

# Jewish Identity & Faith in Jesus

edited by  
**Kai Kjær-Hansen**

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Caspari Center, Jerusalem

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## **Introduction**

No serious person, Jew or Christian, would question that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. Neither is it a question for debate that his first followers were also Jewish. They had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. They had no doubts that they remained Jewish — on the contrary. What had happened with Jesus of Nazareth was a fulfillment of what God had promised through the prophets. Their faith in Jesus was a continuation of what God had intended for all his people. In Jerusalem, Jesus had risen from the dead and through this God had demonstrated that he was Messiah and Lord. The gospel was first proclaimed in Jerusalem by Jews and to Jews. Although some Jews questioned Jesus' messiahship, nobody claimed that those who did proclaim him as the Messiah of Israel were no longer Jews.

A lot has happened since then. Today, many Jews and Christians find it difficult to accept Jesus-believing Jews when they insist on their Jewishness. It would be less problematic, for the synagogue as well as for the church, had they cut themselves off from their people and heritage — as the majority of Jewish converts to Christianity have done over the centuries.

This book looks at Jewish identity and Jewish identity in Jesus. The authors are Jews and non-Jews who have come to faith in Jesus and recognize that Jesus-believing Jews do not cease being Jewish.

Just as the Christian church is not unanimous concerning all its dogmas and practices, so too Jewish believers are divided over similar issues. The careful reader will discern this in the following articles.

Jesus-believing Jews continue to discuss how their Jewishness could or should be expressed, and no single self-designation has as yet been formulated to the satisfaction of all Jewish believers. Several

names are used in this book: for example, Messianic Jews, Messianic believers, Jesus-believing Jews, Jewish believers in Jesus, Jewish believers, Jewish Christians, Hebrew Christians, and others. The term "Christian" is considered by many Jesus-believing Jews to be pejorative in light of the disgraceful attitude of the church towards the Jewish people over the centuries.

Several times, the name "Yeshua" is used in this book instead of "Jesus." The Hebrew form of the name indicates a desire on the part of Jesus-believing Jews to separate themselves from those who often perpetrated their misdeeds in the name of Jesus. At the same time, they also want to maintain the fact that salvation for all — both Jews and gentiles — comes through one the Jew, Jesus.

This book is primarily intended for gentile readers and the Hebrew terminology used is explained in the glossary at the end. The book does not pretend to cover all aspects of the topic or to deal with them exhaustively. Rather, it is an introduction to the subject which hopefully will whet the reader's appetite and create a desire to understand the problems and challenges facing Messianic believers.

Through the Jewish people, non-Jews have become partakers in the blessing to Israel by faith in Jesus. Becoming aware of Jesus-believing Jews will, it is hoped, lead gentile believers back to the roots of their faith, roots which are Jewish. The Christian church needs to remember that it is no sin to be a Jew. On the contrary, God has used the Jewish people to accomplish his plan of salvation.

The apostle Paul who said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Rom 1:16), was also not ashamed of being a Jew — a Jesus-believing Jew. To his kinsmen he declared: "I am a Jew" (Acts 22:3).

Will Jesus-believing Jews be allowed to say the same today?

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Kai Kjær-Hansen  
Jerusalem, 24 April 1996

## Neither Fish nor Fowl?

*Kai Kjær-Hansen*

In a study entitled *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe*, the Jewish sociologist B.Z. Sobel describes Jewish believers in Jesus in the following way:

The “Jewish” Christian is in the anomalous position of having to prove his Jewishness to doubting Jews and his Christianity to questioning Gentiles.<sup>1</sup>

This description says something essential about the position of present-day Jewish believers in Jesus. What it does not say is whether, from a New Testament perspective, the fundamental position of Jewish Christians is anomalous. When Sobel characterizes the Jewish Christian, he indirectly touches a sore spot with the doubting Jews and the questioning gentiles. The phenomenon of Jewish Christians makes both parties uncertain. Perhaps, however, the real issue is rather the anomalous position of these two groups in the eyes of Jewish Christians, i.e., the Jewish believers in Jesus!

### An anomalous position

From the point of view of Jewish believers in Jesus, the doubting

Jews and the questioning Christians, although different, have something in common: both query whether it is possible to be a Jew and a believer in Jesus at one and the same time. Unlike in the past, however, the present movement of Jesus-believing Jews has become a living phenomenon, so conscious of its own situation and so strong — although still numerically weak — that when it now hears the age-old question it does not keep silent. Indeed, it will not take orders from either Jews or Christians but goes on the offensive and boldly proclaims — referring to the first Jewish Jesus-believers of the first century — that Jesus-believing Jews are not ex-Jews. So, in contrast to previous periods, it is no longer only a matter of doubting Jews and questioning gentiles who query the phenomenon of Jewish Christianity. Jewish believers in Jesus now call into question the doubting Jews and the questioning gentiles and their fundamental views of Jewish Christianity.

It is a historical fact that what was later to be named Christianity and the Christian church first emerged as a Jewish phenomenon. Jesus was a Jew, the first to receive him were Jews, the kingdom of God which he proclaimed came out of a Jewish context, and the church was, by its very nature, a Jewish phenomenon intended for all, Jews as well as gentiles. The new belief was a Jewish belief, not a new religion: “It was Judaism of a different kind,” as Jakob Jocz has put it.<sup>2</sup> This “Judaism of a different kind” had its focal point in the person of Jesus, his words and deeds — to such an extent that it was said that there is salvation in no other name than Jesus (Acts 4:12).

Compared to other Jews in the first century, the Jewish believers in Jesus were a minority. But compared to gentile believers, Jewish believers in Jesus were a majority well into the first century and wielded a great amount of authority over gentile believers in Jesus. Just how long this authority lasted is still a subject for discussion. Unlike earlier scholars who have seen in the Apostolic Council around the middle of the first century the beginning of the end for Jewish Christianity, Jacob Jervell maintains that the Jewish believers — not

only up to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 but indeed in the period from 70 to 100 when the gentile believers had become the numerical majority in the church — made up “a mighty minority.” The Jewish believers wrote the agenda in the church, also for the gentile believers.<sup>3</sup>

### Minority or majority?

The decisions at the Apostolic Council, as they are delivered to us in Acts 15, give a clear picture of the diverging opinions among Jewish believers in Jesus as to what position should be adopted towards gentile believers. Some declared: “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5).

After a lengthy “debate” (Acts 15:7) amongst Jesus-believing Jews, Peter, the “apostle to the Jews,” advocated a different view from that put forward by the believers belonging to the party of the Pharisees (Acts 15:5). Peter’s introductory statement is worth quoting because it formed the basis of the decree which was adopted and which was supported by James, the Lord’s brother:

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:7-11).

The Apostle Peter’s reasoning is unmistakable: it is due to God’s decision that the gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and

believe. God gave the Holy Spirit to them “just as he did to us,” so that there is “no distinction between us and them”: we shall be saved through grace “just as they will.” In other words, Jews and gentiles are saved “by grace … through faith” (Eph 2:8). In this respect, there is no difference between the two parties, Jews and gentiles. After Peter's establishment of this basic idea, whereby he affirms the unity of faith between Jewish and gentile believers, the Apostolic Council subsequently passed a resolution concerning gentile believers. This decision shows that the fundamental unity of faith does not involve total uniformity of attitude to the Jewish heritage. The apostolic decree about the gentile believers becomes totally meaningless unless the Jewish believers believed that while they retained close links with their Jewish heritage, non-Jewish believers were not bound by these.

It is worth noting that the then majority of Jewish believers did not use their power and authority over non-Jewish believers to bring them to heel and force them to conform to Jewish traditions. At that time a majority in the church, i.e., the Jewish believers in Jesus, said to a minority in the church, i.e., the gentile believers: you do not have to become like us. In the sight of God we are one. Although you are not of Jewish origin, you are not therefore a marginal people in the church. The fact that we belong to the people whom God chose and used as an instrument of his salvation history does not mean that you are worth less in his sight than we are. In faith in Jesus we are all God's beloved children, we with *our* distinctive marks and calling and you with *yours*.

It should be emphasized that while it is the Jewish believers who express the fundamental unity between Jewish and gentile believers in Jesus, it is also the Jewish believers who are conscious that they are endowed with a Jewish heritage and that they constitute the center of the church.

In contrast to the situation at the time of the Apostolic Council, the gentile believers today are a majority in the church. And even if the Jewish believers in Jesus over the last three or four decades have

become a growing movement, they are still a minority in the church, even a very small minority. What a blessing it would be if the church of gentile believers finally learned their lesson from the victorious party at the Apostolic Council and showed the same degree of broad-mindedness towards Jewish believers in Jesus today which the latter showed towards gentile believers at the Council in Jerusalem.

The simple fact that Jewish believers in the first century showed broad-mindedness — and a broad-mindedness based on theological insight — should be enough to challenge the Christian church on the threshold of the twenty-first century to a similar broad-mindedness — also based on theological insight. It is difficult to ignore the fact that the mainstream of Jewish Christians, as they are explicitly portrayed in the New Testament, could not separate their “Christianity” from their Jewish heritage. If any group constituted Israel they did: the true and genuine Israel, the kind of Israel that God wanted. It was into this Israel that the gentiles had now been admitted.

### **Minority and marginality**

Jewish believers in Jesus were therefore neither a minority nor a marginal group in God's church in the first century. Nor should they be pushed into a marginal position in God's church of today by gentile believers. B.Z. Sobel writes in this regard:

A key sociological datum about Hebrew Christian believers which they share with religious sects on the Protestant fringe is their marginality — their neither-fish-nor-fowl status. They are Christian but decidedly not quite Christian in the way a gentile Baptist or Methodist is Christian. They are Jewish but certainly not in the manner in which an Orthodox or Reform or Reconstructionist Jew is Jewish. They are suspect in the eyes of the former and rejected as renegades or weird cultists by the latter ...<sup>4</sup>

The feeling of being regarded as traitors by other Jews is a burden of which the gentile believers can hardly relieve the Jewish believers. But gentile believers might make an effort to avoid Jewish Christians being betrayed by the Christian church.

The feeling of being betrayed and despised was expressed, for example, by Sir Leon Levison. In his election address as the first President of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance on 9 September 1925, he said:

Our relationship to each other must be maintained in unity, because, as I said yesterday, we are a twice-despised and twice-exiled people — exiled along with the Jewish race, and exiled *from* the Jewish race because of our belief; despised like the Jewish race, but despised *by* the Jewish race because of our belief.<sup>5</sup>

Sobel describes the Jewish Christians' status as "neither fish nor fowl," which is a humorous figure of speech. It is questionable, however, whether such a description furthers a serious understanding of the Jesus-believers' status. The same applies to the characterization of Jewish believers in Jesus as "neither Jew nor Gentile" with an oblique reference to the phrase in Galatians 3:28. It is certainly bad exegesis to use the last verses of Galatians 3 to prove that all distinctions between Jewish and gentile believers have been eliminated. If that were so, the distinction between male and female would also be obliterated, which is an absurd idea. The point which the context conveys is that all believers in Jesus — Jewish and gentile — are God's children through faith (3:26). In the Messiah Jesus all are one (3:28), and the Apostle Paul continues: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:29).

Commenting on "the Jew and non-Jew in the Messiah," Daniel Juster, a Messianic Jew, remarks about the concluding verses of Galatians 3:

Both may be called to different styles of life and witness, to different fields of service, yet they are spiritually one in the Messiah. The oneness spoken of does not lead to a dullness of all peoples, nations and races becoming the same in speech, manner, dress, mission and style. What a horribly boring world that would be! It would be like a symphony orchestra composed of all violins! God's unity is a symphonic unity, blending all together under the head conductor, the Messiah. Oneness in the Messiah leaves ample room for varieties of life and calling, especially in regards to Jew and non-Jew. Note as well, non-Jews are called (in v. 29) not spiritual Israel, but the offspring of Abraham by faith.<sup>6</sup>

Sobel's survey leads him to conclude that "Hebrew Christians tend to be essentially marginal people who suffer from a long list of defeats and frustrations ranging from the psychological to the economic to the social ... This simple data is of central importance ... in understanding the phenomenon of Hebrew Christianity ..." <sup>7</sup>

However, it is by no means certain that marginality, as Sobel perceives it, is the best way to understand Jewish believers in Jesus. In his Ph.D. dissertation, *Depression and Level of Self and Object Representation in Minority Group Religious Converts: Jews and the "Jews for Jesus,"* Jon Howard Siegel (not a believer in Jesus) finds that no difference in certain psychological measurements pertains between "Jews for Jesus" and other Jews:

Neither the empirical data nor the clinical impressions of the researcher ultimately supported the hypothesis that "converts" to Hebrew-Christianity and Jews differed in their possible depressive dynamics and respective levels of self and object representation ... Apart from the data, theorized differences were also not confirmed during the

course of extensive personal contacts. The most straightforward explanation for this may simply be that religious conversion has little to do with either depression or the level of self and object representation.<sup>8</sup>

The findings of the “Jewish Believer Survey” undertaken by “Jews for Jesus” in 1983 across the United States are also significantly different from Sobel’s conclusion — for example, regarding education:

The Jewish believer population has considerably more education than their non-Christian Jewish counterparts ... Less than 3% of the Jewish believers had not completed high school compared with 15.6% of the non-Christian Jews. Whereas 60% of the Jewish believers were either college graduates or had completed a significant amount of college studies, only 32.4% of the general Jewish population attained as much education.<sup>9</sup>

Sobel would have been right if he had said, for example, that there are *also* marginal people among Jewish believers today. Actually, it would be rather alarming if Jewish believers did not include “marginal people” — according to Sobel’s definition of marginal. It is a relief that Sobel did in fact come across such people; a church with no room for “marginal people” would be quite contrary to the church’s true purpose. The New Testament evangelists make no excuses for the presence of many “marginal people” among Jesus’ followers; perhaps they even constituted the majority. But there were also members of the religious establishment and quite a few “ordinary” Jews who believed.

Commenting on Sobel’s claim that Hebrew Christians seem to suffer from a “long list of defeats and frustrations,” Menahem Benhayim, former Secretary of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance in Israel, draws attention to the fact that “from the perspective

of the author [Sobel] (and his presumed readership in the Jewish community) this is a devastating criticism. It isn't, of course, quite so devastating to anyone who has taken Paul seriously ... especially his remarks to the Corinthians, which I think contain a very similar observation about Christians (not necessarily Hebrew)."<sup>10</sup> The relevant quote is from 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Benhayim proceeds to point out that the essential issue is "how to win the marginal, and how to provide the healing strength for those who are not marginal by choice."<sup>11</sup>

Marginality, as Sobel sees it, does not seem to be the most important datum for understanding the Jesus-believing Jews' situation. Jewish believers in Jesus may be a minority in the midst of the Jewish people and in the church, but they are not marginal. They are a minority with a special affinity with the first generations of Jesus-believing Jews, including the disciples and apostles, and a minority which struggles to maintain its belief in Jesus without abandoning its Jewish identity. If the gentile believers accept this as a starting-point, there is hope that they may be able to understand Jewish Christians instead of ignoring them, and ultimately to restore them to their legitimate place in the church.

For the greater part of the church's history Jewish Christians have not been so understood. On the contrary.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> B.Z. Sobel, *Hebrew Christianity: The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 114.
- <sup>2</sup> J. Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ after Auschwitz* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 153.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Jervell, "The Mighty Minority," in *Studia Theologica, Scandinavian Journal of Theology* 34 (1980), 13-38.
- <sup>4</sup> Sobel, 10.
- <sup>5</sup> H.J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1936), 247.
- <sup>6</sup> D. Juster, *Jewish Roots* (Rockville: Davar, 1986), 111-112.
- <sup>7</sup> Sobel, 9.
- <sup>8</sup> J.H. Siegel, *Depression and Level of Self and Object Representation in Minority Group Religious Converts: Jews and the "Jews for Jesus"* (San Diego: California School of Professional Psychology, 1992), 85, 87.
- <sup>9</sup> Jews for Jesus, *Jewish Believer Survey* (San Francisco: Jews for Jesus, 1983), 4-5. Cf. also A. Adelstein, "U.S. Jewish believers surveyed," in *Mishkan* 1 (1984), 52-54.
- <sup>10</sup> M. Benhayim, "Issues Facing the Messianic Jews Today," in O.C.M. Kvarme (ed.), *Let Jews and Arabs Hear His Voice* (Jerusalem: The United Christian Council in Israel, 1981), 18.
- <sup>11</sup> Benhayim, 19.

## **From Research Object to Living Reality**

*Kai Kjær-Hansen*

Throughout the history of the church, Jewish Christianity has remained alive and well — as an object of research amongst gentile theologians and historians. For the greater part of the church's history, in other words, the life of Jewish Christianity has been relegated to history books, learned articles, and scholarly papers.

One can assume that already from about the middle of the second century the question of Jewish Christians was little more than a theoretical problem to many in the gentile church. For many gentiles who were indeed aware of the existence of Jewish Christians, they were no more than a tolerated minority.

With Joseph Rabinowitz's mammoth efforts in the 19th century, Jewish Christianity began to be revitalized and resurrected, so that it once again became a living, present, and challenging presence.

### **From tolerated minority to non-existence**

The problem of "Jewish Christians" was created as early as the church began to define itself as the new Israel. Already by the second century AD, therefore, Jewish Christianity was on the demise. When Jews sincerely came to faith in this climate, it was often assumed as a

matter of course — and required as a course of action — that they ceased being Jewish. Expressed in a different way, the church's mission to the Jews and its interest in winning them to Christ did not correspond to a similar willingness to grant them any legitimate opportunity of demonstrating their loyalty to their Jewish background and heritage.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the church, not only in the Middle Ages but also in modern times, has all but done away with the concept of "Jewish Christianity" as a legitimate reality which might apply to contemporary Jewry. At the same time, the same church and its theologians expended a lot of resources in mapping out "Jewish Christianity" during the New Testament period and subsequent centuries. The church had practically no "Jewish Christians" to consider, only converted Jews who had become Christians, i.e., Christians with a Jewish origin and upbringing, who could be used and abused by the church in its struggle and polemic against Judaism.

In *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, James Parkes has collected some of the professions of faith demanded from Jews who converted from Judaism to Christianity in the Middle Ages. These professions show, in no uncertain terms, that when a Jew was baptized, the church required from him a total breach with all things Jewish:

As a preliminary to his acceptance as a catechumen, a Jew must confess and denounce verbally the whole Hebrew people, and forthwith declare that with a whole heart and sincere faith he wishes to be received among the Christians. Then he must renounce openly in the church all Jewish superstition, the priest saying, and he, or his sponsor if he is a child, replying in these words: "I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths,

and superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom, and above all I renounce Antichrist, whom all the Jews await in the figure and form of Christ; and I join myself to the true Christ and God. And I believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ...”<sup>1</sup>

The trend towards renouncing “absolutely everything Jewish” was maintained throughout the Middle Ages. Jewish Christians were represented during this period, and up into the early modern age, by many fine Hebraists and other eminent men of Jewish origin whose influence the church had no difficulty acknowledging since they did not affront ecclesiastical sensibilities by vaunting their Jewish identity. In portrayals of these so-called prominent Hebrew Christians it is not always made clear that they did not revive the concept of an independent Jewish Christianity after the New Testament pattern.<sup>2</sup>

The first signs of a reviving Jewish Christianity as a living entity rather than as a historical anachronism or as an embarrassing heritage came in the 19th century. Although the regeneration of Jewish Christianity was accomplished through the work of many unsung individuals, we shall focus in this article on a short review of one of the most influential predecessors of the contemporary Messianic Jewish movement — Joseph Rabinowitz.

### **Joseph Rabinowitz**

Joseph Rabinowitz came to faith in Jesus on a journey to Palestine in the early summer of 1882. Rabinowitz was a relatively well-known *Haskalah* Jew, born to a hasidic family, who broke with his upbringing and made a name for himself in the Jewish press in his native Russia. The object of his journey to Palestine was to look into the possibilities of Jewish immigration, Rabinowitz being a delegate for like-minded Jews in Kishinev. Although he was disappointed by the situation in

Palestine, on his return to Russia Rabinowitz concentrated upon his new-found faith in Jesus his "brother."<sup>3</sup>

Rabinowitz's movement, named "Israelites of the New Covenant," attracted enormous interest in the circles then engaged in Jewish evangelism. His stubborn insistence that his faith in Jesus had not made him an ex-Jew, that his Jewish identity had not been drowned in baptism, and that a Jewish believer in Jesus was a person at liberty to live in a Jewish manner, posed a challenge to his Jewish brethren, to his fellow Jewish Christians, and to his gentile brothers in faith.

In 1884/85, Rabinowitz says: "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." On his baptism in 1885, Rabinowitz drew up seven articles of faith, a creed, in Hebrew. This creed was intended for the use of the Israelites of the New Covenant and was later included as an integral part of their liturgical service. One of the most esteemed personalities engaged in mission work among the Jews at the time, Professor Franz Delitzsch, declared that this creed was closer to the universal Christian creed than the earliest Ebionite creeds. Characteristically, Rabinowitz followed Christian doctrine inasmuch as it was faithful to biblical concepts at the same time as he attempted to avoid ideas incorporated into Christian doctrine from later, non-Jewish dogmatic developments.

For example, in the article on justification, Rabinowitz declared:

Through faith alone in Jesus the Messiah all men may be justified without the works of the law. There is but one God, who shall justify the circumcised Jews by faith, and the uncircumcised Gentiles through faith; and there is no difference between Jew and Greek, between bond and free, between male and female; for they are all one in Christ

Jesus. By faith in Christ we fulfil the law, and that faith is wonderful balm to our soul, and full of comfort.

In respect to the Trinity, Rabinowitz found the term difficult to use, although he tried to demonstrate that God is a unity in other ways: one God and his word and his Holy Spirit. "We do not find anywhere in Holy Scripture that the belief in 'Three persons' is to form a necessary part of our confession," he stated. As for the virgin birth, Rabinowitz considered it to be more honoring to God not to go into details and to keep to the brief formula: conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20).

Rabinowitz was called to give his views on observing Jewish customs at his first meeting with representatives of foreign missionary societies, in March 1884. Rabinowitz stressed that he and those of like mind desired liberty to be faithful to the traditions handed down from their fathers, as long as these were not at variance with the spirit of Christianity. From a religious point of view, he and his adherents believed that the Law had been perfectly fulfilled by the Messiah. From a national perspective, however, they felt obligated to keep the Law as far as circumstances made it possible.

These views gave rise to a debate on two major issues: circumcision and the keeping of the Sabbath. The gentile Christian participants at the meeting saw a danger that the Israelites of the New Covenant would keep these commandments not merely from national but also from religious motives. To reach some clarity in the matter, the question was raised whether a Jesus-believing Jew who did not circumcise his child would be committing a sin. Rabinowitz's reply was that "he does not commit a sin, but he thereby estranges himself from his people." He gave a similar response to the question whether it would be a sin to observe the Sabbath, referring to Exodus 20:8 to spell out his belief that while it was incumbent upon the Israelites of the New Covenant to keep this commandment, they were at liberty regarding the laws conditioned by the possession of

the land, temple worship, the rulers holding office, the hot climate, and the need to suppress idolatry. In another context, Rabinowitz added that circumcision is a sacred sign demonstrating that a person is a descendant of Abraham. As a ritual, it offends nobody, since it is not performed publicly, and some doctors even consider it to be physically beneficial. Both the Torah and the New Testament make it incumbent upon Jews to practice circumcision in order to retain their national affiliation. Circumcision “links us to our Jewish brethren, [but] it cannot justify us before God,” he stated, quoting Romans 4:2.

The meeting further gave Rabinowitz the opportunity to explain what seemed so obvious to him: that the distinctive features of the various nationalities may be retained when the various nations receive Christ.

Rabinowitz’s baptism placed him in a dilemma which reflected his commitment to remaining Jewish not merely in theory but also in practice. He was theologically convinced that it was right to be baptized, but he was concerned that it might have serious implications for his identity. If he was baptized in the Lutheran church in Kishinev, which R. Faltin, the Lutheran clergyman, found natural and normal, the force of the contemporary legislature meant that he would have changed identities and would no longer be formally considered Jewish. Consequently, he was baptized in Berlin in quite extraordinary circumstances for a church accustomed to receiving members according to strict denominational lines — not to speak of accommodating Jewish identity. Rabinowitz was baptized in the Bohemian-Lutheran church by a Congregationalist (Methodist) pastor, Professor C.M. Mead from Andover, Massachusetts, in the presence of a few invited people — and on the strength of his own Hebrew creed, after having also testified that he was in agreement with the Apostles’ Creed. He was thus baptized into the universal church of Christ without becoming a member of any one denomination and without losing his Jewish identity.

The lasting significance of Rabinowitz's activity lies first and foremost in his stubborn insistence that his faith in Jesus had not turned him into an ex-Jew: his baptism had not uncircumcised him. Because his faith was rooted in a New Testament doctrine of justification by faith and in a biblically-oriented christology, a conviction he had arrived at through a thorough study of the New Testament, he helped to re-establish Jewish Christianity as a viable and living option. Gentile Christians were hereby challenged to examine why they would not grant Jewish believers in Jesus a liberty corresponding to that which the apostles had won for the gentiles regarding observance of the law (Acts 15). For his part, Rabinowitz desired this liberty without denouncing other Jesus-believing Jews who chose to be assimilated into a Christian church. Through his baptism he showed that he regarded it as necessary and important to become part of Christ's universal church without becoming a member of a particular gentile Christian denomination and without abandoning his Jewish identity.

Outside the circles involved in Jewish evangelism, many of Rabinowitz's Christian contemporaries were skeptical of Rabinowitz and his vision. This skepticism says much about the gentile church's ambivalent relationship to Jewish believers in Jesus. The same ambivalence can still be found today. This attitude is due, to a large degree, to the fact that the church has all too often found it impossible to imagine that Jews who come to faith in Jesus should desire to remain Jewish — just as the Jesus-believing Jews did in the first century.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origin of Antisemitism* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 397.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., H.J. Schonfield, *The History of Jewish Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1936), 141-96; J. Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ: A Study in the Controversy Between Church and Synagogue* (London: SPCK, 1954), 246-50.

<sup>3</sup> I refrain from giving detailed information about the sources for this section about Rabinowitz. Detailed documentation can be found in K. Kjær-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement* (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: Handsel Press/Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).

## The Last Word

In the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke, the Jewishness of the Jesus movement is often emphasized. In the first part of the book, the apostle Peter is the main character; in the second part, it is Saul/Paul. Paul had previously been a persecutor of the followers of the Jesus movement before the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. He subsequently became a believer in Jesus and one of the most enthusiastic proclaimers of the gospel — to the Jews first. To the church in Rome he writes:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom 1:16).

In this book on Jewish identity and faith in Jesus, we will let Luke have the final word with the following examples from Paul's life, related to his Jewishness. It is our hope that they will stimulate further reflection.

*In Philippi, Macedonia (Acts 16:16-24)*

And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a certain slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." And she continued doing this for many days.

But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit,

"I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans."

And the crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them, and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

*In Jerusalem, on the steps of the Antonia Fortress (Acts 21:37-22:1-8)*

And as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said. "Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"

But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people." And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, "Brethren and fathers, hear my defence which I now offer to you."

And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, "I am a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today. And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as

also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

And it came about that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" And I answered "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said to me, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting."

*In Caesarea, before the Jewish King Agrippa II (Acts 26:1-8)*

And Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself."

Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense: "In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time previously, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.

And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?

*In Rome, before the Jewish leaders (Acts 28:17-24)*

And it happened that after three days he called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they had come

together, he began saying to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people, or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar; not that I had any accusation against my nation. For this reason therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel."

And they said to him, "We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are; or concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere."

And when they had set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the prophets, from morning until evening. And some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

## **Glossary**

*Aliyah*, lit. “going up.” Jewish immigration to Israel, normally under the Law of Return, which gives all Jews automatic rights to live in Israel. Different “waves” of immigration are given a name — *Aliyah Aleph*, *Aliyah Bet*, for example.

*Amidah*, lit. “the standing (prayer).” The central prayer in the Jewish prayer book, recited three times daily. Contains the *Shemoneh Esreh*.

*Amutah*. An Israeli-registered non-profit organization.

*Ashkenazi* (pl. *Ashkenazim*). The designation for Jews of German-French, Central and East European descent. See also *Sephardi*.

*Bagatz*. Hebrew acronym for *Beit Din Gavoah le-Tzedek* — the Israeli High Court of Justice.

*Bar mitzvah*, lit. “son of the commandment.” Ceremony for Jewish boys at the age of thirteen, marking their entry into manhood when they become personally responsible before the Law (cf. *bat mitzvah* for girls at age twelve).

*Birkat ha-minim*, lit. “the blessing of the heretics.” The twelfth “benediction” in the *Shemoneh Esreh* is really a curse. The version ascribed to Samuel the Lesser (end of the first century AD) contains a reference to *minim* (sectarians or heretics, including Jewish believers in Jesus). Its inclusion was intended to make it impossible for these to participate in the synagogue worship.

*Chiloni*, lit. “secular.” The common Hebrew word for a “secular” Jew.

*Dati*, lit. “religious.” The common Hebrew word for a “religious” Jew.

*Diaspora*, lit. “dispersion.” The scattering of the Jewish people in exile.

*Eretz Israel*, lit. “the land of Israel.”

*Halakhah*, lit. “walking.” Collective name for the legal material in rabbinic literature, as well as for individual legal rulings (the adjective is *halakhic*).

*Hasidism*, lit. “pietism.” A mystical revivalist movement founded in 18th-century Poland and Russia by the Ba’al Shem Tov (the Master of the Good Name), Israel ben Eliezer. Today, Hasidism is particularly known for its dynasties, such as Habad or the Lubavitcher Hasidism. Adherents of this movement are called *hasidim* (sg. *hasid*, adj. *hasidic*).

*Haskalah*, lit. “enlightenment.” Period in Jewish history. Inspired by and roughly coinciding in time with the general European enlightenment period in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Characterized by increasing openness to the surrounding gentile society and the embracing of rationalist principles in the study of Jewish as well as non-Jewish history and culture.

*Holocaust*, lit. “whole burnt offering.” The attempted systematic annihilation of European Jews before and during World War II. Six million Jews were slaughtered. The Nazis called it “die Endlösung,” the Final Solution to the “Jewish problem” in Europe.

*Kabbala*. The best-known and most important Jewish mystical

**movement which flourished in the 12th century. In popular usage, “kabbalistic” simply means “mystical.”**

**Kippah.** Skullcap traditionally worn by Jewish males as a sign of piety.

**Mashiach**, lit. “anointed.” The Hebrew word for “Messiah.” The same as “Christ” (Greek). *Yeshua ha-Mashiach*, Jesus the Messiah.

**Masorati**, lit. “traditional.” The Hebrew word for a Jew who follows a “traditional” observance of Jewish customs (cf. the Conservative movement in the diaspora).

**Mamzer**, lit. “illegitimate child.” Technical *talmudic* term for a child born to parents forbidden to marry one another according to biblical law.

**Meshichi** (pl. *Meshichiim*); lit. “Messianic.” The name adopted by (Jewish) Jesus-believers in Israel from the word for “Messiah” (*Mashiach*).

**Meshummad**, lit. “apostate.” Term given to a Jew who renounces Judaism and violates the Mosaic covenant.

**Mikveh.** The ritual bath used for immersion in accordance with the purification laws of Judaism. Sometimes used by Jewish believers instead of “baptism.”

**Min** (pl. *minim*); lit. “heretic.” Technical *talmudic* term for sectarians and heretics.

**Mishnah**, lit. “repetition.” The Oral Law, representing the interpretation of the Bible and the accumulation of legal traditions; edited c. 200 AD.

*Mitzvot* (sg. *mitzvah*). The commandments, both of the *Written Law* (*Torah*) and the *Oral Law*. Also used to denote a “good deed.”

*Notzri* (pl. *Notzrim*); lit. “Nazarene.” Term traditionally used in *talmudic* literature to designate Jewish believers in Jesus.

*Olah* (masculine form: *oleh*; pl. *olim*); lit. “one who goes up.” The Hebrew word for a new immigrant.

*Oral Law*. See *Mishnah*.

*Refusenik*. Russian (frequently Jewish) dissident. His crime might be to apply for permission to immigrate to Israel, to teach Hebrew, or be otherwise engaged in Jewish religious or cultural activities.

*Sages* (Hebrew: *Chachamim* or *Chazal*). Alternative title for the *talmudic* rabbis.

*Sephardi* (pl. *Sephardim*). Frequently used to designate Oriental Jews or Jews from Arab countries, although its strict reference is to Jews who trace their descent from medieval Spain. See also *Ashkenazi*.

*Shema*, lit. “hear.” Basic statement of the Jewish faith, drawn from Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

*Shemoneh Esreh*, lit. “(the prayer of the) eighteen (benedictions).” Part of the central part of Jewish liturgy known as the *Amidah*, recited in every synagogue service.

*Shoah*, lit. “calamity.” Hebrew term for the *Holocaust*.

*Tallit*, lit. “prayer shawl.” A four-cornered, fringed garment worn by

men during certain prayers, in fulfillment of the biblical commandment of fringes (Num 15:38).

*Talmud*, lit. “study” or “teaching.” The central corpus of rabbinic literature, comprising the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara* (the explication of the *Mishnah*), or an alternative name for the *Gemara*. Extant in two versions: the more authoritative Babylonian Talmud (edited at the end of the fifth century AD) and the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud (edited at the end of the fourth century AD).

*Tanakh*. Hebrew acronym for *Torah* (the five books of Moses or Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (the Writings); the Hebrew Bible — frequently used by Jews instead of “Old Testament.”

*Tannaim*, (sg. *tanna*). Rabbinic teachers of the first and second centuries, mentioned in the *Mishnah*.

*Torah*, lit. “instruction.” The Hebrew name for the Five Books of Moses, although it is commonly used as a synonym for the whole *Tanakh*. In Jewish tradition, it frequently refers to both the *Written Law* and the *Oral Law*.

*Tosefta*, lit. “addition.” A secondary compilation of sayings of the early *Sages* which were not incorporated into the *Mishnah*.

*Yeshua*. The Hebrew name of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Matt 1:21); often used by Messianic believers instead of “Jesus” in order to stress his Jewishness.

*Yetzer*, lit. “inclination.” Term for man’s inclination to do good (*yetzer ha-tov*) or to do evil (*yetzer ha-ra*).

*Written Law*. See *Torah*.

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No serious person, Jew or Christian, would question that Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. Neither is it a question for debate that his first followers were also Jewish.

A lot has happened since then. Today, many Jews and Christians find it difficult to accept Jesus-believing Jews who insist on their Jewishness.

From different angles, the 15 contributors to this book present the issue of Jewish identity and faith in Jesus, a complex but highly relevant subject for both Jesus-believing Jews and the Christian church.

The Christian church is hereby reminded of the fact that it is no sin to be a Jew, and has never been.

The apostle Paul who said: "I am not ashamed of the gospel," also was not ashamed of being a Jew, a Jesus-believing Jew. To his kinsmen in Jerusalem he declared: "I am a Jew."

Will Jesus-believing Jews continue to be allowed by the Christian church to state the same today?

That is the question and the challenge which this book presents.