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Jewish Identity

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The Identity of Jewish People

Frequently, as I have had the opportunity to minister in various congregations, I have asked people, 'What do you think it means to be Jewish?' People tell me that being Jewish is being part of the chosen people. Or it is a person who has the Jewish religion. Or it is a person who does not believe in Jesus. People also respond in other ways. Even Jewish people have difficulty defining 'What does it mean to be Jewish?'

In the field of Jewish evangelism, definitions and terminologies seem to facilitate an understanding of how we might effectively communicate the message of Messiah. Jewish people are referred to as: Jews, Jewish people, Hebrews, Israelites, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Chosen people. Some Christians even seek to boast that THEY have become the true Jews because of their circumcision of the heart through faith in Jesus.

Yet it would be the height of insensitivity for a Gentile Christian to approach an orthodox Jewish person and say to him or her, 'I am a true Jew, because I believe in Jesus, and really you are not so Jewish." That would not open communication or build bridges for a clear hearing of the Gospel.

So the question we must focus on is, "Who is a Jew?" For centuries, rabbis and Jewish scholars have wrestled with this question. Debates have raged and court cases have occurred. If you were to ask three different Jewish leaders, "Who is a Jew?" you would likely end up with three answers.

The Origin of the Term "Jew"

What is the origin of the term "Jew"? The original Hebrew word is Yehudi. It survived through the Greek and Latin and found its way into early English about 1000 CE.

The term Yehudi originally applied to members of the tribe of Judah, who was the fourth son of the patriarch Jacob. As time passed, that definition expanded to include the people who lived within the kingdom of Judah. These peoples came to be known as "Judeans." Later, as the southern kingdom was formed, both the tribes of Benjamin and Judah came to be recognized together as Yehudi or Judah.

Eventually the term Yehudi was applied to all residents of the southern kingdom irrespective of their tribe. After the destruction of the northern kingdom, with only people in the southern kingdom remaining, the term took on a different focus for the people who were outside the land or in exile. They were referred to as Yehudi even though they came from different tribes. An example is found in the book of Esther, where we find Mordecai, from the tribe of Benjamin, referred to as Yehudi or "Jew" even though he is not physically present in the southern kingdom of Judah.

The Historic Definitions

During that time period and up to modern times, the term "Jew" came to encompass not merely tribal identity, but took on nationalistic, political, religious, and even ethnic or cultural points of identity. However this identifying word seems to only apply to those who were in exile. The Jewish people residing within the land of Israel chose to identify themselves by the title "Israelite" and called themselves "Israelites." Much of the literature until the time of the destruction of Israel seems to verify

this. Paul demonstrates this in Romans 10:1: "Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved."

In the New Testament are about 55 references to the people as "Israel." Within the synoptic gospels, the term "Jews" is used 17 times. Eleven of those 17 refer to Jesus as "The King of the Jews." The word "Jews" within the Gospel of John speaks in a different light. It does not refer to all the people from a national, political, religious or ethnic orientation, or from the land of Israel outside, but rather to the political and religious leaders who sought to mount opposition against Jesus. It is essential to understand, when reading John, that not all the "Jews" sought to rebel against Jesus.

The term Jewess for a female Jewish person is found only twice in the Bible – Acts 16:1 and Acts 16:24.

The historic term "Jew" brings some negative connotations to modern times.
Some suggest the roots of this negativity go back to the person of Judas Iscariot. There were some early Christians who took the term "Judas" (which was the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew Yehudi) and equated that with the Gospel account of Judas Iscariot.

The term "Jew" was used so negatively that some early dictionaries define it as someone who deals in monetary means through usury, for high gain for the individual. Used as a verb, "jew" unfavorably referred to business practices of trying to drive down a price through negotiation.

Unfortunately, today we find people continuing to believe these negative connotations through stereotyping and ignorance. This directly contradicts the original intent and purpose of the word "'Jew" which means "to be a praise" or "to worship."

The Halachic Definition

So, "Who is Jewish?" Halachah is the rabbinic legal system that considers 1) the writings of the sacred Scriptures, 2) the Talmud, or the oral law, 3) at times the mystical revelations known as Kabballah, and 4) the writings of the scribes, through which Jewish customs have evolved. The Halachic definition of a Jewish person is a child born of Jewish parents, or a convert to Judaism, who possesses both the sanctity of the Jewish people and the obligation to observe the commandments given by God.

This definition seems a bit circular, because it presumes an understanding of what it means to have Jewish parents. Today, rabbis contend that being Jewish is a matter of having a mother who is Jewish; or a mother and a father who are Jewish. Others claim it means practicing the Jewish religion, Judaism. Jewish people who are more orthodox in their religious practice would say that those who are less orthodox, i.e. those who might be Conservative or Reform, or even atheistic or agnostic, are Jewish, but not as good a Jewish person as one who is more orthodox in religious practice.

As an example of the confusion, a public opinion poll was taken of 1,500 Jewish families. The results were recorded in The Jerusalem Post in 1968. When asked "Who is Jewish?"

- 12% declared that a Jewish person is one whose father or mother is Jewish, or who had a Jewish spouse

- 23% said a Jewish person is one who considers himself to be Jewish

- 19% held that a man born of a Jewish mother, or a convert to Judaism, is Jewish. 13% said that a Jewish person is one who lives in Israel, or who identifies with the Jewish state

- 13% said that a Jewish person is one who observes Jewish religious practices, and 11% said that a Jewish person is one who is raised and educated as a Jew

- 9% said they just could not define it

So, the Halachic (is it Halachic or Halakhic?) definition, public opinion, and rabbinic opinion identify Jewish people as based on their birth or lineage through the mother.

A Nationalistic Definition

A unique case was brought before the Supreme Court of the state of Israel in the late 1960s. Benjamin Shalit, a military leader in the Israeli navy, had a wife who was not Jewish. Both atheists, they lived in the land of Israel, where each was required to carry an identity card identifying them as Jewish or not.

Commander Shalit was a citizen of Israel and his children were reared in Israel. They knew the Hebrew language and identified with the culture. He felt that by nationality, not religion or personal belief in God, his children, though they had a gentile mother, should be registered as Jewish. The Israeli Minister of the Interior refused.

Eventually the matter went to the Supreme Court of Israel. Nine of the 10 justices presided over this hearing to answer, "Who is a Jew?" Commander Shalit's argument was that the Israel minister had used a religious standard in judging whether or not a person was Jewish. Since he was not religious, he felt that this standard was inappropriate, and that identity or nationality should be the determining factor. He maintained that as a non-believer, he should not be forced to accept a decision based on religious law.

In November 1968, *Time* Magazine reported Commander Shalit's statements: "It is not faith that unites us as a nation. Too many people do not practice religion for that. It is the cultural and the sociological factors that are the ones that determine who is a Jew. It is not the memory of a primitive religion, but children who were born in Israel, speak Hebrew, live in a Hebrew culture and go to Hebrew schools. They know nothing else. How can the Interior Minister say that they are not Jews?"

Commander Shalit sought to persuade the court that anyone who declares himself to be Jewish by nationality is Jewish. With one important exception of course — a Jewish person who identifies or affiliates with another religious group.

With a five to four decision, the Supreme Court ruled in Commander Shalit's favor. Yet national religious parties of Israel applied pressure to the government and announced that they would remove themselves from the government coalition should the Supreme Court's rule stand. The day after the Shalit decision, the pressure was so intense that the government overturned the Supreme Court's ruling

and reverted to a more vague definition of who was Jewish. Government leaders did not do this out of conviction, but political expediency.

Jewish people from all countries are welcome to come to the land of Israel and are granted under the Law of Return, the right of free return and automatic Israeli citizenship. Both Jewish people of religious and non-religious backgrounds can return. The Supreme Court decision made one exception, however – Jewish people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and have been baptized are denied free return.

This decision does not answer whether a Jewish Christian is still Jewish. It speaks only to the issue of the right of return to the land of Israel. So we see no uniformity in defining what it means to be a Jew. A nationalistic, religious, political or Halakhic definition all point to greater or lesser degrees of subjectivity. Confusion, rather than consensus, reigns.

The Biblical Definition

Let us see what the Word of God says about being Jewish, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant found in Genesis:

> *The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'* (Gen. 12:1-3).

> *The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, 'Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.'* (Gen. 13:14- 17).

> *After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.' But Abram said, 'O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.' Then the word of the LORD came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.* (Gen. 15:1-6).

The Bible tells us that Abraham himself tried to bring forth the heir the Lord had promised. Because Sarah, his wife, was childless, Abraham conceived Ishmael through Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar. But God had chosen to fulfill his covenant through the descendant of Abraham and Sarah. When Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90, Isaac, whose name means "laughter," the son of promise, was born. The Lord kept His promise.

God's covenant was confirmed to Isaac in Genesis 26:1-5:

Now there was a famine in the land — besides the earlier famine of Abraham's time — and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar. The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws.

Eventually, the covenant given to Isaac was passed down to Jacob in Gen. 28:10-15:

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: 'I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

The promise and the covenant initially given to our father Abraham and passed down to Isaac, Jacob, and his descendants is still in effect today. Probably the best and broadest definition we can find from a Biblical standpoint is that the Jewish people are— just that! A people.

Jewish people are found on nearly every continent, in various cultural settings, with different racial features and cultural traditions. Those people may be religious or non-religious, they may be in the land of Israel today, or in the exile. But they are inextricably bound together by a covenant that God established thousands of years ago.

That relationship was established when God made His covenant with Abraham, passed it on to Isaac and Jacob, and then down to the people today. The covenant that God established with these people was not a covenant that granted salvation. The Abrahamic covenant merely granted the chartering of a people on earth for the purpose of glorifying God's name. To help the Jewish people understand the nature or their relationship with God, 613 commandments, or mitzvot, were given to the Jewish people through Moses.

Most people know Moses received 10 Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai. Yet Scriptures reveal that God gave another 613 Commandments to help the Israelites understand the nature of their relationship to Him. Through the law, Israel was to work out moral, religious and personal relationships. All were dependent upon keeping the Law.

The Laws were never given to make men righteous! They were given to help men see their sinfulness. The animal sacrificial system established in the book of Leviticus was carried on for many centuries until the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Through the drama of slain animals, Israel understood the consequences for falling short of the Law that God revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. When Jesus, the Messiah, came, He did not change the Law of Moses. The Scriptures teach very clearly that He fulfilled the Law of Moses so that all – both Jew and Gentile – might enter into a living, personal relationship with God, one that He desires. It is incumbent upon us as Christians to bring the message of this vital relationship to all people, including those who are Jewish.

The Jewish people have given us the prophets, Scripture, Law, and the lineage of the Messiah. The first followers of Jesus were Jewish. The early congregation was a congregation of Jewish people who came together to follow the Jewish Messiah, and their message was Good News . . . the long-awaited promised Messiah had come! He died for the sins of all, even those who were not Jewish.

A Jewish person is one born into this covenant, who cannot do anything to change that covenant relationship. Jewish people may deny or reject their covenant relationship established by God. But the covenant stands.

The argument that only those born of a Jewish mother are Jewish seems to fall short. King David, the greatest of Jewish leaders, is definitely recognized as Jewish. And yet, his lineage had two females who were not Jewish.   His great-grandmother was Ruth and his great-great grandmother was Rahab, both of whom were gentiles who followed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Who would say today that David is not Jewish?

The Biblical norm was that the lineage was determined through the father. The genealogical records we have throughout the Scriptures list all of the begats from father to father, not from mother to mother. So it might appear that the Biblical test of Jewishness is who the father is, not the mother. But God's covenant passes through either the mother or father!

For More Information

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