

# Hebrew Christianity in the Acts of the Apostles and in Israel Today: Continuity and Discontinuity

by Wesley H. Brown

Many people who visit the congregation of which I am a part in Jerusalem are interested to discover that there are Israeli Jews present who believe in Jesus. Although they are not many, they are among an increasing number of Jews who believe in Jesus. When one meets them and discovers their intense feelings about their Jewish identity, one has the feeling at times of being back in the days which are described for us in the Acts of the Apostles.

## I. The Image of Hebrew Christianity in the Acts of the Apostles

It is good to remember that at the beginning, the large majority of believers and followers of Jesus were Jews. In the early chapters of Acts, it is evident that the early believers were observant Jews who continued to keep the commandments and the worship of their fathers.

It is striking to note the number of references to the Temple. German New Testament scholar Zahn asserted that the coming of the Holy Spirit's power and manifestation of His presence on and in the first believers on the

Day of Pentecost took place on the Temple Mount. Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, was one of the three major pilgrimage feasts on which observant Jews were to present themselves to the Lord "at the place which the Lord your God will choose" (Deuteronomy 16:16), that is, at the Temple. When one visits the Temple Mount today, it is easy to imagine the crowd from many language backgrounds gathering in Solomon's Portico on the east side of the Temple enclosure and their hearing in their own tongues the "mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11) and Peter's sermon. The chapter concludes "and day by day, **attending the temple together** and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts . . . ." (Acts 2:46).

Peter and John were going up to the Temple at the hour of prayer when they brought the Lord's healing to the lame man in chapter 3, and 3:11 indicates that Peter's next message was given in Solomon's Portico. Acts 5:12 indicates "and they were all together in Solomon's Portico." All of these are indications of the fact that the early believers used

parts of the Temple Mount enclosure for their gatherings and instructions. The Mishnah, which contains much of what was oral tradition at the time of Jesus, tells us that there were areas where the rabbis sat and gave instruction in the Torah, and this undoubtedly is the same area in which Jesus was taught.

Acts 15 indicates the importance with which many of the Jewish Christians viewed the continuing practice of circumcision. It is noteworthy that rabbinic sources tell us that circumcision was required for all males who converted to Judaism, followed by a ritual immersion in a "mikveh," or ritual immersion pool. Many of these "mikva'ot" have been found in recent archaeological excavations just south of the Temple Mount, and a number of us believe that these may have been used on the Day of Pentecost for the baptism of those who responded and confessed their faith in Jesus. In any case, the importance of Jewish believers' continuing observance of the Torah is a clear characteristic that is revealed in the Acts of the Apostles.

In Acts 21, when Paul (and probably Luke) arrived back in Jerusalem from Paul's third journey, James and the elders of the Jerusalem church told Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs . . ." (Acts 21:20,21). In order to show that he was faithful to the customs and was not rejecting his own cultural heritage, Paul was then asked to participate in a temple ceremony to show "that you yourself live in observance of the Law." (Acts 21:24c). Paul accepted their request, wanting to give public assurance of his continued Jewishness, but almost

lost his life in the attack on him when he was on the Temple Mount. The point is that there were many thousands of Jewish believers in Jerusalem at that time, that they were zealous for the law and Paul was willing to affirm his Jewishness in a very public way. Was this a denial of salvation by grace through faith? I don't believe so. What was at stake here was not rituals which were a guarantee of salvation, but rather the continuing validity of certain observances--**for Jews**—which were a rich part of their own cultural heritage. In the perspective of continuity and discontinuity in any cultural setting, I think it is important to ask what meaning is attached to the public observance of a traditional act. Paul, apparently, saw no inconsistency in going to the Temple and participating in that traditional rite, and in his preaching.

Jewish believers in Jesus today read these passages with intense interest and find in them legitimatization for their own desire to reaffirm their Jewish identity, while at the same acknowledging faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

It is certain that there were many early believers who were a part of "hellenistic Judaism" Jews whose primary language of communication was Greek. One especially interesting archaeological discovery was the inscription in Greek from the wall of a synagogue which was located in the oldest quarter of the city of Jerusalem; the City of David. It is called the "Theodotus Inscription" and it is universally recognized that this synagogue—in Jerusalem—was a Greek-speaking one. This has been pointed to as confirmation of the different languages spoken among Jews in Jerusalem which is alluded to in Acts 6:1 where the "Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews, in all probability) murmured against the Hebrews (Hebrew-speaking or Aramaic-speaking

Jews) because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." Paul, in his letters, quotes freely from the Septuagint (LXX,) but it is interesting that when he made his first public defense in Jerusalem on the steps of the Antonia fortress, he did so in **Hebrew** (Acts 21:40).

Most scholars believe that the Jewish believers-in-Jesus in Jerusalem thus remained within Judaism as a sect. This is implied in Paul's defense in Caesarea where he was accused by Tertullus of being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." (Acts 24:5). Paul, however, in replying, said, "According to the Way which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these themselves accept . . ." (Acts 24:14,15).

It appears that after the destruction of the Temple in 70, when Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakai gathered with the surviving Jewish leaders at Yavne (Greek: Jamnia), that we see the clearest steps towards the definition of what George Foote Moore calls "normative Judaism." It was then that the various sects (such as the Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, etc.) were eliminated and Pharisaic Judaism gradually became and remained **the norm** for many centuries of Judaism. Later, when Rabbi Akiva identified the religious and military leader Simon Bar Kochba as messiah (AD 132) at the time of the Second Jewish Revolt, Jews who believed in Jesus refused to participate in the revolt on the grounds that it would imply their recognition of Bar Kochba as the Messiah. This was, as it were, the final decisive separation of Jewish believers-in-Jesus from the Jewish community.

## II. THE HEBREW CHRISTIAN IN ISRAEL TODAY

How should one identify those

among Israeli Jews who believe in Jesus? Should one call them Jewish Christians? or Hebrew Christians? or Messianic Jews? or Jewish believers-in-Jesus? All of these appellations have been used and may be found in one book or another. Those who do believe in Jesus often do not like to use the label "Christian" because of the terrible history of Christian-Jewish relations in which the "Christian" has so often been the inquisitor, the persecutor, the one trying to force a "conversion," or who has participated in a program which ended in the death of many Jews. Should one use the label "Jewish" or "Hebrew?" These appellations also have differing connotations for people. Messianic Jews are those who believe that the Messiah has already come and that He is Jesus. Some prefer using the name so often used in the book of Acts, "believers," and sometimes, in order to make it absolutely clear will say "believer-in-Jesus."

In Israel today the Jewish believer-in-Jesus is part of a vulnerable minority, often lacking community reinforcement which would provide assurance of belonging. He hears even non-religious Jews insisting that it is incomprehensible that a Jew be both Jewish and Christian.

In response to an article in the **Jerusalem Post** in which I insisted that Jewish believers-in-Jesus<sup>1</sup> often have a heightened sense of their Jewish identity, Rabbi Simon A. Dolgin, former Director General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, wrote:

Judaism regards missionaries as undesirable individuals who draw its people to other faiths; conversion is seen as an act of treachery by the convert which affects the Jewish people as a whole. The individual who embraces another faith denies himself—from the classical Jewish point of view—the sal-

vation of the world to come . . . the individual who leaves the faith is regarded as one who leaves his people. There can be no Jews of another faith . . . Jewish law looks upon the apostate as a Jew who is a traitor to his people and no longer entitled to any of the rights of the faith.

“No case can be made for the contention that one can be both Jewish and a believer in Jesus or Christianity’s tenets. Only the Jewish people can define its membership requisites; and one of them involves rejecting any kind of belief in Jesus.” (Dolgin in the **Jerusalem Post**, May 7, 1978).

Rabbi Dolgin’s statement reveals why so many Jewish believers-in-Jesus have an identity crisis since they suffer almost complete sociological and religious rejection by their own people. Such a person is viewed most commonly as a “marginal Jew.” His identity is further threatened by the Church, which has frequently forgotten its Jewish roots and implicitly requests him to assimilate to a non-Jewish culture. On the other hand, he believes that Jesus stands squarely in the middle of Jewish history and that no Jew is required to abandon his Jewishness when he affirms his faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

Most of the Christian population of Jerusalem is Arabic speaking and are formally members of the Greek Orthodox Roman Catholic, or Greek Catholic churches. There are also about 2,000 Armenian Orthodox Christians. Several of the congregations on the Jewish side of Jerusalem are virtual transplants — churches whose liturgy is identical to the pattern of worship of the “home church” in some European or American country. The Messianic Assembly, on the other hand, has Israeli Jewish leadership, meets on Saturday morning,

and endeavors to relate to its Jewish context. The Baptist congregation also makes a serious effort at contextualization. The congregation sings the “Shema” from Deuteronomy 6:4, the affirmation of ancient and modern Israel which is repeated every day in synagogues around the world: “Hear, o Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” There is always a reading from the Hebrew scriptures and portions from the Hebrew scriptures (the Old Testament in other contexts) which have been put to contemporary melodies are joyfully sung.

The congregation, in expressing its praise to God, may raise its hands in the manner which is mentioned in Psalm 63:3,4 and 134:1,2. The service is held on Saturday morning, the Sabbath, when people are meeting in synagogues for study and worship. In fact, most of the people have employment or classes on Sunday, which would make it impossible for them to attend a service at that time.

When a Jew comes to believe in Jesus, one of the crucial questions related to his or her identity regards the issue of “conversion.” In Israel, conversion means a change in one’s religious affiliation, which is registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and involves an act at the Ministry of the Interior in which the word “Jewish” is scratched out and “another people” identity is put in its place, i.e. Christian or Moslem. Most Jews who live in Israel who come to faith in Jesus as their Messiah, therefore, do not wish to “convert” or change their religion in a legal sense that implies alienation from their people. This means that it is extremely difficult to estimate the number of Jewish believers-in-Jesus in the country today, since most do not register their coming to faith in Jesus, or affiliation with a congregation. In one recent case, an Israeli citizen wanted to be baptized, confessing his faith, but did not want to be enrolled as a church

member for fear of potential loss of citizenship.

Another crucial issue in the whole spectrum of continuity and discontinuity relates to observance of Jewish customs, traditions, and commandments. Many of the aspects of the "Oral Law" in Jesus' day were formally written down and codified by the year 200 in what became known as the Mishnah. This was further commented upon and discussed by the rabbis during the fifth and sixth centuries and from all of that emerged the Talmud. One continuing question that a Jewish believer faces is the extent to which he feels he should be observant of the "oral law" and the later rabbinic interpretation of the Mosaic Law. This is particularly true as regards Kashrut, which includes the kosher law which separate meat dishes from milk and milk products. All of these dietary laws developed in the 5th and 6th centuries out of the interpretation of the commandment, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Ex. 23:19 and 34:26.) There are some Jewish believers-in-Jesus who keep a kosher kitchen, with separate dishes and cooking utensils for milk and dairy products, in obedience to that rabbinic interpretation. Is that to be interpreted as denying the doctrine of grace and putting ones' self under the yoke of the Law? Or is it rather a voluntary acceptance of another aspect of Jewish culture and tradition but which does not imply observance in the hope of achieving righteousness before God? This is one of the questions which continues to be debated.

One almost universally followed observance by Jewish believers-in-Jesus is that of the Jewish festivals. Passover, Pentecost (or the Feast of Weeks) and the Feast of Tabernacles are major annual events which are made richer in meaning because of Jesus. There can be no question but that

Jesus' coming, death, resurrection, and the outpouring of His Spirit have given new dimensions to the celebration of Passover and Pentecost.

The observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a more difficult issue for many. It is observed before the Feast of Tabernacles by a 25-hour fast and by many, many hours spent in prayer, repentance, and confession of sin in the synagogues. Does attendance at these services imply a rejection of God's provision for atonement through Jesus? Should observance be continued or discontinued? Jewish believers are not agreed on this point.

Another area in which Jewish believers struggle is in the area of theological affirmation. For many, as the Church became increasingly Gentile-dominated, it not only ceased the observance of the festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles in their original manner, but also the formulation of its faith became increasingly propositional and credal. Hebraic-faith as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) is very existential and allows generally for a variety of interpretations regarding doctrinal issues. Under Greek philosophic influence, the church in the 3rd and 4th centuries became highly credal and exclusivistic and condemnatory when there was not uniform acceptance of the formulation decided upon by the majority at a council. For many Jewish believers, this was a tragic detour which resulted in the loss of that more existential dimension of faith which was grounded in the history of Israel. In particular, current debates among Jewish believers focus on Christological affirmation and especially the Trinity. How should we understand Jesus? For some Jewish believers the emphasis is on affirming faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. But they do not find the traditional Trinitarian formula to be a helpful

one. Misunderstanding has led to the accusation that Christians believe in "two gods" or "three gods." A great deal of distortion and debate continues in this area. There are even those who see Jesus as a great rabbi who brought radical reformation to his own people, but who feel that Paul distorted and transformed the church's position by his "high Christology."

The Jewish believer's struggle for identity, his constant reflection on what elements of his cultural heritage and tradition are to be maintained and what discarded, has its parallel in many countries and cultures today. Paul's affirmation, "If any one be in

Christ, he is a new creature: old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new," (II Cor. 5:17), provokes many questions of what that all means. Just as the Jewish believer does not want to abandon all the rich and worthwhile things in his heritage, so also many Asian Christians are today reaffirming the values found within their pre-Christian heritage. And yet, every culture and tradition must be made to stand beneath the Lordship of Jesus and in that process, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to find what must be rejected and discarded and what may be reaffirmed as a part of God's common grace to all men and cultures.