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Conversion in the Hebrew Scriptures

ISRAEL'S UNDERSTANDING OF "CONVERSION"

(From the Exodus to the Present)

Introduction

In the Apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy he states without equivocation that God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Paul then goes on to underscore this concern by speaking of the redemptive work of the "one mediator" between God and the human race, "the man Christ Jesus." (2:4-6). On this basis we would expect that the subject of conversion would be developed in our Bible in a comprehensive fashion, even to the point of delineating the way in which it is to take place. Actually, this is a complex subject, and Scripture contains neither a systematic doctrine of conversion nor any detailed instruction as to how it is to be realized. No small difference exists between the manner in which the prophets under the Sinaitic Covenant called Israel as a nation and Israelites as individuals to return to God, and the manner in which the Apostle Paul called gentiles to turn to God from idols.

In addition to this variation in context, we are surprised that pertinent data in the Old Testament is rather limited, particularly in terms of individual conversion. Furthermore, even in the New Testament we are not specifically informed as to how the Apostolic Church understood conversion. And frankly, don't you wish you knew what actually happened when Paul, the persecutor of early Jewish congregations, was flattened on the road to Damascus? In his letters all references to what happened are tantalizingly brief. Beforehand, he saw himself as a loyal and diligent Jew (Phil 3:5,6) whose devotion surpassed that of his peers (Gal 1:14). Meeting the risen Lord (1 Cor 9:1,2; 15:8-10) brought about a radical change in his values and commitments (Phil 3:7) and included the call to become an apostle to the gentiles (Gal 1:15,16). But what is tantalizing about all this is that he asks the Philippian Christians with whom he shares some of these details nothing less than that they imitate him (3:17). They are to believe that God is the One taking the initiative and that the divine intervention is anything but a finished or completed event. It is an ongoing process.

Now, the task before us is to trace the way in which ancient Israel understood this phenomenon, and the manner in which this perspective was altered in the long interval over the centuries until the present day. But we must begin at Israel's beginning. Only then can we gain comprehensive insight into the subject before us.

From Abraham to the Babylonian Captivity

When God made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity via Isaac and Jacob and later supplemented it with a covenant at Sinai with the Israelites whom he had just delivered from the Egyptian oppression, the dominant intent of his action was to constitute them a people (nation) and to pledge that his covenant with them would be eternal (Ex. 19:5,6). He would never abrogate it. In response the Israelites freely accepted his terms and pledged to do all in their power to keep them (Ex. 19:8). Even so, both God and they soon realized that they would fail (e.g., Ex. 32-- the incident of the Golden Calf). The people then began to realize for the first time that the Sinaitic legislation made gracious provision via priesthood and sacrifice for the nation and for individuals within it to repair their corporate or personal violations of the covenant and to reaffirm its continuity as the basis of God's dealings with them. Although individual Israelites might completely repudiate the covenant and give no allegiance to Yahweh, the divine intent was to remain faithful to this nation (Gen. 17:7,13,19). To seal this fact God pledged that the people of Israel would never cease to exist (Jer. 31:35-37). They are still with us today!

When the Israelites left Egypt under the leadership of Moses, the record states that "a mixed multitude also went up with them" (Ex. 12:38). This mixed multitude consisted of those who seized the opportunity to leave Egypt by joining the Israelites, but without having rootage in the religious traditions of the larger community. Nor did they share in any real commitment to the God who made the Exodus possible. They subsequently became the occasion for dissension and sin within Israel (e.g., Num. 11:4).

Actually, even among the Israelites themselves there were two types of people, religiously speaking. There were the committed and the nominal. Whereas at the time of the Exodus deliverance all the Israelite households actively participated in killing a passover lamb, marking their doorposts and lintel with its blood, and thereby escaping the judgment of God (Ex. 12:1-51), no one would presume to claim that at that time all were in vital relationship and spiritual communion with the living God. This dual pattern becomes apparent again and again when we review Israel's subsequent history.

Although Israel was an elect nation, only a portion of the people really believed in God. A case in point: the reaction of the people to the reports of the twelve men Moses sent to spy out the land of Canaan. Within the twelve there were ten whose report was so negative and so totally accepted by the people that God said to Moses: "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me?" (Num. 14:11). In contrast, he found in Caleb "a different spirit" and commended him for his wholehearted obedience (14:24). Admittedly, one would not want to superimpose such New Testament categories as "saved" or "lost" on these particular Israelites, but it would be unwarranted to assume that no essential difference existed among them at that moment in their history. We must keep in mind that God made a separation within Israel when he denied entrance to the land to the great majority (Num. 14:26-35).

Furthermore, God provided an additional means whereby the people of Israel might be helped to resist the temptation to nominality and covenant violation. Beginning with Moses (Deu. 34:10) he brought forth an order of prophets to address the nation while the Hebrew canon was in process of development. The prophets were men and women whom he called and equipped to make known his true nature and character and to exercise a ministry of spiritual renewal among the people. In a very real sense they were the evangelists/revivalists of Israel. They exposed the sinfulness of nominality and all violations of the covenant. They warned of divine retribution, won people to repentance, and guided the penitent in the ways of righteousness. They constantly proclaimed that the highest good was the experiential knowledge of God, and they exhorted the Israelites to turn to him for relationship and fellowship. God was neither remote nor impossible to please.

But there first had to be repentance, then faith expressed by an ongoing pattern of obedience. Sin had to be acknowledged and repudiated, with the pledge to put it away, once and for all. Only then would God in grace receive them.

During this long period the key thrust of the prophetic ministry whether vocal or written focused on the word sūbh: "to turn, return."[1] Since the prophets sought to call the Israelites to vital faith and trust in God, their ministry was solidly based on what he had initially promised to the Patriarchs, achieved by the Exodus deliverance, and communicated in the Sinaitic covenant. As far as the prophets were concerned, it was this total Torah--the record of the divine redemptive activity on Israel's behalf--that "converted" or "revived" the soul (Ps. 19:7).

The tragedy, of course, was the sinfulness and waywardness of the Israelites. Whereas on occasion they might honor God with their lips, their hearts were invariably far from him (Isa. 29:13; Eze. 33:31). Indeed, more often than not, their waywardness led to outright idolatry (Jer. 50:38; Hos. 4:17). The prophetic corrective was particularly revealed during the sequence when Elijah prayed for drought on the land, then challenged the worship of Baal, exposed the double-mindedness of the people, and

called the penitent to commitment. His intimation was that God would bless their land with rain, if only they turned their hearts back to him (1 Kg. 18:20-45).

Indeed, this preaching of the need for "turning" is widespread throughout the historic period covered by the Hebrew Bible. God repeatedly called upon his people to "rend their hearts," to "turn again," to "be converted." No Jewish person today who is at all familiar with the Bible can possibly take offense at such language as long as the word "convert" does not imply the total rejection of one's cultural heritage to embrace an entirely new religious allegiance.

Some might suggest that many of the psalms of lament in the Psalter describe the spiritual experience of conversion. These psalms speak of individual Israelites moving from a state of doubt and disorientation to faith and reorientation or restoration to life. But should we contend that testimonies of spiritual renewal refer to movement from nominality to vital relationship with God? Perhaps one or two might refer to such an experience. But it seems significant that they generally begin with an affirmation of spiritual relationship with God, despite the distress and terror of the moment (e.g., Psalm 13:1 and verse 6). In this sense all true believers have experienced spiritual ups and downs. But conversion as popularly understood is quite a different matter.

We have seen that in the Old Testament the Israelites were united by birth, rather than by deliberate personal decision. As intimated earlier, there was an occasional exception to this, such as when Ruth the Moabitess decided out of loyalty to her Jewish mother-in-law to cast her lot with Naomi's people and Israel's God.

Furthermore, we must underscore the fact that conversion to God, although an intensely personal matter, is never private in the sense that it is not related to the ongoing redemptive purpose of God. This fact was made clear to the Israelites even before they entered the land. The return to God of individuals was related to Israel's reaching the land promised to them (Deut 4:30; 30:2,3). A more fully developed illustration is found in Jeremiah's memorable plea that Israel return to YHWH (3:1-4:4). All the elements are present: the call to sincere repentance (3:13; 4:4); the removal of the abominations in their lives offensive to God (4:1); the pledge of fidelity to truth, justice, and righteousness (4:2,3); and the conviction that YHWH's enablement will make true conversion possible (3:22,23).[2]

The wistful appeal God made through Malachi is normative: "Return to me, and I will return to you" (3:7). In this context the Israelites were being urged to reaffirm the religious heritage of their people and "seek" the Lord personally (e.g., Ps. 27:8). Malachi was calling them to turn to the one who could bring to fullness their nominal faith in God. It is apparent from even a cursory review of the Hebrew Bible that as a result of the ministry of the prophets, spiritual Israel was always clearly differentiated from political Israel. Zephaniah spoke of this distinction when he appealed:

> Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the wrath of the Lord. . . . I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones . . . I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord (2; 3; 3:11,12).

The "humble of the land" to whom Zephaniah addressed his message are occasionally referred to as the believing "remnant" within Israel. When the word "remnant" first appeared in the Hebrew Bible, it did not have this theological significance, rather, it only had the meaning of "survivors." Despite the most severe judgments that Yahweh allowed to fall on his people because of their sins, there would always be those who survived, thus enabling the purpose he had for Israel to move forward (Isa. 43:3,4). Then, one finds a few passages that introduce the concept of a

believing people within the nation, virtually an ecclesiola in ecclesia (Isa. 6:13; 10:20-23; 28:5; Mic. 5:7).

But there is another factor that must be taken into consideration: the incorporation of outsiders into the community of Israel. It needs to be kept in mind that during the centuries from Moses to the destruction of the First Temple, the Israelites did not alone occupy the land. The Old Testament mentions three distinct types of non-Israelites: natives (*'ezrachim*), foreigners (*nokhrim*), and sojourners (*gerim*). Most common were the *gerim*, people without nationality, who placed themselves under the legal protection of the enfranchised Israelis. They were not fully entitled to become part of the "congregation" or "assembly" of Israel, but were permitted involvement in much of the religious life of the people (Deu. 5:14; 16:11, 14; etc.). In 31:12 it is explicitly stated that the *gerim* are to be present for the solemn reading of the Law; in other words, they were exposed to the demands of the Law.[3]

Because of this, we conclude that as long as the Israelites remained in the land, their openness to non-Israelites was genuine. The problem of children of mixed marriages was resolved by appealing to the invariable pattern of biblical genealogies: only the names of men are listed, except in cases where the mother was notable in Jewish history. David was definitely Jewish, although two Gentile women (Rahab and Ruth) were among his ancestors. This stress on paternity is reinforced by appealing to the case in Leviticus 24:10-12 in which "the son of an Israelitish woman, whose father was an Egyptian" is not identified as an Israelite.

It is this thought that Paul seizes in his exploration of the ongoing role of Israel in God's redemptive purpose for Israel herself and the Gentile nations (Rom. 11). His whole argument turns on the distinction he made earlier between nominal Israelites and the believing company of Abraham's true descendants in the nation:

> He is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God (Rom. 2:28,29).

Post-Exilic Judaism: The Second Temple Period

We now turn to the subject of Judaism and its relation to conversion. At the outset it is necessary to review the manner in which Jewish scholars define "Judaism." In his writings, Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era, Jacob Neusner frequently confronts us with the various Judaisms that emerged and flourished during the period of the Second Temple (from Cyrus the Persian through the Greek period and until its destruction in A.D. 70 by the Romans).[4] In general terms, Judaism represents the dynamic reconceptualization of the religion of ancient Israel into forms that were regarded as congenial to the varied diasporal experiences of the Jewish people.

Nebuchadnezzar's earlier destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, his reduction of the cities of Judah to rubble, and his deportation of the leadership segment of the people to Babylon provoked a massive spiritual crisis among those who survived. All knew that Israel's sins against God, particularly her idolatry, had brought this calamity to their nation (2 Ch. 36:5-21; Amos 5:25-27). The prophets who had predicted this judgment had been terribly vindicated.

But what were the exiles in Babylon to do? Jeremiah was explicit. He encouraged them to make Babylon a more decent place through their presence and prayers. Furthermore, provision should be made for the ongoing of the race during its 70-year removal from the land they had so grievously abused (29:4-14). At its end God,

through a surprisingly benevolent Cyrus, urged them to return to Judah and reestablish its theocratic essence by rebuilding the Temple and reinstituting its worship.

Strangely, not all were willing to rise to this exciting though demanding challenge. Those who chose to remain in the midst of Babylonian, Persian, and Grecian civilizations as a diasporal people felt themselves obliged to develop religious forms of Judaism that were devoid of priests and sacrifices as they scattered throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin. But whether the Jewish people lived in the land of Israel or in the surrounding nations, they all constantly faced the terrible possibility of becoming assimilated by the pagan peoples surrounding their minority communities. Inevitably, they turned inward and structured their religious and cultural life to prevent this.

Those who returned to the land and rebuilt the Temple were in the vanguard of efforts to model a pattern of life that reflected continuity with the past and salutary benefit from the failure of their fathers to take the demands of the covenant to heart. It was the early reform of Ezra (Ezra 7:6-10; Neh. 8:1-10:39) that convinced them of the primacy of the Pentateuch. They made it the divinely appointed basis for a distinct style of life and thought that has shaped Orthodox Judaism ever since. Its object was to make every aspect of daily life immune to Gentile influence. This precipitated the development of an "Oral Law"--a tradition of additional rules whereby obedience to the Law might be fully secured. National pride was promoted, non-Jews were regarded with contempt, and all Jewish communities tended to draw ever more tightly within themselves.

All of these changes radically impacted on the Israeli understanding of what was meant by Jewish identity. Increasingly, what legitimized this was physical descent. The term "Jew" gained precise definition: "Every Jewish child is a Jew by birth." One only had to make sure of having personally accepted the yoke of the Law. Whether one lived in the land or in a diasporal community was of little consequence. What mattered was that one had Jewish parents. It became increasingly accepted that no response to any prophetic call to turn to YHWH was needed to make them more surely Jews.

It is thought that during this period the leaders in Judaism interpreted Deuteronomy 7:3, 4 to the effect that the Jewish status of a child depends upon that of its mother.[5] Actually, this text contains the divine prohibition against Israelites making marriage arrangements with the Canaanites, lest they weaken the allegiance of Israel to YHWH. In Ezra's day many Israelites, including Priests and Levites--the leaders of "the holy race"--intermarried with non-Jewish neighbors and became involved in their "abominations" (9:1, 2). The rabbis recognized that since mothers tend to shape the spiritual development of children more than fathers, and since a child's maternity is more easily traced than its paternity, the decision was taken that only those whose mothers were Jews were certified as Jews by descent.[6] Understandably, those Jews who lived outside the land in diasporal situations became increasingly concerned with rectitude in these matters. Genealogies became important.

Efforts to tighten the racial coherence of diasporal communities collided with the growing desire of not a few *gerim* in their midst to attach themselves in varying relationships to this strange people and their singularly different faith.[7] The *gerim* were now regarded as potential proselytes, drawn to the Jewish congregation by its Law. The informality of the past was replaced by rigid conditions. Admittedly, not many became proselytes (i.e., formally converted to Judaism). The majority of those attracted were content to develop only a loose attachment to the Jewish people and came to be known as "God-fearers," but not real Jews. In general, however, one gains the impression that proselytes were welcomed, but not always sought. Naturally, those who persevered in their efforts to convert to Judaism had to be circumcised and accept a rigorous regimen of submission to the Law before being admitted to the community.

So then, in general terms whether Jewish by birth or conversion, all sought to affirm their Jewishness by obeying and fulfilling the Sinaitic Law and the burdensome "Oral Law," since this was regarded as the only way to "win the divine favor." Inevitably, human limitations prevented even the most zealous from achieving this goal (Ecc. 7:20). In fact, all the people knew themselves to be liable to divine punishment and hence facing deprivation of "the bliss of God's presence" (Isa 59:2). What were they to do? They could only presume that God's "compassion for human weakness" had provided in the Law the means whereby the penitent could "find their way back to the divine source--the way of repentance." But this heightened their preoccupation with legal rectitude.[8]

Over the years the issue of circumcision became ever more determinative. As earlier intimated, all male children of Jewish parents, despite the blood ties that automatically destined them for admission to Jewry, had to be circumcised. All were agreed: this alone separated them unto God and his service, and made them members of the covenant. Circumcision likewise was essential to the transformation of even the most zealous converts into what their conversion experience could not make them: real Jews. It is not surprising that the rabbis referred to circumcision as "being born again."[9] This stress on circumcision was fundamental to all the various Judaisms during the time of Jesus. Only by ritual circumcision could one enter the redeemed community. Joachim Jeremias comments:

> The whole community of Judaism . . . was dominated by the fundamental idea of the maintenance of racial purity. Not only did the priests, as the consecrated leaders of the people, watch anxiously over the legitimacy of priestly families . . . but the entire population itself . . . was classified according to purity of descent . . . the nation was considered God-given and its purity was God's will . . . pagans converted to Judaism could not of course become part of the pure seed . . . but they were indeed received into the larger community of the people.[10]

With the hardening that gradually took place in the basic requirements for conversion to Judaism and admission to the Jewish community, one rabbinic tradition became normative: the requirement that all proselytes follow the same sequence that Israel passed through prior to entering into covenant relationship with God at Sinai. This began with circumcision based on the myth that all male Israelites were circumcised just prior to the Exodus deliverance, then followed eating the passover lamb (sacrifice), and immersion in the Red Sea (baptism). After this, the candidate was ready to receive the yoke of the Law (Ex. 20:6) and enter the community of Israel.

What became important in this sequence was the thesis that all converts were literally changing their heredity by becoming Jews. In turn they would pass on to their children something not inherited but acquired when the Torah was accepted. They were now identified with the entire historic experience of the Jews, were called to a life of holiness, and through bringing a sacrifice were expressing their readiness to draw near to the divine presence and become full members of the people of Israel.

But not all were diligent in adhering to this demanding legalism. Not a few began to drift into nominality and became indifferent to the Law. This precipitated the emergence of an inner group, the "Hasidim." They saw themselves as the preservers of the Law, both in its written form (the Pentateuch) and in its oral form: the growing "tradition" of supplementary legislation to guarantee obedience to God. Inevitably, there were Jews who rejected this fiction that an "Oral Law" was also given by God to Moses at Sinai. They appealed to Exodus 24:4 with its statement that Moses recorded "all the words of the Law." It is not without reason that Neusner concludes that during this period several competing systems of Judaism emerged. Actually, Judaism became a diverse phenomenon and "tolerated sectarianism and schism," despite the intense desire of the Jewish people to remain racially pure.[11]

One tragedy of this infighting was a diminished emphasis on the centrality of God. Whereas in the religion of ancient Israel the idea of God was "eminently personal, supramundane but not extra-mundane, exalted but not remote," these Judaisms tended to exile God from the world. The proper name Yahweh ceased to be commonly used. It was largely confined to the Temple liturgy. God was so exalted in lonely majesty that something most important was sacrificed: the immediacy of relationship with him: the intimacy of communion between individuals and the God of Abraham.

In the third century before the Christian era the Pentateuch was translated into Greek. Years later the rest of the Hebrew Bible was also translated. This became necessary because many diasporal Jews, particularly in Egypt, became so Greek-oriented in language and culture that they no longer could read the Scriptures in Hebrew. The Septuagint reflects this tendency to depersonalize God. Many of the anthropomorphic expressions in the original text were recast to make God so absolutely transcendent that the impression was conveyed that intimate knowledge of him arising from one's personal experience with him was no longer possible. He had practically become unknowable.[12] Obviously, this made the earlier appeals of the prophets to "turn" to the living God in repentance and faith both remote and somewhat less relevant.

Before we close this section, mention should be made of a significant institution that diasporal Jews created in order to keep Jewish tradition and religious practice alive: the local synagogue. Its function was to educate and edify all classes within the community in Jewish religion and morality. These local synagogues soon became not only centers for religious instruction; they also served to stimulate intellectual, social, and cultural life. Indeed, few would challenge the claim that the creation of the synagogue precipitated nothing less than "one of the greatest revolutions in the history of religion and society."[13] It became the prototype of Christian churches and Muslim mosques. The synagogue greatly shaped the Jewish sense of call to the academic tradition. One's life should be devoted to study, particularly of the Torah. One could not devote too much time to disciplined reflection on the ethical concerns it stimulated. As a result Jewish people today tend to downplay the charismatic, what they call "mystical" or experiential religion. With the passage of time this preoccupation with the cognitive tended to minimize the call to be primarily concerned about one's need for personal encounter with God himself.

Judaism Encounters Jesus of Nazareth

John the Baptist was the last of the prophets under the Old Covenant and the one commissioned to reveal Jesus of Nazareth to Israel as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world (Lk. 16:16; Jn. 1:29, 31). Like the prophets before him, John's call to repentance was an implicit call to conversion. He was concerned with the sort of repentance that repudiated all confidence in one's physical descent from Abraham. He wanted all Israelites to seek the Lord and to enter into the sort of vital relationship to him that expressed itself by righteous deeds (Mt. 3:7-10). At first, Jesus proclaimed the same message of the need for personal rebirth, and told Nicodemus that what both he and John called for was something that any "teacher in Israel" should have fully understood (Jn. 3:10 within vs. 1-15). Indeed, all of the parables that Jesus later gave to illuminate his "gospel of the Kingdom" challenged conventional Jewish understandings of who God is and how he acts in the world. It is significant that when Jesus told Nicodemus that unless he was "born from above," he could neither see nor enter the Kingdom of God" (vs. 3, 5), he was addressing corporate Israel. When he said, "You must be born again" (vs. 7), the "you" in the Greek is plural rather than singular.

We have already intimated that the post-Exilic period witnessed the proliferation of religious parties (Judaisms) that sought to cope with the implications of the destruction of Solomon's Temple. Following the restoration of the Temple and its cultic life under the inspiration of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, a slow but

inevitable gravitation to Jerusalem took place on the part of the wealthy and aristocratic. Among them there emerged an ultra-conservative priestly party known as the Sadducees. Although not particularly strict regarding religious observance, they were adamant in their contention that "we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers."[14] Since they tended to play the political game with Rome, they were naturally suspect by the common people.[15] When their negotiations with Rome resulted in the Temple area being decreed out of bounds to gentiles, and when they transformed the Temple Court of the Gentiles into a place where animals were kept and money changers served, Jesus protested (Mk. 11:15-18) and re-affirmed God's intention that the Temple be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:6,7). This public disruption of the Sadducees' lucrative exploitation of those who came to Jerusalem to worship was deeply resented. Jesus was too forthright in his denunciation of their vested interests to be regarded with any measure of favor.

But it was the Pharisee party that particularly provoked Jesus' wrath.[16] Although he found elements of their ministry to be commendable (Mt. 23:2,3), and although we find several outstanding Pharisees in the Gospels, it was the Pharisees' preoccupation with the "Oral Torah"--the traditions handed down by men--that aroused Jesus' antipathy. "For the sake of your tradition, you have made void the Word of God" (Mt. 15:6). It was this tradition that promoted Jewish pride, caused non-Jews to be regarded with contempt, neglected the renewal ministry of the prophets, diminished interest in the significance of the Aaronic priesthood in relation to atonement through sacrifice and neglected reflection on the holiness of God and sinfulness of all people. When Jesus repeatedly denounced this tradition, the total religious establishment increasingly united in hostility against him.

In contrast to this hardening of resistance to Jesus in the heartland of Jewry, diasporal Jewish communities were experiencing the stirrings of missionary outreach initially dominated by morally earnest Jews who had exposed themselves to the universal concerns of the Hebrew prophets. How could any devout Jew not be moved by the universal concern of God for the nations? "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22)? Faced with similar appeals, many diasporal Jews could only reason: "If there is but one God, there can only be one true religion. If we Jewish people alone know and worship this God, then should we not be his instruments as a light to the nations that his salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6)?[17]

It is rather significant that Jesus did not condemn <u>per se</u> this missionary outreach. He only denounced the efforts of the Pharisees to transform this valid activity into producing people who embodied their own preoccupation with legal rectitude (Mt. 23:15). It is easy to see that in the Jewish mind the idea of conversion was something to which gentiles should submit. It was not something for the Jewish people themselves.

This brings up a significant point that is easily overlooked. The Pharisees in Jesus' day did not exceed 6,000, and the Sadducees were even fewer in number. But it is estimated that at that time the total Jewish population in the land exceeded two million. What then of this bulk of the people, the <u>Am-ha-aretz</u>, the "great throng who heard him gladly" (Mk. 12:37)? They were hardly caught up in the minutia of legal observance or the casuistry involved in rabbinical circumventions of the written Law. They were the humble, morally earnest Jews who inhabited the towns and villages of the land. They had responded to the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist and had become the followers of Jesus. With them Jesus had no controversies. They had been faithful in their worship at the local synagogue and in the Temple. Indeed, their religion was largely that of pre-Exilic Israel.

Suffice it to say, it was the message and ministry of Jesus and his followers that restored the prophetic stream to Israel. Since God is strictly personal, he can only be met in personal encounter. This concern of the prophets came to culmination in Jesus and characterized from that time onward the renewal movement he launched in Israel and which streamed out into the gentile world after Pentecost.

To summarize: people need to enter into fellowship with the living God, to come into vital contact with the One who is life, so that his implanted "newness of life" in them might begin the necessary total process of renewal: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. In sharpest contrast, the narrow focus of Judaism on the Law meant nothing less than significant departure from all that is subsumed under the prophetic call to turn, to return, to be converted.

Crisis: The Messianic Movement vs. Rabbinic Judaism

The first two centuries of what the Jewish people designate as the Common Era witnessed two dramatic and far-reaching religious changes among the Jewish peoples. The first change was brought about by the advent of Jesus Christ and the prophetic movement he launched within Jewry and to which he gave the task of making disciples of all nations, the Jews included. The second change was precipitated by the savage Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt in the land of Israel, particularly the reduction of Jerusalem to rubble and the destruction of the Temple. This tragedy forced the surviving rabbis to cope with the theological and existential implications of such an unmitigated disaster. They had to restructure Pharisaism, the one form of Judaism that survived, and enable the Jewish people to rationalize and transcend the loss of their priesthood and cultus. They also had to render fellow Jews impervious to the growing movement of Nazarenes in their midst.[18]

The Nazarenes not only proclaimed that Jesus was "Lord and Christ" by virtue of his death and resurrection (2:32-36). They also sought to persuade their fellow Jews to call upon him "to be saved" (2:21; 4:12). Indeed, Peter proclaimed in no uncertain terms that when Jews turn to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith, they are doing nothing less than reaffirming their personal allegiance to the Abrahamic-Sinaitic Covenant that God had made with ancient Israel. To reject him was to repudiate their essential relationship to God via this covenant (3:12-26). Their submission to baptism and their possession of the Holy Spirit gave them a deep sense of conviction that they were nothing less than the vanguard of something new and universal that God was doing on behalf of Israel and the nations of the world.

Missiologically speaking, in those early years the disciples of Jesus confined their witness to the large number of receptive Jews in the land who earlier had been responsive to the renewal ministry of John the Baptist and to the prophetic ministry of Jesus. The movement grew, despite the fact that within the land of Israel during those years prior to the beginnings of the first revolt against Rome (A.D. 66), Jewish believers in Jesus were repeatedly and increasingly persecuted, sometimes officially but more often by mob action. This involved flogging in the synagogues and executions as Jesus had predicted (Mk. 13:9; Ac. 4:5-20, 5:17-42; 8:1-3; 22:3-5; 23:12; etc.). But the movement kept growing.

But when the national revolt against Rome increasingly involved all Jews in the land, the followers of Jesus began to draw back and refused to participate. They fled from Jerusalem when Roman armies began to encircle the city. They did this in obedience to Jesus' earlier instruction (Luke 21:20-24). Inevitably, they were regarded by the enraged populace as lacking in real concern for their own people. This marked the beginnings of an irreparable breach between rabbinic Judaism and Hebrew Christianity that remains to this day.

As a result Rabbinic Judaism increasingly sought to promote the idea that the call to conversion heralded by the Nazarenes should be understood in terms of what rabbis required of gentiles converting to Judaism. Since gentile conversion to Judaism involved the repudiation of one's former religion, family, heritage, and people--as Ruth did when she forsook Moab to enter Israel (1:15-17)--the rabbis charged that Nazarenes were really calling Jews to abandon their Jewish heritage and reject everything that had to do with their own people. Over the centuries this terrible distortion has so crystallized that Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz recently released his reaction to the oft repeated dictum of Judaism: "Once a Jew always a Jew."

> What he (the convert) has done is a heinous and despicable crime. He has spit into his grandmother's grave . . . but he is still a Jew if he was born of a Jewish mother. He has lost all his privileges as a Jew. He cannot marry a Jewish woman, he cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery and he better not show up at services I conduct. But he is still a Jew.[19]

Actually, this contemporary expression of what has been described as "furious intolerance" and "vitriolic reaction" serves a sociological purpose. It is not so much aimed at the Jewish person who has come to faith in Jesus but is designed as a a warning to the rest of the Jewish community. In effect it states: "If you convert to Christianity, this is the kind of contempt and abuse you can expect to have heaped on you."[20] But we are getting ahead of our story.

Parting of the Ways: Further Details

The Hebrew Bible makes abundantly clear the major reason for the destruction of the Solomonic Temple and the Babylonian Captivity that followed. But the rabbis were hard pressed to explain the destruction of the Second Temple and the uprooting of the people from Jerusalem. Why had God allowed the Romans to triumph? Of course, Jewish Messianic believers were quick to point out that this judgment came to their people for rejecting Jesus as their Messiah (Matt 21:33-46; 22:7; 23:34-39). Even Daniel had predicted the coming of the Kingdom of God (2:34-45) followed by the sequence: the "anointed one shall be cut off . . . the city and sanctuary shall be destroyed" (9:26).

But the rabbis bitterly resented this facile explanation and chose rather to blame the disaster on the infighting that had constantly taken place between the various contending religious parties in Israel ("hatred without cause").[21] Hence, they were determined to so reconceptualize and unify Judaism that from henceforth all Jewry would reflect not only ethnic unity but unity in culture and religion.

And yet, while they were seeking to develop an interim Judaism in anticipation of a future rebuilding of the Temple and return to the land, they also had to cope with the Messianic movement growing in their midst with its intolerable penchant for incorporating gentiles as well. Jakob Jocz contends that the fixed tradition which they fashioned to solidify Judaism also "exists by virtue of its negation of the Christian faith." Only thereby did the rabbis feel that they could preserve the Jews as a separate and distinct people.[22]

Cyrus H. Gordon, a distinguished Jewish scholar, has described some of these changes in a notable essay: Jewish Reaction to Christian Borrowings.[23] He begins by calling attention to the eschatological predictions of two of Israel's most honored prophets--Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Both predicted that a radical religious renewal would come to Israel through God initiating a "new covenant" with his people (Jer. 31:31-34; 32:39-41 and Eze. 36:26,27; 37:24-28). Inevitably, Jewish Christians seized on this (Lk. 22:20; He. 8:8-12; 10:16,17) to the consternation of the rabbis. Here was no small problem. Jeremiah and Ezekiel antedated the coming of Jesus by centuries and now, because of their predictions of a new covenant, these Jewish believers in Jesus were calling the writings of their apostles "The New Covenant." This meant that the rabbis

had to convince the Jewish people that the only valid covenant was the "old" covenant made with ancient Israel. And this was but the first of many major problems provoked by the emergence of the Messianic movement. In this connection Gordon argues: "Jewish elements stressed by Christianity tended to be played down by Judaism by way of reaction. Accordingly, Christianity has determined to a great extent what Judaism has become."[24]

This does not mean that there was no place for conversion to God in rabbinic thought. In this connection Phillip Sigal is vigorous in his contention that Christianity is not alone in its desire that all people be converted to God. He reminds us that the *Aleinu* prayer that closes every statutory service in the Jewish community is an affirmation of the reality and importance of conversion. However, it does not apply to Jews! This prayer looks forward to the time when all non-Jews will confess Judaic monotheism by taking upon themselves the yoke of God's sovereignty and the yoke of the *Halakhah*. Sigal states: "In essence the *Alienu* looks forward to the eschatological attainment of the hope that all will confess and comply with Deuteronomy 6:4-9."[25] For this reason when Christians emphasize repentance and faith as essential to conversion now, this is not at all relevant to the Jewish people. Jews see themselves as already within the covenant people of God. All they have to do is to study and obey the Torah.

We must keep in mind that the Messianic congregations in those early years had no intention of separating from the synagogue. They were forced out of the Jewish communities in such a way that coexistence became impossible. The most effective weapon used against them was the ban (Luke 6:22; John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). The Tosefta Hullin expressed this as follows:

> One does not sell to them [the *Minim*] or receive from them or take from them or give to them. One does not teach their sons a trade, and does not obtain healing from them (2:20f).

This ban arose out of the disassociation of Messianic Jews from the Jewish political liberation movement, from A.D. 66 to 135. At first, under the peace movement launched by Yohanan ben Zakkai, they were tolerated. However, during the incumbency of his successor, the more volatile Gamaliel who had instigated the *Birkat Haminim* in the synagogue liturgy, the ban was increasingly used and further drove an irrevocable wedge between Messianic Jews and rabbinic Jews. Understandably, the parting of the ways became total and final by the end of the Javneh period (A.D. 135). By the 4th century when the Church gained political power, its uncritical allegiance to the state meant that it often became either a tacit supporter or an active accomplice in its anti-Semitic activities.

Over the centuries rabbinic Judaism has clung to its impressive integration of religion (ethical monotheism), race (ethnic roots), and culture (personal, family, and community life). It was able to do this rather successfully until the 18th century. The ancient prophetic concern that all individuals within the elect nation need personal relationship with God has been replaced by the conviction that because they are his chosen people, they have been endowed by him to lead a reasonable and righteous life. The Jewish people are particularly taught to be self-reliant and to take full responsibility for their lives. They sense no need for a Savior coming to their aid from outside. And this is confirmed to them in a thousand ways when they observe that gentile Christians--who claim such a Savior--do not live very impressive lives.

Judaism: From the Enlightenment to the Present

Such ideas persisted without significant change until a significant shift in intellectual climate came to Western Europe in the 18th century. At that time such concepts as the equality of all people and their inalienable right to life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness began to fill peoples' minds. This changing mood, the Enlightenment, was the result of two conflicting ideologies partially converging: the conviction that both private and public virtue were possible without religion and widespread reaction against the excesses of state churches in Europe.

It was the Enlightenment that brought about the emancipation of the Jewish people. They slowly began to leave the stultifying rigidities of their ghetto enclaves, entered the gentile world, and found to their growing surprise that they could obtain the full rights of citizenship. This meant that they could begin to participate in the economic, social, political, and cultural life of their respective countries. Naturally, long troubled years had to be consumed in their struggles to take full advantage of their social emancipation. For one thing, their very success in the public arena made gentiles envious of their achievements, and the Jewish people began to encounter different, more virulent, not church-related forms of anti-Semitism. In fact, they began to realize that not all gentiles were Christians any more than all Jews were positively related to the synagogue.

Reform movements began to surface in Judaism. The Jews who were able to secure secular education became aware of the ways in which the Talmud had denigrated Jesus the Jew from Nazareth. Some even began to study the Gospels critically. Inevitably the ethical teachings of Jesus came under careful scrutiny and were found to be impressive. At the same time Orthodox Judaism was subjected to critical review. Eventually, the focus of reflection was directed on the tragic events of the first century: the destruction of the Second Temple and the emergence of Messianic congregations followed by the ostracism from the Jewish community of all followers of Jesus.

Although there was deepest agreement among educated Jews that the claims Christians made of Jesus were sheer madness, they could not deny that his followers throughout the world had gained innumerable adherents and had brought about the social transformation of nations. It seemed as though everyone knew about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This provoked the natural desire to reclaim Jesus as their own, but freed from the myths that Christians had built up around him. It is not without reason that Samuel Sandmal begins his book, We Jews and Jesus (1965), with the ringing statement: "In the past one hundred and fifty years there has taken place what amounts to a reversal of eighteen centuries of Jewish and Christian attitudes toward each other."[26]

From the Enlightenment until the present within Protestantism there has emerged a growing evangelical movement, committed to historic biblical Christianity and determined to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all peoples of the world, and with the Jewish people. Their proclamation of the gospel followed by issuing the call to conversion sounded strange to most Jewish people, although here and there individual Jews who had drifted from the synagogue gave them a hearing because of their sheer hunger for contact with the living God. Some came to faith and frequently became active in lay mission organizations engaged in Jewish evangelism.

At first, it was most difficult for any Jews to believe that anything other than monetary or social advantage bribes could persuade Jews to "convert," which was regarded as leaving one's Jewish identity and assuming a radically different religious orientation. Such a conversion appeared as nothing less than the betrayal of one's Jewish roots, family, and heritage, totally rejecting historic Israel and repudiating the Abrahamic-Sinaitic covenant. Unfortunately, during the early centuries of Roman Catholic triumphalism, no Jew could be baptized into that church without publicly breaking all ties with the Jewish people. This tended to confirm to Jews that Judaism and Jewry were one and the same. To leave rabbinic Judaism and embrace the faith of Jesus meant that one was ceasing to be a Jew and entering an entirely different religious system. Even so, in the latter part of the 18th and throughout the 19th centuries Jewish

people started coming to faith in Jesus Christ in increasing numbers. One Jewish scholar puts the figure as high as 200,000.[27]

In recent decades it is being recognized that when a Jewish person accepts the Messiahship of Jesus and commits his/her life to him, this is nothing less than an affirmation of the ongoing significance of the ancient prophetic faith of Israel and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. A case in point would be the religious experience of Aaron Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, currently the Archbishop of Paris. In 1982 he was interviewed by two Israeli journalists (Y. Ben Porat and D. Judkowski) for publication in Yediot Haharonot, an Israeli daily.[28] This interview aroused great interest in Israel and throughout the world, because Lustiger is a Jew who is adamant in his claim to be a Jew, even though he has come to Christian faith. Furthermore, most of his family was destroyed in the Holocaust. As to his Jewishness:

> I cannot repudiate my Jewish condition without losing my own dignity and the respect I owe to my parents and to all those to whom I belong. . . . In becoming a Christian I did not intend to cease being the Jew I was then. I was not running away from the Jewish condition. I have that from my parents and I can never lose it. I have it from God and he will never let me lose it.[29]

As to his conversion to Jesus Christ:

> It was Christ who gave me the key to my searchings, Christ as Messiah and image of the Jewish people. . . . I reread the Gospels. . . . My parents absolutely refused to accept that I was convinced; they thought it was disgusting. I said to them, "I am not leaving you. I'm not going over to the enemy. I am becoming what I am. I am not ceasing to be a Jew; on the contrary, I am discovering another way of being a Jew."[30]

As to Judaism:

> It found its fulfillment in welcoming the person of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel; it was in recognizing him, and only in recognizing him, that Judaism found its meaning. . . . The person of Jesus, once he was recognized as Messiah, brought into focus a whole range of Jewish expectations which were seen to have a special spiritual content and which were experienced, at that moment, as fulfilled in the Christian experience.[31]

Perspectives such as these are being widely promoted in our day, largely by Jewish people who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Some serve in lay mission groups such as Jews for Jesus. Within recent decades other Jews have formed what are called Messianic Jewish congregations. These function as Christian synagogues and seek to bridge the Jewish community and the largely gentile Christian movement. Today, in North America there are probably 40,000 Jewish followers of Jesus. About 80% of them are identified with Christian churches, but the remainder feel the need to be a visible loving witness within the Jewish community via their one hundred or so Messianic Jewish congregations in North America.

All these Jewish people have responded to the prophetic concern of Scripture to "seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near" (Isa. 55:6). They have found in Jesus their Messiah and the fulfillment of the promises of the ancient prophets of Israel. Furthermore, they refuse to grant to any the presumption to declare that they are no longer Jews.

Tragically, as has been intimated earlier, Messianic Jews are bitterly resented by the synagogue and misunderstood by many in the churches. But they appeal to the

Scriptures, Old and New, to substantiate the thesis that when the Messianic movement began to receive gentiles as well as Jews, it was early decided that no effort should be made to Judaize Gentile believers or to Gentilize Jewish believers. Race and culture are not to be repudiated when Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, is embraced.

Fortunately, at the 1989 gathering of the Lausanne Consultation for World Evangelism (Lausanne) II many evangelicals felt that the lordship of Jesus Christ was at stake on the issue of Jewish evangelism. As a result, they drafted and adopted the following affirmation:

> It is sometimes held that in virtue of God's covenant with Abraham, Jewish people do not need to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah. We affirm that they need him as much as anyone else, that it would be a form of anti-Semitism, as well as being disloyal to Christ, to depart from the New Testament pattern of taking the gospel to "the Jew first . . . ." We therefore reject the thesis that Jews have their own covenant which renders faith in Jesus unnecessary.[32]

And so, the struggle of almost four thousand years continues. It began with Israel's prophets, was heightened by Jesus and the Apostles, and has been continued by faithful Christian witnesses down through the centuries. The great theme throughout this period was succinctly stated by Jesus Christ: "Salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). By this he meant that within the stream of Israel God has provided the good news of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike. The redemptive work of Christ on the cross was retroactive for all peoples, past, present, and future (Rom. 3:19-26). But there has never been a time when it did not have to be appropriated personally, by repentance and faith.

Endnotes

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[1]For a detailed study of the covenantal use of *sūbh* consult The Root sūbh in the Old Testament by William L. Holladay (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1958). Its key meaning, "a change of loyalty on the part of Israel or God, each for the other" (p. 2). Also "having moved in a particular direction, to move thereupon in the opposite direction, the implication being (unless there is evidence to the contrary) that one will arrive again at the initial point of departure" (p. 53).

[2] See also Isaiah 55:1-13.

[3] See article on the *ger* by D. Kellerman, Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 439-449.

[4]Jacob Neusner, Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. ix-xiv.

[5]Roland de Corneille: Christians and Jews (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 4.

[6]Daniel Juster: Jewish Roots (Gaithersburg, MD: Davar Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 191-195.

[7]Lawrence H. Schiffmann: "Jewish Sectarianism in Second Temple Times," in Great Schisms in Jewish History edited by Raphael Jospe and Stanley M. Wagner (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1981), pp. 1-46.

[8]The forms of Judaism that emerged among diasporal Jews all tended to downplay theTemple, its priests, and the sacrificial system. This emphasis was later to characterize the unified Judaism that was developed following the destruction of the Second Temple (A.D. 70). It is significant that the exposition of the word "repentance" in The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia places stress not on the Levitical code of "confession and the bringing of animal sacrifice" which is regarded as "rather mechanical," but on the manner in which the prophets "spiritualized" it. "Sacrifice is unnecessary," "repentance and good deeds are at least as efficacious." "Judaism indeed recognizes the need of divine grace, but it also declares that man can and must attempt his own moral regeneration: the doctrine of return (teshubah) is an affirmation of human freedom" (Vol. 9, p. 134, 135).

[9]See Oscar Cullmann: Baptism in the New Testament (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1950), pp. 57, 60, 61.

[10]Joachim Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

[11]Lawrence H. Schiffmann: Who is a Jew? Rabbinic and Halakhic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism. (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1985), pp. ix-xii.

[12]Charles T. Fritsch generated no small debate among Jewish scholars when his doctoral dissertation was published: The Anti-Anthropomorphisms of the Greek Pentateuch (Princeton University Press, 1943).

[13]A History of the Jewish People, edited by H. H. Ban-Sasson. Part III: "The Period of the Second Temple" by Menahem Stern, pp. 185-303. (Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 285.

[14]The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus translated by William Whiston (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Company, no date). "Antiquities of the Jews"--Book XIII, Ch. X, Par. 6, p. 397.

[15]Ibid. Flavius Josephus: "The Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them" (p. 397).

[16]"The Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them. . . . but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side" (p. 397).

[17]George F. Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era. This particular theme is developed in Vol. I, Ch. 1, "Nationality and Universality," pp. 219-234, particularly pp. 228, 229 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).

[18]Phillip Sigal in the first of his two-volume series, The Emergence of Contemporary Judaism, has produced a remarkable chapter (No. 7) on the rise and separation of Christianity (pp. 377-507). It is refreshing to read an account that is so fair and balanced in its treatment of both sides of this tragic schism (Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1980). The second volume, Appendix D, particularly reflects Sigal's fairness: "The impact of Christianity at Yavneh" (pp. 297-305).

[19]Quoted by Moishe Rosen: "Christian Conversion and Jewish Culture," p. 13.

[20]Ibid. p. 1, 2.

[21]Talmud: Babylonian Shabbat 32b.

[22]Jakób Jocz, The Jewish People and Jesus Christ After Auschwitz (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 124.

[23]Cyrus H. Gordon's essay, "Jewish Reaction to Christian Borrowings" (pp. 685-690) in the Festschrift in honor of David H. Freedman, The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983).

[24]Ibid., p. 685.

[25]Phillip Sigal, op. cit., Vol. II, Appendix C: "Dual Covenant Theology" (pp. 287-291), p. 288.

[26]Samuel Sandmel, We Jews and Jesus. His opening sentence (p. 13) is quoted in Donald A. Hagner's impressive volume: The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 60.

[27]Israel Cohen states that 204,542 Jews were baptized throughout the world during the 19th century. Jewish Life in Modern Times (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919), Chapter III "Drift and Apostasy," 268-283, especially 273-274.

[28]Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, Dare to Believe (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 33-66.

[29]Ibid., p. 37,38.

[30]Ibid., p. 41.

[31]Ibid., p. 37, 46.

[32]The Manila Manifesto, Sect. A., Par. 3 in The Whole Gospel for the Whole World, ed. Alan Nichols (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1989), p. 114.

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