

What Happened To The First Christians?

'Barnabas went to Tarsus to search for Saul (Paul), and when he had found Saul, he brought him back to Antioch. For a whole year they assembled together as guests of the church and taught many people; and in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians' (Acts 11:25 & 26).

'They will hand you over to suffer persecution and put you to death and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. Many will be offended, stumble and fall away and will pursue one another with hatred ... The love of the great body will grow cold because of the increased iniquity ... when you see the abomination spoken of by the prophet Daniel standing in the Holy Place (Daniel 9:26; 11:31 to 33), let the reader understand. Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains' (Matthew 24:9 to 16).

'They will persecute you and turn you over to the synagogues and prisons for My names sake. This will be an opportunity for you to testify ... You will be betrayed by family and friends and some of you will be put to death. You will be hated because you carry My name. When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then understand that Jerusalem's desolation has come. Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains ... alas for those who are pregnant and nursing babies in those days, for great misery and distress will come upon the land ... many will fall by the sword and will be led away as captives among all nations and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles have come' (Luke 21:12 to 24).

There were many thousands of people who gave their lives to Jesus in the first forty years after His death; from about 30 AD when He died and rose again, until 70 AD when Jerusalem was destroyed. Most of the known world heard the Gospel in those years; beginning from Jerusalem, spreading to Ethiopia in Africa (Acts 8:27 to 39), Europe (most of the Book of Acts) and all of Asia. 'All the inhabitants of Asia, Jews as well as Gentiles, heard the Word of the Lord' (Acts 19:10). To find out what happened to all those people, we need to turn to the pages of history, for most of this information is not recorded in the Bible, but in history books. The Gospel went to the Jews first, so the early Christians consisted of many Jews as well as Gentiles. 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus our Messiah for it is the power of God to bring salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Gentile' (Romans 1:16).

After Stephen was murdered by religious Jews for believing in Jesus (Acts 6:5 to 7:60; 11:19), some of the greatest persecutors were religious Jews persecuting Messianic Jews. Paul was initially one of the worst persecutors (Acts 8:1 to 3; 22:3 to 5; 22:19 & 20; 26:10 & 11) until his dramatic conversion. There was so much persecution of both Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians, they believed it was all led by an antichrist spirit, and they believed the chief antichrist was living at that time. 'Let no one deceive you in any way for that day will not come until many have fallen away and the man of lawlessness is revealed, who is the son of perdition (destruction), who opposes and exalts himself against all that is God's or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in the temple as God ... So then Brethren, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us' (2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4 & 15). 'This is the antichrist which you heard was coming, and now is already in the world ... Many impostors have gone out into the world, men who will not admit the coming of the Messiah in the flesh. Such a man is the deceiver and the antichrist' (1 John 4:3; 2 John 1:7). The early Christians believed the wicked Nero was the antichrist spoken about by Paul and John. The written Hebrew language has no vowels like we have in English, and each character has a numerical value. The name Caesar Nero, pronounced 'Kaisar Neron' (or Emperor Nero in Latin) was written in Hebrew (in the English equivalent) as Q S R. N R W N. If we add the numerical value of each of those characters, we come up with a total of: Q = 100; S = 60; R = 200; N = 50; R = 200; W = 6; N = 50 = 666. We need to look no further to see whom John was writing about in the Book of Revelation 13:18.

Nero came to power in 54 AD and ruled for 14 years. After the fire of Rome in 64 AD, Nero had hundreds of thousands of Jews and Christians tortured and executed. When Jesus warned the Apostles about terrible

things that were about to happen in Judea, he was referring to the time when the persecution of Jews and Christians would be at its peak – during the time of Nero. The warnings spoken by Jesus could not have been warnings for this generation because Israel is not called Judea; it would not matter in this day and age if they did have to flee in the winter; there would be no alas for pregnant or nursing mothers because nowadays they could travel by car and not on foot or on donkeys; the modern Israeli people would still drive on the Sabbath Day if they had to, which they could not have done 2,000 years ago and lastly, Jews do not have to flee to the mountains when they are attacked, they simply go to underground bunkers. There was terrible tribulation for the Jews and Christians at that time. They were thrown to lions, used as human torches, tortured, burned alive and all manner of terrible things were done to them. The shortening of the days did not mean days that were ended. It was a time when the literal days were shortened from the usual 12 hours to about 6 hours of daylight because of a cosmic phenomenon (which has been recorded in history) and the Roman soldiers had to try to fight in the long hours of darkness, holding a shield and a torch while trying to fight with a sword. They gave up. Jesus warned believers not to follow false Messiah's and there were plenty of them around then. Nero was one the cruellest, most sadistic rulers the world has ever had. That is what Jesus, Paul and John were warning the Jews and Christians about. By the end of Nero's reign in 68 AD, almost all of the Apostles were dead. The attitude of the Roman rulers, was that the way to solve any problem was by intense bloodshed. Between 7 AD and 41 AD, Judea had seven different governors. Flavius, Nero and Titus were the eighth, ninth and tenth governors. Flavius ridiculed the Godly beliefs that the Jews held dear, he confiscated the priest's robes then demanded a temple tax of 17 talents of gold which would be about \$2,000,000 in today's currency.

In 66 AD the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea rebelled against Flavius in a David versus Goliath battle. The handful of Jews were rebelling against the greatest empire the world had known at that time. Other countries that had been forced into the Roman Empire watched in disbelief as the Jews fought against their mighty foe; and the Roman rulers knew the world was watching. The Romans knew if the Jews won, there would be no way of keeping the empire intact, so Nero set out to utterly destroy the Jews and Christians. He sent his general Vespasian and troops from Rome, but the determined Jews and Christians kept resisting. At that time, the Christians felt Jerusalem was as important to them as it was to the Jews. Remember that Christianity was then, a Jewish religion, and they held fast to the Jewish traditions taught to them by Paul (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Vespasian was given absolute command over all the legions of troops. One legion was 10,000 soldiers. He moved slowly and methodically. By 68 AD all of Judea had been conquered and taken back, but Jerusalem stood strong.

The Roman army went up against the walls of Jerusalem again and again, but they were repeatedly rebuffed. Nero died before Jerusalem could be conquered. The Roman senate offered the governorship to Vespasian who gave the task of destroying Jerusalem to his son Titus. Titus made the destruction of Jerusalem his whole focus. He had Jerusalem completely surrounded with more than 80,000 soldiers, who had been commanded to don full battle uniform and parade around the walls of the city for three days in an effort to intimidate. Far from showing intimidation, when the Roman soldiers had ended their parade, the Jews let out a long, loud cheer from the ramparts.

Titus became enraged. Huge rocks were catapulted at the walls of Jerusalem until a massive hole was smashed through a wall, where Roman soldiers poured in by the thousand. It took the Jews two weeks of relentless, savage combat to drive the Romans out. Titus then sealed Jerusalem off to prevent any food or water entering the city in an effort to starve the inhabitants into submission. Any person caught anywhere in that area who was not a Roman soldier was immediately flogged and crucified in sight of the Jews and Christians still in Jerusalem. Some days, as many as 500 people were crucified. The Romans used battering rams and made portable bridges to enter Jerusalem once again. This time, exactly what Jesus said would happen, did happen. Most people were slaughtered, including priests and Christians. Some were tossed over the walls to their deaths; some were sold as slaves; some were fed to lions; others were made human torches and the temple was burned and torn apart brick by brick, as the Roman soldiers tried to collect the melting

gold that ran between the bricks, leaving only the Western Wall. The war had lasted 3½ years, as is prophesied in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 7:25; 9:27). The Jews and the Christians who stood up against the might of Rome were incredibly brave. All this time, the Messianic Jews were still a cohesive part of the Jewish community. During all this time of terrible persecution, the believers, Jews and Gentiles alike continued to spread the Gospel wherever they went. We need to praise the Lord for the dedication and bravery of these wonderful people for spreading the Gospel of the Kingdom in the face of such terrible persecution. Without them, many of us would never have heard the Gospel of Jesus.

We have only traditional information regarding the loss of the twelve original disciples apart from just two who were mentioned in the Bible. James, the son of Zebedee was killed with a sword at the order of Herod (Acts 12:1 & 2). Judas Iscariot was disembowelled when he fell heavily during the process of hanging himself (Matthew 27:5; Acts 1:18). Reliable information says Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was crucified by the Romans. Peter was crucified upside down by the Romans. Thomas and Bartholomew became missionaries to India and were speared to death by the Indian king, Misdas. John, the other son of Zebedee who wrote the Book of John plus the three epistles one, two and three John, and the Book of Revelation, died aged about 94 at Trajan. He called himself 'the elderly elder' (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1). John had been exiled to the Isle of Patmos where he wrote the Book of Revelation, but he was released a few years before he died. We do not have reliable information regarding the deaths of James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Philip, Matthew or Thaddeus. Other well known apostles, Paul, Luke, Mark, Barnabas and others died at the hands of persecutors. Nero was the ruler at the time Apostle Paul was murdered. It was Nero who had sentenced Paul to death by beheading somewhere around 63 to 67 AD (2 Timothy 4:6). Matthew and Mark probably died during that time. Luke died in Bithynia, about 74 AD, so he would have been a very elderly man by then. Barnabas was burned to death by religious Jews. James, the brother of Jesus was killed by religious Jews about 63 AD.

After the temple was destroyed, the Jews had to try to continue with their beliefs, traditions and religion in Gentile countries around the world and without a temple. In time, synagogues replaced the temple as the centre of Judaism in each individual Jewish community around the world, wherever that community was. Priests were replaced by Rabbis (teachers of the Tenach; the Old Testament). Jewish households continued to celebrate the Sabbath day and all of the holy festivals ordained by God. For the Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah, and that He had fulfilled all the prophecies regarding the Jewish Messiah, had a lot more to deal with. They were no longer bound by the Laws of Moses and they attempted to tell the Jews that they were living in the new age of grace; that the temple was destroyed to bring animal sacrifice to an end. In that day, the Messianic Jews called themselves Hebrews, as some still do today. The whole Book of Hebrews was written by a Jewish author, to convince Jews to become believers in Jesus as their Messiah. There was severe tension between the two groups of Jews. The religious Jews resented the fact that hundreds of thousands of Messianic Jews fled Jerusalem and Judea just before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, as Jesus had warned them to do. Although all Jews, both religious and Messianic were as close as the Jewish people always had been as the children of Israel, many Messianic Jews opposed the new forms of Jewish religious expression. The Gentile believers were easily able to thrive away from their Jewish counterparts, but to do so, many denied their Jewish roots, and many Christians still do that today.

For decades, subsequent Roman rulers had insisted the Jews pay a temple tax, supposedly to support the temple in Jerusalem, but after the Jewish temple was destroyed, Rome forced the Jews to pay a temple tax for the support of the temple of Jupiter in Rome. All Jews and all believers had to pay that tax until it was cancelled in 96 AD. There were other crippling taxes forced upon the Jews and they longed to be free. They thought their chance came in 132 AD when religious and Messianic Jews fought together against the might of Rome. It was a foolish Rabbi Akiba who declared the general of their army, Shimon son of Kosiba the new messiah. The thousands of Jews who believed Jesus was their Messiah walked right away from Akiba and the general, making victory against Rome impossible. The Messianic Jews believed Akiba was a false prophet,

and the general, a false messiah. A war between Rome and the Jews lasted three years with the loss of thousands of lives on both sides. Akiba and all the leaders of the revolt were executed.

Rome took quick revenge by ploughing Jerusalem into the ground. Jews were not allowed to enter the district of Jerusalem. The religious Jews were angry with the Messianic Jews for 'deserting' them during the revolt and the rabbis declared them to be traitors. All contact between the two groups of Jews was severed and they were ostracised. Even Jews in desperate need were forbidden to go to the Messianic Jews for help. That left the Messianic Jews with a series of terrible dilemmas. They knew to remain a follower of Jesus, they would be permanently ejected from their Jewish families; yet as Jews, they would also be rejected in the Gentile world. They had to decide whether or not to reject and deny Jesus as their Messiah and be accepted by their families, or contemplate publicly denying Jesus, but secretly continuing to believe. Some Messianic Jews found it was impossible to survive outside the Jewish communities and gave Jesus up altogether. Others kept their ongoing relationship with Jesus a secret. Some lived successfully within the Gentile world, supported by Gentile believers and became part of the Gentile church.

There was one group of Jews who became what was called the 'Ebionites', a group that lasted for about six hundred years. They continued to obey the Laws of Moses including circumcision; they did not believe Jesus was born the Son of God by the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary; they rejected Paul but venerated Peter and James, the brother of Jesus. They combined the teachings of the Catholic doctrine and Orthodox Judaism and were rejected by both as apostates and heretics. Another group became the Nazarenes who believed Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God; they believed everyone had to observe the Laws of Moses including circumcision, the Sabbath and kosher foods; they believed Jesus was superior to Moses and all the prophets. They insisted all the Jews amongst their group observe the Laws of Moses, but the non-Jews did not have to.

Although initially, there were far more Jew than Gentile believers, after the many persecutions, murders and massacres of both the religious and Messianic Jews, there were many more Gentile believers than Jewish and as time passed, the Gentile Christians could not understand their Jewish roots and tried to stop the Jewish believers from being Jewish. Up to this point, the Gentiles had always observed the Jewish holy days as part of their beliefs and traditions as taught by Paul. Jesus was Jewish; all the apostles were Jewish; the writers of the Bible were Jewish and so Gentiles had initially fully accepted all the Jewish ways as part of their new faith. They openly participated in Passover, Hanukkah, and all the feasts. Now, the Gentiles wanted to do away with everything Jewish. Resurrection Day, which had been meaningful for the early Christians became Easter Sunday. Passover was changed to Easter in line with paganism. The Messianic Jews were understandably angry. God had given the Jews Passover, and Jesus had celebrated Passover with the disciples, then as our Jewish Messiah, He rose on the third day of Passover, but all that was pushed to one side without consulting any Jews. It was not long before Passover was entirely rejected by the church, and any Christians seen to be observing Passover was excommunicated from the church of Rome, and to this day, very few Gentile believers observe Passover. Hanukkah was changed to Christmas – another pagan festival. The calendar, once given to us by the Jewish people, was changed by Caesar to suit paganism. The days and months all carry pagan names. Then the calendar was changed again by Pope Gregory and the church decided Jesus should have been born on Christmas Day in the year one AD because that suited the heathenistic beliefs. Christmas was celebrated in Rome by 336 AD. The Winter Solstice and the pagan festival Saturnalia (December 17th), which was the Roman feasting week, occurred at the same time. This was a time of merrymaking, dancing, feasting and the exchanging of gifts, just like Christmas is today. The ancient Roman New Year's Day pagan festival was held on January 1st. That date for New Year's Day has carried over. The approximate middle date of these two big pagan festivals was the 25th December, which was adopted to celebrate the supposed birth of Jesus; merging paganism with the Holy Truth of the Word of God; thus defiling the early church. That is quite probably one of the reasons the church died off for so many centuries during the 'Dark Ages'. What is even worse than that, is the 25th December is the celebrated birth date of the ancient Persian mystery god Mithra – known as the 'sun of righteousness'. Christmas, with its feasting and gifts, and

New Year's Day are both ancient pagan festivals still observed by the modern world, and have nothing to do with Christianity in any way. All Jewish festivals in the Jewish calendar, given to them by the Lord God Himself were replaced by pagan ones, then the church instigated a few of its own. There are no Jewish festivals or holidays mentioned in the average modern universal calendar.

As time passed, the church pulled itself further and further away from its Jewish roots until it finally denied its Jewish roots altogether, even to the point of teaching a false doctrine that the Jewish New Testament was written in Greek. The New Testament was not written in Greek – it was written in Hebrew, by Jewish men who spoke Hebrew, to Jewish people, within the bounds of the Jewish culture, in the Jewish land of Israel. A couple of the books were written outside of Israel, but they were still written by Jews to a Jewish audience and to Gentiles who adhered closely to the Jewish traditions. Eventually, the church blamed the Jews for murdering Jesus. The Jews did not kill Jesus, the Romans did with the permission of some religious Jews, but the Roman church did not want that on their conscience, so they offloaded their guilt onto the Jews. The Jews played no active role in the death of Jesus, apart from Judas who betrayed Him. The gulf between Jews and Gentiles widened.

A further denial of the Christian's Jewish roots was during the Crusades and the following Inquisition and regular pogroms like the one in Russia and later in Great Britain, which then ended up with the so-called 'Christian' nation of Germany, slaughtering millions of Jews. How could the Jewish people then identify themselves with the Gentiles who allowed the brutal murder of millions of Jews? How could the message of the full Gospel that began with the Jews, which is supposed to be a message of divine love for our fellow man with Jesus as our Head, end up being so utterly distorted and filled with murderous hatred?

What happened to the first Christians, was domineering religious men who knew religion, but had no relationship with Jesus, being allowed to make rules and regulations for the masses. Those men did exactly what Paul warned against; 'The Holy Spirit expressly declares that in latter times, some will turn away from the faith giving attention to deluding and seducing spirits and doctrines that demons teach' (1 Timothy 4:1). As free thinking people, we need to ignore those erroneous doctrines and turn back to our Jewish roots and embrace our Jewish heritage. We need to love the Jewish people and try to make up for the ignorance and cruelty shown to them by many Gentile believers. Reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles has been happening for about fifty years, will only fully come when Gentiles who think they know the Bible, humble themselves before the Lord, really search out the truths regarding our Jewish roots and accept three major facts. (1) Jesus Himself was Jewish, His name was Yeshua – not Jesus, and He came from the Hebrew tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14). (2) God Himself ordained that our salvation should come from the Jewish nation with the Jewish language of Hebrew, which the Lord calls a pure language spoken by pure lips (John 4:22; Zephaniah 3:9). (3) Gentile believers have been grafted into the divine spiritual Jewish vine, and we are commanded not to consider ourselves superior to the Jewish people (Romans 11:16 to 26), but to accept that we are another part of the New Covenant of the blood of Jesus (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). 'May the God and Author of peace, Who brought our Lord Jesus out from among the dead; the Great Shepherd of His sheep, by the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work according to His will; working in you through Jesus the Messiah, to Whom be the glory forever and ever, Amen' (Hebrews 13:20 & 21).

Amen and God bless you.

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