply long for would love you back. Now I would go so far as to say that the history of Western European Jewish life may be characterized as one unrequited love affair after another. And one of the first rude awakenings came in the area of biblical scholarship, as Jewish scholars sought a seat at the table with their non-Jewish counterparts. For the liberalizing tendencies of some Protestants provided a reason to hope that Jewish scholars operating along similar lines would be welcomed in the academy for their ability to contribute a sorely needed corrective to earlier, insufficient Christian approaches not only to the Hebrew Scriptures, but to the New Testament as well. And they sought to do so by employing the same academic methods of Bible scholarship and historical research as those whom they hoped would be their new Christian conversation partners.

The approach by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to Jewish history was a radical departure from the biblical and Talmudic studies of what had heretofore been normal, Jewish life, which viewed secular study with deep suspicion. This was new. It was both liberating and self-limiting in that it consisted of both affirmations and denials regarding Jewish identity. It was liberating in that it boldly sought to refashion Jewish self-understanding, repositioning Judaism as a vital force in the midst of the modern world. It was self-limiting because in so doing, it cast away the

traditional sense of chosenness, separation and expectation of Messianic redemption that had sustained Jewish life for centuries. But by stepping into the world of modern historical scholarship, paradoxically, Jewish scholars not only donned robes as the modern interpreters of Jewish history, but for the first time became interpreters of the early history of Christianity as well.

And here's where it gets even more interesting, I think. Modern Jewish scholars became at long last defenders of the first-century Judaism that had served for centuries as the whipping boy for Christian theologians and Bible scholars. Now, as Jews began to write their own history for the first time employing the tools of Christian historians, when they got to the first century they ran head-first into Jesus the Jew and the New Testament.

As modern Jewish historians, scholars felt compelled to address Jesus and Christianity in the context of first century Judaism. In so doing, they presented a heretofore unheard-of challenge to Christian scholars through the perspective they brought to the New Testament as Jews. Christian theologians, who had long arrogated to themselves the authority to carry on a one-way interrogation of Judaism and to define Second Temple Judaism and the life of Jesus on their own terms were considerably discomfited by the prospect of Jewish scholars turning the tables on them.

Therefore, far from welcoming the input of Jewish scholars and the insights their learning provided, Christian academics remained impervious to alternative interpretations of a life of Jesus based upon Jewish sources that Christian scholars either ignored or were ignorant of. The liberalism of Protestant Bible scholars seemed only to be skin deep. Although they said they advocated a more historical approach to the life of Jesus, they refused to be led by their own historical methods to the most unwanted conclusion that Jesus was a Jew who practiced Judaism.

This undermined Christianity's long-held but flawed stance that the life and teaching of Jesus existed over and against the Judaism he had come to replace. Christian scholarly investigation was determined to promote Christian claims at the expense of Judaism. Yes, Jesus was a Jew, they might reluctantly admit, an embarrassing fact, and one from which we would much prefer to avert our eyes. But he had nothing whatsoever to do with Judaism. Case closed.

Jewish scholars were determined to demonstrate exactly the opposite. While liberal Protestant scholars sought to flush the Jewishness out of Jesus, the project of Jewish scholars such as Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, Joseph Klausner and others was to present a Jewish Jesus and thereby Judaize Christianity and demonstrate Judaism's complete relevance to Christianity. They drew differing conclusions: Jesus was a Pharisee, an Essene, a revolutionary, a Zionist and so forth. Although they differed about what he might have been, the most important thing they had in common was their shared conviction of what he is not. That is, while Jesus is indeed part of Jewish history, He is *not* the Christian Redeemer.

One lasting result of the early Jewish pioneers in New Testament study is that Jewish scholarship had freed itself to encounter Jesus and Christianity. The question is, why would they want to? Partly because had their own agenda. It was to construct a counter-narrative to their centuries-old marginalization that instead placed the Jew not only at a seat at the table of Western civilization, but in the seat of honor. By reclaiming Jesus for the Jewish world, they could say to Christians, look, the one whom you worship as your Redeemer was one of us. Therefore, we are at the center of your civilization, whether you like it or not. You can no longer ignore us or look down on us. But while we accept Jesus of Nazareth as an historical person and as a Jew, we still reject Him as the Christian Lord.

What was the upshot? The anti-Jewish sentiment these Jewish scholars encountered was so deeply entrenched in the universities that they could not surmount the obstacles that prevented them from conquering the bastions they had had such high hopes of storming. Jewish scholars were all but powerless to refute the arguments of their detractors, for no Christian academic journal would publish their views. Jewish scholars who had hoped they had refashioned themselves sufficiently to gain access to the world they had longed so to enter were shut out. The hostility of the academic elites among whom Jewish intellectuals had mistakenly reckoned to be allies saw to that. It was yet another unrequited love.

But the cat was out of the bag. Jesus was now a legitimate focus of Jewish scrutiny. Jewish philosophers could now proudly, as Martin Buber could, speak of him as “my great brother.” The artist Marc Chagall could depict a crucified Christ wearing tefillin and a tallis, portraying him not as Christian Redeemer, but as the epitome of Jewish martyrdom and thus say to the Christian world, “Here is your Son of God. He is one of us. And when you persecute, brutalize and murder us, you are crucifying Him all over again.” Moreover, scholarship in the ivory tower spilled over into the printed word of the popular press. As the *Haskalah* spread to the Yiddish speaking world, the conversation about Jesus that went on was much more unfiltered. Free from the desire to impress others, Yiddish writers could be as pro or con as they wanted, and there was some of each.

By far the most influential Jewish figure to explore the Jewish-Christian connection on the popular level was Sholem Asch. Because his name and work are now nearly forgotten, it is difficult to imagine the immense popularity and international stature Sholem Asch enjoyed at the height of his career. At one time, his reach and reputation also extended far into Christian awareness. Born in the small city of Kutno, Poland in 1880, Asch arrived in Warsaw in the early

1900s, where he received encouragement by the great Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz. From there, Asch immigrated to America and was strongly promoted by Ab Cahan, publisher of the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, through which he reached a vast audience of Yiddish readers both in America and in Europe at the height of his fame.

He was also, for a time, by far the most successful Jewish author to cross over to make an impact on the wider world. In 1933 and again in 1944, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize, although he would be denied that honor both times. In 1936, Asch was mentioned along with Albert Einstein, Martin Buber and Sigmund Freud in a list of “Ten Outstanding Jews” published in the *New York Times*.

But beginning in 1939, Asch would be ostracized by many of his Jewish colleagues and readers because of the publication of *The Nazarene*, the first of his three so-called “christological novels” that would gain him even further acclaim among his non-Jewish readership. From the first, the publication of Maurice Samuel’s English translation of *The Nazarene* proved to be wildly popular. It is a thorough re-Jewishing treatment of the life of Messiah in the form of a biblical historical novel, such as those popular at the time, like *Ben-Hur*, *The Robe* and *The Big Fisherman*.

In 1941, two years after its appearance, it is estimated that *The Nazarene* had some two million American readers, an extraordinary number for any translation from Yiddish and an undeniable sign of Asch’s cultural influence. It appeared on the *New York Times* fiction best seller list in third place in December of 1939 and remained in that position for eight weeks before dropping off the list.

By contrast, Ab Cahan of the *Forverts*, the man who had been Asch's champion for thirty years, carried out a two-year war against Asch in the pages of his newspaper and pressured other writers who worked for him to smear Asch's reputation with wild accusations, such as Asch was an agent of the Vatican whose aim was to corrupt Jewish readers, especially the young, and so on.

What provoked such a violent response among Jewish critics? The most popular reasons advanced seem to be the poor timing of the novel's publication, coming as it did on the eve of World War II, the implacable enmity of Ab Cahan, Asch's injudicious and somewhat confusing public statements after the novel's appearance, which were interpreted by some to mean that he had embraced the Gospel and, finally, his own temperamental personality. I think it goes deeper than that, and I'll tell you why, because it has great bearing on our situation even today.

The objection of Jewish critics to the *The Nazarene* was not primarily Asch's engagement with Jesus. As I hope we have already seen, Jews reclaiming Jesus for our own was by now nothing new. No. What made Asch a particularly threatening figure in the eyes of his critics was their perception that he wanted to erase the border between Jew and Christian, although somehow allowing each to hold on to its own beliefs. For example, toward the end of *The Nazarene*, Asch stresses his perception of the essential unity of the Messianists (Jewish Christians) and those Jews who remained outside that fold. As one character in the novel puts it:

The only difference between us was that in their belief the Messiah had already been once on earth and was due to return, and we said this could not be, that the Messiah could not have been on earth and mankind remain unredeemed from evil, but full of wickedness.

Now, this is not going to make anyone happy. Certainly not the Jews determined to disown Jewish believers in Jesus. And certainly not Christian believers for whom belief or non-

belief in Jesus is the single defining fact of eternal human destiny, and who believe that if Yeshua is not the Messiah of the Jews, in Walter Kaiser's words, He isn't *anyone's* Messiah.

As we have seen, by 1939 Jesus and Christianity had been for some time fair game as subject matter for Jewish popular writers, artists and academics. Jewish scholars had approached Jesus and Christianity in ways that drew conclusions that were sometimes strikingly similar to those of Asch. Along with Asch, they located Jesus in the framework of a Jewish world. They insistently asserted Judaism as the basis upon which any validity for the Christian religion must be sought, as did Asch. And like Asch, their efforts were most consciously shaped by the Christian culture that formed the context of their work. However, Asch parts ways with them and others in one critical regard and perhaps this is the heart of the matter.

Despite the common ground Asch may have shared with the Jewish writers, artists and academics who have sought to engage with these subjects, his treatment of Jesus and Christianity was distinguished from theirs in one all-important respect. It is that the Jewish reclamation of Jesus has always involved Jews asserting His Jewishness while rejecting the Christian Jesus of Western culture.

By blurring the Jewish-Christian borders that others insisted upon, Asch failed to keep a reclaimed "Jesus not-the-Messiah" safely in Jewish territory. This is the distinction that set him apart from other Jewish writers and artists. By writing about a Jewish Yeshua who is understood by at least some of his fellow Jews as Messiah, Asch was perceived as a threat by the Jews who wanted Jesus as a Jew but no Messiah and by the Christians who wanted a Messiah who was no Jew. Strange, isn't it? This was his sin and his transgression.

Asch would not back down. In spite of the criticism he received from his critics, he published two more novels to complete his so-called "christological trilogy" – *The Apostle*

(1943) and *Mary* (1949). He would expound upon the theme of Jewish-Christian unity in non-fiction works also, such as *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians* (1945). There he writes:

The preservation of Israel and the Nazarene are one phenomenon... The two are one. And notwithstanding the heritage of blood and fire which passionate enmity has brought between them, they are two parts of a single whole, two poles of the world which are always drawn to each other, and no deliverance, no peace, and no salvation can come until the two halves are joined together and become one part of God.

The anger poured out on Sholem Asch and its causes is something for Jewish believers and others to pay attention to even today. It explains in large measure why Jewish believers are seen as such a threat not only to so many of our fellow Jews, but also to some Christians as well.

People like borders and fences – and, as I mentioned earlier, there is always a border patrol on both sides. As long as Christians and Jews agree that each should stay on their own side of the border, there is safety. As long as Jews who accept Jesus are no longer considered Jews, sad as it might be, the borders keep both groups safe. But when Jews accept the Jewish Yeshua that was, ironically, uncovered by Jewish scholars, artists and authors and stubbornly hold to their Jewish identity, it upsets people because it blurs the borders between Jew and Christian. That makes some people on each side feel insecure. Jewish believers and those who share the Apostle Paul's vision that the Gospel is still "to the Jew first" should not be surprised by rejection. The same anxiety and insecurity is still at work today. For some, including myself, this is actually evidence of the work of the Spirit. For it is the Spirit who questions us. It is the Spirit who convicts us. It is the Spirit who upsets the apple-cart of our false illusions about who and what we are at the deepest level of our being in order to draw us to the new life of peace and freedom the Gospel offers us.

In conclusion, I want to circle back to the question I started with, which was “So what?” What does it all mean? I want to look at that from two directions. (1) What does the formation of modern Jewish identity have to do with Jewish believers today and why does it matter? (2) How has what we’ve looked at shaped the outlook of Jewish people we meet and what insights can this knowledge give us about how to approach them? Both of these points may be of some importance to non-Jewish believers as well, to help you understand your Jewish brothers and sisters in Messiah a bit better and perhaps help you to approach your Jewish friends as they actually are and not as you may imagine them to be.

I’ll begin with the question, “Does being Jewish matter in the first place; does it matter now that I am a believer in Messiah, and if so, why? What kind of a Jew do I want to be or should I be now that I am a disciple of Yeshua? And, to me, the answer depends to some extent on what kind of a Jew was I before.

When I first came to faith in 1975, after a year of deep reflection, counting the cost, and all of that, I met a Jewish believer at the first fellowship I was introduced to in New York City. He told me that he felt being Jewish was something he had left behind in his former life as an unbeliever. It was “of the flesh,” as he put it, and as now that he was living in the Spirit, being Jewish was unimportant. My response to that was, “No way. Being Jewish matters, especially for a Jewish follower of Yeshua.” I suspect if you are Jewish, you may feel as I do. That even as new creatures in Messiah, Jewish identity remains an essential part of who we are, although quite honestly, I cannot to this day fully articulate why.

I most vigorously assert, however, that although we may still only see in a glass darkly, it is important that we become as secure in that identity as possible. I also assert that the power of our witness and testimony is grounded, especially to other Jews, in the depth of our own self-

understanding as Jewish men or women. That cannot be faked. It must be truthful. Without that authenticity, we are severely handicapped in our efforts to remove the mote from our Jewish neighbor's eye, so long as a log of confusion is clouding our own vision. This means we must sometimes resist embracing the image our Christian brothers and sisters at times press upon us. Big experts in Judaism, for example, when in truth so many of us, including myself, are not. Does this make us less Jewish? No. Because the beauty of it is that the *Haskalah* and modernity have created alternative identities for Jews to embrace. Most of us are the heirs of that legacy, and it's time we recognized it.

This is why our modern Jewish history matters today. Partly because it makes us aware of those who came more immediately before us, what they experienced and how it made them what they were. And because whether we want to admit it or not, it is part of what makes us what we are and the more we understand that, the better we understand ourselves.

And also, I think, we owe it not only to Saul of Tarsus and Simon Peter and the rest of them, but to our more recent forbears not to forget what they bequeathed us in terms of Jewish heritage. That's why I learned Yiddish, although I realize that may not be for everyone. That's why, even at my advanced age, I returned to school. It was to revisit the question of what kind of a Jew am I – a question that could never even have been thought of before the developments we've been speaking of today. And this is a question that many of the Jews we meet are asking, whether they even know it or not.

So, as Jewish believers, we have a double role. The first is to be a good witness to the Gospel to any one we meet. But for Jewish seekers, we have a special role. It is to show it is possible to be a follower of Yeshua and to live as a Jew, as we discover our own identity and not a poorly fitting suit of clothes that another has fashioned for us. To come across as authentic, as

truthful, you yourself have to be clear about what your Jewish identity is. What kind of a Jew are you? How is your *pintele yid* – the essence of your Jewishness – coming alive in Messiah? You have to answer that question for yourself.

And the good news is, there are so many ways. This is what we owe directly to the Enlightenment, the *Haskalah*, and all the rest of the Pandora's Box of restless Jewish identities that modernity let loose. It all provided the great variety of Jewish expression we can observe. It gave us a Jewish Yeshua that Jew and non-Jew can both celebrate. It set the stage for a new kind of Jewish evangelism that affirms Jewish identity, without which there would be no groups such as Chosen People Ministries or Jews for Jesus, just to name two examples.

What I have found is that Jews who are spiritually open are attracted to respond to other Jews who demonstrate a commitment to learn about and to honor not just the Jewish religion, which so many really know nothing about and couldn't care less about, but Jewish history and culture – and that through these interests, spiritual matters may be approached indirectly.

If you are a Jewish believer, and being Jewish matters to you, it is natural to want to be accepted and trusted as a fellow Jew. And that will not even begin to happen unless and until we demonstrate commitment to some form of Jewishness that they can see in us. Whatever it is. It could be as an observant, kosher Jew. Or not. With me, it is commitment to honor the treasures of a world that I and others like me are determined should not perish from memory.

There are other ways, besides the few I have mentioned. But we have to find them out. We must demonstrate authentic commitment to them and build them into the deepest levels of our being. Identity and authenticity. They go hand in hand. They reinforce each other.

But the great thing is this, and with this I will close. Whatever you are, Jewish believer or a Christian who has a precious heritage of your own, remember this. Whatever heritage it is, it is important only because there is something, or more precisely, some One, more important still.