

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT “SPIRITUAL JEWS” ?

The Question: Do non-Jews become “Spiritual Jews” if they come to faith in Jesus, and are Jewish people who believe in Jesus still Jews? - Four Bible Passages
- this paper combines two articles that originally appeared in Ariel Ministries magazine

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Often when I have just finished as the guest preacher at a church service, and am greeting people at the door as they leave, someone will say to me:

“It’s so wonderful that you, a Jewish man, have come to accept Jesus as your Savior, but really, aren’t we all now ‘spiritual Jews’ because we believe in Jesus”.

Then they smile, believing they have said something that will make me feel welcome in their church. This is said in a friendly manner and in full innocence. Their last statement is not really a question, they just assume it’s a universally accepted doctrine that all believers in Jesus become spiritual Jews.

It would be nice if this doctrine, though false, could be overlooked simply as a minor and innocent error, perhaps just people thinking that it would serve to unite the church. However, history is full of examples where church groups and even nations who have embraced this teaching have used it as a springboard from which to form animosity toward the actual Jewish people. In its most extreme forms, this false doctrine has led to brutal violence and horror directed against Jewish families in the form of the Crusades and the Inquisition, the Pogroms which directly affected my family in Eastern Europe 1903-1906, and most recently, the Holocaust. Other than violence, what connects these events is their ideological origin: the belief that God has cast off the Jewish people for ever, and has replaced them with a new, spiritual Israel, the church. This is what is meant by the term “Replacement Theology”.

HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF A FALSE DOCTRINE

That teaching came to maturity in the fourth century, with the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church, as they tried to distance themselves from the Jewish origins of Christianity. This effort of trying to cut off and deny the Jewish roots of the faith was both racist bigotry, and theologically, an effort to claim that God had transferred the covenant promises made to Israel to the new Church of Rome. If true, that would give the mantle of authority to this church. Even the invention of the Roman Catholic priesthood was meant to somehow transfer the authority of the Old Testament priesthood, which God had ordained, to this new man-made institution.

Part of the effort to make this accepted was an increasingly harsh and violent series of denunciations by both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians against the Jewish people. John Chrysostom, viewed as a Saint in both the Roman & Eastern churches, encouraged hatred toward the Jewish people.

In “First Homily Against the Jews”, Chrysostom wrote, *“Jews are dogs, gluttonous, drunkards. They are beasts unfit for work... The Jews have fallen into a condition lower than the vilest animals... The synagogue is worse than a brothel and a drinking shop; it is a den of scoundrels, a temple of demons, the cavern of*

devils, a criminal assembly of the assassins of Christ.... I hate the Jews, ... It is the duty of all Christians to hate the Jews."

While the period of the Reformation corrected some of the errors that had developed, not all were recognized. Martin Luther himself continued a shocking and visceral hatred of the Jewish people, writing: *"First, their synagogues should be set on fire... Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed, . . . travelling privileges must be absolutely forbidden to Jews..., let us drive them out of the country for all time."* Martin Luther rejected the scriptural idea that God has an eternal, unbreakable covenant with Israel, the Abrahamic covenant, and held on to the old Roman Catholic idea of the church as a new spiritual Israel. In this mindset, it becomes acceptable to many that Jewish people can be violently persecuted, as it is believed that they have been cast off by God.

How in the world did Luther, devoted to the Scriptures, come up with such a view? The answer is frighteningly simple: he chose to give weight and authority to a few Scriptures that seemed to support his ideas, while ignoring the majority of Scripture which teaches a different view. We say that is frightening because it is something that is still being done today, and is rather common.

"Ariel Magazine", the periodical I write for (www.Ariel.org), has recently published studies that dealt with various Scripture passages which are used by some in an attempt to support the idea of replacement theology. In the spring 2018 issue, Dr. Gary Hedrick had a scholarly article proving from the Greek that Galatians 6:16 does not speak of the church as spiritual Israel, but rather firmly establishes the identity of a remnant of ethnic Jewish people within the church, these are the ones who are spiritual, hence spiritual Israel. This article will consider 4 Bible passages that are often misused in the same way.

Here is a passage that we need to call attention to since it is sometimes quoted in an attempt to establish the idea that the church has replaced Israel forever and that God has no future for the Jewish people. Here is the first:

"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" Romans 2:28-29 ASV

When you glance at just these two verses, they appear to support the idea that when anyone is born again, i.e, undergoes the circumcision of the heart, they become Jewish in the truest sense. However, should we put a mask over everything but those two verses and ignore the surrounding context? This idea reminds us of the old TV comedy sketch, in which a person overhears an alarming conversation through a closed-door in which a murder is being planned. Upon rushing in, he discovers two people holding paper scripts and rehearsing for a play. Yes, ignoring the context often leads to a critical misunderstanding of the facts.

Regarding the verse above in Romans 2, it is not difficult to establish the context. From Rom. 1:18 thru 2:16 there is a warning given to mankind in general, both Jews and Gentiles. It establishes that the evidence for God is all around us and those who ignore it do so at their own peril.

Then in Rom. 2:17 there is a sudden shift, a turning to address one specific group. The text is very clear and simple: "If you bear the name 'Jew', and rest upon the (Mosaic) Law, and glory in God . . . ". It then goes on to address those who are Jewish by pointing out things that are specific to what rabbinical Judaism had become by the first century, a religious system that had drifted from the original intent of Scripture. Rabbinic Judaism was confident that in holding to these outward traditions, they were acceptable to God. They believed that because of circumcision under Mosaic Law, that they were automatically acceptable in God's sight. The passage in question corrects that mistaken view. In verses 28 and 29, he is speaking to people who were already "physically" Jewish in that they were descended from one of the 12 tribes of Israel and had received Mosaic Law circumcision. It is that group of people to whom verses 28 and 29 are addressed, and thus only to them is it applicable, when he says, in essence; you are not a Jew if you are merely one outwardly, you must ALSO be a Jew inwardly by having a circumcised heart. This would have been far better understood in that day than ours, because they understood that the very meaning of the word 'Jew' (Yehudah) means a praiser of God. How can one be a Jew, a praiser of God while having a heart in rebellion to Him? This coincides with the "Remnant" sub-theme of Scripture, which traces the idea that ultimately there will only be a remnant of Jewish people within the larger group who will recognize Messiah, follow Him, and be a spiritual Israel in addition to being a physical Israel.

So, it is an unlawful hijacking of Romans 2:28, 29 to apply it to others than to whom it was addressed. You have no right to do that, even if the motivation is to try to make others feel more important. The fact of the body of Messiah is simple, we are all equally beloved as sons and daughters of God no matter what our ethnic origin is, we are chosen in Him. God loves the Gentile believers as Gentiles, and continues to address them as Gentiles in Romans 11. If you are a Gentile believer, you have been called into God's family in that state. This is why first Corinthians 7:19 and 21 say: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing . . . Each one should remain in the situation he was in when he was called".

Here is the second passage that is sometimes quoted to support the idea that Gentiles have become Jewish when they come to faith, Ephesians 2:11-16

"Wherefore remember, that once ye, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called Circumcision, in the flesh, made by hands; that ye were at that time separate from Messiah, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Messiah Jesus ye that once were far off are made nigh in the blood of Messiah. For he is our peace, who made both one, and brake down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; that he might create in himself of the two one new man, so making peace; and might reconcile them both in one body unto God through the cross"

Ephesians 2 is a wonderful passage which instructs us that as believers in Messiah, we are part of a brand new entity, the Church, one that did not exist in the Old Testament, but was birthed in Acts 2 as the Holy Spirit came down to do a brand-new thing. Gentile believers have full and equal status in this new entity, no longer kept out of God's household by the barrier of Mosaic Law. Key to understanding this is the fact

that the word “both” is used twice, recognizing the continued Jewish or Gentile identity and distinction. This is not a division in the body, any more than the continued distinction between men and women in the body, a distinction that is repeated several times in the instruction to the New Testament church.

Helpful in understanding this is a simple fact: Jewish identity is derived from being physically descended from one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Eventually, a subgroup within larger Israel will emerge as the Remnant of Israel, that group spoken of in Romans 11:5. While the Mosaic Law is no longer the rule of life for Jewish believers in Messiah, Jewish identity was never granted by that covenant. It is the unbreakable Abrahamic covenant which establishes Jewish identity, and that covenant is still binding today. (Gal. 3:17)

It is no less “Christian” to recognize this continued distinction, since all those who are born again followers of Messiah can be called Christians, followers of Messiah. In the same way that we do not attempt to erase the God designed distinction between men and women, we do not attempt to erase the God designed distinction that Israel has. This is not a matter of one group being better or worse, or more important vs. less important, but rather it speaks of God’s faithfulness that He keeps His promises. He made an unconditional, irrevocable covenant with Abraham, and ultimately the remnant of ethnic, physical Israel that emerges as ‘spiritual’, i.e., believers in Messiah Yeshua, that is the group that Scripture identifies as “Spiritual Israel”.

There is a unity between Jewish and Gentile believers in the body, for there is only one Savior for all, and both groups have been placed into the same body.

THE DUAL IDENTITY OF JEWISH BELIEVERS

The phone call came into our ministry line and the female voice on the other end sounded uncertain.

“My fiancé and I are very happy together but our families are giving us a problem. He’s Jewish and I am Christian, and none of our parents are completely happy about it. We get the impression that if our wedding ceremony were to be a mix of both religions, equally 50% of each, then our parents would be supportive. Your website looks like you are 50% Jewish and 50% Christian, could you officiate our ceremony that way?”

My answer surprised her. “Actually, we’re 100% Jewish and 100% Christian!”

While that sort of math works fine in my birthplace of Brooklyn, it perplexed her. I went on to explain that being Jewish can be both an ethnic identity, and it also refers to someone who regards their religion as some form of Judaism. I explained that even as someone who has embraced Jesus as my Savior 100%, I can never be anything else but Jewish.

Well it turned out she was not a ‘believer’, and when I repeated my 100% Jewish and 100% Christian statement, she declined to meet. Lest you question the accuracy of my 100% assertion, let me explain.

All four of my grandparents were born into Jewish homes in Eastern Europe in the 1890s, the sort you see portrayed in the movie “Fiddler on the Roof”. They lived in villages that were essentially segregated, either the entire village was made up of Jewish people or there were separate neighborhoods for Jews and Gentiles. While people of different backgrounds met at the markets, the rest of their lives were

completely distinct. While they may have lived in the Ukraine, Poland or Russia, Jewish people were essentially barred from being identified as Ukrainians or Poles or Russians, no matter how many generations they lived in the area. Your ethnic identity determined whether you worshiped in a synagogue or in one of the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Churches. Many localities required people to carry identification cards, and in my grandmothers village in the Ukraine, her card was stamped Jewish for nationality, and not Ukrainian. In the rare instances of intermarriage, the Jewish person was often simply absorbed into the general culture, their Jewish identity surrendered, they were lost to their families.

That's what made one scene in "Fiddler on the Roof" such a tearjerker, as the third daughter left her family to marry a gentle, educated, but non-Jewish boy. Her family's angst & tears signaled her departure into a foreign universe. In that time and place, there was no straddling the two worlds.

Well that was then, but what about today? Have Jewish believers in Jesus like myself surrendered our identity, or should we continue to identify as part of the people of Israel?

I have seen that question cause some Christians to set aside the scriptures and indulge feelings of anti-Semitism, even believers who have most of their theology correct. At a conference of urban missionaries many years ago, I delighted to hear stories of full-time workers, colleagues, reaching out to people of their own ethnic backgrounds, often in storefront churches, using the culture of the inner-city. They were effective because they reached the people where they were. When it came time for me to share my ministry, I also was able to share how my ministry operated similarly, but within a Jewish cultural context, with our Messianic Fellowship meeting on Shabbat, Friday evening, and singing the Psalms in their original Hebrew. Afterward I was confronted by two senior missionaries who expressed grave concerns to me that I was, in their words "going back under the law", by using Jewish cultural practices in our ministry.

This was not an isolated example. The irony of this is that amongst Messianic Jewish Bible teachers, I am well-known for teaching a fully grace centered, Messiah focused theology, clearly stating that we are not bound by Mosaic Law. But for these critics, any use of Jewish culture raised a red flag in their own minds. Their position wasn't rational, it wasn't biblical, but it does reflect a needless fear of anything having to do with "Jewishness" among some in the evangelical world. One wonders how they might have done if transported to the completely Jewish context of Jesus and his Jewish disciples as they conducted their ministry using only the Hebrew Old Testament within the Jewish province of Judea!

This is a sad and needless situation and fully in disobedience to the clear commands of Romans 11.

MELTING POT OR SALAD BOWL? - THE SCRIPTURE PASSAGES:

Let's examine the Scriptures that some believe erase the identity of Jewish believers, and then see how these very same Scriptures actually teach that within the church, the very presence of Jewish believers in Jesus who can be identified as Jews is actually testimony to a promise God made.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" Galatians 3:28

In my first week of Bible college, I learned a critical rule that all careful Bible scholars hold to be true: "a verse apart from its context becomes a pretext for anything you wanted to be"

So, let's be Bereans and look at the context. When you examine the entire chapter it is crystal clear that the discussion is about one issue: Are there different ways for Jews and Gentiles to be saved, to be acceptable in God's sight? Is it necessary that one ethnic group must keep Mosaic Law and not the other? The scriptural answer is clear, as regards the method of salvation there is just one path to salvation for different ethnic groups (Jews & Greeks), one path to salvation for men and women and one path to salvation for both servants and the wealthy.

If you think that verse is abolishing the distinct identity of Jewish believers, then please be honest and consistent with the passage and say that it also abolishes the distinction between men and women. How absurd is that twisted logic? Elsewhere in his Letters, the same Apostle Paul who penned Galatians speaks clearly to the many distinctions between men and women because it follows God's creative design, as well as to their different roles in the local congregation.

In essence, if you honestly and simply examine the verse within its context, it is immediately apparent that the issue being discussed is that there is just one way of salvation for all. It is the worst type of faulty and dishonest Bible study to put a mask over the rest of the Bible, examine one verse out of its context and pronounce that to be doctrine. So why do otherwise godly people persist in saying that Galatians 3:28 erases Jewish identity?? At the risk of offending, let me suggest that they may feel obligated to defend old church creeds that they have inherited, creeds that often used imaginative allegory instead of the plain meaning of the text of the Bible.

A second reason why this passage is sometimes used to deny continuing Jewish identity is the desire that we all, as believers, be unified and not divided. But why do some deem it "division" to simply recognize that God has called us from varying backgrounds to be in unity in Messiah.

UNITY, NOT UNIFORMITY

During the years I lived in New York City I was a member of a church that was in an ethnically diverse area. God was at work in that neighborhood and we saw people coming to faith from various backgrounds. It was wonderful to see people of various nations, practicing various cultures, yet in unity as brothers and sisters in the Messiah. It was a testimony to the fact that something supernatural was going on. None of us were under the delusion that to have unity we had to erase the ethnic identity of where each person had come from. Frankly, in most cases I've seen of individuals telling Jewish believers that they are no longer Jewish was simply an attempt to enforce their own personal cultural preferences on the newcomers.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE FOR CONTINUING JEWISH IDENTITY

In First Corinthians 12:12-13 we see an acknowledgment that within the body of Messiah there will continue to be distinctives:

"For as the body is one, and has many members; and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Messiah. For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit"

In this instance the distinctions are seen to be in the present tense, they are continuing, that's the whole point of the unity. It demonstrates the supernatural working of God. It doesn't make me any less

'Christian' when I also identify myself as a Jewish believer in Jesus, rather it identifies the great work of God in calling a remnant of His people to Himself, just as He promised he would

There is another passage that confirms the continuing dual identity of Jewish believers, and that is Galatians 6:16:

And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

The immediate context is that Paul was warning Gentile believers against taking Mosaic Law observance and circumcision upon themselves as an obligation. So in verse 16, he pronounces peace upon the Gentile believers who walk according to this correct biblical teaching, and he also wishes mercy on a second group, the "Israel of God". The original Greek is very clear in portraying "the Israel of God" as a second and distinct group, a recent scholarly article by Dr. Gary Hedrick in a previous issue of ARIEL MAGAZINE (Spring 2018) explicitly proves that. Yet some modern translations have taken liberties with the text and have erased the distinct identity of the second group. Let's allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves and recognize that God doesn't want to erase Jewish people in the body of Messiah!

Paul identifies himself as being Jewish long after he had become a believer in Jesus: ***"For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" Romans 11:1.*** For Paul it was a current identity, not in the past, fully compatible with his identity as part of the church.

So yes, Jewish believers have a dual identity. As this article started out, we are 100% Jewish and 100% Christian, fully and joyfully part of the body of Messiah, the church. At the same time God portrays us as continuing to have a Jewish identity, testimony to His promise to preserve a remnant of His Jewish people who will come to Him in saving faith. If the Jewish remnant is assimilated and erased and can't be identified, where is the testimony?! Praise God that he has brought both Jews and Gentiles into one new body, the church, we display the fact that he is calling together a people from every tongue, tribe and nation!

In this 70th year of the re-establishment of Israel as an identifiable nation, it is the very presence of Jewish believers in Jesus, Messiah Yeshua, that affirms that God will carry out his ultimate plan for Israel, that they may come to know His Messiah.

May God bless the unity between Jewish and Gentile believers in the body today as we bring to the world the Good News of the arrival of the one and only Savior for all.

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