

Jewish or Christian: Clarifying the Terminology

A Summary Paper

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Can one be "Jewish" and "Christian" at the same time? Since the belief that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel is a Christian belief, Judaism would argue that a Jew who accepts Yeshua as the Messiah is a Christian and no longer Jewish. Therefore, the terms "Jewish Christian," "Hebrew Christian," and "Messianic Jew" are rejected as oxymorons.

Obviously, "Christianity" and "Judaism" are parallel terms and refer to two systems of well-defined beliefs, and these beliefs include opposing answers to the question of whether Yeshua of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel. But are "Christian" and "Jew" parallel terms? A Christian is one who accepts the truth of Christianity. Is a Jew one who accepts the truth of Judaism? Only if the answer to the latter question is yes can the terms "Jewish Christian" and "Messianic Jew" be oxymorons. However, the answer to the question of who is a Jew has been given different answers throughout the centuries and is hotly debated today, even apart from the issue of a Jew accepting Yeshua as the Messiah.

Nevertheless, for a "Jewish" person who is investigating the biblical case that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel, this question is far more than a mere academic issue. For him an exceedingly important question arises: will he cease to be "Jewish" or a "Jew" if he accepts the Messiahship of Yeshua? That is the question this paper addresses.

The Biblical Data

The Hebrew name **יְהוּדָה**, transliterated *yəhûdâh* (in plain English letters this would be Yehudah, generally written Judah),¹ is used in the Tanakh in five basic ways:² (1) one of the sons of Jacob and

1 The original verbal root is unknown, being lost in Hebrew, Ugaritic, and Assyrian (Paul R. Gilchrist in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, R. Laird Harris, ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), I:369.

2 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 397; henceforth called simply *BDB*.

Leah,³ (2) the tribe descended from Judah, the son of Jacob,⁴ (3) a nation--the name of the Southern Kingdom under the dynasty of David,⁵ (4) a nation--the exiles returned from the Babylonian captivity,⁶ and (5) the land of Judah, both before⁷ and after the exile.⁸

The word, **יְהוּדִי**, transliterated *yəhûdî* and apparently from the same unknown root, has two uses: (1) an adjective describing a people, *Jewish*⁹ or *man/men of Judah* and (2) an adjective used substantively describing a people, *Jew/Jews*.¹⁰ This word is used much more often in exilic and post-exilic contexts, occurring most often in Esther--over 50 times.¹¹

This biblical data can be summarized as follows:

"Jew" originally denoted one of the inhabitants of the southern kingdom of Judah (2 K. 16:6; 25:25; Neh. 1:2; 2:16; Jer. 32:12), or one of the postexilic Israelites in general as distinct from Gentiles (so in Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Zechariah, Daniel and the NT); strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to use the term with reference to Hebrews or Israelites of an earlier period.

Although the Heb. *yəhûdî* means "person belonging to [the tribe of] Judah," it is never used this way in the OT. It comes into prominence only after the destruction of the northern kingdom

3 Genesis 29:35; et al. Several other men have this name as well, but they are not relevant to the issues in this paper.

4 Numbers 1:7; et al.

5 2 Kings 14:21; Hosea 4:15; et al.

6 Ezra 4:4; et al. According to Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 392, n. 53, "Most of those who returned from captivity were of the tribe of Judah, which gave rise to the name." Note that there were no "lost tribes of Israel." Though Judah was in the majority, all twelve tribes were represented among the exiles who returned (Ezra 6:17; 8:35; Zechariah 8:13, 9:1, 13; 10:6). Also, the New Testament mentions that Anna, daughter of Phanuel, living in Jerusalem at the time Yeshua of Nazareth was born, was of the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36).

7 2 Kings 23:24; Isaiah 7:6; et al.

8 Ezra 2:1; et al.

9 Zechariah 8:23: "Jewish man" (singular form with an explicit word for "man"), that is, *a man of Judah*; Jeremiah 43:9: "Jewish men" (plural form with an explicit word for "men"), that is, *men of Judah*.

10 Esther 3:4; Jeremiah 34:9: "a Jew" (singular form with no word for "man"); Jeremiah 52:28: "Jews" (plural form with no word for "men"). Note that the English translations are not careful to distinguish between the adjectival and substantive use of the word. 2 Kings 16:6 uses the plural form substantively (no word for "men"). The NASB translates it correctly as a substantive by "Judeans" ("Jews" could also have been used); the NIV translates it adjectivally by "men of Judah" (equivalent to "Jewish men") as if there were a word for "men."

11 All the data in this paragraph were taken from *BDB*, p. 397.

and, more specifically, after the Babylonian Captivity. Thus it is used of an Israelite living in the province of Judea (Judah) during the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman periods. It is most frequent in Esther, where it denotes all Israelites (cf. the application of the term to Mordecai, who was of the tribe of Benjamin: 2:5; 3:5; 5:13; etc.); the same usage is found in [the Aramaic of] Daniel (3:8, 12).¹²

In its biblical use, therefore, it should be noted that the primary meaning of יהודי is *ethnic*: it is associated with the physical descendants of Jacob, the covenant people of God.¹³

An additional association needs to be explored. Due to the connection of יהודי with the name יִשְׂרָאֵל (*Israel*), it is important to note that "Israel" is also clearly an ethnic term denoting physical descent, in this case, from Jacob (renamed Israel¹⁴):

As a designation for the entire people of Israel, the name derives from the idea of Jacob/Israel as the ancestor of the nation, since he was the father of twelve sons from whom the twelve tribes descended (thus the more common designation for the whole nation is "children/people/men of Israel")...

When the kingdom split, the northern ten tribes kept the name Israel (1 K. 11:37; 12:1-3, 16, 19f.; etc.), as they had earlier used it (e.g., 2 S. 2:9; 3:10, 17-21; 20:1f.), and the southern kingdom became Judah, an appropriate name since that tribe was the dominant one in the south (cf. 2 S. 2:10f.; 3:10; 20:2; 1 K. 12:17, 20)....

Even after the kingdom split, the southern kingdom was

¹²W. W. Gasque, "Jew," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), II:1056; henceforth called simply *ISBE*.

¹³Of course, one could convert to the worship of Yahweh and be considered a Jew: "In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them" (Esther 8:17). The Hebrew word translated "became Jews" is מְתִיחִים, a denominative formed from יהודי and occurs only here (*BDB*, p. 397). Of course, the concept of becoming a proselyte was well known and regulated in the OT, requiring circumcision (cf. e.g., Exodus 12:43-47). However, this does not change the conclusion that יהודי was primarily ethnic in connotation.

¹⁴Genesis 32:28.

occasionally called Israel (Isa. 5:7; 8:18; Jer. 10:1), especially after the fall of the northern kingdom. This is no doubt a reflex of the general use of Israel to refer to the people of God. In postexilic times Israel was again used to designate the whole people (e.g., Ezr. 2:2), though its use as a national name was obviously secondary to its function indicating the people of God, since the nation was no longer autonomous....

The Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha [during the intertestamental period] use "Israel" in ways similar to the OT, though naturally the predominant use is for the people of God and/or those of Jewish descent (Sir. 17:17; 24:8; Jth. 4:1, 8; 1 Macc. 1:11, 20; Jub. 1:29; T. Reub. 6:8; Ps. Sol. 2:24; etc.). At Qumran the name Israel was adopted by the covenanters to indicate that they were the people of God...¹⁵

The Talmud and Rashi

There is a passage in the Talmud that confirms the ethnic basis to being יהודי or one of the בני ישראל, sons of Israel.

But why was Achan punished [if] his crime was in secret? Because his wife and children were aware of it. "Israel hath sinned!" Said R. Abbah b. Zabda: Although he had sinned he was still called an Israelite. And said R. Abbah: This is what people say: "A myrtle which stands between thorns is still a myrtle," and so it is named. In Joshua, vii. 11, five times is "gam" (also) written in the cited verse: Infer from this that he had transgressed all that is written in the five books of Moses.¹⁶

This discussion is based on Joshua 7 and argues that even though Achan was a covenant breaker (v. 11), he was still an Israelite.

Jacob Katz relates a legal question in which Rashi¹⁷ applies this Talmudic text. The Torah forbids an Israelite from charging interest (usury) on a loan to another Israelite.¹⁸ But what of the case where a Jew becomes an "apostate," a Jew who had willingly converted to Christianity? Rashi ruled that an apostate Jew remained a Jew and could not be charged interest by fellow Jews.¹⁹

¹⁵ Gary A. Lee, "Israel," *ISBE*, II:907-908.

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44a, Rodkinson's translation (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/t08/t0809.htm>).

¹⁷ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105), perhaps the most renowned of the biblical and Talmudic commentators.

¹⁸ Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:19.

¹⁹ Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in*

Rashi's decision that an apostate Jew was still a Jew remained traditional Jewish law until well after the founding of the modern State of Israel.

The Second Amendment to the Law of Return

Shortly after the State of Israel was created, David Ben-Gurion wrote the draft of the Law of Return. The version that was eventually passed unanimously by the Knesset in 1950 made a very simple statement:

Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an Oleh [immigrant].

At the time, there seemed to be no need to include a formal definition of who is a "Jew." As David Clayman points out,

When David Ben-Gurion drafted this law in the shadow of the Holocaust, the definition of who is a Jew seemed self-evident. It meant that whomever the Nazis called a Jew and sent to the death camps was to be offered refuge in the newly established State of Israel.²⁰

Whom did the Nazis call a "Jew"? Anyone who had "Jewish blood." During the Nazi era, even Jews who had converted to Christianity and who were baptized members in good standing of a Christian church were nevertheless still considered Jews by virtue of their "Jewish blood" and sent to concentration camps.

However, the Law of Return was to become, and still remains today, a source of intense debate. The intent of the law was never in question. Rather it was the question of who was a "Jew." A number of cases came before the Israeli Supreme Court. One of them was the Brother Daniel case of 1962. Daniel Rufeisen was born a Polish Jew. His mother was Jewish, but he converted to Catholicism and came to Israel as a Carmelite monk requesting citizenship under the Law of Return. In a landmark decision, the court declared that a Jew who had freely adopted another faith was not eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. According to Clayman,

By this ruling the law of the land contradicted Jewish law,

Medieval and Modern Times (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1961), pp. 70-71; cited by Michael L. Brown, http://realmessiah.askdrbrown.org/read/who_is_a_jew.
²⁰ David Clayman, "The Law of Return Reconsidered," July 16, 1995, on the Web site of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (<http://www.jcpa.org/jl/hit01.htm>).

since according to rabbinic halakhah, a Jew remains a Jew even if he is converted to another faith.²¹

This traditional Jewish law was based on the Talmud and the ruling of Rashi, as reviewed in this paper. Nevertheless, the Brother Daniel case, along with a number of others, formed the basis for the Second Amendment to the Law of Return (1970) which added a definition of "Jew":

For the purposes of this Law, "Jew" means a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion.

However, rather than clarifying the legal issues involved, this Amendment has only further complicated the debate. What is meant by "another religion"? What about a Jew who abandons traditional Judaism in favor of New Age beliefs and practices yoga? What about Jews from the ultra-Orthodox Lubavitch sect who believe that their deceased leader, the Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was the Messiah of Israel? What about secular Jews and atheist Jews? The Second Amendment opened Pandora's box, and it is difficult to see how to close it.

Based on the Second Amendment, some decisions have already been made. In 1989, the Israeli Supreme Court denied Gary and Shirley Beresford, Messianic Jews from South Africa, citizenship in Israel because of their alleged change of religion. "Messianic Judaism" was considered a different faith from Judaism. But the problems caused by the Second Amendment went far beyond Messianic Judaism.

In the late 1980s this legislation created a crisis in the relationship between American Jewry and Israel. The attempt by the ultra-Orthodox political parties to amend the Law of Return was seen as a ploy to delegitimize Conservative and Reform Judaism.

The acrimony and bitterness engendered by that controversy have left their mark. Ever since then, Israeli leaders have avoided even the slightest revision or amendment of the Law of Return so as not to open up the issue. However, recent events have once again created controversy in regard to the Law of Return.²²

So wrote Clayman in 1995. In 1998 the Conversion Bill was proposed by which Orthodox rabbis sought to increase their control over determining Jewish identity. According to the Web site, Israel

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Religious Action Center, this bill is still highly divisive within the Jewish community even in May, 2010.²³ Delving into the details of this controversy is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noted that the "conversion" which the bill addresses is not Jewish "conversion" to Christianity, but Gentile conversion to Judaism, specifically within the Reform or Conservative movements. Are they valid? Are the converts now really "Jews"? Orthodox rabbis want a negative answer given legal status, and this has mobilized both Reform and Conservative Judaism in the United States to oppose this bill.

Is a Messianic Jew Still a Jew?

This paper, however, is concerned only with the question of the status of a Jew who accepts Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel. Suppose after studying the evidence from the Tanakh, you are considering this view. If you adopt it, do you remain a Jew or not? Would it be abandoning your people, giving up your Jewish heritage? Is "Messianic Jew" an oxymoron, as the anti-missionaries claim? There are several possible answers to these questions.

First Answer

According to Rashi's ruling and traditional Jewish law, a Messianic Jew must still be considered a Jew. Although not addressing the question of Messianic Jews, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America offer the following official definition:

Jew - an individual who is a member of the Jewish People...According to strict Halachah, the answer to the question is clear. A Jew is someone who either...is a child of a Jewish mother or is a Convert to Judaism...²⁴

Another popular Jewish Web site affirms the same definition:

A Jew is any person whose mother was a Jew or any person who has gone through the formal process of conversion to Judaism. It is important to note that being a Jew has nothing to do with what you believe or what you do.²⁵

23 See the "Update on the Conversion Bill, May 23rd, 2010:
<http://www.irac.org/PublicPolicy.aspx?SubheadingID=109>

24 Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America Web site,
<http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/jew.htm>.

25 Tracey Rich, Judaism 101 Web site, <http://www.jewfaq.org/whoisjew.htm>. Note that Mr. Rich is not a rabbi, but his site is well-researched and written from the standpoint of Orthodox Judaism.

The traditional Jewish law as summarized by Orthodox rabbis in the United States is quite clear and unambiguous. One who was born of a Jewish mother is a Jew and must still be considered a Jew even if he accepts the belief that Yeshua is the Jewish Messiah.²⁶ Therefore, the statements made by some anti-missionaries, "You can't be Jewish and believe in Jesus" or "'Messianic Jew' is an oxymoron," are false.

Now of course the OU also makes the statement that "Messianic Judaism is not authentic Judaism."²⁷ That is entirely correct. Belief that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel is a tenet of Christianity denied by Judaism. What this paper argues is that "Jewish Christian" or "Messianic Jew" is a valid, non-contradictory description.

Second Answer

According to the national law of the State of Israel, one born Jewish is no longer a Jew if he has changed to another religion, including the acceptance of Yeshua as Messiah. However, as already pointed out, the law of Israel is in conflict with what has been, and still remains, traditional Jewish law from the time of Rashi.

It should also be noted that being still considered a Jew by Rashi and Halachic definition after accepting Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel will bring you only limited comfort. Both would consider you an "apostate Jew."

Third Answer

There is a third answer to this question, the one recommended in this paper. Suppose you are considering making a commitment to Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah. Also assume that these are your current attributes:

- You were born Jewish,²⁸ a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a member of the covenant people of God, the chosen nation

²⁶If it is argued that one who accepts Yeshua as Messiah is still a "Jew" by Halachic definition but no longer "Jewish," it must be remembered that "Jew" and "Jewish" are based on the same Hebrew word, as discussed earlier in this paper. Even in English "Jewish" is the adjectival form of "Jew." Therefore, this argument presents a false distinction.

²⁷OU Web site, <http://www.ou.org/oupr/1998/j4jdeaf98.htm>.

²⁸The Talmud and Orthodox rabbis restrict this to being born of a Jewish mother (called matrilineal descent). However, the Tanakh traces lineage through the father (called patrilineal descent) and Reform rabbis consider a child to be Jewish if he has either a Jewish father or Jewish mother and is "raised Jewish."

of Israel.

- You remain committed to the truth of the Torah and the entire Tanakh as God's word.
- You believe that the Tanakh teaches that God will send King Messiah.

These attributes you hold in common with Jews within Judaism, at least the Orthodox form. Now suppose you come to believe this Messiah predicted by Moses and the prophets was Yeshua and accept him as the redeemer of Israel. Here is a new list to consider:

- You still believe the three points in the previous list.
- The thousands of Jews who accepted Yeshua as the Messiah during his life and during the next three or four decades remained within the Judaism of the day. They did not consider themselves to have forfeited their identity as Jews or to have abandoned their faith and commitment to the Tanakh. They continued to circumcise their children,²⁹ worship in the Temple and synagogues, and remain Torah-observant.
- Many Messianic Jews today continue to be Torah-observant, circumcise their children, observe the Sabbath, and celebrate the Feasts.

Messianic Jews today, like the Messianic Jews in the first century, remained loyal to the Hebrew Scriptures. If Yeshua is the Jewish Messiah predicted by Moses and the prophets, believing in him is the most Jewish thing a Jew can do.

It is true that during the life of Yeshua, most of the Jewish leaders did not believe that he was the predicted Messiah. The debate, however, was over the interpretation of the Tanakh, not who was a Jew. In the decades that followed, though, these leaders forced those who believed in Yeshua out of the synagogues and Jewish circles.

Messianic Jews today, convinced as they are that Yeshua is the Messiah predicted by Moses and prophets, are not only still Jews but wholeheartedly follow the faith presented in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But have they left Judaism? Have they joined Christianity? No word meaning "Judaism" is found in the Tanakh. The Greek word, Ἰουδαϊσμός,

²⁹With which the Apostle Paul agreed (Acts 21:17-26).

meaning "the Jewish way of belief and life,"³⁰ first appears in the intertestamental literature³¹ and twice in the New Testament.³² However, once again the terminology must be used very carefully. "Judaism" can be used in the sense of *the faith presented in the Hebrew Scriptures* or it can be used in the sense of Rabbinic Judaism or traditional Judaism. Orthodox rabbis would argue that these two senses are identical. Of course, there is much overlap to be sure, but at the very least one must admit that portions of Rabbinic Judaism were developed after the destruction of the Second Temple in A.D. 70 and in response to that event.

However, there is a more serious problem with actually identifying the Judaism of the Tanakh with Rabbinic Judaism: it begs the very question in dispute here. Michael Brown writes as follows:

As Jewish believers in Jesus we are convinced that our fore-father made a tragic mistake in rejecting Jesus as Messiah. To say that Christianity is not Judaism, therefore, is to miss the key question, namely, Which faith is the true biblical faith? It is also highly misleading to say that Christianity is not Judaism, because it gives the false impression that we are dealing with two completely separate religions, when in reality we are dealing with two faiths that have much in common. For example, both faiths believe in the authority and inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures, both faiths believe in one God, both faiths believe in the coming of a Messiah, both faiths believe in an afterlife with reward and punishment....Many scholars today--both Jewish and Christian--point out that Christianity in its New Testament form was actually quite Jewish, or, as other scholars have expressed it, another of the first-century Judaisms. For this reason, some Jewish believers prefer to speak of Messianic Judaism vs. traditional Judaism--two different *Jewish* expressions of faith....This way, the key issues of dispute come into focus: Are the Jewish followers of the Messiah correct, or are the Jewish followers of the traditional rabbis correct?³³

Conclusions

This paper has argued in support of the following propositions:

³⁰William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 380.

³¹2 Macc. 2:21; 8:1; 14:38; 4 Macc. 4:26.

³²Galatians 1:13f.

³³Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), p. 19; emphasis his.

- One who is born Jewish remains Jewish regardless of his beliefs or practice.
- If Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel predicted in the Tanakh, then a Jew who commits himself to this belief does not reject the faith of the Hebrew Scriptures but remains faithful to the God of Israel.
- The belief structure of Messianic Judaism is a legitimate expression of Jewish faith, while Rabbinic Judaism is another.

The question is, which is right?

If traditional Judaism is the faith of Moses and the prophets, the true and only faith for the people of Israel, then as a Jew you must follow it. But if traditional Judaism (in its overall direction) has strayed from its biblical roots, if it has made a terrible mistake throughout history in rejecting Jesus the Jewish Messiah, then you must reject those errant traditions and go back to the Word of God, the God of the Word, and the Messiah sent by God and foretold in the Word.³⁴

To become a follower of Yeshua, you give up nothing. Rather, you embrace the end of the story told by Moses and the prophets.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 20.