To the Ends of the Earth Ministries presents

The Jewish Roots of Christianity

With Pastor Jeff Harrison

Come learn about God’s original vision for the Church, How the Church rejected that vision, and how God is restoring the Church to its Jewish Roots in our generation
THE JEWISH ROOTS OF CHRISTIANITY

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Many Scripture verses have been translated or modified by the author to bring out details of the original Greek or Hebrew text. Otherwise:


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Preface

Welcome! Incredible discoveries in Israel and the Middle East are helping us understand Jesus and the Bible more accurately than for almost two thousand years. To The Ends Of The Earth Ministries is dedicated to making this information known around the world. Join us as we explore the Jewish Roots of Christianity and take this exciting information to the ends of the earth. For more information, visit us online at www.totheends.com

The Jewish Roots of Christianity is one in a series of Landmarks of Faith Seminars that have been presented to thousands of students and in scores of churches in the U.S., Canada, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The Landmarks series draws on Pastor Jeff Harrison’s experience as a study-tour teacher in Israel and his study with some of the top Israeli archeologists and scholars in Jerusalem.

This e-book is being made available free on our website in response to the many requests we have received over the years for transcripts of these seminars. If you enjoy it, why not stop by our website and make a donation?

This is an excerpt from the first lecture of the Jewish Roots of Christianity Seminar. For additional lectures request a seminar.

Or you can now read the entire seminar and get lots of additional information by buying the book in print.
Introduction

Our first seminar, Jesus of Nazareth, presented Jesus and the disciples as they really were: Jews living in Israel. It showed how important our Jewish roots are to help us understand Jesus and the Bible more accurately. But that seminar also raises many questions. Why do Christians know so little about their Jewish roots? Why did Christianity, which started out as a Jewish religion among the Jews, become a mostly Gentile religion? What other important parts of our faith have been lost or misunderstood over the years? And how do we get back in touch with our original Jewish roots today?

This seminar is to answer those questions. We’re going to learn how Christianity rejected the Jews, Jewish Christians, and its own Jewish roots; how this rejection led it far away from God’s plan and purpose; and how God is pointing the way back home in our generation. To answer these questions, we have to look back into the history of Christianity. But this will not be the kind of Church history most of us are familiar with. There is a dark side to Church history that most people know nothing about: a history of hatred, persecution, and rejection of the Jews, of Jewish Christians, and of Christianity’s Jewish roots. This is a hidden history that every Christian needs to know. And God has chosen this generation to hear this message and to act on it.

Some parts of this seminar may be difficult to listen to. But it may be one of the most important teachings you will ever hear. The information in it can change your life, as it has mine, and bring you into a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

For all this to make sense, you have to hear the whole story. So I’m going to challenge you right from the start to attend every session and listen diligently to everything that is taught. Some of it may
take an effort to understand. But it will be very much worth it in the end! Are you ready?

**Seminar Outline**

The seminar is divided into five parts:

**Lecture #1) Early Jewish Christianity:** What did the church look like when it was still in touch with its Jewish roots? What was God’s *original* plan for the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Messiah? There’s a lot of confusion on this topic that we’re going to try to clear up in this first session with the help of new discoveries.

**Lecture #2) The Gentilization of the Faith:** What happened when Christianity came to Rome and to other Gentile cities and towns. How did Gentile Christians understand and how did they misunderstand the gospel? How did a series of horrible wars make bitter enemies of Jews and Gentiles, and bring anti-Semitic attitudes into the Church—along with many misunderstandings of our Jewish and Biblical heritage. Some of these misunderstandings continue until today. What are they and how can we correct them?

**Lecture #3) Imperial Christianity:** In the 4th century, Christianity went from being the faith of a persecuted and hated minority to become the official religion of the Roman Empire. This was the origin of the State Church, an official, government sponsored church. State churches can still be found in some places in Europe today. In a state church, pastors are government employees whose salaries are paid by the government! But this also means they are controlled by the government. This State Church officially cut itself off from its Jewish roots under the Emperor Constantine, becoming a Gentile-only religion. The Christian Empire introduced anti-Semitic laws against the Jews and also persecuted Bible-believing Christians. The worst atrocities came in the time of the Crusades, a church sponsored invasion of the Middle East in which thousands of Jews, Muslims, and Christians were killed through war,
massacre, and torture. Perhaps you’ve heard of the Inquisition: Church-sponsored torture of those who disagreed with the official Church. Many of those tortured were Jews. These are the pages of history that, as one scholar said, the Church has torn out of the history books, but which the Jews and others have never forgotten—and we, too, should never forget.

Lecture #4) Christianity and the Modern State of Israel: The peak of persecution of the Jews was not in the Middle Ages, but in the 20th century. The Holocaust was one of the most horrible events in human history, in which 6 million Jews were killed. This took place in historically Christian nations: Germany, Russia, and Poland. Many of those who committed these murders were baptized, church-going Christians. How could this happen? The Holocaust was not just a horrible “accident” along the road of history. It was the direct result of a long heritage of hatred and persecution of Jews by Christians, a sickness that has gripped Christianity for hundreds of years—and still does today in many places. Anti-Semitism did not end in World War II. It is continuing to grow and spread around the world today.

We’ll also look at the dramatic rebirth of the State of Israel, the most important fulfillment of prophecy since the time of Jesus. More prophecies are being fulfilled in Israel today than at any time since the life of Jesus! An important part of these prophecies is the rebirth of Jewish Christianity, or as it is known today, Messianic Judaism. These events came as a shock to many Christians and Christian denominations. What do these amazing prophetic events mean? They’re happening for a reason. They’re a message that God is sending to us! How does God want us to respond to the message? How is God using Israel to restore the Church to its Jewish roots? And what will this mean for the Church in the years to come?

Let’s begin with a word of prayer: Lord God, open our hearts and our eyes as we study the difficult history of your Church. Help us hear the voice of the Spirit as we meditate on both the victories and
the sins of the past, so that we can grow in wisdom and knowledge, and lead our generation into the truth. In Jesus’ name, Amen.
The Law of the Spirit: Early Jewish Christianity

Part I: The Book of Acts

To many Christians, and to many Jews, Jewish Christianity sounds like a contradiction in terms. How can you be both Christian and Jewish? This contradiction can be seen in Christian artwork—even in Israel. The Church at the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem has huge mosaics at the front of the church. Jesus and the disciples are shown with light skin, high foreheads, and light-colored hair: they’re shown as Gentiles, as Europeans. But the high priest, Judas and the others, the bad guys of the story, are shown as Jewish with exaggerated features: dark skin, huge potato noses, claw-like hands. This is, of course, ridiculous. Yeshua (Jesus) and the disciples were just as Jewish as the rest of them. So why are such inaccurate and insulting pictures allowed in a church—especially in Israel—and not just there, but in hundreds of other churches around the world? Why is it so hard for Christians to accept Jesus and the disciples as Jews—and a tendency to paint other Jews as less than human? Why are so many Christians ignorant of the most obvious truth about our religion: that we worship a Jewish savior, whose Jewish disciples founded a Jewish religion in Israel?

Originally, there was only one kind of Christianity, and that was Jewish Christianity. That was the Christianity of Peter, Paul, James, and John. They didn’t stop being Jews when they accepted Jesus! In fact, you could say they became more Jewish than ever when they accepted Jesus as Messiah. According to their own writings, Christianity is the fulfillment of what Israel and the Jewish people are all about—it’s why God separated out Abraham from among

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1 The Church of All Nations on the Mt. of Olives.
2 Yeshua (yeh-SHU-ah) is the original Hebrew name of Jesus.
the peoples. It’s why God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It’s why God spoke through the prophets: to prepare a people for the coming of the Jewish Messiah. That people was the Jewish people. And the early Jewish Christians were the ones that first received him. We always tend to focus on the Jews that rejected Jesus. But as Paul says in Romans 11, God didn’t reject his people—aren’t I a Jew, he says? God didn’t reject me! (Rom. 11:1) Nor did God reject the thousands of other Jews that accepted him. Sure, it was only a remnant, a minority of the Jewish people. But God has always worked with a remnant. As Paul says in Romans 9: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved” (Rom. 9:27).

Yet this original Jewish Christianity of Jesus, Peter, Paul, James, and John disappeared so completely from history that for centuries it was forgotten, and Christians carried on as if there had never been such a thing. Christianity became a completely Gentile religion, cut off from its Jewish roots. Today we must piece together the evidence for the early Jewish Christians like a detective story, sorting out tiny bits and pieces of evidence to find out what happened.

**Why Should We Care About the Early Jewish Christians?**

But why should we do that? Why should we care about the early Jewish Christians? As one fellow put it, why should I care about such a small group of people that lived in a distant country so long ago? What difference does it make to my Christianity here today, thousands of miles away? Here are five good reasons to start with:

**#1: Because God himself cares about the Jews.** The biggest miracle taking place right now—in our lifetimes—is the restoration of Israel to the Jewish people: the rebirth of the State of Israel. This came as a shock to many Christians and Christian denominations. Why? Because for hundreds of years, we had been teaching that God has rejected the Jews and has replaced Israel with the Church. And yet,
miraculously, spectacularly, God has answered that false teaching with a resounding “No! I have not rejected my people!”

#2: Jesus is a Jew. The gospels of Matthew and Luke list Jesus’ ancestry generation by generation all the way back to King David—back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That’s as Jewish as you can get! Not only did he look like a Jew, he spoke as a Jew, he taught as a Jew, his ministry was to Jews. If you remove Jesus’ ministry from this Jewish context, you will misunderstand his message and his meaning. (This was the subject of our first seminar: “Jesus of Nazareth.”)

#3: The New Testament is a Jewish book: nearly all of it was written by Jewish Christians, and much of it was written to Jewish Christians. One of the first things they teach you when you study Bible interpretation is: find out who is writing and who they are writing to. Why? It makes a difference. Many churches want to be New Testament churches, but let’s face it, New Testament Christianity was mostly Jewish Christianity. If we really want to have New Testament churches, we must find out about our Jewish roots. Otherwise, we won’t understand what the Bible is talking about.

#4: Christianity was originally a Jewish religion. Jesus himself said: “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). Not only were Jesus and the disciples Jewish, all those thousands saved on the day of Pentecost were Jews. The thousands saved at the preaching of Peter and John in the Temple were Jews. In fact, the entire Church was almost completely Jewish for at least ten years after the resurrection of Jesus. That’s how many years it took before they realized the gospel was also for Gentiles!

In the early years, these Jewish Christians only preached the gospel to fellow Jews: “Those who were dispersed…made their way…speaking the Word to no one except to Jews alone” (Acts 11:19). This is the way the gospel was first spread to Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), Antioch (in modern Turkey), Cyprus, Asia Minor (also in modern
Turkey), Greece, and Rome—as the book of Acts tells us; but also, as we know from history, to Alexandria (in Egypt), Cyrene (in modern Libya), Edessa (in Syria), Persia (modern Iraq and Iran), and even to India in the East. It was a strictly Jewish religion preached only among the Jews.

The disciples never said when they accepted Jesus as Messiah that they left one religion and joined another. They claimed that Christianity was what I’d like to call the “true Judaism,” the correct understanding of what Judaism is all about, and a fulfillment of that same Jewish religion.

#5: Even Gentile Christians are part of what God is doing with Israel. As Paul said to Gentile believers in Eph. 2:12,19: "Remember that you were at that time without Messiah, being alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise.... [but now] you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow-citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God." The relationship of Judaism and Christianity is shown in the olive tree of Romans 11: That tree is Israel. Some branches have been broken off, other branches have been grafted in—but it’s still the same tree (Rom. 11:17-24). We Gentile believers have been grafted in to Israel. Israel is the root, we are only branches.

Israel is the focus and the heartbeat of God’s interaction with mankind—even if nearly the whole nation of Israel should turn away from God, as happened in the time of Elijah (1 Kings 19:14,18). Because the true Israel is the spiritual remnant of the nation. As Paul quoted Isaiah in Romans 9:27: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved.” And because of that holy remnant, Israel was and still is the apple of God’s eye. The good news is that we as Gentiles have been invited to join that remnant—that God is willing to accept us into his chosen people.

The coming together into unity of the remnant of Israel and a believing remnant of the Gentiles is one of the reasons Jesus died
on the cross. Paul said in Ephesians 2:13-16: “But now in Christ Jesus, you who formerly were far off [Gentile Christians] have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both [Jews and Gentiles] one, and broke down the dividing wall… – the hostility between the two – in his flesh…that in himself he might make the two into one new man…through the cross.”

Satan has done everything he can over the years to destroy that unity and tear it apart. But that doesn’t change the fact that it is still God’s plan for us as Gentile Christians to be incorporated into the spiritual reality of Israel. We have become citizens of the Jewish kingdom of a Jewish king: King Jesus (Melech Yeshua), who rules and reigns over his Messianic kingdom.

Pentecost: Something Completely New?

But this is not the traditional Christian view. Many Christians look at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as the start of something completely new, the new religion of Christianity, the “birthday” of the Church, as if it was totally disconnected from all the preceding history of Israel. But that’s not what the disciples themselves thought of it. On that same day of Pentecost, they said that these are the last days of which the prophets have spoken. As Peter said in Acts 2:17: “And it will be in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” The Messiah was to come at the end of time, the culmination of the age. As the apostle Paul put it in Gal. 4:4: “When the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son.” This is imagery from an ancient water clock: when the container was full, it was the end of a period of time. The Messiah came at the end of the age, in the fullness of time. To the disciples, this was not the beginning of the story, but the last chapter of an incredible story that was already ages old, tracing all the way back to the time of Moses and Abraham, even back to Adam himself.

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3 Melech (MEH-lek) means king in Hebrew. Yeshua is Jesus’ original Hebrew name.
The festival at which this happened, the festival of Pentecost (also known as the Feast of Weeks or Shavuoth) is one of the Jewish feasts that the Jewish people have celebrated since the time of Moses. For Judaism, Pentecost is the anniversary of the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. On this day they remember their incredible experience in the desert, when a thick cloud descended on Mt. Sinai with thunder and flashes of lightning and the loud blast of a trumpet (Ex. 19:18,19). No wonder God chose this day to send the Holy Spirit with the noise of a strong, rushing wind, and with tongues of fire resting on each one of them (Acts 2:2,3)! To the Jewish disciples of Jesus, this must have seemed like a second Sinai! God was descending again in the fire of the Holy Spirit!

As at Sinai, this was a revelation from heaven to change something in their relationship with God. As Jesus said just a few days before, “when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will receive power…and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). The Jews had long recognized obedience to God’s Word — to his Law — as a witness to the nations. Even the tablets of the 10 Commandments are called the “tablets of witness” (in Ex. 31:18, 32:15, 34:29): they were a witness to the reality of God’s covenant with his people. But now that testimony would no longer be engraved on tablets of stone, but on the hearts of men. As Jeremiah prophesied: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and on their heart I will write it” (Jer. 31:33). This is what the New Testament calls the Law of the Messiah (1 Cor. 9:21, Gal. 6:2), the law of faith (Rom. 3:27), the law of liberty (Jam. 1:25, 2:12), the Royal Law (Jam. 2:8), the commandment of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:2), the holy commandment (2 Pet. 2:21), the commandment (1 Tim. 6:14), his commandments (1 John 2:34, 2 John 1:6), or as Jesus said, my commandments (John 14:15,21; 15:10): an inner law of holiness that is in us because of the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

To the Jewish disciples, this new Law was not a contradiction of the old Law, but its confirmation. As Paul says in Romans 3, “Do we

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4 Pronounced shah-vu-OTE. The syllable in capital letters gets the accent.
then nullify the Law through faith?  May it never be!  On the contrary, we establish the Law” (Rom. 3:31).  In Rom. 8:4, Paul says that the new law of the Spirit was given “in order that the requirement of the Law [the old Law of Moses] might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4).  The Spirit of God in us gives us the power to fulfill the requirement of the Law of Moses!5

Zealots for the Law

The book of Acts tells us that the thousands of new Jewish believers in Jerusalem were "all zealots for the Law" (Acts 21:20).  Instead of abandoning the Law of Moses because of their faith in Jesus, they became more devoted to the Law than they had ever been before!  Just like today, Jewish people who become believers in Jesus often "rediscover" their Jewishness, and suddenly become very interested in Jewish history, Israel, and the Jewish Law.  This obedience to the Law by Jewish Christians has been a big stumbling block for Gentile Christians over the years.  When I first heard that most Jewish believers in Jesus obey the Law of Moses, I couldn’t accept it.  It contradicted traditions I was taught in church and in seminary.  But the facts of the Bible are indisputable, as most scholars recognize today.

For example, in Jerusalem, Jewish believers in Jesus continued to worship as Jews in the Temple, even after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus:

Luke 24:53 "And they were constantly in the Temple, blessing God."
Acts 2:46: "Every day…spending a lot of time with one mind in the Temple"
Acts 3:1: "Peter and John were ascending into the Temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer"
Acts 3:11: "All the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s [located in the Temple]"

5 The requirement of the Law is that we be set free from the law of sin and of death, even though the Law itself was unable to bring this about (Rom. 8:2-4).  Only in Messiah can this take place through the Holy Spirit.
Acts 5:12: "They were all with one mind in the Portico of Solomon"
Acts 5:21: "They entered about dawn into the Temple and were teaching"
Acts 5:42: "Every day...in the Temple...they did not stop teaching and telling the good news of Jesus the Messiah"

They also continued to participate in synagogue worship:
Acts 9:2: "...letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found some who were of the Way [followers of Jesus]"
Acts 22:19: "From synagogue to synagogue I was imprisoning and beating those who believe in you"
James 2:2: "For if a man in shining clothes with gold rings on his fingers enters into your synagogue [this is what it clearly says in Greek, though rarely translated correctly]..."

Do you remember the first name for Christianity used by the believers themselves? It was called "the Way":
Acts 9:2: "So that if he found some who were of the Way"
Acts 19:9: "But as some were becoming hardened...speaking evil of the Way"
Acts 19:23: "A commotion took place, and not a little one, concerning the Way"
Acts 22:4: "Who persecuted this Way to the death"
Acts 24:14: "According to the Way that they call a sect"
Acts 24:22: "Felix, since he understood the facts concerning the Way more accurately"
2 Peter 2:2: "The Way of the truth will be slandered"

Christianity was understood to be the way to go, the way to live your life, or you could say, instruction for living. It was not so much a creed of correct beliefs, although beliefs were certainly important. But the emphasis was on how you lived. This is still the focus of Judaism today. Rabbis teach their students the correct way to live, the correct way to obey the Law of Moses (Halacha⁶). In the same way, the Jewish Christians believed that their rabbi, Yeshua

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⁶ Pronounced ha-la-KHAH. It means literally “the walk” or “the way to walk (or live)” in obedience to the Jewish Law.
(Jesus), had given them the correct way to live, the correct interpretation of the Law of Moses through the Law of the Messiah.

The Prophet Like Moses

This was one of the Jewish expectations of the Messiah, that the Messiah would resolve all the difficulties of the Law of Moses. Where did they get this idea from? From Deut. 18:18,19, which was one of the most well-known prophecies about the Messiah: "I will raise up a prophet for them from among their brothers like you [Moses], and I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to them all that I command him.... The man that will not listen to my words that he will speak in my name, I will require it from him." This was a prophecy that God would send a prophet "like Moses," that is, not an ordinary prophet, but one with the law-making authority of Moses himself, to explain God’s Law. And how would they recognize this prophet? God said he would “raise him up” (Deut. 18:18). In Hebrew, this is the same word used for resurrection (Hos. 6:2, Jer. 30:9).

That’s why, when Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” (Matt. 16:13), they answered John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the other prophets: all people that were already dead. Because of Deut. 18:18, they were looking for a prophet that had been raised from the dead. But it wasn’t until after the resurrection of Jesus that they understood it’s true meaning. It was a prophecy of Jesus’ own resurrection, and the proof that he is the Prophet like Moses, who interprets God’s Law for us, and whose words must be obeyed.

To the early Jewish Christians, it would be impossible to imagine any contradiction between the Law of Moses and the Law of the Messiah. Christianity was not a replacement for Judaism. As Jesus Himself said in Matt. 5:17: “Do not suppose that I came to abolish the
Law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fill them." So of course the Jewish Christians continued to live as Jesus himself did, obeying the Law of God as Jesus interpreted it to them.

Paul and the Jewish Law

Many are willing to admit that Jesus himself observed the Jewish Law, along with many of his disciples. But what about Paul? Did he obey the Law? There is a popular view that Paul was against the Law of Moses. Some go so far as to say there was a split in the Church between the followers of James in Jerusalem, who kept the Law, and the followers of Paul, who did not. Is this true? Was Paul really against the Jewish Law, as so many believe?

According to the Bible, in Acts 18, Paul took a vow: "...after he [Paul] cut off the hair of his head in Cenchrea, for he was keeping a vow" (Acts 18:18). What kind of vow was this? A Jewish Nazirite vow, taught in the Law of Moses (Num. 6:1-21). Why would Paul do this after becoming a believer in Jesus if he was against the Law?

He continued to observe the Jewish feasts: As it says in Acts 20:6: "We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread..." Why after the feast? Because the Law forbid travel on holy days. Or in Acts 20:16: "...for he [Paul] was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost." Why? To celebrate the feast. And again in Acts 16:8: "But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost..." Paul continued to measure time by the Jewish feasts.

On another trip to Jerusalem, Paul found out that the rumor had gone out (just as it has gone out today) that he was teaching Jews to stop observing the Law, and to stop circumcising their children:
"They have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their

7 Jesus said he came to “fill” (pleiōsaї) the Law and the Prophets, that is to fill them with their full meaning (“the Law and the Prophets” is the Jewish term for the Old Testament). This can refer to fulfillment, as this is usually translated, but also to completing and perfecting the Law and Prophets, in the sense of giving them the correct interpretation.
children nor to walk according to the customs" (Acts 21:21). What did he do about it? He went up to the Temple, not only to prove that these charges were false, but also to prove that he himself was faithfully keeping the Law (Acts 21:23-26). As he said later in Acts 25:8: "I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the Temple."

The accusations against Paul were similar to those against Stephen in Acts 6:13,14: "They put forward false witnesses who said, 'This man does not stop saying things against the Holy Place [the Temple] and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus, the Nazarene, will destroy this place and will alter the customs which Moses delivered to us [the Law].'" The Bible says it was the false witnesses that said Jesus will change the Law!

But here is the most powerful argument of all: If Paul was really against the Law, why did he circumcise Timothy? "Paul wanted this man [Timothy] to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those parts." (Acts 16:3). Paul circumcised Timothy? But isn't Paul the one who said in Galatians: "If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you" (Gal. 5:2)? What's going on? Is Paul for or against circumcision? Is he for or against the Law?

Let's let him answer this puzzle in his own words: "Was anyone called who is circumcised [in other words, who is Jewish]? Do not remove the marks of circumcision. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision [in other words, a Gentile]? Let him not be circumcised.... 'Each in the calling in which he was called,' let him remain in this (his calling)" (1 Cor. 7:18,20). According to Paul, being a Jew (circumcised) or being a Gentile (uncircumcised) is a calling of God, which cannot and should not be changed after you become a Christian. Timothy was Jewish: his mother was Jewish, which makes you a Jew even today (Acts 16:1). He should be circumcised. But the Gentile Christians in Galatia should not be. A Gentile should continue as a Gentile; and a Jew should continue as a Jew, which means he will continue to obey the Jewish law.
This doesn’t mean that the Law can contribute anything to salvation. It obviously can’t—and nothing is more obvious to a Jewish believer in Jesus that had obeyed the Law all his life, but was not saved by it. Salvation is only through faith in Messiah, for both Jew and Gentile. This is just as true now as it was in the time of the OT—for salvation was only ever by faith. As Paul says in Gal. 3:6, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

But for many Gentile Christians, this obedience by Jewish Christians to the Law doesn’t make sense. If observing the Law is not essential to salvation, and in fact never provided salvation, why do Jewish believers in Jesus feel that they should continue to obey it? The answer: Because God told them to. He made a covenant with them, which the Bible says will endure as long as the heavens and the earth endure (Matt. 5:18). Have the heavens and the earth passed away? No. Then it’s still in force! As Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law and the prophets” (Matt. 5:17). Obedience to the Law is not, and never was a means of salvation. But it continues to play an important role: to point to the Messiah, and to confirm that Jesus is who he says he is!

As Paul says in Romans 11, in speaking about this same issue: "For the gifts and the calling of God are unchangeable" (Rom. 11:29). Jews are Jews, and as Jews, they should continue to keep the Law of Moses even after they come to faith in Jesus: it's their calling. Remember, too, that at the time, the Law of Moses was the law of the land. It would make no more sense for a Jewish believer in Jesus to break the Law of Moses than for a Gentile Christian to break the laws of his own country. The Bible says that we should obey the authorities over us. How much more when you know that these laws were given by God himself!

Now that is a different point of view than we’re usually taught! And it just might make us downright uncomfortable. When I first heard this from modern Jewish Christians (Messianic Jews), I
couldn’t accept it. It went against ancient prejudices I’d been taught in seminary. But as I studied the evidence, verse by verse, in Greek and in Hebrew, I was shocked to find: they’re right! It's what the Bible has always taught. And it’s what the early Jewish Christians did without debate or disagreement for hundreds of years. We Gentile Christians just forgot how to understand these verses correctly.

Gentiles and the Jewish Law

So if Israel is the focus of God’s work in the world, and we Gentile Christians have been grafted in to Israel, what about us? Are we supposed to keep the Law, too? If we are fellow citizens with the holy ones (as Paul says in Ephesians), shouldn’t we obey the same laws that they do? This was the big question troubling the early Church. They never questioned whether Jews should obey the Law, but what about us, the Gentile Christians? Do we need to observe the Sabbath, as some teach? Do we need to avoid pork, as others teach? What about blood? What about Jewish festivals? Today there are many groups teaching that Gentile Christians must obey the Law of Moses. Are they right?

The place of the Gentiles with regard to Jewish religion was not a new problem in the time of the book of Acts: the Jews had already spent hundreds of years debating whether Gentiles should obey the Law of Moses or not. Some rabbis, we’ll call them group “A”, taught that Gentiles who wanted to serve God should convert to Judaism: they should become proselytes, converts to Judaism. This meant they had to obey all the Jewish laws, just like those born Jewish.

But other rabbis, we’ll call them group “B”, taught it was not necessary for Gentiles to observe the Law of Moses, since the Law of Moses was a covenant between God and the Jewish people alone. Instead, they said it was enough for Gentiles to observe the
Laws of Noah.8 Now what are they? Most of us have never even heard of the Laws of Noah before. According to the rabbis, there are seven of these Laws of Noah: “Rabbi Johanan taught: Seven laws are binding on the descendants of Noah: (1) establishment of courts of justice; (2) prohibition of blasphemy; (3) prohibition of the worship of other gods, (4) of murder, (5) of incest and adultery, (6) of theft and robbery, and (7) of eating the flesh of a living animal before it dies [i.e. with its blood]” (San. 56a).

Where did the rabbis get these seven laws, which by the way they still teach today? They are the laws given by God to all mankind in the book of Genesis, from the time of Adam until the time of Noah. It’s the covenant for which God gave the rainbow as a sign in the sky. Since we’re all descended from Noah, we’re all part of God’s covenant with Noah. Right? Makes sense.9

In Gen. 9:9, God said, “I myself establish my covenant with you [Noah] and with your descendants after you.” Are you a descendant of Noah? Then this covenant is also with you. In Gen. 9:16, it’s called an eternal covenant! Does God break his eternal covenants?

The Laws of Noah match some of the 10 commandments:

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8 The Laws of Noah were formalized and given this name after the time of the New Testament. But the idea of seven Noachide laws can already be seen in the book of Jubilees, which dates to the pre-Christian era and was influential in early Christianity (Jub. 7:20,28,29). Many believe these laws originated in sections of the Law of Moses concerning the ger ha-gar (resident alien), laws concerning Gentiles who lived among the Jews found mostly in the book of Leviticus. This body of law closely matches the rabbis’ seven laws: the prohibition of sexual immorality (Lev. 18:26), the prohibition of eating blood (Lev. 17:10,13,15), the prohibition of idolatry (Lev. 20:2), the prohibition of blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), and the prohibition of murder (Lev. 24:22). The Laws of Noah are mentioned in many places in rabbincic literature, including Gen. R. 16:6, 24:5, 34:8; Sanh. 56a-59b; Hul. 92a; and BK 38a. In Gentile Christian theology, the Laws of Noah were replaced by the more general idea of “Natural Law.”

9 If you look in Gen. 9, you will find only three of the laws mentioned by the rabbis: no murder (Gen. 9:5), the punishment of murderers (Gen. 9:6; usually interpreted as the responsibility to establish courts of law), and no eating of blood (Gen. 9:4). Where did the rabbis get the other laws? From the things forbidden to Gentiles (strangers, gerim) in other places in the Law of Moses. See previous note and the “Laws of Noah” teaching on the Classroom page of our website at http://www.totheends.com/noah.html
1) No blasphemy is the **3rd Commandment**: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7).

2) No idolatry is in the **1st and 2nd Commandments**: "You will have no other gods besides Me" (Ex. 20:3); "You shall not make for yourself an idol...you shall not worship them or serve them" (Ex. 20:4,5).

3) No adultery is the **7th Commandment**: "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14).

4) No murder is the **6th Commandment**: "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13).

5) No robbery is the **8th Commandment**: "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15).

And because of this, some in the Church have taught over the years that Gentile Christians must obey the 10 commandments. But they forgot why we must obey them: because they were first given to our ancestor, Noah!\(^\text{10}\)

The rabbis of group “B” considered any Gentile willing to obey the Laws of Noah a **Godfearer** (in Greek) or a **Fearer of Heaven** (in Hebrew), and taught that they will have a share in the world to come. (Today the rabbis call them Righteous Gentiles or Sons of Noah.) In other words, they taught that Gentiles have their own law, the Laws of Noah, and their own accountability before God, which is different than the law of the Jews. After all, God is the Father of all mankind, isn’t he? Which is exactly how Paul put it: "Is God only the God of the Jews? Is he not also the God of Gentiles? Yes, also of Gentiles" (Rom. 3:29). Paul agreed that keeping the Law of Moses is not a requirement for all mankind. The Law of Moses is a distinctive covenant between God and the Jewish people, and no one else.

\(^{10}\) To say that Gentile Christians must obey the Ten Commandments because they are written in Exodus and Deuteronomy contradicts the Biblical teaching that we are not under the Law of Moses (Gal. 5:18; the Ten Commandments are part of the Law of Moses, Ex. 20:1-17 and Deut. 5:6-21). But if we understand that these instructions stretch back to Noah (or to our created nature as the early Church Fathers taught), there is no contradiction. The most important difference between the two sets of law is that the Laws of Noah (and the Church’s original teachings about Natural Law) do not include the Sabbath commandment (more on this later).
For example, everyone knows that the Jews are forbidden to eat pork (Lev. 11:7). The rabbis of group “B” saw the prohibition of pork to mean nothing about pork itself. Pork was a perfectly good food. So why did God prohibit pork for the Jewish people? To set them apart from others—period. It’s part of their special calling. This was not because pork was bad for you, or had something about it that was unclean: it was simply because God, for reasons unknown to man, had selected pork to be forbidden.\(^{11}\) Lev. 11:7 says, “It will be unclean to you”—to the Jews.\(^{12}\) It doesn’t say anything about it being unclean to others. This is exactly the point of view of the apostle Paul in Romans 14:14: "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing (he's talking about food) is unclean in itself." We do not need to be worried about certain foods because they are themselves unclean.

If you, a Gentile Christian, stop eating pork, it won't make you any more holy. The pork itself is not the issue. All that is important is obeying the will of God. "Circumcision [that is, being a Jew] is nothing, and uncircumcision [being a Gentile] is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Cor. 7:19). A Jew who obeys God will not eat, because it's forbidden to him, and a Gentile who obeys God is free to eat. Why? Because each has his own calling from God: “Each in the calling in which he was called” (1

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\(^{11}\) Many in both the Jewish and Christian communities over the years have tried to explain the food laws on the basis of health considerations. While there may be other reasons to avoid the foods forbidden in Lev. 11, the bottom line is the fact of God’s command, and not our attempt to derive a rationale for these restrictions.\(^{12}\) These Jewish food laws were not rejected by Jesus and the early Jewish Christians. When Mark says of Jesus’ teaching, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (as it’s usually incorrectly translated; Mark 7:19), Jesus was talking about contact uncleanness from unwashed hands (the area of Jewish Law known as Tohoroth). This passage is not talking about the food laws (an area of Jewish Law known as Kashrut). Jesus is upholding the Written Law of God against the traditions of the Pharisees. Nor did Jesus ever teach against any precept of the Written Law. As he himself said, “Do not suppose that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets...” (Matt. 5:17). See the teaching “Did Jesus Abolish the Jewish Food Laws?” on the Classroom page of our website at http://www.totheends.com/hands.html
Cor. 7:20). Why? "For the gifts and the calling of God are unchangeable" (Rom. 11:29).

This idea of different people with different callings is a very Jewish way of thinking. And because of that, it’s very hard for Gentiles to understand. How can God have different rules for different people? We always want to make all people alike: equality under the law is a popular legal ideal in modern society.

But the Jews are used to different rules for different people. In the Law of Moses, there are different laws for men and women, for priests and Levites, for kings, for children, for those who are married, and for those who are single. And in the same way, there are different laws for Jews and Gentiles. Each has a special calling, and there are different laws that apply to each calling.

But what about Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus." Doesn’t that prove we’re all the same, with no differences? Does it? It certainly proves that we are all one body in Christ. All of us are accepted by faith, no matter what kind of person we are. But this doesn't mean that men stop being men or women stop being women! Nor does it mean Jews stop being Jews or Gentiles stop being Gentiles. We all have our individual callings. But in spite of this diversity of callings, we are all one in Christ. Diversity in unity, unity in diversity: this is one of the great truths and the great revelations of Christianity.

God does not want uniformity: all of us doing exactly the same thing the same way—like an army of robots. What he wants is unity, or better yet, harmony, like a symphony orchestra—all of us working together toward a shared goal, but each playing a different instrument according to his own individual calling. This is the same God that made thousands of different kinds of flowers, thousands of different kinds of trees, yet all blend together into beautiful landscapes. This is God’s vision for the body of Messiah: one body and one spirit, but with grace given to each individually
according the gift given to each (Eph. 4:7). Using those gifts in spiritual harmony is what builds up the Body of Messiah (Eph. 4:16).\(^{13}\)

**The Council of Jerusalem**

At first, Jewish Christians were split on this issue of Gentiles and the Law. Some sided with the rabbis of group “A,” who were in favor of making Gentiles convert to Judaism; others sided with the rabbis in group “B.” The issue became a conflict in Antioch, when Paul and Barnabas got into a fierce debate with some believers from Judea (Acts 15:1,2; Gal. 2:12-14). Because of this, the Church held its first council, in Acts 15, to decide what should be done about the Gentiles. The believers that were Pharisees said that Gentile believers must be circumcised (they were on side “A”; Acts 15:5). Then Peter spoke up for the other side (side “B”) and told about the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 15:7-11). Paul told about his missions work in Turkey and Cyprus among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Then a decision had to be made.

That’s when James, the brother of Jesus, began to speak. He quoted a Scripture from the book of Amos (Amos 9:11-12): "After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the Tabernacle of David that has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been named" (Acts 15:16-17). On the basis of this verse, the issue was settled. Why? What does it mean? What is the tabernacle of David?

These verses refer to the kingly line of David, which fell into ruins in the time of the Babylonians. But in Jesus, this kingly line is now restored! Now the door is wide open to Gentiles as well as to Jews to seek the Lord. Amos’ words imply that Gentiles as Gentiles are

\(^{13}\) See the Ephesians translation and notes on the Classroom page of our web site at http://www.totheends.com/ephesians1.html).
made acceptable to God through Jesus.\textsuperscript{14} Conversion to Judaism is not necessary.

In David’s historical kingdom, there were not only Israelites, but many different kinds of Gentiles: Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and others (2 Sam. 8:1-14). But the Law of Moses was observed only in the Israelite portion of this kingdom. This is the picture of the kingdom of the Messiah given in Acts: All who accept Jesus are under his kingly authority, but only in the Jewish section of that kingdom is the Law of Moses in force.

In Greek, the “booth” or tent of David also brings to mind the tent David built for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:17). Here they worshipped the Lord not according to the Law of Moses, which required the Tabernacle of Moses, but according to the instructions of David in a new tabernacle, with new music and singing that had never been part of their worship before. This was a new way of worshipping God, outside of the Law of Moses. The “Tabernacle of David” is a way for Gentiles to worship God without having to do it according to the Law of Moses!\textsuperscript{15} James and the others accepted this prophecy as proof that it is not necessary for Gentiles to become Jews in order to serve God. God has made another way for us: the Tabernacle of David, which is a picture and a type of the ministry of the Messiah. And because of that, you and I as Gentile Christians are not under the Law of Moses today!

**The Three Exceptions**

But there were three exceptions to this ruling, three things they thought should be required of Gentile Christians: That they "[1] Abstain from things contaminated by idols, and [2] from sexual immorality, and [3] from what is strangled and from blood" (Acts

\textsuperscript{14} The words “over whom my name has been named” in the original Hebrew of Amos 9:12 and the Greek of Acts 15:17, refer prophetically to Christian baptism.

\textsuperscript{15} Worship in the tent of David did not replace worship in the Tabernacle of Moses, but was in addition to it. The Tabernacle was at the time in the neighboring city of Gibeon (1 Chron. 16:39, 21:29).
Now this is really strange. They just decided on the basis of prophecy that the Gentiles are not under the Law of Moses. But then they turn right around and impose three of those laws back on us. What’s going on?

If you look carefully, you’ll see that these are three of the Laws of Noah. By making this ruling, the Council showed its agreement with the rabbis of group “B,” who did not require Gentiles to convert to Judaism, but only required them to obey the Laws of Noah.

But why only these three laws, and not all seven? Perhaps, as someone suggested, it’s because most of the other Laws of Noah were already accepted by the Gentile world: The Romans recognized that murder and robbery were wrong, and had courts to deal with these crimes. The prohibition of blasphemy was probably considered unnecessary, since the rabbis considered this only to involve the actual name of God (YHVH)\(^\text{17}\), which only the priests knew how to pronounce. This left only three to mention: (1) idolatry, (2) sexual immorality, and (3) eating blood, all of which were practiced by the Romans. These are the same three mentioned in Acts 15.

Does that mean these three things are all it takes to be a Christian? No way! We also share with Jewish Christians the Law of the Messiah, the Way that Jesus came to show us, which is recorded in the New Testament. Acts 15 only exempts Gentile Christians from commands found in the Law of Moses. We must still obey the Laws of Noah as well as the Law of Messiah, the New Testament.

\(^{16}\) The prohibition of eating the meat of a strangled animal is essentially the same as the prohibition of blood: The strangled animal is prohibited because its blood remains in it. Some understand the prohibition of blood to be a fourth exception referring to the prohibition of murder. But the allusion is clearly to Gen. 9:4, where the eating of blood is forbidden.

\(^{17}\) Often written YHWH or Yahweh. This is the four letter name of God (the tetragrammaton). The correct pronunciation is no longer known.
The Bible says this was not only the decision of the Council, but also of the Holy Spirit: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). But do we obey their decision today? I hope so! I certainly hope none of us are worshipping idols, or eating meat offered to idols, or practicing immorality. But what about eating blood? Do we require our meat to be properly butchered, and the blood drained out? Do we avoid foods made with blood?\(^{18}\)

In the Western Church, Christians have ignored this ruling of Acts 15 since about the 10\(^{th}\) century AD. This is when the Roman Catholic Church began to take a very literal view of the Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist), teaching that the wine becomes the actual physical blood of Jesus. This created a conflict with Acts 15, which forbids the eating of blood. So the popes effectively cancelled Acts 15 and said it’s now okay to eat blood! But this was not the view of the early Church. Even today in the Eastern Church (the Orthodox churches) eating blood is forbidden because of Acts 15.\(^{19}\)

**Judaizing and Gentilizing**

In the decision of the Council, and in the writings of Paul, keeping the Jewish Law is considered part of the special calling of being a Jew. Of course a Jewish Christian will obey the Law, because he is

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\(^{18}\) One example of a food made with blood is the German *blutwurst* (blood sausage, also known as black pudding). In the Philippines there is *dinuguan* (pork blood stew). Many other examples could be given. Properly butchered (*kosher*) meat is available in many grocery stores.

\(^{19}\) Under the influence of Augustine, the three exceptions have been treated in the West as a temporary concession rather than a theological necessity, despite the Bible’s affirmation that these are “necessary things” (‘...no greater burden than these necessary things,’ Acts 15:28). But in the Eastern Church (the Orthodox churches), they remain in force today, having been reaffirmed in the Seventh Ecumenical Council (8\(^{th}\) cent.). Many in the West take Acts 15:21 as an explanation of why the three exceptions were instituted (i.e. as a concession). But in fact, Acts 15:21 explains why the writing of a letter was necessary: to give Gentile Christians an authoritative defense against those preaching Moses “in every city,” who were trying to bring them under the yoke of the Law. Jesus, too, disapproved of this zeal to bring Gentiles under the law (to make them proselytes). He said against the Pharisees: “you travel about the sea and the dry land to make one proselyte...” (Matt. 23:15). These were clearly Pharisees of group “A,” that believed conversion to Judaism was necessary for Gentiles.
Jewish. And because he is also Christian, he will also obey the Law of Messiah. No other alternative is even mentioned in the Bible for Jewish believers in Jesus.\(^\text{20}\)

But for a Gentile to submit to circumcision (in other words, to become a Jew) is a step away from God. Why? Because it’s a rejection of salvation in Christ (Gal. 5:4: “You are divorced from Messiah, you who are made righteous by Law, you have forfeited grace”). Instead, we Gentile Christians should be concentrating on moving forward in Christ, in the Law of the Messiah, rather than going over to the Law of Moses.

That part Christians have historically agreed about. The Church has always condemned Judaizing, that is, telling Gentile Christians they must become Jews or act like Jews.\(^\text{21}\) But what about the other side, the side of the Jews? If observing the Law doesn’t help a Gentile get saved, how can not observing the Law help a Jew get saved? It can’t. In fact, for a Jewish believer to reject the Law is also a step away from God. We all agree that Jews should not be allowed to Judaize Gentiles. But that means Gentiles should also not be allowed to “Gentilize” Jews (1 Cor. 7:19,20). Right? Unfortunately, for more than 1,000 years that’s exactly what the Christian Church has done to Jewish believers in Jesus: it has

\(^{20}\) Although Paul makes the point that his continued obedience to the Law as a Jew is not because he is “under” the Law of Moses, but because he is now under the authority of the greater Law of Messiah (1 Cor. 9:19-21).

\(^{21}\) Although Judaizing has been gaining in popularity in recent years. Some claim a special “blessing” for Gentile Christians that observe the Law of Moses. But this directly contradicts the Biblical teaching that in Messiah, God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies (Eph. 1:3). If we already have every spiritual blessing, there are none remaining that obedience to the Law of Moses can bring us. Others go further, claiming that Gentile Christians (whom they prefer to call Ephraimites or Israelites) are required to obey the Law of Moses. This is in direct contradiction to the clear teaching of the Bible in Acts 15 and many other places (see especially Gal. 4:21-5:15, where Paul addresses a similar teaching).
forced them to be Gentilized, sometimes under threat of death for heresy! It wasn’t that long ago that Gentile Christians would give a Jewish believer a ham sandwich to eat to see if he “really” had become a Christian.

But what if a Messianic Jew doesn’t want to observe the Law of Moses anymore? Should he be allowed to stop? That’s a good question. But in practice it hardly ever comes up. Most Jews want to observe the Law after they accept Jesus. The calling of God is unchangeable (Rom. 11:29). Paul circumcised Timothy, even though he was not circumcised before. Why? Because he was Jewish. For a Jewish believer to stop obeying the Jewish Law would be to renounce the covenant of God with his people, to turn his back on God’s calling for his life. Instead, what does Paul say? Stay in the state in which you were called (1 Cor. 7:20). If you are circumcised (Jewish), don’t become uncircumcised (a Gentile). If you are uncircumcised (a Gentile), don’t be circumcised (become Jewish; 1 Cor. 7:17-20). Instead, obey the commandments that apply to you (1 Cor. 7:19).

For Jewish believers in Jesus, this means the Law of Moses as interpreted and amplified in the Law of Messiah. For Gentile believers, this means the Laws of Noah as interpreted and amplified in the Law of Messiah. The Law of Messiah does not replace God’s previous work in the Bible, but brings it to perfection.

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22 How this actually works out in detail for Jewish believers in Jesus (Messianic Jews) is a topic best left for them to decide. It’s much more complicated than most Gentile Christians can possibly imagine.

23 An exception to this occurs when Gentile Christians are living in a Jewish community. Following the instructions for the ger ha-shaar (the stranger living within the gates) in the Old Testament, as well as the spiritual principles of 1 Cor. 9:20 and Rom. 14, they should adapt their lifestyles so as to give no offense to the larger Jewish community.
From the Circumcision and From the Uncircumcision

This understanding of two distinct groups within the Body of Messiah was common in the earliest Christian Church. Archeological evidence can be seen in this diagram from the catacombs in Rome: two fish caught on a cross-shaped hook. One (on the right) is kosher: it has scales and fins, which means it’s permitted by the Law of Moses (Lev. 11:9). The other (on the left) is not kosher: it has no scales, and looks like a catfish. The first represents the church from the circumcision, obeying the Law of Moses; the second is the church from the uncircumcision, which is not subject to the Law of Moses. This was the earliest understanding of the Body of Messiah: two distinct groups, each with a different calling, yet united in a common witness to Messiah Jesus as Lord.

Now, in Messiah, it doesn’t matter anymore if you are a Jew or a Gentile: both have access in the same Spirit to God the Father. And because of this, the barriers between Jew and Gentile have been broken down. Even though we are different, we can now have peace between us, because we have been united through the death of Jesus. There are different callings, but one Body of Messiah. And just as different spiritual gifts are necessary for the proper functioning of the body, both Jews and Gentiles are necessary for proper balance in the Body of Christ. This is the “one new man” vision of Paul in Ephesians 2:14-15: “He himself is our

24 The original was found on a marble plaque in the Catacomb of Domitilla in Rome, a burial area identified with early Christians.
25 Another example comes from the Church of Santa Sabina in Rome. Here a mosaic depiction from the 5th century shows two women, one labeled the “Church from the Circumcision” and the other the “Church from the Gentiles.”
peace, who made both (Jews and Gentiles) one, and broke down the dividing wall…that in himself he may create out of the two one new man.” Gentile Christians need Jewish Christians to connect us to our Jewish Biblical roots. Jewish believers need Gentile Christians to help interpret and teach those roots to all the peoples of the world. Working together, we can extend the spiritual impact of Israel—and Israel’s Messiah—to the ends of the earth.

CHAPTER 2: AFTER THE BOOK OF ACTS

War with Rome

Unfortunately, Paul's "one new man" vision has never been fully realized in the body of Messiah, except perhaps in the first generation or two. Because soon after the time of Paul, while the New Testament was still being written, history would begin to make bitter enemies of Jews and Gentiles through a series of wars and revolts that drove a deep wedge between the two.²⁶

War finally broke out in 66 AD, only four years after the end of the events recorded in the book of Acts.²⁷ It started with street fighting between Jews and Gentiles in Caesarea: the same city where God had first poured out his Holy Spirit on the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46, 15:8,9). The resulting strife quickly spread to Jerusalem where Fadus, the Roman governor, fanned the flames by acts of aggression against the people. In response, the high priest cancelled the sacrifice offered in the Temple on behalf of the emperor.²⁸ This was the first act of open rebellion. Before long, the entire city was in revolt. Several Romans soldiers were killed.

²⁶ Paul died, according to tradition, in the persecution of Nero in AD 64, two years after the end of the events recorded in the Book of Acts. The First Jewish Revolt began in AD 66. The New Testament was completed in about AD 95.
²⁷ The spark that ignited the conflict was the intentional desecration of a synagogue in Caesarea on the Sabbath by sacrificing birds at the entrance to the building.
²⁸ Wars 2.17.2 (409).
In response, the Gentiles back in Caesarea rose up against the city’s Jewish inhabitants: 20,000 Jews were killed—almost all the Jews in the city.29 This roused the whole country to rebellion, and ignited conflicts between Jews and Gentiles throughout the region. Tens of thousands were killed.30 Most of the Jewish dead—50,000—were in Alexandria, the second largest city in the Empire, where Roman soldiers attacked a Jewish residential area.31

The Roman governor of Syria, Cestius Gallus, marched to Jerusalem to restore order, but retreated with heavy losses. Now there was no turning back. The Jews set up a revolutionary government and built up their defenses as quickly as they could. But there was little hope against the huge Roman army.

Ironically, the Jewish will to fight was encouraged by some of the same Biblical prophecies that lay at the foundation of faith in Jesus as the Messiah.32 But while Jesus placed the realization of the Messianic kingdom far in the future (“the end will not take place immediately,” Luke 21:9), others used these prophecies to stir up the resistance to Rome.33

Nero, the emperor, sent his best general, Vespasian, with three Roman legions to Ptolemais.34 Vespasian quickly moved into

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29 Wars 2.18.1 (457).
30 Including many “Judaizers,” which probably includes Gentile Christians, that were suspected by both sides (Wars 2.18.2 (463).
31 Wars 2.18.8 (497). This Egyptian city, with its large Jewish population, is likely where Jesus and his parents hid when they escaped Herod’s attack on the infants of Bethlehem (4 BC, Matt. 2:13-15).
32 Another factor that encouraged the Zealots to fight was their hope for assistance from the Parthian Empire, the eastern enemy of Rome, though this hope never materialized (Philo, Embassy to Gaius 31 (216)).
33 Jesus taught, “But when you hear of wars and unrest, don’t be alarmed; it is necessary for these things to happen first, but the end will not take place immediately…. Nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will not only be great earthquakes and in different places famines and plagues, but there will also be dreadful events and great signs from heaven…” (Luke 21:9-11). This implies the passage of a great deal of time.
34 Wars 3.1 (1-8). Modern Akko, known in Crusader times as Acre; a coastal city just north of modern Haifa.
Galilee and destroyed the Zealot command center at Jotapata, near Nazareth. He then took Tiberius, followed by Magdala, the home town of Mary Magdalene. The battle for Magdala extended out onto the Sea of Galilee, turning the sea red with blood. Gamla, the home of the Zealot movement, was destroyed.

**Jesus' Prophecy of Destruction**

Then the Romans marched south to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, unlike these other cities, was strongly fortified. The Zealots believed God would never let the city fall. But the Jewish followers of Jesus knew better. Forty years earlier Jesus had predicted the destruction of the city and told them when to leave:

> But when you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, then know that her desolation is near. Then let those in Judea flee to the mountains and let those inside the city depart, and let not those in the countryside enter into her; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written (Luke 21:20-22).

There was only one problem with this prophetic instruction: if the city is surrounded by enemy armies, how do you get out of it? Miraculously, just before Vespasian began his siege, the Romans

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35 Here Josephus, the Zealot regional commander, was taken captive. His writings provide eyewitness descriptions of Galilee and Judea at a time when the disciples of Jesus were still alive.

36 *Wars* 3.10.9 (529, 530). Tiberius and Magdala lie along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

37 Home of Judas the Galilean mentioned in Acts 5:37. Gamla was located in the Golan Heights, overlooking the Sea of Galilee from the northeast, not far from Bethsaida, home to several of Jesus’ disciples.

38 *Wars* 6.5.2 (285-287).

39 “All that is written” is a reference to Dan. 9:26, the prophesied desolation of Jerusalem and the Temple. The destruction of Jerusalem as “vengeance” was against the sins of this “evil generation,” including its rejection of Jesus as God’s chosen Messiah (Matt. 12:41,42; 23:36). Prophetic condemnations of this kind are common in the Bible, in response to the specific sins of a particular generation and for the nation’s eventual blessing and good. The later Christian interpretation that this was a blanket rejection of the Jews violates the meaning of the passage as well as other specific statements of Scripture (Rom. 11:28,29). More on this in Part IV below.
abruptly withdrew to Caesarea. The Jewish believers saw this as a sign from God and fled the city, just as Jesus told them to do.\(^{40}\)

The Romans withdrew because they had received news of the death of the Emperor Nero in Rome, and were awaiting new orders. But since there was no clear successor to Nero, the troops proclaimed General Vespasian himself emperor. Vespasian soon entered Rome in triumph.\(^{41}\) One of his first acts as emperor was to send his son Titus to finish the war in Judea. This time, the Romans didn’t leave until Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed (AD 70).

Hundreds of thousands were killed, hundreds of thousands were taken into slavery.\(^{42}\) Jerusalem was leveled to the ground, except for three strong towers left to show how great the city once had been.\(^{43}\) All this happened in exact fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus:

\begin{quote}
For days will come on you when your enemies will put up a siege wall around you and surround you and press in on you from every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children in you, and they will not leave in you one stone on another.... For there will be great distress in the land and wrath to this people, and they will fall by the edge of a sword, and be led captive into all the nations (Luke 19:43,44; 21:23,24).
\end{quote}

Prophetically speaking, this is the start of the “distress of Jacob” prophesied by Jeremiah, a horrible time of tribulation that was to come on the Jewish people, including the Jewish believers in Jesus (Jer. 30:7). Jesus called it a “great tribulation,” a time when Jerusalem would be trampled underfoot by Gentile nations and the

\(^{40}\)Eusebius, *Church History* 3.5. They fled to Pella, one of the Decapolis cities, located on the eastern side of the Jordan river not far from Galilee. A Christian sarcophagus discovered in Pella from the late 1st/early 2nd century is evidence of this early Christian presence.

\(^{41}\)In 69 AD.

\(^{42}\)Josephus places the total number of Jews killed in the war at over a million.

\(^{43}\)Wars 7.1.1 (1,2). The bottom half of one of these towers can still be seen today just inside Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem.

Judaism after the War

The consequences of the war were dramatic, especially for the Jewish religion. The Sadducees, who controlled the Temple and the priesthood in the time of Jesus, disappeared from history. Most of the Zealots were killed. The Essenes, who also joined in the fighting, never returned for their precious Dead Sea Scrolls. Of the branches of Judaism that existed before the war, only two survived: the followers of Jesus, or as they had come to be known, the Nazarenes, and the Pharisees.

While the Nazarenes escaped from Jerusalem to the east, the Pharisees escaped to the west. The famous rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai snuck out of the city by pretending to be dead: the only way out after the Roman soldiers returned. In an audience with Vespasian, he convinced him to spare Jamnia (Yavne), a center of

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44 Dispensationalists place some or all of these prophetic events in the future. As a result, they ignore the centuries of persecution and misery suffered by the Jews, including Jewish believers in Jesus, from the destruction of Jerusalem until modern times. But Jesus’ prophecies were addressed to his Jewish disciples and interpreted Old Testament prophecies directed to the Jewish people (such as Dan. 12:1 and Isa. 10:20-23). The early believing community understood these prophecies to refer to the time they were living in, and not a future period. Justin Martyr (2nd cent. AD) understood that Jesus’ prophesies about false prophets, false Christs, and persecution were being fulfilled all around him (Dialogue with Trypho 51, 82). Irenaeus similarly considered that the prophesied time of tribulation and apostasy had already begun and would continue until Jesus’ return (Against Heresies 5.28.2,4). The “abomination of desolation” was understood to refer to the desolation of the Temple (compare Matt. 24:21 to Luke 21:20; Josephus, Antiquities 10.11.7 [276]; Eusebius, Church History 3.5). These views changed later with the coming of the Imperial Church. For more on this topic, see our book, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John” or visit http://www.totheends.com/page9.html

45 The Sadducees were a political-religious party that was influential among the priests and wealthy ruling class in Jerusalem and Judea. They were a special object of prophetic wrath on the part of Jesus and John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7, Mark 12:1-12). In return, they were the primary instigators among the Jews of persecution against Jesus and his early followers (Matt. 26:3,4; Acts 4:4,5; 5:17; 6:12; 9:1,2; 24:1).

46 Nazarenes in Hebrew is notzrim, the name still used for Christians today in modern Hebrew (Acts 24:5).
rabbinical learning. Here the rabbis began to decide what Judaism would be like without a Temple, now that the Temple had been destroyed. This is the beginning of modern Rabbinical Judaism, the kind of Judaism practiced by traditional religious Jews around the world today.

The destruction of the Temple created a major problem for the Jewish religion. It was the only place sacrifices could be offered to atone for sins. What would they do now that the Temple was gone? The answer, proposed by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, was that the sacrifices would be replaced by acts of mercy, that is, by good deeds (mitzvoth, obeying the commandments).

This is a nice idea. But is it Biblical? The Biblical penalty for sin is death, which is why Jesus had to die as a sacrifice for sin. But most of the rabbis were unwilling to accept the sacrificial atonement of Jesus. Without it, and without the sacrifices of the Temple, there no longer remained an assurance of forgiveness in Judaism. As a result, traditional religious Jews today express the hope, rather than the certainty, that their sins have been atoned for.

**Jewish Believers after the War**

The war also had consequences for Jewish believers in Jesus, the Nazarenes. They had abandoned their fellow Jews by fleeing from Jerusalem. But far worse, according to the rabbis, was that they didn’t mourn for Jerusalem after its destruction. Why didn’t they mourn? Because Jesus had told them the city would be destroyed, 

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47 Git. 56b.
48 The sages at Jamnia constituted a rabbinical Sanhedrin that took over many of the duties of the former supreme Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Yavne is located along the Mediterranean sea coast just south of modern Tel Aviv.
49 Modern Rabbinical Judaism, sometimes also called Talmudic Judaism, is the direct spiritual descendant of the ancient Pharisees.
50 *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan*, chap. 4. Rabbi Johanan supported his decision by an appeal to Hos. 6:6: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”
51 Said of the Nazarenes of Kefar Sechaniah (Git. 57a).
and that it was a righteous judgment from God. As a result, faith in Jesus began to fall from favor in the eyes of many.52

But the Nazarenes survived and continued to spread their teaching for centuries.53 These years were, in effect, a tug of war between the rabbis and these believers in Jesus for the hearts of the Jewish people.54 History has favored the rabbis, because they eventually won the contest—at least until now. But their hold on the nation was far from complete. Archeology has found that rabbinic law was not always followed—even in the hometown synagogues of famous rabbis.55 But because of the later dominance of the rabbis,

52 The earlier respect that had been shown at the preaching of the gospel (Acts 5:13-16), had continued into the years immediately preceding the war with Rome, as can be seen in the esteem in which James, the brother of Jesus, was held. He was martyred at the instigation of the Sadducees in AD 62, an act that was opposed by many of the people (Antiquities. 20.9.1 (200-203); Eusebius, Church History 2.23). But these positive feelings began to decline after the war.

53 The discovery of a Nazarene synagogue built in Jerusalem immediately after the war (late 1st century, now the site of the Tomb of David on the modern “Mt. Zion”) provides physical evidence for the return, mentioned in Eusebius, of those who had fled to Pella (Church History 3.11). Unlike most Jewish synagogues, which were oriented toward the Temple Mount, this one was oriented toward Golgotha, the place of Jesus’ crucifixion. Other physical evidence of the Nazarenes includes a Nazarene synagogue found in Nazareth (with a Jewish ritual immersion bath used for Christian baptism), and a Nazarene house-synagogue at Capernaum (the traditional house of Peter’s mother-in-law).

54 Along with the temptations of the Greco-Roman world and many other religious groups. The rabbis had an upper hand from the beginning, since much of the nation was sympathetic to their views. But the estimated number of Pharisees before the fall of the Temple was only about 5,000. The Nazarenes reached this same number within the lifetime of the apostles, after which they continued to spread and grow (Acts 4:4). The rabbis weren’t able to consolidate their power until the 3rd century, in the time of Judah the Prince (ha-Nasi).

55 This includes the surprising discovery of images—of animals, people, even Greek and Roman gods—on synagogue floors in famous rabbinic centers, such as Tiberias. These images would have never been allowed before the fall of the Temple. This represents both the power of Greco-Roman thought as well as the weakness of rabbinic authority over large parts of the Jewish population. The specific images found represent an attempt to integrate the popular astrological beliefs of the pagan world with Judaism, in a manner reminiscent of the astrological speculation of the Sadducees reflected in Josephus’ interpretation of Temple symbolism. Astrological beliefs became widespread in Judaism, being held even by many of the rabbis.
much of the history of the Nazarenes has been lost and must be reconstructed from bits and pieces of evidence.

An important part of this evidence comes from the writings of the rabbis themselves. The first of these after the war is the *Birkhat ha-Minim*, the so-called “Blessing of the Heretics.” This was added to the daily prayers in about AD 90.\(^{56}\) In spite of its name, it was not much of a blessing: “May the heretics (*minim*) perish.” In reality, this was a curse against believers in Jesus and others the rabbis considered heretics. At some point, or in some places, the target of the “blessing” was made even more clear: “May the heretics (*minim*) and the Nazarenes perish.”\(^{57}\) The purpose of the blessing was to discourage Nazarenes from attending synagogue, where they must still have been making many converts. Belief in Jesus was still strong twenty years after the destruction of Jerusalem.

### Interactions with the Rabbis

One story that comes from this time is about Hanina, a nephew of the famous Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah (AD 80-120).\(^{58}\) On a visit to Capernaum, Hanina was influenced by the Nazarenes there of the truth of the gospel.\(^{59}\) Afterwards, Hanina "went to his uncle, Rabbi.

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\(^{56}\) By the rabbis at Jamnia (*Yavne*). It was added as one of the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh* or *Amidah*) recited on weekdays (Ber. 28b).

\(^{57}\) As shown by the discoveries in the Cairo Geniza in Egypt. But the intention was clear from the beginning, as Justin Martyr observes to Trypho: "...cursing in your synagogues those that believe in Christ" (*Dialogue* 16; early 2nd cent. AD).

\(^{58}\) Eccl.Rab. 1:25. Rabbi Joshua was one of the best-known disciples of Johanan ben Zakkai, and a teacher of Rabbi Akiva (see section on the Bar Kochba Revolt below). Before the war, he was a Levite that served as a singer in the Temple. In his teaching, he reflected the disturbing trend among the rabbis to place their authority above that of God himself: In a debate with Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Eliezer’s position was confirmed by a *bat-kol* (the “echo” of the voice of God, see Matt. 3:17, 17:5; John 12:28). Joshua replied, “The Torah [Law] is not in heaven,” a rejection of the heavenly voice, implying that the Law was now under man’s, not God’s, authority (BK 59b). This trend had been noted earlier by Jesus (Mark 7:7,8). For a scholarly analysis of the rabbinical stories in this section and on the debates with the rabbis mentioned below, see Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Christianity*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1995.

\(^{59}\) The rabbis claimed that the Nazarenes cast a "spell" on him, an accusation of witchcraft similar to that brought against Jesus himself by the Pharisees (Matt. 12:24).
Joshua, who anointed him with oil and he recovered." After this, his uncle forbid him to live any longer in the land of Israel, but instead sent him to Babylon, where he spent the rest of his life.\(^{60}\) Rabbi Joshua’s decision to send Hanina to Babylon implies that Nazarenes could be found all over Israel: The only way his nephew could be kept free of their influence was to send him completely out of the country! The gospel was affecting even the families of the most famous rabbis.

In the early years, rabbis and Nazarenes met freely.\(^{61}\) But beginning with the early 2nd cent., this was discouraged, and the rabbis instructed their disciples to avoid the Nazarenes completely.\(^{62}\) Why? The gospel must have continued to convince many.

A few years later, the position of the rabbis had hardened even further. This can be seen in a story about Eleazer ben Dama, the nephew of another famous rabbi, Rabbi Ishmael (AD 120-140), who was influenced by the Nazarenes.\(^{63}\) When Eleazer was bitten by a snake, Jacob, a Nazarene with a healing ministry, came to heal him. But Rabbi Ishmael wouldn’t allow it.\(^{64}\) As a result, Eleazar died. What was Rabbi Ishmael’s reaction? He "rejoiced" that his nephew died "in a state of purity."\(^{65}\) The message of the story was clear: It

\(^{60}\) “Babylon” was used by the rabbis to indicate the large Jewish population in the area of ancient Babylonia (modern Iraq).

\(^{61}\) As Rabbi Eliezer (AD 80-120) with Jacob of Kephar Sekaniah (Eccl.R. 1.24). Rabbi Eliezer was himself falsely accused of being a Nazarene by the Romans in the persecution of Trajan.

\(^{62}\) Using Prov. 5:8: "Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the entrance of her house." In answer to the question, "How far?" the answer was given: 4 cubits (6 feet).

\(^{63}\) bA.Z. 27b, Eccl. Rab. 1.24. Rabbi Ishmael was of priestly descent. As a child, he was sent captive to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem. Here he was ransomed by R. Joshua (see previous story), who became his teacher. He was a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva (see next section).

\(^{64}\) This is the same Jacob of Kefar Sekaniah mentioned in a previous note.

\(^{65}\) This negative attitude toward the Nazarenes is confirmed in his wholly negative attitude toward Nazarene writings. While others thought that at least the name of God should be preserved in them, he argued that they should be completely destroyed, quoting Psa. 139:22 in support: “I have hated them with complete hatred” (bShab. 116a).
is better to die than accept even healing from Jews who believe in Yeshua (Jesus).

The Bar Kochba Revolt

The increasing hostility of the rabbis toward the Nazarenes was reflected in the Bar Kochba Revolt (AD 132-135). This was a second Jewish revolt against Rome.\(^\text{66}\) The leader of the revolt, Simeon son of Kosiba, popularly known as Bar Kochba, was a descendant of David to whom Messianic hopes were attached. He enjoyed crucial rabbinical support from the famous Rabbi Akiva, who pronounced him to be the Messiah.\(^\text{67}\)

But while the Nazarenes might have agreed with the reasons for the revolt—the oppressive policies of Rome, the high taxes, the many injustices—they could not follow a false Messiah. This made them a disloyal and therefore potentially dangerous obstacle to Bar Kochba's revolutionary plans. Because of this, hostility flared up. Bar Kochba tortured Nazarenes when they refused to deny their faith: “For in the present Jewish war it was only Christians [Nazarenes] whom Bar Kochba, the leader of the rebellion of the Jews, commanded to be punished severely, if they did not deny Jesus as the Messiah and blaspheme him.”\(^\text{68}\) Since the revolt had strong popular support, the population must no longer have been as tolerant of belief in Jesus as it once had been.

Debates with the Rabbis

After the revolt failed, the Nazarenes continued to spread the gospel to their friends and neighbors. They must have been successful: the rabbis were forced to debate with them regularly in

\(^{66}\) The second revolt affected mostly Judea, in which more than 500,000 were killed.

\(^{67}\) Akiva gave him the nickname Bar Kochba (“Son of the Star”) after the Messianic prophecy of Num. 24:17, “A star will march out of Jacob.” His opponents called him Bar Koziba (“Son of the Lie”; Lam. Rab. 2.4).

\(^{68}\) Hegesippus as recorded in Eusebius, History IV.8 (NPNF2 1:259). Also in Justin Martyr, Apology 1.31.
public. These debates continued through the 4th century, an indication of the continuing appeal of the Nazarenes’ message. These debates, the Nazarenes relied intensively on the Bible to support their beliefs. This put pressure on the rabbis to come up with a Biblical response. When a Nazarene asked Rabbi Abbahu (early 4th cent.) why he knew the Bible better than another rabbi from Babylon, he said, "We [the rabbis of Israel] live among you, therefore we take it upon ourselves to learn."

The record of these debates tells us something about Nazarene beliefs. Rabbi Johanan (c. 180-c. 279) debated with Nazarenes about the divinity of Jesus. To support their side in the debate, the Nazarenes referred to Gen. 1:26, "Let us make man in our image," a verse still used by Christians today. This, taken together with many similar Nazarene arguments, proves conclusively that the divinity of Jesus was a belief of the early Jewish followers of Jesus, and not a later Gentile invention.

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69 The gospel penetrated even to the highest level of Jewish society: the Patriarch himself, the highest Jewish official in Israel in the 2nd-5th centuries. Joseph of Tiberius (late 3rd, early 4th cent.), once a patriarchal emissary, said that he saw one of the Jewish patriarchs secretly baptized (probably Gamaliel IV [270-290]). Joseph himself came to faith through reading Hebrew translations of the Gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles and a copy of the original Hebrew Matthew, all of which were hidden in a repository in the patriarchal residence. This information comes to us through Epiphanius, who claims to have heard it directly from Joseph himself, Panarion, 30.4-12).

70 bA.Z. 4a.

71 Or as the rabbis put it, about whether or not there was a “second ruling power” in heaven (bSanh. 38b).

72 Other plurals used in these debates to support the divinity of Jesus include Gen. 11:7, "Come, let us go down and there confuse their language"; Gen. 35:7, "For there God revealed [the verb is plural in Hebrew] himself to him [Jacob]"; Deut. 4:7, "For what great nation has a God as near [the adjective is plural] to it as the LORD our God when we call on him?"; 2 Sam. 7:23, "And who is as your people, as Israel, the one nation on the earth to which God went [the verb is plural] to redeem it for himself as a people"; and Dan. 7:9, "Until thrones [plural] were set up, and the Ancient of Days sat down."
The debates were seen by some rabbis as a waste of time. Their language became highly insulting of Jesus. Even Celsus, a pagan writer (2nd cent.), knew of the slanderous rabbinical teaching that Jesus was the product of adultery between Mary and a Roman soldier, and that he performed cures by means of magic he had learned in Egypt. This view was later included in the collection of rabbinical writings known as the Talmud.

The increasingly bitter opposition of the rabbis led the Nazarenes to see their opponents in an equally negative light. They interpreted, for example, the “mediums and spiritists” spoken against in Isa. 8:19 as a prophetic reference to the rabbis, as was the consultation of the dead mentioned in that same verse. The rabbis were those who “ensnare” and “mislead” with “empty arguments” in Isa. 29:20-21.

This association of the rabbis with spiritism was not without some justification. The secret Jewish mystical tradition known as Merkabah mysticism is associated with the most famous rabbis of the post-war period, including Johanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva, and was well established by the 4th century. This dangerous pursuit of mystical experience involved specific

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73 Rabbi Judah ben Nakosa (AD 165-200) complained that they turned the “precious stones and pearls” of his mind to “ashes” (Eccl. Rab. 1.25 [30]).
74 In his True Discourse, preserved in Origen’s Against Celsus 1.32,38. The name the rabbis gave to this Roman soldier was Panthera.
75 bSanh. 67a in the uncensored editions. There were two versions of the Talmud, one compiled in Israel (4th cent.), the other in Babylonia (modern Iraq; 5th cent.). The Babylonian version became the standard reference.
76 The Nazarene interpretation of these verses was recorded by Jerome in his Commentary on Isaiah (4th cent.).
77 bHag. 14b. Mystical speculation had existed in Israel prior to this time. Apocalyptic writings dating as early as the 2nd cent. BC record mystical journeys in which the mysteries of the heavens were revealed to the seer (as also in 2 Cor. 12:1-7). Mystical leanings and rites could also be found in the Dead Sea Scroll community. But now, for the first time, they appear in the heart of Palestinian rabbinism.
techniques used to induce a trance. At some point, it became the practice to record the words spoken by those who achieved the trance, and to seek knowledge in this way from angelic authorities. Needless to say, this developing mystical and spiritistic tradition caused concern among the Nazarenes, and was seen as a further turning away by the rabbis from the God of Israel and his Messiah.

**Rejection of the Nazarenes by Gentile Christianity**

But the most dangerous threat to the Nazarenes came from the Gentile world. In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr, a Gentile believer from Samaria, recorded a discussion he had with a Jewish refugee from Judea named Trypho. In the course of their discussion, Justin mentions Jewish believers in Jesus that kept the Jewish Law. Justin himself had no objection to this, as long as they didn't try to convince Gentile believers that they, too, must keep the Law: the same view held by the apostle Paul. But he also

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78 They called it “descending” to the Chariot (the Merkabah; associated with Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot of God in Eze. 1). These techniques included fasting, special hymns or prayers recited with their heads between their knees, and the invocation of God or the angels with special names. Of the companions of Rabbi Akiva who engaged in such practices with him, one is said to have died as a result, another to have gone insane, and a third to have left Judaism (bHag. 14b).


80 This mystical tradition achieved its full flowering in the Kabbalah of the late Middle Ages.

81 Trypho had just escaped from the Bar Kochba revolt in Israel. They met in Ephesus. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 1.

82 This was also the opinion of Ignatius a generation earlier (AD 108). Ignatius still understood the body of Messiah to be made up of two legitimate groups, the circumcised and the uncircumcised: “It is better to hear Christianity from a man who is circumcised than Judaism from someone who is uncircumcised” (*To The Philadelphians* 6.1, Greek text from *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake [Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1985], 1:244). Ignatius speaks of Judaizing according to the original meaning of the term, which was imposing the Law of Moses on Gentiles (*To The Magnesians* 10.3). Only later did Judaizing come to mean any practice that so much as
mentions that some Gentile Christians thought that those keeping the Law could not be saved—in other words, that Jewish believers who kept the Law of Moses were doing something wrong!\(^{83}\) Here we have the earliest evidence of a break between Gentile Christianity and the Nazarenes. Justin himself represents the older view that had no problem with the two groups side by side, one of which kept the Law (the Nazarenes) and one that did not (Gentile Christians). But already the view was gaining ground that someone who kept the Law could not be saved! \(^{83}\) Justin himself accuses those who keep the Law of "weak-mindedness," a reference to Rom. 14:1 implying that Jewish believers who kept the Law lacked faith.\(^{84}\) This is remarkable given that the New Testament itself clearly records that Peter, Paul, James, and the other Jewish disciples continued to keep the Law.\(^{85}\)

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\(^{83}\) "...and these [Gentile believers] do not venture to have any dealings with or extend hospitality to such persons [Jewish believers who keep the Law]" (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue* 47, ANF 1.415).

\(^{84}\) Though implying that they were to be accepted in fellowship ("Accept the one who is weak in faith" (Rom 14:1; *Dialogue*, 47). Already the context of Paul’s words had been misunderstood. The controversy in Romans over meats offered to idols is not between those who did (the “weak”) and those who did not obey the Law of Moses, as this was later understood. The eating of meat offered to idols is nowhere mentioned in the Law of Moses. Rather, this was a controversy over the implementation of a rabbinical ruling that was accepted by the Nazarenes (Acts 15:29, Matt. 23:2,3). Paul took the position that idols had no real power to defile the meat (1 Cor. 8:4,8; 10:19), therefore the prohibition was only to protect the consciences of those (the “weak”) who still attributed some power to idols (1 Cor 8:7,9-12; 10:24). Therefore, he said, it’s perfectly all right to eat any meat without asking questions about it (1 Cor. 10:25-27). But if someone should tell you it has been offered to idols, you should abstain out of concern for his conscience (1 Cor. 10:28-30). In much the same way, an increasing number of Gentile Christians took Paul’s opposition to Gentiles coming under the Law to apply to Jewish believers in Jesus, which led them to reject the Nazarenes, who continued to obey the Law of Moses (Gal. 5:2-4).

\(^{85}\) The strength of this Scriptural evidence was acknowledged by no less an authority than Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who defended the continued obedience of the apostles to the Law against the views of Jerome (*Letters* 40, 75, 82). "How much more, then, may I shrink from pronouncing that to be bad [the Law] which I cannot deny to be of divine institution!" (82.14). Augustine felt that the continued observance of the Law by the apostles was necessary so as not "to give the impression that [the Law] was worthy of abhorrence and condemnation." Yet as Jerome points out in reply, Augustine could point to no other contemporary authority that shared his views. (Jerome claimed that the
By the next (3rd) century, most Gentile Christian writers considered the Nazarenes to be heretics. This didn’t affect the Nazarenes much, since most of them were living in Judea and surrounding regions, while most Gentile Christians were in distant countries. But by the 4th century, the negative attitudes of Gentile Christians began to directly threaten their existence. Gentile Christianity was accepted by Rome and became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This gave the views of Gentile Christians the force of law. Before this, the worst punishment the Church could give anyone was excommunication. But now, those who disagreed could be banished or even put to death. Offenses against the church became offenses against the state, and Nazarenes, since they were considered heretics, were at risk.

Anti-Judaism was sealed into the law of the Gentile church at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. The council decided that the church should separate from what it called "the detestable company of the Jews" and that "we should have nothing in common with the Jews." Not all accepted this ruling. But Augustine saw this observance as only temporary, and that it would "slowly, and by degrees...vanish away through the power of" the preaching of the gospel. He, like his contemporaries, felt it was not appropriate in his own day (82.15).

86 They were falsely equated with the heretical Ebionites, who rejected the divinity of Jesus.
87 This language appears in the letter of Constantine to those not attending the Council (Eusebius, Life of Constantine 3.18-19 in NPNF2 14.54,55). He claims to represent the "united judgment of all present." Anti-Jewish barbs appear throughout the letter, which concerns itself primarily with the controversy over when Easter should be celebrated, and the Council's decision to avoid celebrating it at the same time as the Jewish Passover. The Jews are charged (twice directly, once indirectly) with deicide, after which "...they have been subject to the direction, not of reason, but of ungoverned passion, and are swayed by every impulse of the mad spirit that is in them... On this point as well as others they have no perception of the truth..." He also calls them the "most wicked of men."
88 The Quartodecimians, who celebrated a Christian version of Passover on the date of the Jewish Passover, survived as a separate church down to the 5th century AD. Another group, the Audians, felt it was an apostolic ordinance to celebrate Passover with the Jews. They were banished by Constantine in 330 to Scythia, where they did missionary work among the Goths.
many Gentile Christians gained an official status that it has kept right up until modern times.

Christians were soon forbidden to participate in Jewish worship, attend Jewish synagogues, or Jewish feasts. If a Jew wanted to join the Christian Church, he had to completely renounce his people: that is, he had to be Gentilized. Here’s an example of the vows required of a Jew if he wanted to become a Christian:

I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and sacrifices of lambs of the Hebrews, and all the other feasts of the Hebrews…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 if afterwards I shall wish to deny and return to Jewish superstition, or shall be found eating with Jews, or feasting with them, or secretly conversing and condemning the Christian religion…then let the trembling of Cain and the leprosy of Gehazi cleave to me, as well as the legal punishments to which I acknowledge myself liable. And may I be anathema in the world to come, and may my soul be set down with Satan and the devils.

Whew! Nothing like this has ever been required from converts from any other group. Why only the Jews?

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89 Which indicates that a significant number were participating in these things. For more anti-Jewish legislation, see Part III below.
Because of these pressures, the Nazarenes began to drift north and east of Israel, toward the edges of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{91} By the early 5\textsuperscript{th} century, they were concentrated in synagogues outside the Roman Empire, where they had a strong influence on the development of Eastern Christianity.\textsuperscript{92} By the late 5\textsuperscript{th} century, the Nazarenes had disappeared from Israel. There are a few traces of them outside the Roman Empire for a while. But then, even these stop. For all practical purposes, Jewish believers in Jesus as an organized group disappeared from history for 1,500 years.\textsuperscript{93}

\section*{CHAPTER 3: ASPECTS OF NAZARENE BELIEF}

\subsection*{The Gospel of the Hebrews}

The hostility of Gentile Christians toward the Nazarenes caused many Nazarene doctrines and practices to be either rejected by the Gentile church or reformulated to reflect Gentile ways of thinking. The extent of this Gentilization was dramatic, affecting nearly every aspect of the life and faith of the church. As a result, Nazarene ideas often seem strange to us today. We’ve been separated from them by hundreds of years of non-Jewish thinking. But many of these Jewish ideas were shared by the apostles themselves and hold the key to an accurate understanding of the New Testament.

Recovering the beliefs of the Nazarenes is a challenging task. One of the greatest difficulties is distinguishing Nazarene writings from

\textsuperscript{91} In the 4th cent., Epiphanius locates the Nazarenes in Pella of the Decapolis (modern Jordan), in Bashan (the modern Golan Heights), and in Beroea in Syria (\textit{Panarion} 29.7.7).

\textsuperscript{92} See Appendix. Jerome, who knew the Nazarenes from personal contact during his time in the Middle East and his residency in Bethlehem, said that they could be found "in all the synagogues of the East among the Jews" (Letter to Augustine 75 4.13, NPNF 1:338). Perhaps they found a readier reception for their beliefs here than in Israel. This eastward drift was not unique to the Nazarenes. Many other Jews also found refuge in the Jewish communities of Babylonia (modern Iraq) at this time.

\textsuperscript{93} Until their dramatic rebirth in the 20th century, a fulfillment of prophecy to be discussed in Part IV.
those of other Jewish Christian groups. Only one ancient text has an established historical connection with the Nazarenes: the Gospel of the Hebrews. Several early Christian writers thought this might be the original Hebrew form of the Gospel of Matthew. But the quotations they give from this document (the document itself has not survived) bear little resemblance to the current Gospel of Matthew. To add to the confusion, there may have been another, heretical gospel of the same name.

With few certain sources to draw on, scholars have had to reconstruct Nazarene beliefs by identifying themes common to all early Jewish Christian groups. This shared heritage indicates that these beliefs owe their origin to the Nazarenes that preceded these other groups. This “textual archeology,” combined with the discoveries of archeological excavation, is providing fascinating insight into Nazarene beliefs.

94 The names of the writers and their religious affiliations are not mentioned in these writings, of which many survive from the early centuries. These other, heretical groups include the Ebionites, the Cerinthians, and various Gnostic groups.

95 This Gospel of the Hebrews should not be confused with various Hebrew manuscripts of the gospel of Matthew found in Europe from the Middle Ages (the DuTillet, Münster, and Shem Tob manuscripts), with which it has “little or no relationship” (George Howard, Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, Mercer U. Press, Macon, Georgia, p. 160). The current wave of enthusiasm for these manuscripts should be tempered by the fact that the Shem Tob version, which underlies the other two and is least corrected to the canonical gospel, is heretical. It avoids identifying Jesus as the Messiah and postpones the possibility of salvation for the Gentiles to the future Messianic era.

96 A section of the Gospel of the Hebrews may be preserved in the Gospel of John. Papias (early 2nd cent.) attributed the story of an adulterous woman, probably the one found in the first part of John 8, to the Gospel of the Hebrews (Eusebius, Church History 3.39). John 7:53-8:11 is not found in most of the older manuscripts of the Gospel of John.

97 An Ebionite Gospel of the Hebrews. The Ebionites (who denied the divinity of Jesus) and the Nazarenes were often confused by early Gentile Christian writers. This may have begun intentionally as a polemical means of denigrating the Nazarenes for their continued observance the Law of Moses.
Nazarene Art and Symbols

While Gentile Christianity accepted images in worship from an early date, the Nazarenes rejected them. Archeological evidence from Capernaum, Nazareth, and elsewhere shows that the Nazarenes respected the legal prohibition of images found in the Law of Moses (of people, birds, fish, and animals; Deut. 4:16-18, Ex. 20:4, Lev. 26:1). This confirms the literary evidence that the Nazarenes observed the Law of Moses.

The artwork they did permit is of geometric and floral designs. Images of flowers found in a Nazarene house-synagogue at Capernaum (see diagram) are a symbol of Paradise as Judaism understood it: Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden), the name still used today in Hebrew for the place of the righteous after death. In the book of Revelation, this Paradise is found in the New Jerusalem, a city that will descend from heaven to earth at the end of time (Rev. 3:12, 21:2). This heavenly city is described with the imagery of the Garden of Eden, with its Tree of Life in a garden-like setting (Rev. 22:2).

Other designs include the ladder as a symbol of ascending to and descending from heaven. This is the ladder of Jacob’s dream (Gen. 28:12), which was associated with the ministry of Jesus (John 1:51:

98 “Paradise” is a Persian loan-word that means “a walled garden.” This was used in the Old Greek Bible (the Septuagint) to translate the word “garden” as in the “paradise of Eden.” A belief in this garden-like Paradise was also held by the early Gentile Christians until it was replaced with the more abstract Greco-Roman idea of heaven (see Part II below). Images of flowers were permitted by Jewish Law. The flowers found at Capernaum are stylized crosses. Similar floral artwork was found at the Nazarene synagogue at Nazareth.
“You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending for the Son of Man”).\textsuperscript{99} The net is a symbol of the gospel task of fishing for the souls of men (Matt. 4:19). The wreath-shaped crown (diadem), as that found in the Nazarene synagogue at Nazareth (see diagram; the wreath surrounds a central cross shape flanked by two stars\textsuperscript{100}), is a symbol of the victor's crown that will be given to the saints in Paradise (the "crown of righteousness" of 2 Tim. 4:8, the "crown of life" of James 1:12, and the "crown of glory" of 1 Pet. 5:4). Literary evidence suggests that the Nazarenes placed a wreath (a “crown”) on the head of newly baptized believers to symbolize the goal of the Christian life.\textsuperscript{101}

The Cross Symbol

Other symbols can no longer be deciphered. Many of these make use of the symbol of the cross, as in the panel with small crosses at the bottom of the mosaic in the diagram above. Elsewhere there are crosses appearing in a square or a shield, floral crosses, an upright cross with a small cross beside it, and a ship with a cross-shaped mast. Though the specific meaning of these representations may escape us, the cross itself was clearly an important Nazarene symbol.

\textsuperscript{99} The “cosmic ladder” of Nazarene apocalyptic writings is the seven levels of heaven through which the Son of God descended in the incarnation and ascended at the ascension. See below.

\textsuperscript{100} This central cross is a “yod-tav” cross, the Hebrew precursor of the Greek “tau-rho” (or chi-rho) cross. See below.

\textsuperscript{101} See the section on baptism below. The wreath found at Nazareth is part of a mosaic floor adjoining a Jewish ritual bath (a mikvah) used for Nazarene baptism. The use of this ritual bath for Christian baptism is indicated by the Christian symbols scratched in the plaster of its walls.
Today, we associate the cross with the death of Jesus. But the origins of this symbol among the Jews goes back to pre-Christian times. In the 6th century BC, the prophet Ezekiel in a vision saw a man dressed in linen mark the righteous with a cross-shaped mark (the tav): "Mark a tav on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are being committed" (Ez. 9:4). This “tav” was originally made either as an upright equal-armed cross “+” or tilted to the side, like a letter x. Those who were marked in the vision were saved from God’s destruction. As a result, the “tav,” the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, came to be associated with Messianic salvation in the end-times.

The Essene community at Qumran (2nd cent. BC-1st cent. AD) marked little crosses in their Bible scrolls next to verses that prophesied the coming of the Messiah (cross #1 in the diagram). They may also have had a ritual in which the tav was marked on their foreheads, as a sign of deliverance from the coming judgment.

The rabbis, too, had a Messianic association with this shape. They taught that it was used in the anointing of priests—also with oil on the forehead ("Messiah" means "anointed one"). So it was natural for Christians to adopt this end-times marking, already rich

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102 The word “tav” can refer either to a mark in general or to the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
103 In the old Hebrew alphabet, which was in use when Ezekiel was written. The later, Babylonian-style alphabet used today for Hebrew gives the tav a different form. But the older shape was remembered and still used occasionally in the New Testament period, as can be seen in inscriptions and coins from the end of the Second Temple period (1st-2nd century AD).
104 In a similar way the omega, the last letter in the Greek alphabet, was associated by Gentile Christians with the end-times (Rev. 1:8, 21:6, 22:13).
105 This same system of marking was continued by Christian scribes (Finegan, p. 348).
with Messianic meaning, since it also resembled the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

Archeological evidence for the use of the tav comes from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and nearby Talpiot, where tombs from less than forty years after the resurrection of Jesus are marked with crosses (crosses #2, 3, and 4). The names of those buried in the tomb of Cross #4, along the road to Bethany, are familiar from the New Testament: Lazarus (Eleazar), Jairus, John, Judas, Martha, Mary, Sapphira, and Zachariah. Are these Nazarene tombs—possibly even of those mentioned in the Bible? Or are they Jewish tombs, marked for deliverance from the coming judgment?

One of the cross symbols we do understand is the representation of the cross as the tree of life (cross #5). This image draws on the appearance of a date palm tree, commonly associated in the Middle East with the tree of life and with fertility (Song 7:7,8). The two bag-like objects hanging down from the arms of the cross resemble ripe clusters of dates hanging below the upper fronds of the tree.

Although this particular image, found at Capernaum, dates to the Byzantine period, the theology relating the trees of the Garden of Eden to the “tree” of the cross dates back to the Nazarenes. One early Christian writer preserves the teaching, “As by means of a tree [the tree of knowledge] we were made debtors to God, (so also) by means of a tree [the cross/tree of life] we may obtain the remission of our debt.” Or as another puts it: “Death was in a...

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106 All were found on ossuaries (“bone boxes” used for secondary burial). #2 is from Talpiot near the old Bethlehem road south of Jerusalem. #3 is from Dominus Flevit on the Mt. of Olives. The name, Shlomzion, means “peace of Zion,” a female given name. #4 is from is from the southern section of the Mt. of Olives known as the Mt. of Offence (Silwan), near the road to Bethany. #1-4 are base on Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, Revised Edition, Princeton U. Press, Princeton, NJ, 1992, pp. 359-371.


108 The cross is called a “tree” in the original Greek of Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24.

109 Irenaus, *Against Heresies* 5.17.3.
tree [the tree of knowledge] and life also was concealed in a tree [the cross/tree of life].... The man who believes in Christ eats of the tree of life.”¹¹⁰ The “way of the tree of life” of Gen. 3:24 is therefore also the way of the cross, the “Way” of Jesus, that leads to the Paradise of God (Gan Eden).

Just as the eating of the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden was a breaking of God’s command, the “eating” of the tree of life in Christ represents obedience to God’s commands: “Eating of the fruit of the tree of life is being nourished by the commandments of Almighty God.”¹¹¹ This reflects the Nazarene understanding of the teachings of Jesus as a new Law, the Law (or Way) of the Messiah.¹¹²

The small curved line (that looks something like a circle) at the top of cross #5 represents the Hebrew letter yod, the first letter of the Hebrew name of Jesus (Yeshua), identifying this as the cross of Jesus.¹¹³ A similar cross with a larger curved line at the top (that looks like a capital “P”) was later adopted in the Gentile church by assimilation to the Greek alphabet. This was the famous “sign” seen by Constantine.¹¹⁴ But in the transition between cultures, the cross shape, while retaining its association with the death of Jesus, gradually lost its identification with the tree of life and its apocalyptic association with deliverance from the coming judgment.

¹¹⁰ Commodian De Centesim 321-322,327,333; quoted in Jean Danielou, The Origins of Latin Christianity, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 112. Though Irenaus and Commodian were Gentiles, their writings reflect a Christian context in which Jewish influences were still strong.
¹¹¹ De Centesima, 330, p. 113.
¹¹² More on this topic in Part IV below.
¹¹³ This is another example of a “yod-tav” cross.
¹¹⁴ See illustration in Part III below. This was the “chi-rho” or “tau-rho” cross, representing the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ.
Baptism

Although baptism in the New Testament was little more than a profession of faith and immersion in water (Acts 8:36-38), the rite soon became more elaborate. An initial examination tested the motivation of the one seeking to convert, just as the rabbis did with prospective converts to Judaism. Then followed instruction in Christian doctrine: the teaching of the two ways (see Matt. 7:13, Jer. 21:8). "There are two ways, one of life, and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways." This was a summary of the do's and don't's of the Christian faith, which preserves the earliest understanding of Christianity as "the Way": not just a system of belief, but a way of life, the Law of the Messiah. Baptism was in response to a willingness to obey this Messianic Law. "Those who believe in the truth of our teachings and our doctrine first promise to live according to this doctrine." This is how the Israelites had entered into covenant with God in the desert, after hearing a reading of his Law and agreeing to obey it (Ex. 24:3).

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116 Yev. 47a; Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition* 15.2 (following the numbering system of Botte).

117 Didache 1.1. See Didache 1-6, Epistle of Barnabas 18-21. In the Gentile church in Rome (2nd-3rd cent.), this instruction was done by private individuals first, before bringing the baptismal candidate to church officials. This reflects the Jewish practice of instruction by rabbis, who taught independently of the synagogue. Only after instruction was a candidate brought before a *beth din* for the conversion rites themselves. Gregory Dix, *The Apostolic Tradition*, London: SPCK, 1968, p. 81.

118 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61.2, in Danielou p. 375. The Gentile church later changed the emphasis from basic moral instruction to baptismal creeds concerned with statements of belief (orthodoxy). The Gentile Christian baptismal creeds were the source of many doctrinal battles in the Byzantine period (see Part III below).
After the completion of this teaching, there was a fast of a day or more. This was a time of repentance and purification from evil, in which demons were cast out of those preparing for baptism. Traces of this practice can be found in some Eastern churches today: blowing or breathing on the one being baptized (insufflation, a sign of the Holy Spirit) is performed to expel evil spirits.

Just before baptism itself, the entire body was anointed with oil. This was followed by a renunciation of Satan. Then followed the baptism in water: a total immersion in the nude following the pattern of the Jewish ritual bath (the mikvah). This immersion in water was a purification of the flesh after the heart was made right through repentance. Removal of clothing and immersion in water were symbols of leaving the old life behind, and dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:2-8). Even this symbolism has roots in the Jewish mikvah, an important

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119 Didache 7.4, Hippolytus’ *Apostolic Tradition* 20.7.
120 Fasting was seen to be particularly effective against demons, as in Matthew 17:21: "this kind [of demon] comes out only by prayer and fasting." *Apostolic Tradition* 20.8.
121 As the final step in casting out Satan, perhaps related to the anointing with oil for healing mentioned in Mark 6:13 and James 5:14. In the Syrian church, insufflation is performed following the anointing with oil.
122 The early order of deaconesses served primarily to assist with the baptism of women, in order to avoid any impropriety. See Rom. 16:1, 1 Tim. 3:11.
123 Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.117. In the Gentile church, the association of immersion with purification of the body was soon lost.
step in becoming a proselyte (a convert) to Judaism: “One who became a proselyte is like a child newly born.”

The detailed requirements for Christian baptism mirror those of the Jewish mikvah: Women were to loose their hair; no foreign object (of clothing or decoration) could enter the water with them. The preferred location for immersion was in running (“living”) water, as with the baptisms of John the Baptist in the Jordan River. But rock-cut ritual baths were also used (see diagram). These were soon integrated into Nazarene synagogues and Gentile Christian churches as baptistries.

When new believers came up out of the water, hands were laid on them for the communication of the Holy Spirit, as was done by Peter and John in Samaria (Acts 8:17). This was later supplemented, and in the Gentile church replaced with, a second anointing with oil, this time in the form of a cross (the tav) on the forehead, as a symbol of the reception of the Holy Spirit.

The communication of the Holy Spirit was known as the “seal” of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21,22; Eph. 1:13). As with seals placed on letters and other documents, the “seal,” that is the presence, of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is a mark of God’s ownership. This is the meaning of the “seal of the living God” in Rev. 7:2: the 144,000 that receive the seal are baptized, Spirit-filled believers.

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124 Yev. 62a.  
125 Shab. 6:1; Apostolic Tradition 21.5.  
126 Mik. 1:8, 5:4,5; Didache 7.1; Apostolic Tradition 21.2.  
127 As at Nazareth: see above.  
128 Jerome, Dialogue against the Luciferians 8; Novatian, A Treatise on Re-Baptism 4.  
129 This secondary anointing gained in importance as the expectation of a real spiritual experience at the laying on of hands declined. With this increase in the importance of a secondary anointing, the practice of pre-baptismal anointing also declined. Today it has disappeared altogether except in Syrian rite churches, including the Church of the East.  
130 Because of this, the whole ceremony of baptism was sometimes referred to as receiving the seal of Messiah. This corresponds to the seal of circumcision in conversion to Judaism.
The newly baptized believers were then clothed in white robes. This was both the symbol of a holy life and a foreshadowing of life in the resurrection (Rev. 19:8). Next followed a taste of milk and honey, a symbol of the Promised Land (the “land of milk and honey”) to be restored in the Messianic Age. A palm wreath (a “crown”) was also placed on their heads: a symbol of victory, like the crowns to be given in the resurrection (Rev. 2:10; 3:11; 4:4,10). This whole ritual of baptism is a beautiful picture of the Christian life: a turning from sin and the devil to God, a cleansing of the spirit and the flesh, an empowering of the Holy Spirit, and a persevering to glory!

The Angel of the Lord

Perhaps the most important Nazarene contribution to our understanding of the Messiah is their identification of Jesus with the Angel of the Lord of the Hebrew Scriptures. This idea has not completely disappeared even today. One of the most well-known of these appearances is as one of the three men who appeared to Abraham, where he is identified not merely as an angel, but as the LORD God himself (“and the LORD said to Abraham,” Gen. 18:13,17,20). Later, this same LORD rained fire and brimstone on Sodom "from the LORD out of heaven" (Gen. 19:24): a clear

131 Because of this change of clothing, baptism was sometimes referred to as the “re-dressing.” Traces of this practice have been retained in the wearing of special white baptismal garments in some churches.
132 The Roman church, which had a history of rejecting Millennial teaching (more on this below), allegorized the milk and honey of the Promised Land to refer to “his flesh, which Christ indeed gave” (Apostolic Tradition 21:28).
133 Baptismal crowns were retained in the Church of the East (made of silk). They were abandoned in the West because of the danger of confusion with pagan rites (Tertullian, De Corona). Palm crowns were once worn by the Jewish people as part of the festivities of the Feast of Tabernacles, itself a symbol of the Messianic Age. The importance of these crowns can be seen by their inclusion with palm branches as symbols of the Feast. They were also worn at weddings, which ties in beautifully with the Messianic wedding feast of the Lamb.
134 The "LORD" appearing in all capital letters is used here, as in many Bibles, for the Hebrew "YHWH" (the Tetragrammaton), the personal name of God. Dialogue 126.
135 The use of this verse by Nazarenes in controversy with the rabbis is illustrated in Sanh. 38b. See also Justin, Dialogue 127, 129.
reference to two distinct entities (the Father in heaven and the Son on earth) that share the divine name (LORD) and are together one God.\textsuperscript{136}

This is the same Angel of the Lord identified as God when he found Hagar in the desert (“the LORD who spoke to her,” Gen. 16:7,10,13; 21:17,18), who spoke as God to Abraham (“you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me,” Gen. 22:11,12,15-18), who wrestled with Jacob at Peniel (“I have seen God face to face,” Gen. 32:24,28,30),\textsuperscript{137} who spoke with Moses at the burning bush (“God called to him from the middle of the bush,” Ex. 3:2,4),\textsuperscript{138} who went before the children of Israel in the desert (“my Name is in him,” Ex. 23:20-22),\textsuperscript{139} who spoke to Gideon (“and the LORD turned toward him,” Jud. 6:11,14), and who appeared to the parents of Samson (“we have seen God,” Jud. 13:3,6,8,22).\textsuperscript{140} Moses saw him at Mt. Sinai above a pavement of sapphire (Ex. 24:10). The prophet Isaiah called him the saving angel of God’s presence (Isa. 63:9). Ezekiel saw him as the man that glowed like metal (Eze. 1:26,27). Daniel, too, saw him as a radiant man (Dan. 10:5,6). These Old Testament appearances of the Angel of the Lord, identified as God, are the foundation of the New Testament teaching of a

\textsuperscript{136} This divine name, YHWH (sometimes vocalized as Yahweh), is often referred to as “the Name” in Jewish tradition. This is the unspoken name shared by Father, Son, and Spirit, in Jesus’ command: “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:18). An entire Nazarene theology was built up around this idea of the Name, based on verses such as Exodus 23:21, in which God says of this same Angel of the Lord, “my Name is in him.” Another simultaneous appearance of these two who share the same identity as LORD is in Exodus 34:5,6, where one who is LORD, identified as the hand of God in Ex. 33:22 (the Son of God), descends from heaven and stands with Moses while another who is also LORD (the Holy Spirit) passes by overhead (compare Ex. 33:21-23).

\textsuperscript{137} Dialogue 126.

\textsuperscript{138} Dialogue 127.

\textsuperscript{139} Evidence that this section was used in controversy with the rabbis appears in Sanh. 38b, where it was used by Nazarenes in a debate with R. Idith. See also Dialogue 75, 126.

\textsuperscript{140} See also the angel that identified himself as God to Jacob at Bethel (Gen. 31:11,13), the angel that Jacob said "has redeemed me from all evil" (Gen. 48:16), the man that identified himself to Joshua as the captain of the Lord’s army (Jos. 5:13-15, 6:2), the angel that spoke as God at Bochim (Jud. 2:1-5).
mysterious plurality in God: that while God (the Father) remained unseen in heaven, he could also appear on earth as a "self" (the Son) distinct from that "self" that was in heaven.

The connection of this Angel of the Lord with the Messiah had already been made at the time of the Old Greek (Septuagint) translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (3rd cent. BC). Here the child who will sit on the throne of David and rule over his kingdom—the Messiah—is called "the Angel of Great Counsel" (Is. 9:6,7 LXX). As a result, the "Angel of the Lord" is one of the most important early titles of Jesus.141

But the Nazarenes also saw the Angel of the Lord in places we are not used to seeing him. Origen, a famous Gentile Christian writer (185-254), says he was taught by a Nazarene that the "burning ones" (seraphim) of Isaiah 6—who cry out before the Lord “Holy, holy, holy”—were the Son and the Holy Spirit.142 Gentile Christians have long seen the cry of the angels ("Holy, holy, holy") as a hint to the tri-unity of God.143 But the Nazarenes gave this passage an even stronger tri-unitarian interpretation.

It may seem odd to us today to think of the Holy Spirit and the Son of God as angels.144 But this is, in part, because the definition of the word "angel" has changed over time. In Hebrew, as well as in Greek, "angel" simply means "messenger."145 Often the same word

141 See Justin Martyr, Dialogue 34,56,58,59,76. The necessity of an explanation for these verses, and the need to reply to Christian teaching, led the rabbis to invent the angel Metatron—the lesser YHWH—who participated with God in the Creation and served as high priest in the heavenly Temple. Yet in spite of the many parallels between Metatron and Christian teaching about Jesus, the whole purpose of the Metatron teaching is to deny the full divinity of the Angel of the Lord.
142 De Principiis I.3.4.
143 Known in Greek as the Trisagion ("the three holies"), it is included in many ancient orders of worship (liturgies) and is still recited in traditional services today.
144 Although see Psalm 104:3 (in Hebrew): “who walks on the wings of the Spirit” (also 2 Sam. 22:11, Psa. 18:10). The angel of the Holy Spirit appears in the apocryphal Nazarene writing The Ascension of Isaiah 9,10.
145 Malakh (in Hebrew), just as the word angelos in Greek, means “messenger.” Only later was the Greek version of this word used exclusively for the spirit beings we call
is used of human beings who act as messengers, or of God himself acting as a messenger.

But Jesus’ incarnation--God becoming man--in light of his earlier appearances as the Angel of the Lord, suggested something more to the Nazarenes: that the Son of God had “disguised” himself in his descent from the highest heaven, taking the appearance of progressively lesser orders of angels until he finally became man in the womb of Mary. This “hidden descent” reflects the New Testament idea that Jesus’ divine identity, as well as the true purpose of his incarnation, was hidden from the angels (“...none of the archons (angelic rulers) of this age has understood”; 1 Cor. 2:8) and revealed to the church (“...that the many-sided wisdom of God may now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies through the church,” Eph. 3:10,11).

The Book of Revelation

The theological interest of the Nazarenes in Jesus as the Angel (or Messenger) of the Lord makes it necessary to re-evaluate the angels that appear in the Book of Revelation. Though the trend in some circles has been to dismiss that any of these are the Son of God, several are clearly identified with Old Testament appearances of the Angel of the Lord. In Revelation 10, for example, the angel “clothed with a cloud” is remarkably similar to the Angel of the Lord that appeared to Ezekiel: both appear in a cloud with a rainbow (Rev. 10:1 and Eze. 1:28); both appear with a striking radiance, their legs (or feet) glowing like fire (Rev. 10:1 and Eze. 1:27); both appear with a scroll in their hand (Rev. 10:2 and Eze.

“angels” today. In the Bible, spirit being messengers are distinguished from mere human messengers by an identifying title (such as "messenger of the Lord" or “...of God”, or “...of heaven”) or by the context. See for example Acts 12:23; Gal. 4:14, 1:8.
146 1 Sam. 23:27 and more than 90 times in the Hebrew Bible; Luke 7:24, 9:52, and James 2:25 in the Greek New Testament.
147 As in The Ascension of Isaiah 9.13-16.
148 This is a heavenly extension of the “Messianic secret,” Jesus’ instructions to the disciples not to tell anyone he was the Messiah until after his resurrection (Matt. 16:20, 17:9).
2:9); and in both accounts, the prophet is directed to eat the scroll, which was sweet as honey, but produced an inner bitterness (Rev. 10:8-10 and Eze. 2:8-10, 3:1-4,14). This is a remarkable set of correspondences that must be explained in some way. Since the early church saw these verses in Ezekiel to describe an appearance of the Son of God, the most consistent explanation is that Revelation intentionally refers us to Ezekiel as a clue to the identity of this angelic figure.¹⁴⁹ This is a connection that none of the early Jewish followers of Jesus would have missed: the one clothed in the cloud is Jesus.

In the same way, the angel (messenger) with the incense in Rev. 8:3-5, acting as a priest in the heavenly tabernacle, fulfills the mediatorial role ascribed to Jesus in the book of Hebrews (7:25, 9:11,15) and elsewhere (Rom. 8:34, 1 Tim. 2:5). As Hebrews explains to us, this mediation cannot be performed by angelic beings, but requires one sharing our flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14,17). The unexpected action of this messenger, in throwing fire on the earth, is also clearly an allusion to Messiah’s ministry: Jesus said, “I have come to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it was already burning!” (Luke 12:49)

The one “similar to a son of man” sitting on a cloud in Rev. 14, with a golden crown on his head, is an allusion to Jesus’ prophecy of the Son of Man: “And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30). His “sending” out the sickle “for the harvest of the earth has ripened” (Rev. 14:15) is an allusion to the parable of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is like a man who throws seed on the land.... When the crop allows, immediately he sends out the sickle, for the harvest has come” (Mark 4:26,29).¹⁵⁰

One of the reasons for hesitation in accepting that these angels (or messengers) are in fact Jesus is that later, in the Gentile church, the

¹⁴⁹ Irenaus, Against Heresies 4.20.10-11.
¹⁵⁰ Similar correspondences can be found for the angelic Son of Man in Rev. 1 and the Angel with the seal of God in Rev. 7.
idea of Jesus as the Angel of the Lord was misunderstood and
misused. Some taught that Jesus was “just” an angel, a created
spirit being, and therefore not God.\footnote{Epiphanius attributes this belief to the Ebionite heresy (a heretical offshoot of the Nazarenes). Tertullian says that the Ebionites taught that Jesus was an ordinary man indwelt by an angel.} This view became popular in
the Arian heresy (4th-5th cent.), and lives on today in the Jehovah’s
Witnesses and other cults. As a result, the originally intense
speculation about Jesus as the Biblical Angel of the Lord was
replaced in the Gentile church with more abstract discussions of his
divinity, to our loss in understanding the Bible correctly.\footnote{See Part III below.}

As for the Nazarenes themselves, they were perfectly orthodox in
their beliefs about Jesus.\footnote{Epiphanius (4th cent.) says, “In this alone do they differ from...the Christians...in being bound still to the Law” (\textit{Panarion} 29.7.5).} This is proven not only from historical
notices, but also from archeological discoveries. The Nazarene
finds at Capernaum and Nazareth include graffiti inscriptions that
mention Jesus as Lord, Christ, Son of God, the Most High, and God.
But in spite of this orthodoxy, their continued observance of the
Jewish Law had become a stumbling block to the Gentile church.
The Nazarenes were soon considered heretics and rejected by their
Gentile brethren.

What happened to make Gentile Christians reject their Jewish
brethren? What made Gentile Christians reject their Jewish roots
and become so anti-Jewish? In Part II, we follow the gospel to
Rome to discover why Gentile Christians abandoned God’s original
plan and rebuilt the wall of division that had been destroyed in
Jesus (Eph. 2:14).

\textbf{This is an excerpt from the first lecture of our Jewish Roots of
Christianity Seminar. For additional lectures request a seminar.}

\textbf{Now you can read the entire seminar with lots of additional
information by buying the book in print.}