

## FROM TEL AVIV TO NAZARETH: WHY JEWS BECOME MESSIANIC JEWS

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Plotting conversion stories is my sacred hobby.

Lauren Winner's best-selling memoir of her conversion from Reform Judaism to Orthodox Judaism and then on to evangelical Christianity is one of the best reads of the last decade, and her story illustrates one type of conversion by Jews to the Christian faith. Her aesthetically-prompted and liturgically-shaped conversion story is as difficult to plot as it is joyous to read—she tells us about things that do not matter to conversion theory while she does not tell us about things that do matter. In her defense, she did not write her story so the theoretically-inclined could analyze her conversion. Here is a defining moment in her conversion story:<sup>1</sup>

My favorite spot at The Cloisters was a room downstairs called the Treasury. In glass cases were small fragile reliquaries and icons and prayer books. In one case was a tiny psalter and Book of Hours. . . . It lay open to a picture of Christ's arrest. I could barely read the Latin. Sometimes I would stand in front of that psalter for an hour. I wanted to hold it in my hand.

My boyfriend in college was Dov, an Orthodox Jew from Westchester County whom I had met through Rabbi M. Dov thought all this [her studying American Christianity and interest in things Christian] was weird. He watched me watch the Book of Hours, and he watched me write endless papers about religious revivals in the South. He saw that I was reading a book about Southern fiction called, after Flannery O'Connor's memorable phrase, *The Christ-Haunted Landscape*, and he worried. He said, "Lauren, if a Jewish person converted to Catholicism, wouldn't you think it was strange if she then majored in Jewish Studies at college, spent afternoons at the Jewish museum, and read *My Name is Asher Lev* once a week?" . . .

"Well, look," I said, "a girl can have an intellectual interest or two, can't she?" . . .

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<sup>1</sup> *Girl Meets God: On the Path to a Spiritual Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2002). See also her follow-up *Mudhouse Sabbath* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2003).

At the time, I thought Dov was overreacting. Now I think he could see something I could not see. He could see Jesus slowly goading me toward Him.

Lauren's story of conversion to Jesus Messiah is a story of disaffection with Orthodox Judaism (including the wounds from snide remarks about her being a convert and therefore "not a proper Orthodox girl"<sup>2</sup> as well as her own failures as an Orthodox). It is also a story of attraction to things Christian. In essence, she gets it all together with this:<sup>3</sup>

When people want the quick answer to "Why did you become a Christian, what attracted you to Christianity?" I tell them, "The Incarnation."

*En route* to a commitment to Jesus as Messiah, few have penetrated more deeply into the social consequences of conversion than Winner, as can be seen in her Flannery O'Connor-like syntax and commonsense:<sup>4</sup>

One of the things that happens [when you convert] is, you feel family-less, even if your own family doesn't cast you out. . . . And so, should you convert again, you lose all sorts of things: not just your library and your vocabulary and your prayers, but also your family, all the people who made you their own and who made you yours. It's a good reason to only convert once, if you can help it. Because it is more than just your religion that you lose.

I would like to explore her account of what she learned to take with her into her new-found Christian faith, those elements of Judaism she found particularly valuable for her faith in Jesus as Messiah, but there is not space and it is not the purpose of this study. Instead, I commend to you the second chapter of her conversion story, the charming *Mudhouse Sabbath*. What Lauren Winner illustrates for us is the sort of thing that occurs in the special kind of conversion when a Jew becomes a Christian. That thing always revolves around what is best called "Jewish identity."

On the basis of my theoretical and Gospel study of conversion, *Turning to Jesus*, a concrete study plotting the conversion stories of evangelicals becoming Roman Catholic followed.<sup>5</sup> It was my intention at the time to mirror that study with one on why Roman Catholics become evangelicals as soon as possible, but anecdotal evidence of such converts is not as readily available as I anticipated at the time, even though I am presently collecting such stories.

What is available is a small bookshelf of stories of Jewish conversion to Christianity, or to be more precise: of (non-Messianic) Jews to Messianic Jews

<sup>2</sup> *Girl Meets God*, 92. I see little reason to include here her further criticisms of Orthodox Judaism; they can be found on pp. 88–99.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 178.

<sup>5</sup> *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002); "From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic," *JETS* 45 (2002) 451–72. The model developed in *Turning to Jesus* is a slight adaptation of the brilliant study of conversion by Lewis R. Rambo, called *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). I wish here to record again my indebtedness to the exceptional studies in conversion by Lewis Rambo.

(= JMJ's).<sup>6</sup> Lauren Winner illustrates a “generic brand” of Jewish conversion to Christianity: she was Jewish, she converted, she left Judaism, and she sees her faith in distinctively Christian terms. That she followed up her conversion story with a study on the value of Judaism for Christianity in *Mudhouse Sabbath*, however, brings to the surface a significant issue in the conversion of Jews. Namely, many Jews do not give up, or refuse to give up, their fundamental identity as a part of Judaism. They remain observant. Those Jewish converts who retain their Jewishness are usually called “Messianic Jews” and are a part of what is called “Messianic Judaism.” The present study is concerned with the latter “sort” of Jewish conversion to the Christian faith.

Messianic Judaism, however, has its own sorts, and I do not wish here even to attempt to delineate the differences nor estimate their numbers (which are not high). Most Jews who convert to the Christian faith assimilate into ordinary forms of Christianity. Nor do I wish to suggest that what I mean by “Messianic Jew” will be agreed upon by the various sorts of Messianic Jews. What I mean by “Messianic Jew” is the Jew who converts to faith in Jesus as Messiah and who remains, to one degree or another, observant and self-consciously Jewish. The use of the category “Messianic” Judaism complicates another complicated picture.

Judaism, like Christianity, is so radically diverse that many today prefer to speak of “Judaisms.” Some see “Messianic Judaism” as a kind of Judaism, while others dispute the legitimacy of “Messianic Jews” as members of Judaism. This discussion is only one end of the goose; the other end, perhaps even more difficult to hold still, is the variety within Judaism today. Happily, this study is concerned with the experience of conversion to “Messianic” Judaism, and it takes its starting point in that “destination” rather than in the convert’s “origination” point—whether Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Reconstructionist. At some point, perhaps, a finer analysis can be done of the experience of conversion from the various sorts of Judaism. All we do here is to chart out the conversion experience of those who convert to Messianic Judaism, or who become Messianic Jews, or Jews who become Christians but who remain self-consciously observant.

<sup>6</sup> There is a tricky and (not for me to solve) problem among Jews who believe in Jesus, and that has to do with what to call themselves. Among the names, we note: Hebrew Christians, Messianists, Messianic Jews, and Jewish Christians. For discussion, see the careful study of Joseph Rabinowitz; cf. Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement: The Herzl of Jewish Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). See also Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (London: Cassell, 2000); T. Elgvin, ed., *Israel and Yeshua: Festschrift celebrating the tenth anniversary of Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1993); Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Jewish Identity & Faith and Faith in Jesus* (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996); L. Goldberg, ed., *How Jewish is Christianity? 2 Views on the Messianic Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

In the study of the converts whose stories we have analyzed, approximately 60% are males and 40% are females. It was not our intent to unravel the differences between male and female JMJ's. The JMJ's charted in this study come from all the major forms of Judaism.

Messianic Jews have been criticized from two sides: non-Messianic Jews think of them as apostates and as no longer genuinely part of Judaism while (Gentile) Christians tend to be both enamored with them and, at the same time, quite skeptical of their desire to retain their Jewish identity. In response to their desire to retain their Jewishness, Christians pull out Gal 3:28 (“there is neither Jew nor Greek”) and suggest that the Church annuls one’s ethnic heritage and levels all Christians on the same plane. There is something important to understanding the catholic nature of the Christian faith, of course. However, since Paul retained his Jewishness around Jews and since all humans are anchored in some socio-cultural context, there has been a growing acceptance of not only the tolerability of Messianic Judaism but also a strong encouragement for Jewish converts to retain their Jewishness, both for the stability of their own identity and for the possibilities of reaching into their own communities with the gospel. What has perhaps strengthened this encouragement, though unintended, is the shift in NT scholarship toward a more Jewish paradigm of understanding Jesus and the early churches.<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, “full rights as children of God” have not yet been achieved sufficiently for JMJs because those “grafted on” presently hold the majority vote. However, there is evidence the vote is shifting.<sup>8</sup> It might be better, then, when speaking of Gal 3:28, to speak not of a “blurring of distinctions” but of “distinctions within the blur.” I could go on.

Recognizing the legitimacy of “Messianic Judaism” brings with it, again, a recognition of diversity. It is not my intention either to adjudicate the differences between various branches of Messianic Jews, nor is it my intention to lump them into one group at the theological or halakhic levels, nor do I want to debate whether or not “Messianic Judaism” should be granted full rights as a legitimate form of “Judaism”—either in Israel or in the Diaspora. Inasmuch as the following study demonstrates a reasonably coherent experience of conversion, I will disregard these differences and debates.<sup>9</sup>

To make this study of Jews becoming Messianic Jews clear, I begin with a basic summary of how conversion works, drawn from my book, *Turning to*

<sup>7</sup> Out of the multitude of studies that express the present state of scholarship, I limit myself to the following references: W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (4th ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Don Hagner has two very important studies in this regard: see his *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) and “Paul in Modern Jewish Thought,” in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday* (ed. D. A. Hagner, M. J. Harris; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 143–65. A good example of what Messianic Jews are producing can be seen in David Stern, *Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., 1989) and his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., 1992).

<sup>8</sup> A nice study can be seen in Kai Kjær Hansen, “Neither Fish nor Fowl?” in *Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus* (ed. Kai Kjær Hansen; Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996) 9–18. For a study of how various Christian denominations perceive these issues, see articles in the journal *Mishkan* 36 (2002).

<sup>9</sup> For a survey of the theology and practice of Messianic Judaism, see Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* 72–166.

*Jesus*. Because this section attempts to summarize a complex discussion with its own set of jargon, I apologize in advance for the density of the summary.

## II. CONVERSION: SIX DIMENSIONS

Christian conversion is a spiritual phenomenon, and so must be handled with the gloves of reverence. Ultimately, it is what happens between a whole person and the whole God. As such, conversion to Jesus is best defined as the *transformation of identity in Christ*, of who a person is in their deepest being, of that “who we are” becoming an “I in Christ” identity.<sup>10</sup> But, since we all live in a social, psychological, physical, and political earthly reality, the spiritual event and process of conversion makes itself visible in observable realities, in realities like context and crisis and consequences. I prefer to speak of conversion in terms of its spiritual reality, and so God the Holy Spirit and terms like “repent” and “faith” and “trust” and “love” best fit what we are talking about. But, these spiritual realities readily make themselves obvious in more abstract, clinical, and empirical categories. Since it is these clinical terms that are used in conversion theory studies, I briefly sketch those terms that will be used in the discussion of Jewish conversion that follows.

All converts, in the process of identity transformation, go through six separable dimensions of conversion. In contrast to Rambo—at the level of terms but not at the level of substance—I prefer the term “dimension” rather than “stage” for the simple reason that converts can be in different dimensions at the same time. Details and bibliographic support for what follows can be found in my book *Turning to Jesus*.

Conversion is change from one’s context to a series of consequences. All humans begin the process of conversion in a *context*, or what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann would call one’s “primary socialization.” Christian converts have the primary *consequence* of conversion by being placed in the “Church,” or what Berger and Luckmann might call “secondary socialization.”<sup>11</sup> To the degree that one’s primary and secondary socialization are similar—the case of a child being reared quite successfully in the Christian faith of their parents—the process of conversion can be subtle and rather uneventful (if I may in this instance call conversion such). To the degree that one’s primary and secondary socialization are at odds with one another—the case of an Orthodox Jew becoming an evangelical Christian with a “Jews for Jesus” stripe—the process of conversion can be volcanic and heart-rending, not to mention family-rupturing. (It ought perhaps to be noted here that many, if not most, American Jews are agnostics, making the starting point in evangelism the reality and knowability of God. The irony, of course, is that it is ancient Israel that handed on to the world a firm grasp of monotheism.)

<sup>10</sup> For a brief discussion of the definition of conversion, see my *Turning to Jesus* 50–52.

<sup>11</sup> P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday [Anchor], 1967) 129–47.

If the two bookends of conversion are *context* and *consequences* (about which I will say more immediately below), the central dimensions include *crisis, quest, encounter and interaction, and commitment*. (There are enough velar plosives here to make the categories catchy and confusing.)

One's *context* includes social and psychological factors. Jews, for instance, especially those reared in an American community where many other Jews live, find themselves marginalized in the larger society in some senses because the common, public rhetoric tends to be Christian and secular rather than traditionally Jewish. The conversion of the marginalized normally creates a powerful crisis, giving the conversion process its own genius.

The least-understood dimension of conversion is *crisis*. If we think of crisis in terms of the apostle Paul, St. Augustine, or Martin Luther, we will be led to think that most Christians experience either no crisis or only a mild crisis. However, recent studies in conversion demonstrate that "crisis" mirrors the "crisis" of growing up—some converts go through a series of "gentle nods of the soul," while others go through a volcanic eruption. A conversion crisis is precipitated by a variety of factors—including mystical experiences, near-death experiences, illness, a general dissatisfaction with life, a desire for transcendence (including desires for the elimination of guilt, of sin, or of a lack of certainty), an experience of an altered state, apostasy from one's family's faith, and external factors like political changes, international crisis, encountering a charismatic figure, or a tragedy in the family. Crises, then, are of different sorts, and many find themselves in a crisis as a result of more than one factor.

Two specific crises may be mentioned here to illustrate the variety of crises that precipitate conversion. First, many Jews think anyone who converts to Christianity must have some underlying pathological problem. And, second, few doubt today that a leading Messianic Jewish activist of the nineteenth century, Joseph Rabinowitz, had at the very core of his conversion a socio-political crisis at work.<sup>12</sup> Rabinowitz was on a quest to resolve the socio-political tensions surrounding his beloved southern Russian Jewish community: Christianity provided him with what he thought was a resolution to that crisis.

A crisis provokes a *quest* to resolve the crisis, and thus the dimension of a *quest* looks like this: a desire to find pleasure or to avoid pain. When the well-known pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels, asked Mel Gibson on the stage at Willow after a preview of *The Passion of the Christ* what brought him back to a relationship with God, Mel simply said, "Pain." In addition to the desire to avoid pain or find pleasure—again, at the deepest and most elemental levels—the *quest* that leads to conversion may involve a yearning for intellectual satisfaction, self-esteem, or settled relationships. (I had a professor who once said he was converted in a church when his sister walked forward to find faith and he accompanied her—out of fear of being abandoned. While sitting with his sister he realized he wanted the same

<sup>12</sup> See Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz* 23–40, 47–52.

faith!) Also, a *quest* can take the form of seeking for power or opening oneself to encounter transcendence (something more, something beyond, etc.).

A crisis serious enough to provoke a quest that leads to conversion inevitably leads to *encounter* and *interaction*. This dimension of conversion is messy in clinical terms. What theologians and exegetes call evangelism, response, and regeneration, a sociologist of conversion surrounds with the terms *encounter and interaction*. The potential convert encounters an “advocate,” or anyone or thing advocating the Christian faith, and this interaction with an advocate leads eventually to a conversion.

The two primary forms of advocates in Jewish conversion to Christianity are human advocates (evangelists or someone evangelizing, or something written by a person) and the Holy Spirit, working through the Bible and some form of human advocacy. What may surprise many is the history of Christian “advocacy” with Jews. If we say the Church is 2,000 years old, active interest in Jewish evangelism has been a part of probably less than one-quarter of that time.<sup>13</sup>

In the encounter and interaction dimension of the conversion process, the advocate frequently “encapsulates” the converting person. This can be physical, as in a retreat or a Bible study. It can be social, by restricting contacts with non-Christians, and it can be ideological, by providing an abundance of argumentation for the convert to consider. That is, the advocate presents to the potential convert an alternative explanation of reality and an offer to undergo secondary socialization. In that process, the advocate also appeals to the converting person in a variety of ways: cognitively, affectively, pragmatically, relationally, or with an offer of power. In the same process, whether consciously or not (and usually not), the advocate offers to the convert the following: relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and a role for the convert to play in the Church. While all these terms and categories may appear confusing, pausing to consider each set of categories often sheds light on both the evangelistic effort and the converts’ needs.

One of the inevitable impacts of this advocacy and offer of an alternative reality is the development of an apologetical and defensive, even denunciatory, rhetoric. As an example, the Jewish converts discussed below frequently heard from their advocates some kind of defense of Christianity as well as a denunciation of the system of Judaism. This rhetoric quickly makes itself manifest in the new convert’s own rhetoric. Many converts hear of the Jewishness of Yeshua Mashiach and the Jewishness of earliest Christianity, as well as the Gentilization of the Church in the second and third centuries. They hear as well about the de-messianization of the Tanak, the importance of reading the Tanak before reading the Talmud, the growing number of

<sup>13</sup> Christian concern with the conversion of Jews, especially as can be seen in Dispensationally-tied missionaries, has been thoroughly studied by Yaakov Ariel in his monograph *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000). He has a nice survey of conversion on pp. 38–54. A brief survey can be found in L. Goldberg, *How Jewish is Christianity?* 13–26. For brief biographies of significant figures in Jewish evangelism, see *Mishkan* 27 (2002).

Messianic Jews, and the alternative form of Christian faith to be found in Messianic Judaism.

From the other side, because so many Jews have converted to the Christian faith, there have developed what are called in Jewish circles “anti-missionaries” whose responsibility it is to reclaim converts to Jesus as Messiah for traditional forms of Judaism.<sup>14</sup> They have been especially critical of the group founded by Moishe Rosen, often called Jews for Jesus.<sup>15</sup> A new autobiographical account of a return to Orthodox Judaism, that of David Klinghoffer, will no doubt be a blessing to those who are seeking to reclaim JMJs.<sup>16</sup> The engaging story of the Chabad, the Orthodox Jews following Menahem Mendel Schneerson, as told by Sue Fishkoff in *The Rebbe’s Army*, is another book that will foster a renewal of Jewish faith.<sup>17</sup> At the level of rhetoric, these two books—and others could be chosen—offer a positive account of Judaism which can be used by “anti-missionaries” in their efforts to dissuade JMJs. (At the level of personal conversation, several Messianic Jews have told me that the “success rate” of Jewish conversions is famously low. That is, many if not most converts revert back to some form of Judaism.)

If the advocate is “successful,” the convert makes a *commitment*. Normally, the convert describes his or her commitment as “surrender” and witnesses to that commitment either formally or informally. Commitments generate *consequences* for the convert—at a variety of levels: affective, intellectual, ethical, religious, and sociopolitical. When one thinks of the “sociopolitical” consequences of conversion, one thinks of Jewish converts like Benjamin Disraeli or even contemporary Messianic Jews in Israel who are struggling with the legal legitimacy of Messianic Judaism as a form of Judaism, who are wrestling with Jewish identity *alongside* faith in Jesus, or who are as committed to Israel as a state as their non-Messianic Jews.<sup>18</sup>

Again, let me emphasize that these sociological categories are beneficial for analysis, but are not meant to replace the spiritual realities to which they point. The “clinical” and “scientific” is merely an attempt to analyze in neutral categories what is spiritual. For example, we are dealing often in conversion with the Bible as the Word of God—read or expounded, but that very Word of God is also, at another level, the “advocate” of the Christian faith for the converting person. Awareness of the sociological factors in conversion does not necessarily demean or limit the spiritual.

<sup>14</sup> Both Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, and Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, discuss anti-missionaries. A nice synthesis of this can be read in Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* 182–90.

<sup>15</sup> See Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People* 200–219; Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* 60–63.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Lord Will Gather Me In: My Journey to Jewish Orthodoxy* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> *The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (New York: Schocken, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> On this, see J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 69–74 (on Disraeli); see also Tsvi Sadan, “Who is a Jew?” in Kjær-Hansen, *Jewish Identity and Faith in Jesus* 79–86.

## III. A PARADIGMATIC STORY: STAN TELCHIN

To plot conversion stories requires reading stories, or anecdotal evidence, until “a” or “the” plot becomes visible. I have relied upon three major modern<sup>19</sup> collections of JMJ (= Jew to Messianic Jew) conversion stories, added a few others, and come to conclusion that there is a basic plot to the JMJ conversion.<sup>20</sup> But it is clearest if we think first in terms of one person, and I have chosen Stan Telchin’s compelling story, *Betrayed!*<sup>21</sup>

Stan Telchin, with his wife Ethel, were “betrayed” one Sunday night at 10:30 p.m. when their daughter, Judy, a student at Boston University, called to inform them that, as a result of the witnessing and life of an associate, she had become a “believer” (p. 11). This means, she says, “I believe in God. I believe that the Bible is the Word of God” and “that Jesus is the Messiah!” (p. 12). Stan reacted as most would: her words crushed him and they crushed Ethel, too. As Stan expresses it: “Rage started to well up within me. My first reaction was to blast her over the phone” (p. 12). But Stan didn’t, and neither did Ethel. After crying, after seeing the misery in their other daughter’s, Ann’s, countenance, and after going through mourning and suffering the humiliation of friends who learned the story, Stan and Ethel went to work—to prove Judy wrong and win her back to the family’s faith. (They became “anti-missionaries” and they relied upon those who had already worked at reclaiming JMJs.)

Stan attacked the Bible, smoking cigarettes furiously and nearly abandoning his job. Oddly enough, before long the question was no longer Judy’s—“The question had become personal. I needed to know the truth” (p. 42). First, he became convinced that he, too, believed in God: “And suddenly my rebellion crumbled. Deep in my heart I knew that I believed in God” (p. 51). Second, he was convinced that the Bible was the Word of God. Third, he dove into the prophecies about the Messiah in the Tanak (Hebrew Bible).

While reading [Isa. 53 and Ps. 22] I could see a man hanging on a tree. The prophecies were becoming clearer and clearer to me.

<sup>19</sup> For an older collection, though not in first person (thereby rendering it less useful for plotting conversion stories), see J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians*.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Katz, *Ben Israel: Odyssey of a Modern Jew* (Laporte, MN: Burning Bush Publications, 2000); S. Roth, ed., *They Thought for Themselves: Daring to Confront the Forbidden* (Brunswick, GA: M V Press, 1999); R. Rosen, ed., *Testimonies of Jews Who Believe in Jesus* (3d ed.; San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate Publications, 1992); R. Rosen, ed., *Jewish Doctors Meet the Great Physician* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate Publications, 1998); S. Cohen, *Disowned: A Twentieth-Century Jew and His Experience with Jesus* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate Publications, 1995); L. Leigh, *From Yeshiva to Yshua—A Young Man Meets Jesus* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate Publications, 2000); Lauren F. Winner, *Girl Meets God; Mudhouse Sabbath*.

In addition, stories of conversion to Roman Catholicism include some who have converted from Judaism. I refer here to P. Madrid, ed., *Surprised by Truth: Eleven Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic* (San Diego: Basilica, 1994) 161–79 (Rick Conason); *Surprised by Truth 2: Fifteen Men and Women Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000) 261–78 (Martin K. Barrack); M. Grodi, *Journeys Home* (Goleta, CA: Queenship Publishing Co., 1997) 53–62 (Rosalind Moss).

<sup>21</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan [Chosen Books], 1981. All pages will be in parentheses in the text.

There was little sleep for me that night. I stayed in the den thinking until well after 2 A.M., and I knew my answer to question number three: The Tenach *does* contain innumerable prophecies concerning a coming Messiah (p. 64).

Then he became convinced that he was a "spiritual pauper" (p. 67). After Ethel told him one day that "the more I read of Jesus, the more I like him" (p. 76), Stan knew they were in for a strange ride. But, he responded with, "It's not hard to like someone who helps people and is good to children. It's what Jesus says about himself that is at issue" (p. 76). Caught on the horns of an old apologetic dilemma, Stan says, "You have to accept him completely or . . . decide that He was nutty as a fruitcake" (p. 76). He admits that he would prefer Judy did not believe in God than that she believed in Jesus (p. 77). After seriously studying through Church history, and observing that the early Church was Jewish and that the Church had become progressively non-Jewish over time, Stan comes to the realization that "[s]omething had changed inside me during those three months. What was it?" (p. 91). [In conversion theory, Stan is already beginning to experience "consequences."] When his business cronies told dirty stories, he found them distasteful; when they wanted to drink, he had no taste. "My mind," he confesses, "was on something else" (p. 93).

He and Ethel (who had her own spiritual discovery going on) began to attend a Messianic Jewish congregation, Beth Messiah. Stan then decided to go to a large conference at Messiah College for Messianic Jews where he met Lillian, an elderly disabled woman. She asked Stan when he had become a believer. Stan admitted he had not. She asked him to reach into her briefcase and grab her Bible. She asked him to read Exodus 20 and then she looked him in the eye and asked, "Tell me, who is your god?" He had no answer. "A thought so big and startling that it temporarily paralyzed my tongue" (p. 97). That thought was about Jesus.

The next morning Stan went to breakfast and someone (unaware that he had never confessed Christ) asked him to bless the food. He did so and closed his prayer "in the name of Jesus, the Messiah" (p. 99). Sitting with Lillian the day before he had come to the realization that Jesus was Messiah. "An enormous load had been lifted from my heart. Inside of me a singing began to come forth, a joy I had never experienced before, and I reveled in it" (p. 100).

Now, what to tell Ethel? He called her and said, "Eth! It's me! It's over! I've made my decision! Jesus is the Messiah!" (p. 100).

There was a momentary pause as I held my breath. Then Ethel's voice came back softly. "Thank God! That makes it unanimous! We've been waiting for you!"

First, Judy, then Ethel and Ann, and then Stan. A chain-link of advocates.

Stan Telchin and Ethel have had a ministry since those days, and recently Stan wrote another book, calling the "Gentile" churches to recognize the importance of their Jewish roots.<sup>22</sup> His story is but one. It illustrates every one of the six dimensions of conversion, and brings to the surface the particular

<sup>22</sup> *Abandoned: What is God's Will for the Jewish People and the Church?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan [Chosen Books], 1997).

story JMJs have to tell. We turn now to a more analytical examination of the Jewish conversion story.

#### IV. THE CONVERSION STORY OF JEWS WHO BECAME MESSIANIC JEWS

1. *Context: Jewish identity.* The conversion of a Baptist to a Methodist, or of a high church Episcopalian to a Roman Catholic, or of one sort of Orthodoxy to another usually produces some sort of crisis, but nothing compared to what sociologists of conversion call a “tradition transition,” a conversion from one “religion” to another. Regardless of how carefully MJJs (= Messianic Jews) demonstrate that a Messianic Jew remains a Jew even after conversion,<sup>23</sup> the initial confrontation with the option to convert to Christianity is repulsive to nearly every convert from Judaism. Even those Jews reared in a more pluralistic setting know the implications of becoming a follower of Jesus. And it remains the same for the convert, regardless of the form of Judaism he or she comes out of. The chasm is deep, and it is wide, and the leap is long.

When Rosalind Moss, whose conversion to evangelical faith in Jesus included a further conversion from evangelicalism to Roman Catholicism, heard from her Jewish brother David that some Jews thought Jesus was their Messiah, she said, “It’s insane. And besides, you can’t be Jewish and believe in Christ.”<sup>24</sup>

She speaks for most. The issue here is one of *identity* and *history*: Jews know who they are, and they know their own history, and they know the history of Jewish persecution—horrifyingly exhibited in the Holocaust. Many Jews know first-hand what it means to be called “Christ-killer,” “dirty Jew,” or “kike.” Their own history shapes Jewish identity as well as their perception of Christianity, adherents of which are (tragically, lamentably) those who hurl such epithets. Jewish children are taught that Christians have been their persecutors. Therefore, to convert to the Christian faith is to betray not only family but people. Yaakov Ariel, in his survey of Jewish converts to Christianity at the turn of the last century, says this:<sup>25</sup>

Conversion was a radical move that conflicted with many of the values Jews were brought up to hold; it was in many ways taboo. Becoming an American and choosing new lifestyles were changes that put many young Jews of that era [turn of the twentieth century] in conflict with their parents, particularly if the latter resided in America themselves. *But conversion would have put them in even greater conflict with themselves. It was a self-transformation that only a few Jews of the period were willing to make. They had been brought up to regard*

<sup>23</sup> For a nice survey, see Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* 169–81.

<sup>24</sup> *Journeys Home* 54.

<sup>25</sup> *Evangelizing the Chosen People* 40. Ariel, however, makes a further claim I cannot document, and of which I am suspicious: that he was unable to find a convert of that period who came from “a warm and supportive two-parent family” (p. 41). My reading of J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians*, did not lead me to such a conclusion. Hovering over such a claim is the lack of evidence of just the sort of biographical information needed to justify such a conclusion.

*conversion as an act of betrayal of one's people and heritage, as joining the enemy camp.* Conversion generally evoked guilt, inner turmoil, and pain.

Laura Wertheim, who escaped Germany before the Holocaust, and her husband Freddy, "equated Christianity with everything anti-Jewish. We always thought of the Nazis as Christians."<sup>26</sup> David Chansky admits this: "Frankly, my problem was not even spiritual, at least, not that I was aware. The trouble was this Jesus; I grew up disliking him immensely because of all the black eyes and bloody noses I associated with his name."<sup>27</sup>

Barry Minkow, an admitted shyster from early in his life, saw his mother convert: "My mother's mother, my father's father, everyone in the family, including me, condemned my mother for this betrayal."<sup>28</sup> Sharon Allen asked herself: "How could I even bear the thought of being an outcast from my people?"<sup>29</sup> Manny Brotman wondered, "Would that [conversion] make me become a 'goy,' a 'Gentile'?"<sup>30</sup> When Ari-Beth Cohen, about as Jewish name as one could find, confessed her faith to her father, "he tore his sleeve and told me to leave the house."<sup>31</sup>

In fact, nearly every conversion story of a JMJ I have seen in one way or another brings to the surface the incompatibility of faith in Jesus with Judaism. Stan Telchin told his daughter, Judy, "But Judy, you're Jewish." "Jews just don't believe in Jesus. How can you believe in Jesus? It's impossible."<sup>32</sup> Rose Price, a survivor of the Holocaust, when she was considering converting, "started sneaking down to the basement and reading the New Testament in a locked room."<sup>33</sup> In fact, Peter Greenspan, a doctor convert, said, that he "didn't even understand that Y'shua (Jesus) was Jewish."<sup>34</sup> Arthur Barlis, another doctor convert, thought "Jesus was somehow the non-Jewish version of our God."<sup>35</sup> The engineer and scientist convert, Andrew Barron, thought Jesus was a Roman Catholic.<sup>36</sup>

Since the context provides everything against such a conversion, the next dimension, "crisis," is in need of special consideration—and here we unlock the mystery of the JMJ.

2. *Crisis: Jewish identity and crises.* Humans do not convert unless there is some crisis that compels them to quest for a resolution. Converts from one tradition (Judaism) to another (Christianity), that is, whose primary socialization and secondary socialization are radically different, tend to have a "larger than average" crisis experience.

<sup>26</sup> *Testimonies* 249.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 274.

<sup>28</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 218.

<sup>31</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 44.

<sup>32</sup> *Betrayed!* 22.

<sup>33</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 60–61.

<sup>34</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 31.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

Jews become Messianic Jews for a variety of reasons, and I have plotted a significant list of different crises that somehow contribute to the person going on a quest toward conversion. That is, there is evidence for conversion being precipitated by several crises: near-death experiences, an experience of an altered state—Janet Feinberg<sup>37</sup> admits that a drug-induced experience contributed to her desire for faith—illnesses and the need for healing, as well as political issues. But these show up rarely in the JMJs conversion story. In what follows, we will focus on the more important crises that show up: I refer to them as “occasional” as well as the “fundamental” crises leading to Jewish conversion. The occasional crises show up often, but not always; the fundamental crises are inherent to the transformation of Jewish identity as one turns to Jesus as Messiah.

a. *Occasional crises: charismatic figure.* In a wide variety of conversions it is often a *charismatic figure* that provokes a crisis, and JMJs manifest this with some degree of regularity. Ron Cohen, to give but one example, who had been dabbling in eastern mysticism enough to become a “Jewish Yogi,” relates that a “young man with short blond hair, wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, walked through the crowd of people sitting at the plaza area in front of the bench and came up to me. He looked straight at me and asked, ‘Do you have Jesus in your heart?’ . . . [Cohen then says,] ‘For sure I have the Holy Spirit.’ He then pointed his finger at me and said, ‘You’re lying. . . . I can see it in your eyes.’”<sup>38</sup> This, along with meeting others, provoked Cohen’s crisis to convert to faith in Jesus.

*Psychological issues.* JMJs frequently convert out of *psychological issues* or for (what experts might label) *pathological reasons*. I do not mean to be harsh in saying this, but many JMJs are set on the course toward conversion by some emotional trauma. Two quick observations: first, emotional trauma shows up in the background in many conversion plots; and, second, the same sort of trauma can be found at times in the Gospels’ accounts of those who convert to Jesus.

Arthur Katz, whose story of conversion is legendary among JMJs, details his emotional struggles as well as his sexual escapades and hankering for love.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Katz admits that he learned what love was in the arms of another woman—who eventually became his Christian wife. Barry Minkow admits that he was driven for “acceptance,” and that he “tried to gain acceptance by doing something that nobody else had done”—which he did, and it led him into trouble with the law.<sup>40</sup> When Sharon Allen was divorced, she moved West with her daughter Chava Leah, and this (over time) influenced her own conversion.<sup>41</sup> Lev Leigh, whose story of conversion is as odd as it is powerful, speaks of having “black fits of depression.”<sup>42</sup> Finally, Jack Sternberg,

<sup>37</sup> *Testimonies* 57.

<sup>38</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 114–15.

<sup>39</sup> *Ben Israel* 9, 11, 46–47, 53–54, 78.

<sup>40</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 35.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 83–84.

<sup>42</sup> *From Yeshiva to Y’shua* 4.

who was reared in an unobservant Judaism and who became an agnostic medical doctor, states that seeing suffering steeled him against the emotional: "I decided to empty myself of as much emotion as possible—both professionally and personally."<sup>43</sup>

*Family tragedy.* Behind the conversion of a JMJ there is often a *tragedy in the family* that provokes a yearning for resolution. Numerous JMJs were driven to more ultimate realities by a *divorce* or a relationship so strained that divorce seemed inevitable. Arthur Katz, Sharon Allen, Peter Greenspan, Robert Rosett (Diana left him, he went through a crisis, Diana found faith, they re-united), Arthur Barlis, David Madenburg, Norman Bushkin, as well as Henry and Janet Feinberg each experienced this sort of crisis.<sup>44</sup> Some were deeply affected by a *death or near-death of someone close*, as when Batya Segal was surrounded by the Yom Kippur war, Lev Leigh's father committed suicide, when Joseph Caplan's father almost died and altered his own life, and when Susan Perlman's father died.<sup>45</sup> There are other similar "tragedies" in the family. When Judy, Stan Telchin's daughter, converted to faith in Jesus his world was turned upside down; the same happened to Rose Price.<sup>46</sup> When Barry Minkow's economic empire crumbled, his quest began.<sup>47</sup> When Sharon Allen's fiancé, Ron, balked at a conversion to Judaism, Sharon began to investigate the Bible to prove him wrong.<sup>48</sup> When Michael Brown, who has since become a notable biblical scholar, had friends who converted, his world was sent into disarray.<sup>49</sup>

*Dissatisfaction with life.* Perhaps the most common crisis in conversion is a *general dissatisfaction with life at some deep-seated level*. We can begin with Batya Segal, who was reared in Israel in Orthodox Judaism. At twelve she began to question her way of life and transferred to public school. But she found that school setting disenchanting, so she was enrolled in a school that permitted much greater personal freedom to study at home. Here are her words:<sup>50</sup>

This was a period of deep soul-searching for me, a time of seeking for truth. Since I was studying at home I had a lot of time to think and read. I knew I had not found satisfaction in a religious Orthodox lifestyle, even though I appreciated and identified with the traditions. But I had to ask myself, If keeping the commandments does not bring me peace and a closer relationship with God, then what does? I was searching for the answers to other questions as well: What is the purpose of my life here on earth? Who is God, really? What will happen to me after I die?

<sup>43</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 12.

<sup>44</sup> Stories can be found in A. Katz, *Ben Israel* 19–20, 26, 31, 28–29, 114–19; *They Thought for Themselves* 83–84, 88–89, 34, 51; *Jewish Doctors Meet* 148–49, 178–79; *Testimonies* 28, 46, 61–62.

<sup>45</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 172–73; *From Yeshiva to Y'shua* 5; *Testimonies* 170, 214.

<sup>46</sup> *Betrayed!* 44, in his conversation with Stan's other daughter, Ann. For Rose Price, see *They Thought for Themselves* 58–59.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 88–89.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 128–29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 172.

It is precisely this sort of experience that is found in well over half the stories of JMJs that I have plotted. It is the issue that there must be “more” to life than what has so far been tasted. Manny Brotman called this the “God-shaped hole in my soul.”<sup>51</sup>

Lev Leigh recounted it this way:<sup>52</sup>

After a while [of participating in a *yeshiva*] though, I began to feel disillusioned with the way of life. Nothing seemed to be changing in my heart. I still struggled with loneliness and unanswered questions, and I began to wonder if I had done the right thing. Most of all, I could not understand why God wanted us to be so meticulous and perfunctory about every aspect of daily life. I couldn’t reconcile the rabbinical regulations with the God I read about in the Bible. The God in the Scriptures demanded a certain standard of behavior, yet seemed overwhelmingly compassionate. Modern Judaism seemed to have added a whole gamut of extra detail. I felt frustrated by the religion. It seemed that with so many rules and laws to keep, it would be utterly impossible ever to please God. . . . I left school and returned to South Africa. . . . my heart was as empty and hollow as ever . . . Looking back, I realize I was running from something. I was running from the meaninglessness of the world around me.

Jack Sternberg was seeking for deeper fulfillment in his Reform temple activities, but they “left me empty and unsatisfied,” and his conversion gave “my life meaning and fulfillment.”<sup>53</sup>

*Mystical experiences.* An unusual number of JMJs relate some sort of mystical experience as precipitating conversion, reflecting a rather noticeable charismatic emphasis among Messianic Jews. In my study, I found a mystical experience in nearly two-thirds of the converts. I make no claim that such a number would hold across the board if we could plot hundreds of conversions, but the record of the stories studied is clear: mystical experiences are frequent.

David Yaniv injured his back and, after seven and half years of seeking medical help, found none, gave up, and realized he would live the rest of his life paralyzed. Home one day in Israel, he stumbled across *The 700 Club* from a Lebanese station and watched it out of curiosity (in hiding). His wife encouraged him to watch the show where healings occur, simply because it could not hurt. Ben Kinchlow, one of the regulars on *The 700 Club*, often invited his watchers to “pray with me” and David tuned the station off at that point. But, one afternoon, “it seemed that Ben’s finger stretched out from the television pointing straight at me . . . I could have sworn he was talking directly to me.” David prayed with him, to Jesus, he soon bought a Bible, and was soon also attending a church—he became a Christian and he was healed.<sup>54</sup>

Martin Barrack sensed a powerful sense of “peace” whenever he walked toward the church and whenever he walked away from the church that

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>52</sup> *From Yeshiva to Y’shua* 9, 10, 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 13, 22.

<sup>54</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 18–25.

peace decreased.<sup>55</sup> Later he said that he could sense Jesus walking beside him.<sup>56</sup>

Alyosha Ryabinov, a musician Russian immigrant to the USA, asked God for a "sign" and, "Suddenly, a bright light came into my room. It stayed for a little while and then it left."<sup>57</sup> The Yemeni Jew, Batya Segal, found a job typesetting but didn't know it would involve the NT and it confused her. She yearned to know the truth. She prayed, "God please show me the way I should go. Is Yeshua the true Messiah of Israel or is He a false Messiah?" She added: "Right after I prayed, I saw a vision of a man clothed in a long white robe. His bearded face was shining and full of glory. The countenance of the man was majestic. I did not understand the meaning of the vision, yet I felt God was trying to give me a sign."<sup>58</sup> She saw the same man walking toward her the next day and when she looked again, he was gone. This led to her conversion.

Steve Cohen was standing on a sunny Seattle hillside when "a man in a dark suit emerged and strode purposefully toward me. I had never seen him before nor have I seen him since. He informed me that he had a message for me. A message, he said, from God: "*You are to study the Bible and become a believer in Jesus because your mission in life is to bring the gospel to other Jewish people.*"<sup>59</sup> From Robert Rosett: "As she laid hands on us and prayed, I felt a tremendous overwhelming presence."<sup>60</sup> Stephen Schacher, who had become a Zen Buddhist, in an attempt to dabble in the Christian faith, decided to accept Jesus as Messiah to see if it was true. When he said this, in his "mind I heard the words *The Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.*" And suddenly, the "thoughts and images that flooded my mind in the next few seconds were so vast, so all-encompassing of my years of religious/spiritual experiences, that I couldn't contain them. Bins of stored information . . . suddenly flooded together in a manner that produced insight after insight and connection after connection."<sup>61</sup> Arthur Barlis "had either a dream or a vision about Y'shua. It was such a restless night that it's hard to say if I was awake or asleep, but I saw a pure white figure that I recognized as Jesus at the foot of my bed. He told me that I needed to read about him, that I needed to read the Gospels."<sup>62</sup> This suffices to illustrate that a mystical experience can provoke a quest that leads to conversion.

b. *Fundamental crises in Jewish conversion: transcendence and apostasy.* Those who analyze conversion know that using an expression like "a desire for transcendence" can be applied to a variety of "symptoms," but this is the

<sup>55</sup> *Surprised by Truth* 2 265.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 275.

<sup>57</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 182.

<sup>59</sup> *Disowned* 5, 9–10.

<sup>60</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 52.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

way it should be. In the plot of the JMJ there are two essential “transcendent features” that emerge in many conversion stories. First, JMJs want to transcend their history and culture by becoming convinced that Yeshua (Jesus) is Messiah and, second, they want to transcend themselves by ridding themselves of their “sin problem” and their “guilt.”

*Transcendence: Jesus as Messiah and Jewish identity.* In the first sort of crisis regarding transcendence, we come to the heart of the JMJ crisis: Is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah of Israel? Since this will come to the surface in other dimensions of conversion discussed below, I will limit myself here to general remarks. JMJs face a distinctive crisis when they begin to let themselves ask the question already answered by Christians: “Is Jesus, the Jesus preached by Christians and the Jesus exhibited throughout the world on the Cross, is this Jesus the Messiah we Jews expect?” For the Jew even to consider this question prompts a fundamental crisis: Is my Jewish identity intact, am I losing my Jewish identity, and is my history and culture mistaken in what role it assigns to Jesus of Nazareth? For Jews to convert they must transcend their identity at the level of the role Jesus plays in the world.

This is not really a Gentile question: Gentiles are reared in a world that is not anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Jews, however, are reared in such a world in which the Messiah is coming (or, as is the case in some forms of Judaism, is not coming)—and clearly the Messiah they anticipate has not yet come (if it indeed is a person rather than an “age”). So, when somehow someone gets into the mind of Jew that Jesus just might be the Messiah, a crisis occurs in heart, soul, mind, and strength. The implosion at the level of identity this creates is impossible to calculate.

For instance, Rick Conason, who eventually converted to Roman Catholicism, was set on a conversion path when he broodingly asked this question: “What if there *is* a Messiah? And what if *Jesus* really is the Messiah. And what if he really *is* coming again soon to judge the world?”<sup>63</sup> His world unraveled by seeking answers to these questions.

*Transcendence: Atoning for sin and Jewish identity.* The first collection of stories I read on Jewish conversion was that of Sid Roth: *They Thought for Themselves*. When I was done, Kris (my wife) and I were walking together at our favorite vacation spot (it was Spring Break), and I said to her: “I’ve read these stories and something doesn’t quite make sense to me. Hardly any of these Jewish converts speak of sin at all. Instead, they speak of coming to terms with Jesus as Messiah.” At that time I framed a hypothesis that has only slightly shifted: for most<sup>64</sup> JMJs the sin-problem follows the Messiah-problem. What I mean is this: the critical pass for the JMJ is crossed when Jesus is confessed as Messiah and, because Jesus Messiah is also Savior from sins, a sin-problem-resolution is entailed in the confession of Jesus as Messiah. It could be said for many JMJs that they became convinced of their sinfulness because they were convinced Jesus was the Messiah, instead of

<sup>63</sup> *Surprised by Truth* 167.

<sup>64</sup> A good example of the exception is David Baron, in J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* 38–40.

being convinced of their sin and their need for a Messiah who could carry away their sins. This is not to say that Jewish liturgy, especially at Yom Kippur, does not have its share of sin rhetoric. What it is to say is this: the anecdotal evidence of Jewish converts suggests that a sin-rhetoric is less significant than a Messiah-rhetoric.

The story of Joseph Rabinowitz illustrates precisely this point: after his conversion—which is very hard to trace in detail—he set out 13 theses that were focused on the resolution of the social problems for Jews in southern Russia. Rabinowitz was quickly criticized for having insufficient attention to the person of Jesus Christ and to his atoning work by G. Friedmann.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Rabinowitz confesses: “I first honoured Jesus as the great human being with the compassionate heart, later as the one who desired the welfare of my people, and finally as the one who bore my sins.”<sup>66</sup>

Another way of framing this is that “Messiah rhetoric” shapes the early phases of conversion for the JMJ and only later, largely due to the “gospel rhetoric” of Christian preaching, there develops a “sin rhetoric.” This absence of “sin rhetoric” can be explained in other ways: namely, it may be that the storytellers simply forgot to integrate the issue of sin and forgiveness; or, it may be that the storytellers were (as Jews) so convinced of sinfulness (after all, it is inherent to the Torah) that the issue was not about being convicted of sin but whether or not Jesus was Messiah. However one explains the relative absence of sin in many JMJ stories, it remains clear that the critical pass is the Messiah problem. The emphasis one finds on the “Messiah rhetoric” in comparison to a “sin rhetoric” could be explained by the sort of “rhetoric” the “advocate” used in setting out the categories of what the Christian faith is all about. If the critical issue is the Messiahship of Jesus, the rhetoric will more often gravitate to the Torah, to the Prophets, and to the Gospels and less to the theological soteriology of Romans or Hebrews.

Still, having offered these observations about the transcendence issues of Messiah and sin, let it be clear that some JMJs do speak of sin as an issue in their conversion. Arthur Katz, for instance, does not ponder sin until Rena brings it up in a Jerusalem book store into which he “accidentally” stumbled.<sup>67</sup> In Sid Roth’s collection of stories, it is not until the final chapter, one that becomes a “gospel offer,” that the issue of sin comes to the foreground.<sup>68</sup> Lev Leigh, after discovering the Messianic joy of the Torah, came to the conviction that sin was an issue.<sup>69</sup> Others speak of the conviction of sin and the overwhelming sense of peace and forgiveness.<sup>70</sup>

*Apostasy.* This is critical: *All JMJs experience the crisis of “apostasy” and the disorder a conversion to faith in Jesus will cause.* Conversion studies

<sup>65</sup> See Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz* 50–52.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>67</sup> *Ben Israel* 114–19.

<sup>68</sup> The chapter is by Manny Brotman, and he explains the gospel in terms of spiritual laws (pp. 206–16).

<sup>69</sup> *From Yeshiva to Y’shua* 17.

<sup>70</sup> Jack Sternberg, Ari-Beth Cohen, Robert Rosett, Daniel Gold, Bernie Cohen, *Jewish Doctors Meet* 19, 42, 52, 126, 128, 140.

are aware that “apostasy” creates a crisis that can, and often does, lead to a conversion to another faith. If it is true that all conversions imply an “apostasy” of some sort from one’s previous beliefs, it is all the more true for those who experience a “tradition transition” from one religion to another. In the Context section above (3.1) we described Jewish identity and history as critical factors in the JMJ experience. We return to this to observe that it is this experience that creates a, perhaps the, *fundamental crisis of the JMJ*. Apostasy occurs at the “interior” level and at the “intellectual” level. At the interior level, the JMJ realizes what will happen to him or her in the family, social, and ethnic level context. At the intellectual level, the JMJ must process the issue of Jesus being the Messiah and making “faith in Jesus” reasonably coherent in that person’s framework of thought.

No one has said this any more forcefully than David Chansky, and I will resume and complete the quotation about him from above:<sup>71</sup>

Frankly, my problem was not even spiritual, at least, not that I was aware. The trouble was this Jesus . . . The possibility that he could be the Messiah—that we might have been wrong about him—I did not know how to handle it. I didn’t see it as a simple question: believing in Jesus versus not believing. I saw it as a choice between the beauty of my Jewish home life and the non-Jewish lifestyles I had seen as a child and did not especially admire. For him to be the Messiah seemed to mean the collapse of my whole world.

His family thought he needed to see a doctor, thinking his time in Alaska had gotten to him. They put him out.<sup>72</sup>

The “crime” was believing in Jesus—but from the punishment, one would have thought it had been child molesting. It was very painful. I loved my family and I never wanted to be separated from them, but as much as I hated being an outcast, I couldn’t pay the price for their acceptance.

3. *Quest for a Jewish identity and faith in Jesus the Messiah.* The dimension of “quest” in conversion begins the resolution to the “crisis,” so that whatever one’s crisis is shapes what one’s quest is all about. Thus, as with any group of conversion stories, JMJs have predictable sorts of quests. If the fundamental issue is psychological, the quest will be toward *self-esteem and psycho-emotional health*, and this can be seen, for example, in the stories of Arthur Katz and Barry Minkow.<sup>73</sup> Inasmuch as being Jewish is fundamental to one’s identity and any “conversion” to Messianic Judaism carries with it the sense of abandoning one’s social home, the quest will take on the shape of *settling relationships*. Few can doubt that Stan Telchin’s own story is the result of his attempt to settle and re-establish his relationship with Judy.<sup>74</sup> Rose Price’s quest was to resolve the break-up of her family when her daughter converted to faith in Jesus.<sup>75</sup> If the problem is pain or illness, the

<sup>71</sup> *Testimonies* 274–75.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 282.

<sup>73</sup> *Ben Israel and They Thought for Themselves* 29–50.

<sup>74</sup> *Betrayed!*

<sup>75</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 58–61.

quest will take on a shape of *pursuing pleasure or healing*. The “mad dog” of the emergency room, David Madenburg was so burnt out and so stressed that his entire body was racked with pain. “How,” he asks God, “to you expect me to ease my patients’ pain when my own suffering is consuming me?”<sup>76</sup> His pain drove him to the Bible, to messianic prophecies, and to faith in Jesus—and physical healing.

The shape of the two major quests for the JMJ is one of these two options: *intellectual satisfaction or encountering transcendence*. To be more concrete, these two quests set out to discover if Jesus is the Messiah or not, and to find a way to overcome one’s sinfulness, each quest tied into facing the ostracism that normally occurs when Jews convert to faith in Jesus. It should be observed at this point that large swaths of modern Judaism are not centrally concerned with the “Messiah” question. JMJs tend to emphasize the lack of interest in their own experience of Judaism in the “Messiah” question, and some observe how their rabbis or family toned down the “messianism” of the Tanak. And, as noted above, the Messiah question and the sin question are often entangled in the JMJ experience, as will be seen below.

The intellectual quest to determine if Jesus is Messiah begins when the JMJ realizes that Jesus was, after all, Jewish. The rhetoric of most forms of Judaism, according to the stories of converts, excludes Jesus from the discussion. Accordingly, many JMJs state that they thought Jesus was a Gentile form of God or that he was part of Christianity, but it had not dawned on them that he was Jewish. As an example, the medical doctor Peter Greenspan, when he went to college in Kansas City, Missouri, met Gary Henke, who entered his room with a NT. Peter says, “I politely informed him . . . that I was not interested in anti-Semitic nonsense about some gentile in whose name countless Jews had suffered and died. I didn’t even understand that Y’shua (Jesus) was Jewish.”<sup>77</sup>

At some point, somehow the potential JMJ begins to wonder if the Christian rhetoric about Jesus as the Jewish Messiah has any foundation in reality—and to sort out this question the JMJ begins to read the Torah. Some converts already know Hebrew, but few dedicate themselves to research—both in the Torah and in rabbinic writings, the way Michael Brown did. Following in the steps of notable Jewish converts like Alfred Edersheim,<sup>78</sup> he dedicated himself to biblical studies and to rabbinic studies, and developed an apologetical stance against rabbinic understandings of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>79</sup> More are like Jerry Karabensh:<sup>80</sup>

So my curiosity and sense of Jewish pride motivated me to begin reading the Old Testament. That interest in learning about the Bible was a turning-point for me. [My wife Del] knew the best way for me to meet Jesus would be by starting in the Old Testament. . . .

<sup>76</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 166.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>78</sup> See J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* 75–78.

<sup>79</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 129–49.

<sup>80</sup> *Testimonies* 79–81.

Del was right. I began reading the Old Testament to find out more about my Jewish background, and I got more than I bargained for. First, I discovered that I believed this Bible of mine was true. I also discovered statements in my Bible about someone who was supposed to come in the future. I vaguely remembered references to such a person called “the Messiah” mentioned in synagogue prayers.

Oddly enough, the Old Testament descriptions of the Messiah and what he was supposed to do reminded me of this Jesus person I’d heard about now and then. . . .

I concluded that if Jesus wasn’t the Jewish Messiah, we might as well forget the whole messianic promise. No one else was going to fit the description more closely than he. I accepted the fact that Jesus was *the* Messiah, but now the question remained, was he *my* Messiah?

If there is one messianic text that seems to trigger the connection with Jesus, it is Isaiah 52:13–53:12.<sup>81</sup> However diverse the modern interpretations of this text are among scholars, Messianic Jews nearly always see in this text a predictive prophecy about the Messiah and see its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>82</sup> Jay Sekulow, who presented a celebrated case for Jews for Jesus to the Supreme Court as a young lawyer, says it this way:<sup>83</sup>

Glenn suggested I read Isaiah 53. My mind was boggled by the description of the “suffering servant” who sounded so much like Jesus. [So he obtains a “real Bible,” the Jewish translation.] It still sounded like Jesus in the “Jewish Bible,” but there had to be a logical explanation.

I began to research the passage and I started to look for rabbinic interpretations. That’s when I began to worry. If I read the passage once, I’m sure I read it 500 times. I looked for as many traditional Jewish interpretations as I could find. A number of them, especially the earlier ones, described the text as a messianic prophecy. Other interpretations claimed the suffering servant was Isaiah himself, or even the nation of Israel, but those explanations were an embarrassment to me. The details in the text obviously didn’t add up to the prophet Isaiah or the nation of Israel. Did I ask the rabbis? No, I didn’t ask the rabbis. I read what the rabbis had written over the years, . . . but frankly, I hadn’t been too impressed with anyone I’d met lately. My last impression of what to expect from the Jewish religious establishment had been in a service where, when somebody sneezed the rabbi said, “God bless you.” Then he said, “What am I saying? I don’t believe in God.”

<sup>81</sup> The engaging story of Joseph Rabinowitz looking down upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and then peering over to Golgotha and, as a result, coming to terms with Isaiah 53 is probably hagiography. For this account, see J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* 148–49; for a more historically-accurate account, see Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz* 11–22.

<sup>82</sup> One of the more interesting stories is that of Solomon Ginsburg (1867–1927). As a thirteen year-old man he was permitted in the Sikkah while his father entertained some visitors and discussed Torah. On the table was a well-used copy of the Prophets, and young Solomon opened it and began to read Isaiah 53, leading to his questioning of his father who this servant might be. His father snatched the book and slapped the young man on the face. When later a missionary explained that text as referring to Jesus, Ginsburg found the explanation more penetrating and it, along with his own struggles, led to his conversion. See J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* 84–85.

<sup>83</sup> *Testimonies* 160–61.

I kept looking for a traditional Jewish explanation that would satisfy, but found none. The only plausible explanation seemed to be Jesus. . . .

I had never felt the need for a Messiah before, but now that I was studying the prophecies and reading about what the Messiah was supposed to do, it sounded pretty good. I'd always thought my cultural Judaism was sufficient, but in the course of studying about the Messiah who would die as a sin bearer, I realized that I needed a Messiah to do that for me.

Though not told in the same details, the story of Zhava Glaser, who grew up in observant Judaism, revolves around a similar confrontation with Isaiah 53. Zhava married Mitch Glaser, who is now President of the Chosen People Ministries.<sup>84</sup>

So critical is the Messianic prophecy interpretation to JMJs that it is not unusual for a convert to trot out a list of Messianic prophecies and fulfillments. A good example of this can be found in Stan Telchin's "A Look at Some Prophecies."<sup>85</sup> For a variety of reasons many JMJs become associated with a dispensational hermeneutic, as can be seen in the listing of prophetic fulfillments by Manny Brotman,<sup>86</sup> but this need not be explored in this context.

4. *Encounter and interaction: advocacy of a messianic Jewish identity.* What Christians normally refer to as "evangelist" or as "evangelizing" sociologists of conversion, in order to flatten the term out so it can be applied to all instances of conversion, call "advocate" and "advocacy." The JMJ conversion plot is noted by two sorts of an "advocate": human advocates and scriptural advocacy. In brief, someone or a group of Christians "get to" the person, and this triggers a need and yearning to know what the Bible says (about Jesus as Messiah).

It should be observed there that there has been a large flap within Judaism, within some parts of Christianity itself, and even among Messianic Jews themselves about the aggressive methods of Jews for Jesus. Whatever one thinks of the methods of Jews for Jesus, these sorts of methods are an element of the "advocacy" pattern of humans in evangelizing segments of non-Messianic Judaism.

When Judy (personal advocate) became a believer, Stan Telchin wanted to prove her wrong so he studied the Torah, which became for him a scriptural advocacy for the very thing he was trying to disprove.<sup>87</sup> My own research of the JMJ turns up a constant presence of a variety of advocates. The advocate for many JMJs is a boyfriend or girlfriend.

While the human advocate and scriptural advocacy are the "norm," there are instances of other forms of advocacy. For instance, David Yaniv encountered the gospel about Jesus Messiah through *The 700 Club*,<sup>88</sup> Ceil Rosen

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* 258–62.

<sup>85</sup> *Betrayed!* 125–37.

<sup>86</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 194–216.

<sup>87</sup> *Betrayed!* e.g. 33–42.

<sup>88</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 18–21.

was moved by Christmas songs and a movie,<sup>89</sup> Andrew Barron by nature,<sup>90</sup> Jerry Karabensh and Jay Sekulow were opened to the gospel in part by a band,<sup>91</sup> while Sekulow himself (following a long line of Jewish converts) was confronted with the gospel as a result of his education.<sup>92</sup>

To illustrate the power of advocacy, and the role it plays in conversion, I will focus on the story of Zhava Glaser, who highlights the role of her advocates.<sup>93</sup> As a candy striper at a hospital, Zhava helped out by schlepping books from the library to patients. One day she discovered *The Greatest Story Ever Written* and, instead of handing it on to her patients, she took it home to read it. Because of that book, Zhava “spent hours this way, reading Bible stories and talking to God.” This led to her to want to read the real Bible, so she checked one out from the library—putting a “rubber band around the ‘New Testament’ so God wouldn’t think I wanted to read the wrong part.” Eventually her mother agreed to buy her own copy, but she had to find one at a used book store, which naturally enough also had the NT.

Later, she found an advertisement for marijuana in the TV Guide, sent away for information, and eventually also got some religious magazines, which she tucked away in the attic. On a rainy, boring day she found those stored magazines and read in them that Jesus might just be the Messiah. So she began to read Torah passages about the Messiah. Soon, some high school friends gave her a copy of the Gospel of Luke and it struck her how similar her messianic passages were to what was said about Jesus in Luke. This led her to Daniel 9, a significant passage in the JMJ conversion story, and she began to think that Jesus could very well be the Messiah. She says: “Even though I now believed that Jesus was the Messiah, I didn’t consider myself a Christian.”

Then along came (not the apostle) Peter, whom she joined one day at a Christian prayer meeting. Peter was a friend with a man named Doug, who worked the American Board of Missions to the Jews. Zhava and Peter attended a Christian concert, where she heard the implications of the gospel. She prayed and “asked Jesus, my Messiah, to be central in my life” and her “life really lit up.”

Zhava’s story illustrates what I would call the JMJ advocacy pattern: human advocates who provoke a person to investigate the Torah to see what it says about the Messiah and then to the NT to see how Christians believe Jesus is the fulfillment of those messianic expectations.

In addition, the *encounter and interaction* dimension of conversion includes what sociologists of conversion call “encapsulation,” or the sealing off of a person to avoid distraction. A notable, and nearly unambiguous, feature of the JMJ encapsulation experience is this: the JMJ’s encapsulation is mostly

<sup>89</sup> *Testimonies* 3, 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 81–82, 161.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 159–60.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 252–62. All quotations come from these pages.

*self-encapsulation*, though often the JMJ begins to spend considerable time with other Christians. The potential Jewish convert tends to go it alone—with his or her Torah and the NT.<sup>94</sup> Because the “act” of considering Jesus as a messianic possibility broaches the act of apostasy, and because Jewish identity is tied into its ethnicity, culture, and religious beliefs (which include Jesus *not* being Messiah), self-encapsulation becomes the norm. The JMJ tends to need to get away, to be private, and to study the Bible with sufficient security that others cannot tamper with the process. Alyosha Ryabinov, the musician, makes this confession: “Quietly, without telling anyone, I began to read books about Jesus that my sister had brought home.”<sup>95</sup> This is typical for the JMJ.

This dimension of encounter and interaction, because it involves a tradition transition from one religion to another and because it strikes at the very core of Jewish identity, almost always involves a serious struggle before a commitment becomes clear. Arthur Katz, whose journal permits insight into the “heart of a convert” unlike no other I have seen (apart from Augustine), accidentally finds himself on the wrong bus and then accidentally in a small bookstore, when he encounters the gospel at the hands of Rena. He heard something inside: “Art,” the Voice said, “you are not to leave.”<sup>96</sup> Here are some of his comments that reveal his struggle to believe:

Why is it such a struggle to believe?

I explained that I am not really Jewish in the religious sense, but rather Jewish in the existential sense . . . in search for meaning and identity. . . . I am a man out of place.

But I have an aversion to becoming a conventional “Christian.” It seems repugnant to my life and insulting to my intellect.

After a night of thought and a letter to God, confessing his sinfulness.

It means [he repeats what Rena is telling him] upsetting and putting into reverse order the self and all the tendencies that for a lifetime have been natural to it. . . . But I am still not man enough to receive Him.

I’m on a collision course. . . . I’m being called by some unknown force to leave all that is familiar and dear and walk into a foolishness and absurdity that promises nothing but a cross.

In my sleep it [faith and surrender] came . . . It was not a dream exactly. It was simply an understanding, given by the Spirit of God who had been leading me all these fourteen months. . . . and saw God revealed in the Messiah. . . . I now take You as my Savior and Lord. . . . I actually feel nothing. I simply accept what I now know to be true, and this morning there is a tremendous peace and calm in my life—peace that actually passes all understanding.

<sup>94</sup> A notable historical example is Carl Paul Caspari, who eventually set up shop in Norway and whose successors are still at work in Israel; see O. Skarsaune, “From Jewish Enlightenment to Lutheran Pietism: The Spiritual Odyssey of Carl Paul Caspari,” in *Israel and Yeshua* 57–64.

<sup>95</sup> *The Thought for Themselves* 74.

<sup>96</sup> *Ben Israel* 114–24.

5. *Commitment: embracing a messianic Jewish identity.* There may be some “gentle nods of the soul” leading to conversion for a JMJ, but there are also cataclysmic events: the moments are conscious, the experiences crystal clear, and the memories rock solid. Conversions that assault primary socialization, identity, and one’s deepest ethnic traditions are normally volcanic in which the human “is taken down” with a struggle. Jacob’s biblical struggle mirrors the typical conversion of a JMJ, only this time instead of being given the name “Israel” the convert is given the name “Messianist.”

We can begin with the “surrender,” the moment when the JMJ gives in, trusts in Jesus, and opens himself or herself to the saving power of Jesus. Rick Conason “felt a gentle, yet irresistible urge to sit under a large, nearby shade tree. I looked up through the leaves at the clouds and blue sky and said, ‘I guess you’re there after all.’ Then, simply and quietly I asked Jesus to come into my life as my personal Lord and Savior.”<sup>97</sup>

Lev Leigh, after being challenged by an unnamed professor at a major American university to read the NT, says:<sup>98</sup>

. . . these books, the Gospels, were really very Jewish.  
It seemed this was the God I had spent my whole life searching for!  
Waves of freedom began to surge through my soul as I read about righteousness through God’s grace. . . .

It took me four months of wrestling with both the Old and New Testaments before coming to the conclusion that Jesus was the truth, as he claimed to be. As a Jew, I felt I had better be certain before I made such a momentous commitment! It was not an easy choice. I knew there would be repercussions in my family and I wanted to be solid about what I believed.

[Lev stumbles upon a Jews for Jesus Friday night service] Tears streamed down my face as God had provided solid confirmation that believing in Jesus was the most Jewish thing I could ever do.

Jack Sternberg, a doctor, tells it this way:<sup>99</sup>

After much reading, prayer and internal turmoil, I finally came to believe in Jesus as my Jewish Messiah. I was unable to actually articulate my decision until a visit with a very sweet patient by the name of Mildred. Mildred was dying. As I was talking to her during her examination, she suddenly looked up at me and said, “Dr. Sternberg, there is something different about you over the last month. What is it?” Her simple observation brought me face to face with the fact that God had already begun to change me, and I found myself explaining to Mildred that I had become a believer in Jesus Christ as my Jewish Messiah, Lord, and Savior. She simply nodded and said, “I thought so.”

Susan Perlman, an activist at a Christian concert, says,<sup>100</sup>

But as I sat in the church, all I could think of was the fact that I was in the midst of holy things, and I felt unholy. I knew I didn’t belong—not because I was

<sup>97</sup> *Surprised by Truth* 169.

<sup>98</sup> *From Yeshiva to Y’shua* 16–18, 20.

<sup>99</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 21.

<sup>100</sup> *Testimonies* 218–19.

Jewish or because anyone had passed judgment on me. I knew I didn't belong because these people had a relationship with God, and I didn't.

I left the church building and sat out on the front lawn. . . . I told God that I, too, wanted to have a relationship with him. I found myself tearfully confessing to God on the front lawn of that church that I believed Jesus was the Messiah. I accepted the fact that he had taken the punishment for my sin, just as the prophet Isaiah had written. I told God that I wanted the forgiveness he offered through Jesus, and that I wanted to live for him.

As far as I knew, I was the only Jewish believer in Jesus on the face of the earth. . . .

What these three stories illustrate masks the profound issues involved: how to be Jewish and to believe in Jesus is not as simple as Gentiles tend to think. There have been long and emotional debates among JMJs about identity, and about whether or not the convert is a "completed" Jew or is one who has "abandoned" his or her Jewishness. Joseph Rabinowitz, known for his "Israelites of the New Covenant" and his 13 theses and 24 articles,<sup>101</sup> as well as his reference to Jesus as "our brother," has successors today and the debate shows little sign of letting up any time soon.<sup>102</sup> What needs to be unmasked in these three stories is this: conversion to Jesus for JMJs strengthens Jewish identity rather than weakens it. This many times in the face of other Jews who think, because they have turned to Jesus, they are *meshumadim* (apostate Jews). One might even say that the "rhetoric" of strengthened Jewish identity mollifies to some degree the stress involved in the "secondary socialization" of converting to Jesus.

JMJ conversion stories show some interest in the "witness." There is not as much interest in the "formal" nature of witness (baptism, etc.) as there is in the "informal" nature of witness, but this for good reasons: the real coming-out of a MJM takes place in the home and in the social womb of Judaism. The "real" witness for the MJM is to family members.

Lev Leigh, to pick up some loose threads from the story from above, gives the norm after he returns home:<sup>103</sup>

My mom was surprised to see me as she thought I was still overseas. She was pleased that I was not filled with the despair that had characterized my previous visit. I confessed to her that I had been living a lie, doing sorcery, taking

<sup>101</sup> Theses #1-7 describe the severity of the conditions of Russian Jews and the need for a renewal. #8: For this renewal a leader of firm character is needed. So far so good, for those who were his contemporary Jews. But, with #9 the tide turns: the leader must be of Jacob's lineage, love Israel, and have given his life for God. He must be with them and simultaneously see their problems. #10: that man is Yeshua of Nazareth. #11: Jesus' contemporaries didn't understand, but we can see Jesus was right. #12: we need to devote ourselves to the Gospels about him. #13: commitment to him will change our (Jews') conditions. See Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz* 47-49. Eventually, Rabinowitz and his associates composed more of a creed for the movement; see pp. 91-116.

<sup>102</sup> See Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz*. The expression was also used by Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (trans. N. P. Goldhawk; New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961) 12; it is the title of Schalom Ben-Chorin's well-known book: *Brother Jesus: The Nazarene Through Jewish Eyes* (trans. J. S. Klein, M. Reinhart; Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2001).

<sup>103</sup> *From Yeshiva to Y'shua* 19.

drugs and abusing the love she had extended to me. I also told her that I was reading the New Testament and that Jesus was shaping my life. She didn't know what to say.

. . . My mother was personally willing to accept my faith, but was afraid of how the rest of the family would react. When I told my older sister, she asked me not to speak of it again. She has not spoken to me since.

So also Susan Perlman:<sup>104</sup>

I didn't expect my family to be overjoyed with my decision . . . Still, I wasn't quite prepared for my mother's reaction. "Susan," she said, "it would have been better if you had come to tell me you were pregnant." I was also completely taken aback by the way my Gentile roommates responded. . . . [who] tried to "shake me loose" of what they saw as "archaic superstition."

6. *Consequences: living out a messianic Jewish identity.* Because of the volcanic nature of JMJ conversion story, many testify to "total" change. Thus, Peter Greenspan says, "My life has changed considerably since coming to faith in Y'shua. One of the promises God makes to those who trust in Jesus is that we will undergo a personal transformation, and that transformation is a process. Caring for God, caring for others, becomes more and more central."<sup>105</sup> When Rosalind Moss became convinced that God took sin seriously, she turned her life over to him: "And God transformed my life—overnight. . . . I wanted to take a megaphone to the moon and shout to the world that God is and they could know him."<sup>106</sup>

With all conversions there tends to be an "affective" sense of release and peace. So, Batya Segal says, "At last I was convinced Yeshua was the Messiah. I had total peace and an overwhelming joy in my heart."<sup>107</sup> Daniel Gold states that "my heart was at peace with God."<sup>108</sup> Bernie Cohen gives the affective consequence a lilt: "I immediately felt changed; there was a lightness to my step and I felt I was floating when walking back to my cabin. I knew God had given me his Spirit and that Y'shua would be with me forever."<sup>109</sup>

In the case of JMJs the "intellectual" consequences are paramount. Time and time again the JMJ is called to account for his or her faith in Jesus as Messiah, and none devoted himself more to an "intellectual" defense than Michael Brown. He became a biblical scholar and an intellectual advocate for Jesus as Messiah.<sup>110</sup> Joseph and Valerie Caplan, after their conversion, say this:<sup>111</sup>

But whatever changes had been wrought by our prayers of commitment—they were still in effect when we awoke the next morning. We both had a tremendous hunger to learn more, and especially to read the Bible.

<sup>104</sup> *Testimonies* 219.

<sup>105</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 35.

<sup>106</sup> *Journeys Home* 55.

<sup>107</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 183.

<sup>108</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 129.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

<sup>110</sup> See *They Thought for Themselves* 127–52.

<sup>111</sup> *Testimonies* 204.

Our desire to know what the Jewish Bible said became our entire life. At first we read it to make certain that the things we'd been told and believed that night really had a basis in Scripture. Once we were satisfied on that account, we discovered that the more we read about God in the Bible, the deeper our relationship with him grew. Through reading God's Word, we developed standards and a value system quite different from those we previously held.

One of the more astounding comments is that of Arthur Katz:<sup>112</sup>

I was made particularly aware of how much of my life I had spent in idle chatter the first night after my return to California. . . . [at a party] I sat there strangely quiet, feeling no compulsion to speak. God's new peace was upon me. . . . The [intellectual] fur was really flying, but I was completely out of it. [When asked about his silence, Art said:]

"I'm sorry . . . but I just find this conversation completely irrelevant to life."

That was a strange thing for me to say because I had never before seen the truth of it. God had just made me conscious of how we so-called intellectuals exult in talk for its own sake and how profitless it really is.

[When asked what was relevant, Katz was put on the spot.] I began to speak of how God had led me to Himself. I explained that I was a fundamental believer, that I believed in the entire word of God and had received Jesus as my Messiah. Their jaws dropped.

Another consequence of conversion is "ethical," and there is plenty of evidence for the JMJ turning over plenty of moral leaves. For instance, Arthur Katz was faced with a profound reality: recently divorced and now facing a baby he has fathered with Ingrid, a woman he loved but saw no future with, as a consequence of his conversion became convinced he would need to marry this woman. He does.<sup>113</sup>

Ari-Beth Cohen testifies to a change in an "ungodly relationship" and "binge drinking."<sup>114</sup>

At both the ethical and sociopolitical level of moral consequences of conversion, Rose Price, a Holocaust survivor, called back to Berlin in a Messianic Jewish ministry, found herself on the stage of the largest coliseum in Berlin where Hitler had predicted Germans would rule the world for a millennium, found herself offering forgiveness to any Nazis present in the congregation.<sup>115</sup>

I am a believer, but people cannot comprehend what I experienced in Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. They cannot imagine the hell I went through. It was only by the grace of God that I was able to forgive those who came forward, because Rose Price could not forgive them for the atrocities I went through as a child.

The most noteworthy "consequence" of conversion for the JMJ is the *test of fidelity to faith in Jesus* when opposition to their conversion begins. Once again, we return to the nature of a JMJ conversion: it is a tradition transition in which the former identity of being "Jewish" is perceived to be under assault by faith in the Jewish Messiah Yeshua. The social and cultural

<sup>112</sup> *Ben Israel* 142-43.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 139-49.

<sup>114</sup> *Jewish Doctors Meet* 44.

<sup>115</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 62-65.

womb of that identity cannot be overestimated. Because of this “context,” the “consequence” of conversion takes on the nature of apostasy. After forty years as a rabbi, Iechiel Liechtenstein converted to Jesus and experienced severe opposition.<sup>116</sup> When one of my daughter’s friends became a Christian, her Jewish family sat “shiva” for her (they mourned for her as for a dead person).

Batya Segal met opposition from her husband:<sup>117</sup>

When I got home, I was so excited about what I had seen, I blurted out to my husband, “Do you know what has just happened? I had a vision and after that I saw an angel, and he was from God. Yeshua is the Messiah. I’m certain of it!” The revelation was so real to me, I did not consider anyone might doubt it. But Avi, a confirmed atheist, looked at me mockingly as if I had gone crazy. He made fun of me in front of my friends.

Avi pursued his course, and Ari-Beth lost her daughter as a result of a Rabbinical Court decision that she was a “missionary.” She prayed, and three days later a “miracle” occurred. She regained custody of her daughter and reared her—though she fought for her eight years and was granted custody when Avi divorced Ari-Beth and granted her custody.

In contemporary Judaism there are “counter-missionaries,” those whose task it has become to dissuade Messianic Jews and to regather them into the former faith. These counter-missionaries accuse Messianic Jews of being dishonest about who they really are and deceptive in their practices. The stakes are high and the rhetoric intense. Furthermore, they provide stories of those who have returned to Judaism.<sup>118</sup>

Though many conversions do not “stick,” some do and for them life on the other side is not always pleasant. However, some JMJs have the happy story to tell that their entire family also joined them in the faith, as Stan Telchin’s story illustrates. More often than not, however, that does not occur.

We conclude with the story of Ceil and Moishe Rosen.<sup>119</sup>

We told Moishe’s family first, and they quickly contacted my parents. My mother responded by telling me in Yiddish, “I hear you’ve become a goy.” . . . She wouldn’t hear a word of it. My father was a little calmer. “Will you at least go talk to the rabbi?” he asked. . . .

Moishe and I went to the rabbi together. . . .

My parents were present. I could see that my father was interested in the prophecies and disappointed when the rabbi did not give us answers. [She did not want to return for other visits to the rabbi, because she was determined her faith was permanent.] When they saw that I did not intend to go back to the rabbi, they told me they would forget I was their daughter. I don’t think parents can really forget about their children, but they did leave town and we never saw them or heard from them again. Somebody told us they moved to Israel, but we could never find a trace of them. . . .

<sup>116</sup> See the story in J. Gartenhaus, *Famous Hebrew Christians* 123–26.

<sup>117</sup> *They Thought for Themselves* 183–88.

<sup>118</sup> See Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* 185–90.

<sup>119</sup> *Testimonies* 10–11.

When I began praying that Moishe would accept Jesus as his Messiah, I had no idea what I was asking! . . . My husband eventually became the founder and executive director of Jews for Jesus, a team of people who have challenged literally millions to think about Jesus.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The socio-cultural and religious context of the JMJ shapes and determines the nature of the conversion. Because Jews are (often) marginalized, because their identity is shaped by their ethnicity, their culture, their persecuted past, and their practices, even consideration of conversion to Jesus provokes a "crisis" of dramatic proportions. That crisis drives the potential Jewish convert to a quest for intellectual satisfaction, and that quest is driven by one central question: Does the Torah provide evidence for Jesus of Nazareth being the Messiah of Israel? When that question is asked, and when that question is answered, the entire process unfolds rather neatly: the JMJ encapsulates himself or herself to study the Torah, comes to a conviction that the Torah does witness to Jesus being Messiah, surrenders himself or herself to Jesus as Messiah, reconfigures his or her identity around Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and then experiences as a general rule considerable opposition by family and friends to this reshaped identity.<sup>120</sup>

They move, as it were, from Tel Aviv to Nazareth. They remain, so I would maintain, in the Land.

<sup>120</sup> I am grateful to others who read and commented on this manuscript, including Tsvi Sadan, Akiva Cohen, Mitch Glaser, and Kirk Gliebe.