



# Ben-Meir and Poljak about Operation Mercy

by Kai Kjær-Hansen

Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir and Abram Poljak both followed Operation Mercy at close quarters in May 1948 from Haifa, where they both lived and where the shipment of various groups of Hebrew Christians from Palestine to England took place.

After he had come to faith in Jesus, *Ben-Meir*, who was born in Palestine, had studied at Moody Bible School in Chicago in the late 1920s. Back in Palestine, he became involved in the Palestine Hebrew Christian Alliance and was until 1944 in the mission's employ. Several incidents in this period contributed to his resignation from service with the British Jews Society; after that time he worked as a postman.<sup>1</sup> As Gershon Nerel says: "Ben-Meir even considered the traditional missionaries his 'enemies.'"<sup>2</sup>

Ben-Meir struggled for a national Messianic community in Palestine/Israel. Below I am going to enter into critical interaction with Ben-Meir, which is why I want to emphasize that on some points he was ahead of his time – for example, in his struggle for Jewish identity for Jesus-believing Jews. He has also put his fingerprints on the development of the Messianic movement in Israel – perhaps in a more moderate version than he would have wished himself, but nonetheless.<sup>3</sup> He deserves credit for that, but this is outside the scope of this article. And one more thing—in my criticism of Ben-Meir, I am *not* questioning his standing with God. That I stress this from the very beginning will be evident from the following.

*Abram Poljak*, born in Russia and raised in Germany, married an "Aryan Christian" in 1924, and was imprisoned by the Nazis in the spring of 1933.

1 Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem: Autobiographical Sketches by Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir* (Hebrew ms 1977; published in English, Jerusalem: Netivya Bible Instruction Ministry: n.d. [2007]), 103–06. The book contains quite a few slips of the memory and some historical lapses. It is sad that Ben-Meir in his old age harboured much bitterness and contempt for the missions, of which there are many examples in his autobiography.

2 Cf. Gershon Nerel, "A 'Messianic Jewish Church' in Eretz-Israel," *Mishkan* 29 (1998): 53.

3 "He may be called the 'father of Messianic Judaism' in its strictest sense of linking faith in Yeshua to a living community within Judaism." Cf. Menahem Benhayim, "The Messianic Movement in Israel – A Personal Perspective (1963–1998)," *Mishkan* 28 (1998): 7.

Here he experienced a spiritual breakthrough: "So far my Christianity had been a Tolstoian experience; now it became a Jewish one," even of a pacifist nature. "I differentiated between a Jewish and a non-Jewish Christianity, and started to hope and work for a Jewish Church." Some time after his release, he arrived, in the beginning of 1935, in Palestine, where he attended the third annual conference of the Hebrew Christian Alliance of Palestine and met Ben-Meir.<sup>4</sup> In London in 1937, he formed the Jewish Christian Community with three others.<sup>5</sup> After some years of internment in Canada in the early 1940s, a reunion took place in London on June 16, 1944, between these four and some Christian friends: "For the first time the Sabbath light was 'kindled in honour of Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of the Sabbath' – a light never to extinguished."<sup>6</sup>

On June 22, 1946, Pauline Rose was able to kindle "the Sabbath Light of the Messiah for the first time in Jerusalem. This date marks the foundation of the Synagogue of the Messiah in the Holy City," she writes.<sup>7</sup> In 1947, Poljak spends approximately five months in Palestine. On February 10, 1948, he is back living in a monastery on Mount Carmel, from where he can watch the course of events in Palestine before the expiration of the British Mandate. Already on February 21, 1948, Ben-Meir and Poljak founded a small Messianic congregation in Haifa.<sup>8</sup>

How did these two Messianic Jews respond to Operation Mercy?

### **Ben-Meir's Sharp Criticism of the Evacuation and of the Missions**

Moshe Ben-Meir leveled a sharp criticism against the people behind the evacuation and against the evacuees. Here are some extracts from an article with the title "The Liberation of Israel – a Time of Grace for Zion."<sup>9</sup>

#### *Did the Holy Spirit Withdraw His Calling?*

On the situation in May 1948, Ben-Meir writes, among other things:

A sudden fear befell missionaries, hospitals, schools and mission cen-

4 Abram Poljak, *The Cross in the Star of David* (London: The Jewish Christian Community Press, 1938), 7, 15–16, 21, 35–40.

5 These were Pauline Rose, Agnes Waldstein, and Albert Springer, who all were to become active in the Poljak group's work in Palestine/Israel; see my article "Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy" in this issue of *Mishkan*, in which their whereabouts in the years 1946–1950 are described.

6 Pauline Rose, "The Light of the Messiah," *Jerusalem* 50/51 (1950): 4–5.

7 *Ibid.*, 6.

8 Cf. *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde* 137 (1948): 1–2.

9 Moshe Ben-Meir, "Israels befrielse – Sions nådetid," *Karmel* (1949): 80–83. The article I refer to is from a Norwegian journal published by Per Faye Hansen. In the following years, he and Ben-Meir worked closely together in Haifa. The issue in which the article appears celebrates the one-year anniversary of the State of Israel's establishment. I concede that some details may be inaccurate as I am referring to a text that was translated from Hebrew or English into Norwegian and then translated back into English. However, I do not think this influences the main point.



tres. Those who had come from America returned there, those who had come from England returned there. Why? Did the Holy Spirit withdraw his calling? Do the Jews in the State of Israel not need the gospel? Was their return a consequence of fear? What had happened to the faith and the courage and the sacrificial spirit that they so often sang about? Can the Lord not keep them safe and sound also in the State of Israel?<sup>10</sup>

It is true that Ben-Meir's tone is ironic, but he does indeed have an important point. Surely, it is not unproblematic when mission societies withdraw their workers in the hour of peril. I, for one, try to understand the disappointment behind his words.

But what a relief if Ben-Meir had said: I do know that several Hebrew Christians connected with the mission remained in the Land in 1948. What a relief if he had said: I do know that during the siege of Jerusalem at least a dozen foreign missionaries remained in Jerusalem and others in other parts of Palestine/Israel<sup>11</sup> – and then added: But I am, nonetheless, disappointed.

He does not do that. Nor is he able to do so. He is filled with aversion to the missions. But Ben-Meir's aversion to Christian mission does *not* begin with Operation Mercy. It may have been increased by it, but his aversion goes further back.<sup>12</sup>

In his criticism of the missionaries, it is a simplification to reduce the problem to "fear." Money and stewardship of money also need to be mentioned. It is as if Ben-Meir supposes that a missionary society always has money enough.

In short, *Church Missions to Jews* (CMJ) had big financial problems. By accident, a child had been badly scalded at CMJ's hospital in Jerusalem in 1947, with the result that it was crippled for life. Action was brought against CMJ, which was ordered to pay damages to the parents that amounted to the enormous sum of 15,000 English pounds.<sup>13</sup> The costs were all in all approximately 17,000 pounds. Four mission bodies came to CMJ's rescue, each providing an interest-free loan of 3,000 pounds over three years.<sup>14</sup>

10 Ibid., 82.

11 See Hannah Hurnard, *Watchmen on the Walls* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 74–75. She writes: "When the mandate ended, about twelve Protestant missionaries and a handful of baptized Christians remained in the Jewish area" in Jerusalem. As to CMJ alone, three missionaries stayed in the Christ Church Compound in the Old City, Jerusalem, and six in Rehovot and Jaffa. Even though the Church of Scotland withdrew its missionaries, some local workers remained. See my article "Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy."

12 See notes 1 and 2 above and my article "Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy," note 11. The president of the Hebrew Christian Alliance in Palestine, Fritz Plotke, is seen as the big villain by both Ben-Meir and Poljak.

13 *Jewish Missionary News* 8 (1947): 8–10.

14 *Jewish Missionary News* 9 (1947): 5; 11 (1947): 4–6. The aid came from the British Jews Society, the Hebrew Christian Alliance, the Church of Scotland Jewish Committee, and the Mildmay Mission to the Jews.

At the beginning of 1948, fewer and fewer students were coming to CMJ's mission schools, which were partly maintained by the fees of the students. Such fees fail to come when the students cannot attend due to violence in the area.<sup>15</sup> Something similar can be said about the hospital. Few patients come in and the workers have difficulty getting to the hospital. As a consequence, CMJ hands over the hospital to the Jewish authorities – free of charge. But CMJ still has to pay pensions to senior workers and compensate others for the loss of employment.<sup>16</sup>

It is against this background that a large part of the staff at the school and the hospital in Jerusalem are called back to England, where some undergo further education for their future work as missionaries. These matters need to be taken into consideration in a fair historical evaluation of CMJ's decision to recall most of its school and hospital staff. CMJ's General Secretary, C. H. Gill, did actually try, early in 1948, to persuade the three British nurses to remain at the hospital.<sup>17</sup> To this may be added what Gill writes immediately after the completion of Operation Mercy: "A very large proportion of our missionary staff are staying in Palestine, and bravely facing the dangers."<sup>18</sup>

### *The Missions in Palestine Have Been a Plague*

Ben-Meir continues:

For many years the missions in Palestine have been a plague. Their working methods and their message were not right. Their work was often destructive. They had lost sight of the goal. They lead Jews to the baptismal font but not to Jesus Messiah. The missions were centres for assimilation and de-Judaization but not for salvation. During the painful birth of the State of Israel they realized their hypocrisy – that they could not perpetuate their play when they no longer had the English rifles to rely on. So they closed down and fled.

And these missionaries were followed by most of their converts, Jews that they had de-Judaized and deprived of the last particles of Jewish feeling and propriety.<sup>19</sup>

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Again, Ben-Meir does have a point when he speaks about assimilation and de-Judaization of Jews who have come to faith through missionary societ-

15 *Jewish Missionary News* 8 (1948): 111–12.

16 *Ibid.*, 23–24; 75–76.

17 See my article "The Organizers behind Operation Mercy" in this issue of *Mishkan*.

18 Cf. C. H. Gill to the Director of the Swedish Israel Mission, Birger Pernow, May 20, 1948, E I:56; 1, Church of Sweden Archives, Uppsala.

19 Ben-Meir, "Israels befrielse – Sions nådetid," 82.



ies. It was a problem then, and no one can deny that it still exists.

But Ben-Meir's statement is not just a criticism of the Christian mission. It is a devastating criticism of the Jews who had a connection to the mission. Here I must raise an objection, not so much for the sake of the mission as for the sake of the Jewish believers. If I were a baptized Jew in 1948–1949, who had heard the gospel through the missions and in childlike simplicity believed that I was a child of God for Jesus' sake, then it would be difficult to listen to this: the missionaries had led me to the baptismal font but not to Jesus Messiah, not to salvation!

I dare not question an assimilated Jew's standing with God if he or she lives in a faith relationship with the crucified and risen Lord.

And I dare not question a person's standing with God because that person left the Land before or in connection with Operation Mercy. It will have to be a matter between that person and God. Salvation does not depend on one's attitude to Zionism but on one's attitude to Jesus.

A good example is the Zeidan family, an Arab-Jewish couple who, with their children, were away from the country for some time but returned to Israel.<sup>20</sup> Salim, the Arab Christian husband and father, died in 1949. But Freda,<sup>21</sup> the wife and mother, "succeeded in rearing her family faithful to the Lord and devoted to all of Israel's people."<sup>22</sup> According to Menahem Benhayim, the family subsequently contributed to the promotion of a Hebrew-speaking milieu for local believers.<sup>23</sup>

Who are we to sit in judgment over the family because they had been "out of Israel during the critical time in 1947/48"?

### *The Days of the Gentiles Are Over*

Ben-Meir next mentions how the running away has cleared the way for the Jewish Messianic congregation's work. He accentuates the "mystical unity of Jews and non-Jews in the body of Christ, but we do not believe in assimilation." He and like-minded believers serve in the Israeli security forces. And, "If our faith that Jesus is the Messiah is regarded as criminal for a Jew in the State of Israel, then we are prepared to suffer for our faith . . . a confirmed Christian will be persecuted everywhere – even in the Chris-

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20 In a mail of May 15, 2008, David Zeidan notes: "Also we were out of Israel during the critical time in 1947/48." Apart from this I have no details about the Zeidan family's whereabouts in 1947–1948.

21 Cf. M. Benhayim, 9. According to Benhayim, "Freda had left Germany before the war [WW II] with the help of Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, a native Jerusalemite believer who obtained an immigrant certificate for her to keep house for him and his family. The Zeidans were then [1963] living in a British Mission Compound in Haifa. They spoke fluent Hebrew, English, Arabic and German"; *ibid.*, 5.

22 Haya Benhayim with Menahem Benhayim, *Bound to the Promised Land* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publication, 2003), 65.

23 Cf. M. Benhayim, 9.

tian countries.”<sup>24</sup>

Ben-Meir concludes his article in this way:

God himself put an end to the British rule in Palestine – and to the work of several missions there. God let the unfaithful Hebrew Christians leave. Now Israel has been given a new beginning and new possibilities. God gave the Jews freedom in the State of Israel. And he has let the Jewish Messianic community bring the testimony about Jesus our Messiah out in the State of Israel. The days of the gentiles are over. Jesus Messiah will soon come again and sit on David’s throne. We are living in the beginning of the end. May we be ready!

“You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favour to her; the appointed time has come” (Psalm 103:13).<sup>25</sup>

So according to Ben-Meir, something good did come out of the evacuation. “God let the unfaithful Hebrew Christians leave.” From what he has said, “unfaithful” means unfaithful to both God and the Messianic cause. Consequently, these Hebrew Christians do not become unfaithful by leaving the country. They are that already.

According to Ben-Meir, the “unfaithfulness” of these believers has resulted in the possibility of a new beginning for the proclamation of Jesus in Israel – without interference from foreign mission societies. “The days of the gentiles are over.”

It was not to be like that. The mission societies returned to Israel. Already on April 26, 1949, a conference is held in Haifa with participation from eleven societies.<sup>26</sup> And among the many immigrants who came to Israel over the following years, there were also Jesus-believing Jews who continued joining the denominations through which they had come to faith in the diaspora and who could not go along with Ben-Meir’s radical criticism of the Christian church and its mission among Jews in Israel – as well as parts of his theology.

### **Abram Poljak’s Appeal and Stance on the Evacuation**

In mid-March 1948, Poljak writes about the recently founded congregation in Haifa (cf. above). He is afraid that they cannot expect support from anybody: “We have *all* against us: Jew and Arabs; churches and missions and also the Hebrew Christian Alliance. Alone we stand – with God!”<sup>27</sup> This is followed by some strong words under the heading: “Unsere Parole.”

24 Ben-Meir, “Israels befrielse – Sions nådetid,” 82.

25 *Ibid.*, 83.

26 A few of these eleven were not involved in direct Jewish mission. Cf. A. Scott Morrison, “Eine Reise nach Israel – 21. Februar bis 11. Maj 1949,” *Judaica* (1949): 196–97. Morrison had worked for the Scottish Church in Jaffa, left Palestine in May 1948, and after his visit in the spring of 1949, he returned to work in Israel in the autumn of 1949.

27 *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde* 138 (1948): 5.



Come what may – we shall never say: “Let him who can save himself do so! Abandon the sinking ship! Flee Palestine!” Our appeal are Jeremiah’s words: “He who believes does not flee!”<sup>28</sup> Stay in the Land! Close ranks! Let us serve one another! If we must go hungry, let us be hungry together, and if we must die, we will die together. There is no fairer death than that on the way of faith in the Holy Land. Let us give thanks to God that he has given us an opportunity to prove our faith, our sincerity and faithfulness and to glorify the name of Christ in Israel – in the hour of need!

We say with Paul that also we “have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men” (1 Cor 4:9). And with him may we also expect that when we have fought the good fight, have finished the race, have kept the faith. Now there is in store for us the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to us on that day – and not only to us, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim 4,7–9).<sup>29</sup>

#### *The Jewish “Quislings” Leave Haifa*

Not without journalistic flair does Poljak tell how Hebrew Christians and others leave Haifa on board the *Empress of Australia* on May 18, 1948.<sup>30</sup> People from Jerusalem, Jaffa, Tel-Aviv, and Tiberias had come to Haifa a few days before. Three military vehicles pick them up at the various places in the town where they were accommodated. The meeting point is the Windsor Hotel in the German Colony. Included in the group are “gentile Christian and Hebrew Christian pastors and missionaries,” among them the president of the Hebrew Christian Alliance in Palestine.<sup>31</sup> These missionaries had, writes Poljak, for decades preached the gospel in the Holy Land, resided in beautiful houses, received a considerable salary, and at the services and meetings they had said: “Sei getreu bis an den Tod” [“Be faithful unto death”]. But now they leave their congregation in the lurch, among them “the greatest mission preacher in Jerusalem” who had an American passport and, therefore, was the first person who could get on board an American ship.<sup>32</sup>

Poljak is aware of what has been written in the English press about oth-

28 “Wer glaubt, der flieht nicht” is found in German translations of Isaiah 28:16.

29 Ibid., 5–6.

30 *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde* 140/141 (1948): 5–9. As to the date, May 18, see my article “Numbers Connected with Operation Mercy.”

31 Fritz Plotke is not mentioned by name.

32 *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde* 140/141, 6. I cannot with certainty decide who is meant. Is it the Baptist minister Robert L. Lindsey? The answer may probably be found in the Southern Baptists’ Archives. With his family, Lindsey had come to Jerusalem in November 1945 to serve in Narkis Street (cf. Robert L. Lindsey, *Jesus, Rabbi and Lord* [Oak Creek, WI: Cornerstone Publishing 1990], 14). But in his book *Israel in Christendom: The Problem of Jewish Identity* (S.I.: s.n., n.d.), 1), he writes about an unusual personal experience he had “in the

er refugees who had been evacuated earlier, for example, that they, to the very end, baptized Jews. "This is true," writes Poljak, adding, "On the morning before his departure, the pastor of the Scottish Church in Haifa had baptized a Jewess."<sup>33</sup>

According to Poljak, the English need Jewish quislings, Jews who are prepared to defame the Jewish people. In the British press, these refugees are "good Jews"; the "bad Jews" are the Zionists. Reuters, the news agency, reports that the Stern group has blacklisted some of these Hebrew Christians with the intention of killing them.

Poljak says about these refugees:

None want to be traitors. They are not bad people, just cowardly. Therefore they flee. By doing so they have to play, although unwillingly, the traitor's part. Those who go over to the enemy have to pay the price for it. England is Israel's enemy, and the renegades have already been caught in the wheels of their propaganda machine, as proved by the Reuter report.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Poljak's Farewell to Refugees at the Windsor Hotel*

Before the group is driven to the harbor in the three military vehicles, the first with luggage, the other two with the refugees, they are met at the entrance to the hotel by Poljak. Some recognized him and asked when he was going to leave. When they heard that he had arrived in February from Switzerland "and intended to stay here," they burst out: "From Switzerland you have come to Palestine – into the witches' cauldron?!"

About his farewell to Fritz Plotke, Poljak writes:

The president of the Alliance lifted up his voice: "I hope that nothing will happen to you. I commend you to God's protection!"

"I thank you and wish you all a safe journey. What has become of the Alliance? Are you taking it with you?"

"It must rest till I return."

"When will you return?"

"When it has become calmer – in six months' time perhaps."

From his room in a monastery on Mount Carmel, Poljak can follow the ship with these Hebrew Christians on board. He ends by writing: "As the day was waning, the *Empress of Australia* left the harbour heading west – where the sun sets."<sup>35</sup>

On board were these "cowardly" Hebrew Christians and their leaders, who would not give their lives for the Zionist cause.

It was quite a different matter for Poljak. What happened in Palestine/

spring of 1949" and continues: "I had returned from the United States with my family to my post as a Baptist pastor in Jerusalem. . . ."

<sup>33</sup> *Die Judenchristliche Gemeinde* 140/141, 7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.





Israel in the middle of May 1948 was God's cause. Therefore, he who believes does not flee!

### **Poljak, Ben-Meir, and "Mercy"**

To cut a long story short, on December 13, 1950, Poljak left Israel, to return only on short visits before he died in 1963. He was buried in the "Jerusalem" he did *not* manage to

build in Israel but in Möttlingen, Germany. His appeal from 1948 returns to him like a boomerang: "Stay in the Land! . . . There is no fairer death than that on the way of faith in the Holy Land."

What is Ben-Meir's reaction to Poljak leaving the Land? In his autobiography from 1977, Ben-Meir writes: "The Lord had a different calling with him, however."<sup>36</sup>

This may be so! And of course it is a matter between Poljak and God. But the "mercy" that Ben-Meir, as late as in 1977, showed to Poljak, who left the Land in 1950, is not shown to the Hebrew Christians who left the Land during Operation Mercy in 1948.

Did God also have "a different calling" for the evacuees? This is not for me to decide. It is a matter between them and God – the God of mercy.

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<sup>36</sup> Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, 129.