

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 in the church and taught many people. 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 Jerusalem's desolation has come. Let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let those in Jerusalem depart and those in the countryside not enter. These are days of vengeance so all things that are written (prophesied) may be fulfilled. Alas for those who are pregnant and nursing babies in those days, for great misery and distress will come upon the land and great wrath to this generation. Many will fall by the sword and will be led away as captives into 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 and many Jews were sent out of Israel. The terrible distress Jesus prophesied, happened during the first century. 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). The whole world heard the Gospel. 'I thank my God through Jesus for all of you. Your faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world' (Romans 1:8). 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 mostly Jews as well as some 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 spirit of antichrist which you heard was coming, and now is already in the world ... Many deceivers 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. 'It is the number of a man. His number is six hundred sixty-six' (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 flee to the mountains when they are attacked, they 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 the way to solve any problem was by intense bloodshed. Between 7 AD and 41 AD, Judea had seven different governors, then Flavius, Nero and Titus were the eighth, ninth and tenth governors. Flavius ridiculed the Godly beliefs the Jews held dear; he confiscated the priest's robes then demanded a temple tax of 17 talents of gold, which would be over \$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, 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 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 lasted 3½ years, as is written in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 7:25; 9:27), and as Jesus prophesied in His warnings (Matthew 24:15). 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, all these years later.

We have only traditional information regarding the loss of the twelve original disciples apart from the 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, Misdus. 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' (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 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 they were living in the new age of grace and the temple was destroyed to bring animal sacrifices 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 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 on 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. Religious 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 if they remained followers 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.

This dreadful situation of having families torn apart was the fulfilment of prophecy. Jesus, from the House of David, was stabbed (pierced) and crucified, then the Spirit of Grace was poured out in Israel, then the immense persecution of Messianic Jews and Christians caused them great mourning for their temple and beloved city Jerusalem. Remember, at that time, the Christians felt Jerusalem was as important to them as it was to the Jews. 'I will pour on the House of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of Grace and of supplication. They (the Romans) will look to Me Whom they have pierced and they (His followers) will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and will grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for his firstborn. In that day there will be a great mourning in Jerusalem like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of

Megiddo. The land will mourn, every family torn apart. The family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart, the family of the house of Nathan apart, and their wives apart, the family of the house of Levi apart, and their wives apart, the family of the Shimeites apart, and their wives apart. All the families who remain, every family apart and their wives apart' (Zechariah 12:10 to 14).

To make matters worse, the Romans then fulfilled the prophecy written by Asaph. 'They (the Romans) conspire with cunning against Your people. They (the Romans) plot against Your cherished ones. "Come," they say, "and let us destroy them (the Jewish people) as a nation, so the name of Israel may be remembered no more"' (Psalm 83:3 & 4). Most of the surviving Jews were forced out of Israel after 70AD and beyond, destroying them as one people in their own land, as they were scattered around the world. Then the name of Israel was changed to Palestine after the enemy of the Jews, the Philistines, in an attempt to erase the name of Israel from the memory of people all over the world. Israel was called Palestine for 2,000 years. The evil plot did not work because as we know, Israel is once again a nation and the Jewish people are back in their own land and will never again be destroyed. "I will bring My people Israel back from exile and they will rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them. They will plant vineyards and drink wine from them. They will make gardens and eat the fruit of them. I will plant them on their land and they will no more be plucked up out of their land I have given them," says the Lord your God' (Amos 9:14 & 15).

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, massacres and exile 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 word Easter comes from the goddess of fertility, Ishtar. That is why eggs and bunnies are sold at Easter time. The Messianic Jews were understandably angry. God had given the Jews Passover, and Jesus had celebrated Passover with the disciples as our Jewish Messiah, 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 were excommunicated from the church of Rome, and to this day, very few Gentile believers observe Passover.

Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, was changed to Christmas – another pagan festival. Jesus celebrated the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22). 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, 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 falsehood, 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 Hebrew-speaking 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 Gentile 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.

False 'Christian' leaders thought up the 'Replacement Theology' and some church members have been viciously persecuted the Jews ever since. 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 while the rest of the world watched on, pretending not to know about it and doing little to help. How could the Jewish people then identify themselves with the Gentiles who allowed the brutal murder of millions of Jews over the centuries? 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? Just as the religious Jews once persecuted the believers in Jesus, so then the 'religious Christians' then persecuted both Jews and genuine born-again believers.

What happened to the first Christians, was persecution by evil men who had no relationship with Jesus. Those evil men did exactly what the Christians were warned about. 'The Holy Spirit expressly declares 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 the Jewish roots of Christianity 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 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 we are another part of the New Covenant of the blood of Jesus (Mark 14:24). 'May the God 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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