

Introduction to Lev Gillet's *Communion in the Messiah*

by Mark S. Kinzer

LEV GILLET WROTE *COMMUNION in the Messiah* at a momentous juncture in Jewish and world history. Living in Britain in 1941, a Russian Orthodox Priest and a refugee from Nazi occupied France, Gillet looked with compassion on the suffering Jews of Europe, who were, as he knew well, "in danger of being exterminated" (page x). His humane concern was augmented by his awareness of the Church's sad record of cruelty and triumphalism in its dealings with the Jewish people, but even more by a profound appreciation for the spiritual riches inherent in the Jewish tradition, and by the conviction that Israel was still elect of God and entrusted with a mission in history.

How should Christians relate to Jews and Judaism? How can they explain their own faith in terms intelligible to Jewish ears? What do Christians have to learn from Jews and the Jewish religious tradition? How can Christians aid the Jewish people in fulfilling their mission in the world? How should Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah relate to the Church and to the Jewish community? These questions are just as pressing now, at the beginning of a new millennium, as they were in the midst of the great European conflagration. Gillet's penetrating answers also have maintained much of their currency. In particular, his prescient discussion of "Jewish Christianity" deserves a careful hearing today among all concerned parties and offers valuable insight to the Messianic Jewish movement as it grows toward maturity.

One always encounters challenges when reading a work written three-quarters of a century past. It can no longer be assumed that educated people in the English speaking world have reading knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, and German, and so a few citations, allusions, and technical terms in *Communion in the Messiah*

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will lose their full force. For those accustomed to forms of Hebrew transliteration common in contemporary Jewish publications, Gillet's rendering of Hebrew words will make the familiar seem foreign. The difficult conditions for publication in wartime Britain prevented the elimination of numerous typos. The reader can easily overcome such obstacles, especially when the reward to be obtained is so great

What in fact is that reward? One can only assess and appreciate the value of a book by reading it. Nevertheless, as the reader begins this task, he or she might be interested in what another, standing at a similar location in time and place, found to be of enduring worth.

Seven points in Gillet's work struck me as especially relevant. First, the author is an advocate for dialogue between Jews and Christians, but his understanding of dialogue is consistent with his notion of mission. According to Gillet, the essence of dialogue is reciprocity—the readiness of each partner to listen and learn from the other. Dialogue does not preclude all mission, but it does preclude unidirectional mission. “There is, and there ought to be, a mission of the Christian Church to Israel; but there is also a Mission of Israel to the Christian Church, and this (as we think) divinely appointed mission must not be overlooked” (172). When each learns from the other, each accomplishes its mission, and true dialogue is established.

Second, Gillet emphasizes the importance of taking Jewish tradition seriously. Many Christians think of Judaism as the religion of the Old Testament, as Christianity minus Jesus. Such views fail to take account of the ongoing development of Judaism. For Gillet, Judaism as a post-biblical reality constitutes a rich spiritual tradition superintended in its evolution by divine grace.

... there is no form of Judaism which could be described as a pure Biblicism, devoid of tradition. . . Many Christian theologians and missionaries who have to deal with Judaism make a grave mistake in that respect. They imagine Judaism as being merely the religion of the Old Testament . . . They forget—or willingly ignore—that, between the Old Testament and our times, there lie more than nineteen centuries of Jewish thought . . . It is useless to approach Judaism without some knowledge of—and much sympathy for—the living tradition of the Jews. (43-44)

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Any attempt to explain the person, teaching, and work of Jesus the Messiah in Jewish terms must build not only on the Bible but also on this living tradition.

Third, Gillet finds in one strand of Jewish tradition a special contact point for fostering “communion in the Messiah”: the heritage of Jewish mysticism. Messianic Jews and evangelical Christians appreciative of Judaism often treat Jewish mysticism with intense suspicion. This derives in part from the superficiality and faddishness of contemporary pop Kabbalah. Even more alarming is the perception that this tradition is riddled with superstition and occult influence. Caution, discernment, sound scholarship, and common-sense are all warranted, but wholesale dismissal would entail the loss of an immensely valuable resource in the fashioning of an authentic Messianic Jewish theology. As Gillet notes, Jewish mysticism provides the fundamental conceptual tools necessary for the articulation of a Jewish understanding of Jesus and of the Triune God.

Fourth, Lev Gillet recognizes the importance of this task—the development of what we might today call a distinctive Messianic Jewish theology. He also possesses much wisdom concerning the manner in which the task should be pursued. For example, he recognizes frankly the disjunction between traditional Jewish and Christian modes of thought, and the challenge facing the theologian who is seeking to articulate the insights of Christian tradition in Jewish terms. What is a Jew to make of the technical Greek terms (e.g. *hypostasis*, *ousia*, *physis*, *theotokos*) employed in the classical Christian creeds?

In all these cases, a translation of words—even the most accurate—would be most inadequate. What is needed is a “translation of meanings.” A re-thinking of Christianity in Jewish terms, i.e., not only in Hebrew words, but in Hebrew categories of thought ... (73)

At the same time, the author refrains from pejorative characterizations of “Greek thought” and its baleful influences on Christian theology, and tendentious contrasts between it and an allegedly superior Jewish mode of thinking.

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This does not mean the violent elimination of the Greek formulas. They have been extremely useful for conveying the Christian faith to the Greek world and for keeping it unaltered Only these venerable words must not stand as an obstacle between Israel and the message of Jesus. There is no reason why a purely Jewish expression of the Christian faith could not be as adequate or become as venerable as the Greek one. But this cannot be achieved through a crude Judaizing process which would be lacking in understanding and appreciation of the Greek traditional values. (73)

All those engaged in the work of Messianic Jewish theology would benefit from an attentive reading of *Communion in the Messiah*.

Fifth, this volume makes an impressive case for the importance of what we now know as Messianic Judaism. When considering the path to be taken by the Jewish person who comes to faith in Jesus the Messiah, Gillet, though himself a Russian Orthodox priest, states that he is “very far from considering the adherence of a Jew to one of the Gentile Christian Churches as an ideal solution” (191). Instead, he advocates the establishment of “Jewish Christianity.” (In this, as in many other matters, he appears to have been influenced by his friend, Paul Levertoff, one of the most brilliant and learned Jewish Jesus-believing thinkers of the twentieth century.) He even entertains the possibility of what he calls “Synagogued Jewish Christianity,” a movement of Jews confessing their faith in Jesus and yet participating actively in the wider Jewish community, to the point of maintaining membership in Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox synagogues. Regardless of the particular form it takes, Gillet is “convinced that a Jewish Christianity, under some form, is desirable for the good of the whole Christian Church” (209). He goes on to assert that “the development of a Jewish Christianity is inseparably linked with the development, among Christians, of a new ecumenical consciousness” (209). This breadth of vision makes *Communion in the Messiah*, written thirty years before the emergence of the Messianic Jewish movement, a work of prophetic force.

Sixth, Gillet both promotes and models a faith that is deeply devoted to Jesus and the truth he embodies, and also irenic and

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open to the best insights of modern scholarship and theology. He quotes with approval a writer who, commenting on a missionary conference he attended in 1927, holds that “it would be a disaster if Jewish missions were bound for the most part to a less progressive theology than is current among Christian scholars and thinkers generally” (187). He describes his friend, Paul Levertoff, in the following words:

Himself a scholar, unable to conform to the obscurantism and weak pietism which have been regrettably favoured by some Christian missionaries to the Jews, he understood the importance of an intellectual appeal and the necessity of expressing the theological concepts of Christianity in Jewish terms (according to him, along the lines of the Shekinah teaching and the Hasidic mysticism) (203).

Like the missionary movements of the past and present, contemporary Messianic Judaism can also get mired in “obscurantism and weak pietism.” On this topic as on many others, Gillet’s reflections and recommendations still hit the mark.

Seventh, though writing seven years before the founding of the state of Israel, and by no means a dispensationalist, Gillet is an avowed Zionist. He perceives the sacred quality of the land of Israel and its importance for the Jewish people, and urges Christians to support the cause of a Jewish homeland. On this matter Gillet may have nothing substantially new to offer. However, his explicit Christian Zionism, at a time when many Jews themselves displayed indifference, ambivalence, or hostility to the Zionist project, once again reveals Gillet’s clear vision.

Lev Gillet did not seek to write a book of groundbreaking scholarship. The volume reflects an impressive breadth of reading, and a good grasp of the best insights of his time. Nevertheless, he wrote before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and his treatment of first century Judaism can no longer be affirmed without considerable modification. With a new appreciation for the diversity of Jewish life in that period, and a more vivid awareness of the problems inherent in using late rabbinic texts to depict first century realities, we can

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no longer say without qualification that “Pharisaism was the most characteristic manifestation of Palestinian Judaism in the time of Jesus” (4), or that “Hillel was the highest authority among the doctors of Jerusalem in the time of the first King Herod” (47). What is more striking, however, is that this occasional scholarly obsolescence detracts little from the essential argument of the work. Lev Gillet still has something to say to us, if we are willing to listen.

It is my sincere hope that this reprinting of *Communion in the Messiah* will bring Lev Gillet’s work to the attention of many in the Messianic Jewish movement, the Christian Church, and the wider Jewish community, and that we might all attain that “communion” with one another in Messiah Jesus which Gillet envisioned and advanced.

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