



# Jewishness of the New Testament

By Avi Brickner

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## **The Jewishness of the New Testament**

Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein was curious when he observed one of the teachers in his school reading a book printed in German. Asking the teacher what he was reading, the book was passed to him. He leafed casually through the pages until his eye fell upon the name, "Jesus Christ." Realizing that the little book was a New Testament, he sternly rebuked the teacher for having it in his possession. He furiously cast the book across the room. It fell behind some other books on a shelf and lay forgotten for nearly 30 years.

An outbreak of intense anti-Jewish persecution arose some years later in Rabbi Lichtenstein's native Hungary, and he was not surprised that the attacks were carried on in the name of Christianity. In the midst of the pogroms, he was startled to read the writings of men who, in the name of Christ, sternly denounced the anti-Semites and defended the Jews. Among these were prominent figures such as the honored Biblical scholar Franz Delitzsch, professor at the University of Leipzig. He was intrigued by statements which spoke of the message of Christ as one of love and life to all people.

At this time, the little New Testament, flung in anger into a dusty corner years ago, was found. For the aging rabbi it had been a closed and hated book which he thought to be the source of venom aimed at his people. Was it really what he had supposed it to be? He opened its pages and began to read.

Rabbi Lichtenstein later wrote in "Two Letters: or What I Really Wish," describing the experience which flowed from his reading of the New Testament:

*I had thought the New Testament to be impure, a source of pride, of overweening selfishness, of hatred, of the worst kind of violence, but as I opened it, I felt myself peculiarly and wonderfully taken possession of. A sudden glory, a light, flashed through my soul. I looked for thorns and gathered roses; I discovered pearls instead of pebbles; instead of hatred, love; instead of vengeance, forgiveness; instead of bondage, freedom; instead of pride, humility; instead of enmity, conciliation; instead of death, life, salvation, resurrection, heavenly treasure.*

## **A Closed Book**

The story of Rabbi Lichtenstein is true. It epitomizes two poles of experience that Jewish people have had so far as the New Testament is concerned. For the majority, the New Testament is a closed and unfamiliar book because it is identified with the age-long persecution of the Jewish people in the name of Christianity. Because most Jews believe that the New Testament promotes anti-Semitism, they think there could be nothing in it which could sustain Jewish life and values.

Thus, the common Jewish assessment of the New Testament is formed by a preconditioned impression. In many ways, Jewish experience seems to support this assessment. However, the majority of the Jewish people do not feel inclined to verify the assessment by an investigation of the New Testament itself.

## **The Message is Jewish**

Yet there is a growing number of Jews who, like Rabbi Lichtenstein, have been prompted, for one reason or another, to investigate seriously what the New Testament actually contains. This writer is among



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them. We have come to recognize through careful investigation that the New Testament is something different than we had first supposed.

First of all, we have discovered that its authorship and cultural background are Jewish. The beginning scenes of the New Testament are centered in the land of Israel, then called Palestine, at the time of the Second Temple. Even as the focus widens from the original setting, the action takes place primarily among Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The New Testament writers, with perhaps the exception of Luke, are all Jews. The early Apostles and followers of Jesus are also Jewish.

### **Fulfillment of the Jewish Hope**

The basic theme of the New Testament is uniquely a Jewish one: the fulfillment of the messianic hope. This expectation was peculiarly the possession of Israel. An early passage in the Gospel of Matthew portrays Gentile wise men recognizing that the promised deliverer is to be "King of the Jews." In the early stages of the spread of the good news about the Messiah, it is only Jews and those Gentiles who are under the influence of Judaism who are prepared to receive and understand the message about the advent of the long expected Redeemer. The primary centers for the initial preaching of the message are the synagogues in the communities of the Diaspora.

In page after page of the New Testament, by direct quote, by free paraphrase, and by allusion, there is one primary literary treasure that is invested with supreme authority: the Hebrew Scriptures. When Jesus or the New Testament preachers intone, "It is written", or "Thus saith the Lord", they rest upon Jewish Holy Writ as the final court of appeal. Jesus challenges the religious leaders with "You search the Scriptures...it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39). Peter proclaims to the Jewish throng: "And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days" (Acts 3:24).

The initial New Testament proclamations are laced with passages from Moses and the prophets, indicating that what is taking place is the fulfillment of the Jewish hope.

When one investigates the general content of the New Testament, if he is somewhat acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures, he will find himself in familiar territory. Angelic communications remind one of the experiences of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua and many other ancient Hebrews. Supernatural births recall the nativity of the patriarch, Isaac. Miracles represent God's confirming activity as He reveals Himself, even as they did in the days of the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets and the kings of Israel. They are not capricious acts of arbitrary power, as in pagan mythology, but they bear profound moral connections through which God trains His people in the ways of faith. Also, as in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is prophetic activity and inspired preaching when the Spirit of God enables men to speak His message. None of these occurrences are strange to the spiritual life and heritage of Israel.

The great themes of the New Testament are the same as those of the Hebrew Scriptures: God's holiness, righteousness and mercy; man's alienation and estrangement from God through disobedience; God's seeking love, forgiveness and reconciliation. There are also the great themes of faith, sacrifice, redemption, hope, love, peace, joy, the ultimate triumph of God's Kingdom and His judgment and reward. One can read and compare them. There is nothing presented in the former which is not



unfolded in the latter. Only the perspective differs. In the Old Covenant, the emphasis is upon promise and in the New Covenant the emphasis is upon fulfillment. The one stresses preparation and the other consummation.

### **A Suffering Messiah**

At this point, some might object that there are themes central to the New Testament which are non-Jewish. Many contend that the idea of a suffering, dying and resurrected Messiah who is at the same time divine is alien to Jewish belief. It is supposedly traced to pagan Egyptian and Greek sources. In addition, it is alleged that the manner in which the New Testament traces the rise and spread of the Messianic community remolds it into a Gentile phenomenon, ripping it from the Jewish context.

The ancient rabbis wrestled with evidence in the Tenach (Hebrew Scriptures) that Messiah was both to suffer and die and to reign as a triumphant and glorious king. Because of this problem, they developed the idea that there would be two messiahs, Ben Joseph who would suffer and die, and Ben David who would triumph and reign. In the Talmud (Sukkah 52 a and b) there is the suggestion that the passage in Zechariah 12:10, which speaks of a pierced one, gave rise to this explanation.

In the Musaf service for the Day of Atonement, there is an ancient prayer which refers to Moshiach Tzidkenu (Messiah our Righteousness) as one who is "wounded for our transgressions." The concept of a suffering and dying Messiah is not strange to Jewish lore.

While the resurrection of the Messiah, as declared in the New Testament, seemed to take everyone by surprise, there are passages in Holy Writ which are seen as promising Messiah's resurrection. Psalm 16:10 declares that God will not abandon His Holy One to the grave. Isaiah 53:10, 12 portrays the Lord as prolonging the days of the Suffering Servant and causing God's good pleasure to prosper in His hand because He has willingly poured out His soul unto death.

There are passages in the prophetic writings which give evidence that the Messiah is to be divine. In Isaiah 9:6, the Messianic King is called by the awesome names: Wonderful Counselor; Mighty God; Eternal father; Prince of Peace. In Jeremiah 23:6, the Righteous Branch that is to be raised to David is given the name, "The Lord Our Righteousness." In Micah 5:2, where there is the announcement of Messiah's birthplace, He is spoken of as coming from eternity. In Daniel 7:13-14, Messiah is seen coming in the clouds of Heaven and receiving an eternal dominion over all peoples. The rabbis who developed the mystical lore, such as that contained in the Zohar, observing these and other passages, speculated that the Messiah was to be divine.

Though Jesus Himself declared that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), He also declared that other sheep which are not of the Jewish fold would also be added to the flock of the Messianic Shepherd (John 10:16). This vision is not strange to Jewish expectation. God declared through Isaiah (Isaiah 49:6) that Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles and His salvation would spread to the ends of the earth. Isaiah 60:1-3 proclaims that Gentiles shall come to the light that spreads from Israel through the Messiah.

So the New Testament vision is not a Gentile aberration. It is rather the vision of the ancient Hebrew prophets who proclaimed that God would bring the Gentiles into the blessings of Israel through the Messiah.



In all of these ways, we Jews who have been prompted to investigate the New Testament carefully have come to recognize its basically Jewish character. But we have also discovered something else. Those passages which allegedly promote anti-Jewish sentiment, upon closer investigation, are not really anti-Jewish at all.

### **Family Dispute**

There is conflict in the New Testament over the Messianic claims of Jesus, but it is mainly conflict between Jews who accept those claims and Jews who do not. In other words, it is a family dispute.

When one looks closely at the ways in which the term, "the Jews," is used, especially in the Gospel of John as well as in some other New Testament writings, it can be seen that it is often used to represent the coalition among the Jewish leadership that had purposed to oppose Jesus. In those passages where this conflict is in view, the term refers to these opposed leaders. The New Testament reveals that Jesus was so popular with the people that His opposers had to operate in secret. This indicates clearly that the term, "the Jews," did not refer to the general populace.

Certain harsh statements pronounced by Jesus and the New Testament preachers are not vindictive but prophetic rebukes, in the same vein as the words of Isaiah when he calls Israel "offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly!" (Isaiah 1:4). Though anti-Semites who professed to be Christians have used these seemingly harsh statements as a pretext to persecute Jews, they did so in contradiction to the express teachings of Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem and lamented her coming destruction at the hands of the Romans, which He announced prophetically (Matthew 23:37-39). He taught His followers to love those who opposed them and to pray for those who shamefully treated them (Matthew 5:43-46). The writings of Paul are often cited to show the anti-Semitic nature of the New Testament. How can this be in light of the fact that Paul taught Gentile believers at Rome that, though many Jews opposed the Gospel, they were loved by God for the sake of the forefathers (Romans 11:28)? Believers are not to be boastful or arrogant against the natural branches (the Jewish people), but they are to make them envious of the Messianic blessings by showing them compassion and kindness (Romans 11:11-12, 17, 30-31). Jesus taught that only the merciful were to receive mercy, only the forgiving could expect forgiveness and that love would be the hallmark of His true disciples.

### **Is It True?**

We see nothing in the New Testament that is non-Jewish or anti-Jewish. It is to the contrary, woven with the warp and woof of Jewish hope and prophetic promise. If one can accept the revelation of Moses and the prophets with utter seriousness, there should be nothing really strange in the New Testament. The real challenge of the New Testament, as we see it, is not about Jewishness, but about faith. It is not a question of "Is it Jewish?" We believe that careful investigation will verify its Jewishness. The real question is, "Is it true?" That, as we have stated, is really a question of faith and it holds a challenge for all people, Jew and Gentile alike.



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The Apple of His Eye Mission Society  
PO Box 1649  
Brentwood, TN 37024-1649  
(888) 512-7753  
[info@appleofhiseye.org](mailto:info@appleofhiseye.org)

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