



*Jewish
Evangelism*

*Muslim
Evangelism*

MISHKAN

■ A FORUM ON THE GOSPEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE ■ *Issue 54/ 2008*



MISHKAN

A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People

ISSUE 54 / 2008

General Editor: Kai Kjær-Hansen

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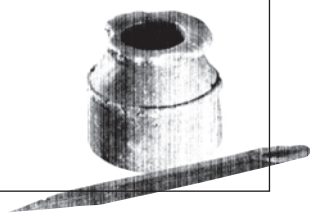
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Mishkan is the Hebrew word for *tabernacle* or *dwelling place* (John 1:14).

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Muslim and Jewish Evangelism

By Kai Kjær-Hansen



Mishkan is "A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People." This issue, however, focuses on the gospel and *Muslims*. There is no contradiction in this. Despite all the differences, there are a number of common problems.

This is not least the case in the matter of Jesus-believers' *identity*: Who am I now? What have I received that I did not have before? What is my relationship to the religion and culture I was raised in? How much of it can I bring into my new existence? How do I act in a society where politics and religion are intertwined and where I, because of my faith in Jesus, am regarded as a traitor or apostate?

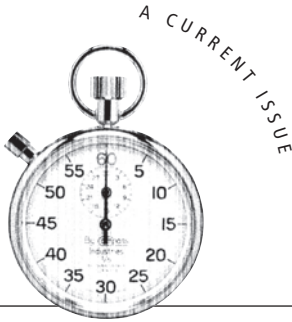
Who can I worship with? And where? In a Christian church, if there is one and if it is legal, or do we need new, indigenous congregations? And if both options are illegal, then what? And how do I respond when faced with harassment or death threats?

How do I, as a Jesus-believing Jew who loves my country and people, relate to a Palestinian Christian who also loves his country and people? And vice versa?

It is a well-known fact that it is difficult to be a Messianic Jew in Israel or a Christian in some Arab countries. Despite all the harassment they may face, the majority of Messianic Jews in Israel live under more tolerable conditions than do many Christians or Muslim background believers in neighboring Arab countries.

Jewish evangelism is special, theologically and historically, but it is not so special that it cannot learn from others, rejoice in and be inspired by their work – and suffer with them.

People involved in Jewish and Muslim evangelism should relate to each other even more in the future – for their mutual benefit.



Israel: 60 Years and Lost Lives

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

Preparations for the celebration of the State of Israel's 60-year anniversary are well under way.

Before Yom Ha'atzmaut, Independence Day, comes Yom Hazikaron, the Israeli national remembrance day for fallen soldiers and victims of terrorism. Placing Yom Hazikaron on the day before Yom Ha'atzmaut is a meaningful way to recognize the fact that freedom and independence have cost – and still cost – sacrifices and lives.

The State of Israel is a democratic state, based on Jewish values. The Declaration of Independence says that the State of Israel "will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex; will guarantee full freedom of conscience, worship, education and culture ..."

On Yom Hazikaron, the approximately 25,000 persons killed in action or in acts of terrorism are remembered. This number corresponds to approximately half of the abortions performed in Israel every year.

Being a non-Jew, I would not dare to mention such a comparison myself. But it is part of the debate in Israel.

According to press releases, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel ruled on December 24, 2007, that abortion is "a grave sin." But not only that, this grave sin is "delaying the coming of the Messiah."

The director of the anti-abortion organization Efrat, Dr. Eli Shusheim, presented the statistical material to the Chief Rabbinate: More than 50,000 abortions are performed annually in Israel; of these only 20,000 are legal.

The same figures are posted on Efrat's web site, together with this statement: "Many of these abortions could be prevented, if only the woman was provided some basic social and financial support. Last year alone, Efrat saved the lives of 1,806 Jewish children in Israel. If we had twice our budget we could have saved twice as many children."

At the bottom of the page is the following:

Last year in an average week in Israel:

- 9 people were killed in road accidents,
- 1 Israeli was murdered by terrorists, but
- over 900 babies were lost to abortion, mainly due to economic concerns!

Similar notes are struck by Be'ad Chaim (Prolife), the Messianic Jewish anti-abortion organization in Israel. In *Mishkan* 49 (2006, p. 71), Sandy Shoshani wrote: "Estimates have been made that since 1948, over 2 million babies have been aborted in Israel ... Had those two million babies been born rather than aborted, the difficult issues of Jewish/Arab demographics would not exist."

However, the reference to demographics will hardly make supporters of abortion change their minds, and secular Jews who do not live in the hope of the coming of the Messiah will scarcely heed the Chief Rabbinate's warning that abortion delays his coming.

By legalizing abortion – within the limits imposed by law – the State of Israel, which otherwise is based on *Jewish* values, is like a number of states built on *Christian* values that have also legalized abortion. The State of Israel is neither better nor worse in this respect.

The figures are shocking, but it is no use ignoring reality. Whether we like it or not, abortion has somehow become a part of democracy in the Western world, the democracy we do not want to be without and which we need for a number of reasons. So, in one way or another, we are deadlocked. No matter how they may justify their decision, not many opponents of abortion – although they believe abortion is murder – would be willing to support the bill put forward in the Israeli parliament in 1997 by the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, which would allow abortion practitioners to be tried for first-degree murder.

And why would they – or we – not support that bill? Because we recognize that the world should not be ruled by theocratic thinking. The next victims might be gays and lesbians. And then Messianic Jews, with a prohibition against their activities in Israel. It is worth considering that when some have tried to limit Messianic Jews' work and freedom of speech in Israel through legislation, the Knesset has refused to pass such legislation because it would be inconsistent with the principles of democracy.

There is no indication that Western democracies, the State of Israel included, want any substantial changes in abortion legislation. Such is reality. But this does not mean that pro-life advocates should resign. Orthodox Jews, Messianic Jews, and Christians – who on this topic base their views on the same biblical values – still have a prophetic role to play. And through their efforts they save lives – not as many as they would like, but some nonetheless. And they reach out to those who once chose abortion and now live with the pain, trying to give them new hope – and new life.

As a friend of the State of Israel, I want to congratulate it on its sixty years. These congratulations do not imply blind support for all that happens in Israel, but I am glad that the State of Israel is a democracy, not a theocracy.





Muslim Evangelism: Why Would This Be in Our View

by **Bob Mendelsohn**

When Necati Aydin accepted Jesus, his Muslim family rejected him. His boldness as a pastor led him to pass out Bibles in villages throughout eastern Turkey, resulting in two trips to jail based on fabricated charges. After he played the role of Jesus in a passion play, he shared in the Lord's sufferings and untimely death. Aydin felt the sting of rejection from his earliest moments as a believer. His family – staunchly Muslim – rejected him outright after his conversion. Disheartened that he married a Christian, they refused to attend his wedding. True to their convictions, they even rejected him in death and would not attend his funeral.

Aydin, 35, was one of three men martyred for their faith on April 18, 2007, in the city of Malatya, following a gruesome attack that involved several hours of torture. Also killed was Ugur Yuksel, 32, who arrived that bloody morning for what he thought was a Bible study at the offices of Zirve Publishing. Zirve prints and distributes Bibles and other Christian literature throughout Eastern Turkey. As early as February 2005, a local newspaper warned that Zirve was under threat due to its activities.

The third victim was a 46-year-old German missionary, Tilmann Geske, who was preparing notes for a new Turkish study Bible. Many Turkish commentators were shocked when Geske's wife, Susanne, spoke forgiveness to the murderers of her husband. In one of her first statements to the press, she quoted Jesus' words from the cross, saying to surprised reporters, "Oh God, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Pastor Bocek affirms this attitude. "Overall, the reaction in our church is forgiveness," he says. "There really is not fear, but a little more caution in the way we bring people to church. We already feel we are ready for whatever comes. We continue to evangelize, do our Bible studies, and have prayer."

I too have been graced by God to be bold in handing out Bibles or tracts on many continents. But I'm still alive.

He sees evidence that God is already turning this horrible offense around for good. "Over the last 10 days, we've had four commitments to follow Christ," he notes. Even a Jewish man in Jerusalem received word of the Turkish martyrs, contacted Pastor Bocek, and gave his life to Christ. "They didn't die

in vain," he says. "God is really going to use this event. We all sense that something is coming."¹

Using anecdotes like this one and interviews, I want to cover a subject that is usually taboo or at least distant for those of us involved in Jewish evangelism.

I relived memories of my life when I read Necati Aydin's story. I lost my relationship with my family because of my faith in Jesus. They refused to attend my wedding, held only eight blocks from their home in Kansas City. I too have been graced by God to be bold in handing out Bibles or tracts on many continents. But I'm still alive.

Abraham had many children, and at least two sons of note. Certainly the news in these days, in whatever country you read it, is filled with the ramifications of the continuing existence of those two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Many ministries around the globe concern themselves with either one or the other of these often-feuding sons of Abraham. One only need to search the Internet for "missions" and either "Muslim" or "Jewish"; the volume of material is mammoth and will grow before you can read another tome on one side or the other.

As ministers who concern ourselves with the Jewish/Isaac wing of the great divide, we would usually give a miss to the considerations of those involved in Muslim evangelism. It's not that we don't care; actually this would be an outlandish statement. We care, but it's a subjugated concern. We also care about refugees in Darfur, or abortionists in Kentucky, or global warming, but to be effective we have to narrow our interests. Most of us receive uncountable letters and emails each week, inviting us to sponsor a needy mission to somewhere or someone. And if you don't ache when you toss the letter in the bin, you have lost something. The answer is not callousness, but commitment and resource management.

All that said, we are never allowed to dismiss completely the needs of those outside our own sector of the globe or missional interest. Consider the irony of the Rev. Dr. Mark Durie, my friend in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. He has learned more about Islam than any other Anglican minister I've ever met. He wrote the book *Revelation? Do we worship the same God? Jesus, Holy Spirit, God in Christianity and Islam*,² for which he received high commendations from many in the Anglican world and others. The irony? He ministers in the most recognizable Jewish section of Melbourne, at St Mary's Anglican Church, Caulfield. Maybe that's why one of the subtitles of the book, "Guidance for the Perplexed," reminds those of us in Jewish evangelism of Maimonides' famous *Guide for the Perplexed*.

What about the work of our own dear colleague Martin Goldsmith? Born in England to Jewish parents, he spent part of his childhood in

1 ASSIST News Service, "In Aftermath of Turkish Killings, God Begins Redemptive Work," n.p. Online: www.acctv.com.au/articledetail.asp?id=5130.

2 Mark Durie, *Revelation? Do we worship the same God? Jesus, Holy Spirit, God in Christianity and Islam* (Upper Mt Gravatt, Australia: City Harvest Publishing, 2006).



Bermuda and trained as a Russian interpreter. He graduated from Oxford University and served as a missionary throughout Southeast Asia, in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. A Jew in Overseas Missionary Fellowship in the 1960s? Reaching Muslims and Buddhists? Shouldn't he have used his "gifts" to reach Jews?

Consider the apostle Paul, who was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil 3:5–6). Who better to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Who better to explain rabbinic manipulations and convince his fellows of the need for and provision of Y'shua? But God, in his irony and mercy, sent Paul to the Gentiles.

Can we learn from this that Islam, and Muslim evangelism (henceforth *ME*), should find its way onto our radar screen? And when we learn about it, can we know enough to separate the wheat of truth from the chaff of hyper-antagonism or bigotry? Can we read information from various sources and discover what's hype and what's true information? Can we spot propaganda?

When Jewish believers/Messianic Jews form their opinions, there is not universal agreement, of course. We know the axiomatic expression – *two Jews, three opinions*. And in the ME world, that same adage can be applied. Every worker in ME whom I interviewed was convinced that his views were right and wanted to make sure I "got it right" in this essay.

For my research, I focused on the following three themes:

1) *Isaac vs. Ishmael: Questions about Jewish people and Israel*

What does it cost a person involved in ME to share positive comments about Jews and Jewish people? What about Israel – can you speak positively about the nation and about Zionism? What happens when a convert from Islam (Muslim background believer, henceforth *MBB*) reads the biblical texts indicating God's continuing love for and maintenance of the Jewish people? Finally, do you feel Jewish believers and those of us in Jewish ministry say too many negative things about you and your ministry?

2) *Identity and cultural maintenance*

Should MBBs remain within the Muslim family, and if so how far can they take this? Should an MBB maintain aspects of the culture – e.g. mosque instead of church, prayer five times a day, taking off shoes, or eating *halal*? Does the danger of syncretism come into play here?

3) *Visibility or secrecy*

Within the Muslim community, are there secret believers? Why do they stay secret? Are they so secret that they are almost invisible?

We probably would not be aware of much of the world of ME were it not for Samuel Zwemer. One hundred years ago, a new era dawned in the attitude of Christian mission among Muslims. The different atmosphere

was first sensed at the Cairo Conference (1906), but it came to fruition four years later at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (1910). Capitalizing on the movement to reach the Muslim world for Christ, Zwemer launched *The Moslem World* (1911). I'm grateful for his seminal work in this regard.

Personally, I've been involved in Jewish evangelism since 1979. Before that I was a pastor in Kansas (USA). I grew up an Orthodox Jew in Kansas City, and came to Christ in 1971. What amazed me in this research was how much we in Jewish ministry have in common with those in Muslim culture, and what we can learn from each other.

What amazed me in this research was how much we in Jewish ministry have in common with those in Muslim culture, and what we can learn from each other.

Interview One: Stuart Binns

Stuart runs a ministry called Gospel Evangelism to Ethnic Minorities and Word of Life. He oversees a correspondence course,³ and during the last few years has taught over 1,200 students – mostly Iranians – the basics of the Christian faith in a systematic manner. Today Stuart is associated with two Anglican parishes in Sydney, but for years was a missionary/church planter in Iran.

Since first things are first, Stuart conducts a series of twenty lessons, written to introduce a Muslim to Christianity. It uses as references both the Qur'an and the Bible, and answers common questions asked by Muslims. It is not suitable for non-Muslims from Islamic countries, unless they wish to learn about Islam.

This ministry began in England and has now been established in Australia, New Zealand, Kenya, Bangladesh, Fiji, the USA, and Canada. Steven Masood, one of the founders of the correspondence school, was introduced to Christ by the Qur'an and later came to know him personally as Savior by reading the Gospel of John. The basic course was written using Steven's knowledge of Islam and Christianity.⁴ After the introduction, the next set of lessons (currently translated into seven languages) comprises a biblical overview, and then Stuart zooms in on one of the gospels or the Book of Acts.

His aim is to get people to read the Bible for themselves so that faith comes "by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom 10:17). What Stuart does is create "safe havens," places for transition between the mosque and the church. There he teaches and helps organize assistance

³ Available on <http://word-of-life.org.au>.

⁴ The story of Steven's life can be read in his book, *Into the Light* (Bromley: OM Publishing, 1986). Other books by Steven Masood include *The Bible and The Qur'an* (Waynesboro, GA: OM Publishing, 2001); *Why Follow Jesus* (Carlisle, Cumbria: OM Publishing, 1997); and *More than Conquerors* (Carlisle, Cumbria: OM Publishing, 2000).



for the emerging believer in areas such as accommodation, employment, Bible studies, and legal and medical concerns.

Stuart doesn't see a need for MBBs to carry on an Islamic lifestyle, since the flesh profits nothing. He doesn't even hold to MBBs being baptized, since this will cut the new believer off from the very people he hopes to reach. The major problems of evangelism are seen in westernizing the religion. He sees a real problem when people come to the West (like Australia), visit churches, get saved, and want to replicate that model (which is too western to speak to native Muslims). The problem is cultural.

For instance, in a recent journal Nik Ripken writes concerning baptism in his article "Muslim Background Believers and Baptism in Cultures of Persecution and Violence."⁵ Since Muslims equate believer's baptism with salvation, they often begin to step up persecution when that occurs. And rightly so, for at that point, the follower of Christ breaks with his or her old community of faith and enters the emerging Body of Christ, the church. Investigating the relationships between missionaries, MBBs, and baptism, the article suggests a baptism tied deeply to local believers and a local MBB church. Further, the article suggests that when western missionaries baptize, premature persecution may be the result.⁶ Stuart would wholeheartedly concur.

Much of Stuart's commitment to contextualization is drawn from his teaching on Naaman, who was sent back to the religion and influences of the Syrians (2 Kgs 5). Naaman said he was going back to the temple of Rimmon and would worship there. Elisha sent him off with two words, *lech b'shalom* (v. 19). Elisha didn't tell Naaman to get baptized or to read Moses; he wasn't instructed to meet with other believers or to start a program of sharing the faith. He was told to go and to be well, even though he would worship in Rimmon's temple.

Anyone familiar with mission strategy knows about contextualization. At least anyone in the last three decades. But what exactly is it?

Gregg R. Allison, Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, says, "No one definition of contextualization exists; indeed, numerous (and, at times) competing definitions can be readily found."⁷ He likes to use the definition formulated by Dean Gilliland. Gilliland first defines contextualization in terms of its task:

5 Nik Ripken, "Muslim Background Believers and Baptism in Cultures of Persecution and Violence," *Then and Now: New Challenges and New Breakthroughs* 1 (March 2007).

6 Ibid.

7 Gregg R. Allison, "An Evaluation of Emerging Churches on the Basis of the Contextualization Spectrum (C1-C6)," n.p. Online: http://theresurgence.com/gregg_allison_2006-11-17_an_evaluation_of_emerging_churches_on_the_basis_of_the_contextualization_spectrum. Originally presented November 17, 2006, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Washington, D.C.

The goal of contextualization perhaps best defines what it is. That goal is to enable, insofar as it is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every human situation. Contextualization means that the Word must dwell among all families of humankind today as truly as Jesus lived among his own kin. The gospel is Good News when it provides answers for a particular people living in a particular place at a particular time. This means the worldview of that people provides a framework for communication, the questions and needs of that people are a guide to the emphasis of the message, and the cultural gifts of that people become the medium of expression.⁸

Concerning my first theme, Stuart sees no continuing role for Israel nor a need for Zionism, but does feel “Jewish people are special” to God. Of course, not even Jewish people are all agreed on the state of Israel or share the sentimentality of so many Christians. Consider Karin Friedemann’s blog:

Why would any sane person think that he has the right to live unharrassed on someone else’s stolen property? Even the cute kids waving Israeli flags are participating in a criminally insane political ideology.⁹

In answer to our second question, Stuart felt that Jewish believers would do well to stay in the synagogue and live “a Jewish life” there, rather than starting Messianic congregations. Likewise, he thinks that MBBs should stay in the mosque and pray there, and not start their own congregations.

Interview Two: D. Smyth

D. Smyth (not his real name) is a delightful man with a keen interest in the work of God. He was a church planter in Turkey for five years, and is now with an evangelical agency in Western Sydney, involved in another church plant among (mostly) Muslim immigrants. He is very involved in community development and sees much of his work through the grid of contextualization. Smyth introduced me to the C1–C6 scale and is continually challenged by it. I found his explanation helpful for the world of Jewish missions and what we encounter.

In the world of church planting, the C1–C6 spectrum was devised to define the degree of contextualization that a church may use in relation to

8 Dean Gilliland, “Contextualization,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 225–227. Also found in the above paper by Allison.

9 Karin Friedemann, “Polite Discussion on Zionism: Is it Possible?” n.p. Online: <http://mparent7777.blogspot.com/2007/04/polite-discussion-on-zionism-is-it.html>.



the Muslim culture surrounding it. The concept was developed by strategists John Travis, Phil Parshall, and others.

This scale is helpful in that it can describe both the style of our approach (mosques or synagogues, dietary restrictions, etc.) and the commitments of the followers. In other words, C5 would describe a Christian gathering in a Muslim area, where everyone is seated around the edges of the room discussing matters and drinking tea, with a large spread of food in the center. It can also describe the commitment of the followers to maintain their culture even if they have come to faith in Christ.

Contextualization means, quite simply, communicating the gospel in terms that are understandable and appropriate to the audience. All Christian communication should be contextualized. A Sunday School teacher using simple language and child-level illustrations, games, and activities is contextualizing. A pastor sharing a message in a senior citizens' home, with appropriate sermon illustrations and an understanding of the unique needs of older people, is using contextualization.

If we are to target other cultures and religious groups, we need a "contextualized" approach which uses their languages and engages with their concepts. A "Western" evangelistic style is unlikely to touch them. We must explain the Gospel using their language and concepts.

For instance, sites for Muslims should use Muslim/Arabic words e.g. *Isa Masih* for *Jesus Christ*, *Injil* for *Gospel*, *Miriam* for *Mary*, and prophets' names. In the same way, a site for Jews should refer to *Yeshua* instead of *Jesus*, *G-d* instead of *God*, and avoid other words which have Christian "baggage."¹⁰

Those of us in Jewish evangelism have been familiar with this argument since the early 20th century, with the introduction of the first Hebrew Christian church in Chicago (now Adat Hatikvah Messianic Congregation)

Smyth feels that the question of Jewish people and Israel is a non-issue. This is seen by those in Jewish evangelism as a cop out in line with those who hold to replacement theology.

or the four Messianic congregations in Warsaw extant in 1939. It was further popularized in the 1970s by the book *Everything You Need to Grow a Messianic Synagogue* by Philip E. Goble.¹¹ Arguments for contextualization are rife on our side of the great divide.

Smyth feels that the question of Jewish people and Israel is a non-issue. This is seen by those in Jewish evangelism as a cop out in line with those who hold to replacement the-

10 "Contextualization," n.p. Online: <http://guide.gospelcom.net/resources/context.php>.

11 Philip E. Goble, *Everything You Need to Grow a Messianic Synagogue* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974).

ology. Smyth would not agree with that, but Israel is certainly not important to him. He has little teaching on it for the MBBs he leads.

Concerning secret believers, they are not evangelistic, although they read the Bible. Their secrecy will prevent their continuing in the faith, Smyth says, or even if they do, the children of these C6 believers will be Muslims.

Smyth worries about long-range continued recognizability. He alleges that those MBBs who get saved at C1 churches are angry, primarily antagonistic to Islam rather than keen on Jesus.

In our conversation, Smyth alluded to revivals a few decades ago in Algeria and Bangladesh, where thousands of Muslims converted to Christ. Stories of conversions continue to pour out of Algeria. But for some, he admits, the continued use of Islamic symbols could be troubling. He told me of an Indonesian missionary who has written an epistle warning of the "cultic" nature of C5 churches. Smyth insists the C5 model is "valid."

Fascinating to me was his explanation that in Turkey a man is taught, "don't even trust your father." Mistrust is high, and especially so in the C4–C6 sectors. They worry about spies in the midst of religious gatherings.

On the other end of the spectrum, consider this story from Jack Harris in Kurdistan:

In a back street, discreetly hidden from public view, is a two story house surrounded by a wall, typical of the city homes here in Duhok; there is something extraordinary happening here. As we walk through the entry gate up the stairs to the open front door, a pretty lady greets us with a kind and pleasant smile. She is the pastor's wife and she is welcoming those who are arriving into her home to participate in evening worship. This is the home of Pastor Layth Ibrahim, it is also his church.

I visited here a week ago ... This is the first Evangelical Church I have encountered here.

The place is packed out. The large living room has been modified into the Church sanctuary. Except for the fact that the language is Arabic (the language most Christians here use) you wouldn't know that you weren't in one of the Churches our Fellowship has planted around the World.

Everything from the video projected songs, a full worship team, complete with keyboard, to the praise service feels exactly the same. To find something like this here is like finding an Oasis in the Desert. There is hand clapping, vibrant music, audible praise, and exhortation from Pastor Layth, their shepherd, who obviously loves his little folk. It's a good place.¹²

12 "Land of the Kurds." Online: http://mideastoutreach.com/2007/05/revival-service-in-kurdistan_03.htm.



This church is a classic C1 church, almost unrecognizable as being related to Islam. The danger of syncretism is nonexistent, but the distance required for a Muslim to travel, religiously, may require a passport!

A reader of the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* writes,

My very strong preference is that people would be able to express themselves in the framework of their cultural identity – but more so, I want people saved. I don't want to get so hung up on the method that I miss opportunities to see people come to faith in other ways. Not only that, with the majority of the world's Muslims being nominal, my feeling is the C6 approach will only be beneficial to a certain segment of the population.¹³

Responding to this letter, Harley Talman writes,

Anthropologists, such as Charles Kraft, assert that although the laws of communication are extremely important, in the case of those who are desperate, almost any method of presentation will be received.

Unfortunately, those who convert to Christianity at the C1–C3 range generally experience “transplant rejection syndrome,” and their witness to their community is minimal in its duration and impact (if they are not first “extracted” by the “Christians”). If we hope to see mainstream members of a Muslim society come to faith, such as in people group movements, then followers of Christ will generally need to adopt approaches at the C4–C6 end of the spectrum.¹⁴

What really got my attention, though, was this statement by Talman: “I believe it has been the experience of most evangelists to Muslims that it is those who are on the fringes of Islamic society who are the most likely to respond to the Gospel.”¹⁵

This has always been a gospel and revival reality, and it's certainly true for those of us reaching out to Jewish people. We don't have Nicodemuses and Josephs of Arimethea joining us; we have the lepers and the outcasts. We welcome the strangers and the needy, those on the fringes.

Interview Three: Tracy B.

Tracy B. works among the multi-cultural Muslim immigrants in Sydney. He agreed that MBBs coming to faith in Jesus have little regard for Israel; the pressure is too great from within the Islamic community to be antagonistic (and thus supportive of their Palestinian “brothers”). He was the only one who told me that he wished Jewish believers would be kinder

13 Craig Merriman, “Contextualization: No Panacea?” 54. Online: http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/21_2_PDFs/53_Letters.pdf.

14 Harley Talman, “Response to ‘Contextualization: No Panacea?’” 54. Online: http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/21_2_PDFs/53_Letters.pdf.

15 Ibid.

and less Israeli (read: political), and therefore apparently against MBBs. Most MBBs in Australia don't have relationships with Jewish believers, to everyone's disappointment.

He also agreed that C6 believers are so invisible that they are negligible and without much "clout" in their own evangelism, if they even believe in doing so.

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Conclusions

The similarities between MBBs and Jewish believers in Jesus are remarkable. Jewish believers and Jewish congregations constantly deal with issues of contextualization and syncretism. Everyone agreed that C6 Christians are so tainted that even if they continue in the faith, their children will not.

Jewish believers long to stay within the context of their culture – unless they are angry or disgruntled, or see no purpose in Jewish life and Judaic practices. For the latter, the C1 model works fine and is satisfying.

The difficulties for Muslims coming to faith, as evidenced in Aydin's conversion and the three murders in Turkey, warrant sympathy from all other believers. MBBs need Jewish believers to speak kindly to them and especially to pray for them. And MBBs need to speak favorably about Jewish people, and especially their brothers in the faith of Jesus.





The Lives of Arab Muslims Who Choose the Christian Faith

by **Kathryn Ann Kraft** and **Abu Atallah**

Muslims have been turning to Christian faith in increasing numbers in recent years, challenging a strong tradition of Christian scholarship surrounding a lack of faith change among Muslims.¹ There have been few known large-scale people movements, though. Just as in the West many individuals and few communities have chosen to embrace Islam,² the story of faith change in the Arab world has been of a growing number of individuals choosing to change, sometimes bringing family members and friends with them. There are few instances in the Muslim world of entire villages choosing to embrace the Christian faith, but that number is also increasing.

In the Arab context, many Muslim background believers (MBBs) choose to affiliate with a Christian church. In countries where a Christian community already exists, they may join an Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant church; elsewhere, they start their own church communities. There are many others who come to the Christian faith through dreams or witnessing miracles, access to the Internet, or the witness of a friend or family member. Many of these MBBs never have personal contact with a Christian person. Some believe there are few such individuals, while others estimate there are as many as a hundred thousand or more in the Arab world.

Most MBBs know very little about others like them. Often MBBs do not even know other MBBs from their own community, as they are hesitant to divulge the fact that they have undergone a faith change. They prefer to be known simply as either Muslims or Christians. It is very common for MBBs whose names are obviously Muslim to use different names when around Christians in order to avoid detection. There is a great deal of mutual suspicion between MBBs and native Christians, so MBBs are very cautious about even letting Christians know their original identity. This suspicion often extends to other MBBs as well, and is sometimes com-

1 Kenneth Cragg, "Conversion and Convertibility," in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. J. R. W. Stott and R. Coote (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 202.

2 Haifaa Jawad, "Female Conversion to Islam: The Sufi Paradigm," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006).

pounded by unwise counsel from well-intentioned missionaries and Arab Christians. Much of the suspicion reported by MBBs, Christian-born Arabs, and foreign missionaries is well founded; family, communal, and governmental harassment of religious converts is not uncommon.

We cannot expect to speak to the whole breadth of experiences of Muslims who choose to follow the Christian faith. However, based on time spent among Arab MBBs and doing extensive fieldwork, we have identified several key issues that many MBBs face as they forge their new lives. The issues vary from context to context, but several general principles may apply to any context in which people are choosing to reject a strong cohesive religious community and adopt a new faith identity, against the flow of the society around them.

Changes in the Life of a New Believer

How and where someone comes to faith in Christ affects how s/he will find other believers, which in turn will influence much of how that person's life develops after his/her decision. The following are four stories which provide potential models for how a new believer forms those significant relationships.

1. *Actively evangelizes to form a community of believers*

Jamal³ explains that when he and his best friend believed, they were advised to leave the country. Instead, they decided to stay and form a community rather than escaping to a place where there were more Christians:

At that time we didn't know of any other believers of our background at all! ... Who will tell my family, my relatives, my friends? We were very alone at this time, so we felt the responsibility fully on ourselves. And together we had a dream to see people come to Christ all over and throughout [our country] ... Our Lord brought us to a pastor of a large church, and we told him about our dream. He saw that we were young but very motivated. But he also saw that we were only 18–19 years old, and there were lots of 18–19 year-olds that he worked with, so he saw us as among the teenagers. He didn't think we could handle the responsibility of such a ministry, nor the pressure: we might turn back, change our minds about it ... So we left, but one year after I believed (we were living in a village far from the city then), there were ten believers! We had gone from two to ten in a year! There were believers from my family, my brother, a friend of my brother ... Then we went back to the church and the pastor welcomed us in, and now he was ready to work with us. We were baptized in the church, disciplined by him, and he/the church introduced us to other MBBs that we hadn't known before.

3 All names are pseudonyms.



2. Knows many foreign Christians and prefers to spend time with them
 Ali was raised in a Christian orphanage which was jointly run by foreigners and Arabs. Throughout his childhood, missionary teams would visit the orphanage and take him and the other boys to camp, or run summer Bible programs. Ali did not show an interest in the Christian faith at the time, but a few years after he moved back to his village he met a Christian Arab man who invited him to church. Ali chose to visit the church because his new friend told him that a certain Western missionary, whom Ali remembered from his orphanage years, attended that church. Since then he has restored contact with many of the foreigners he knew at the orphanage, and they have introduced him to other missionaries. He also has a few MBB friends whom he met through foreigners. Ali has a special appreciation for all the help missionaries have given him over the years, and always tries to find ways to reciprocate and help them in return. He now dreams of moving to the West.

3. Secretly believes for years before finding fellowship

When Um-Hassan got married, she moved from her village to the city. There, she lived right next to a church in a religiously mixed neighborhood. For eight years she did not have children, so one day some Christian neighbors took her to the church with them to pray, and she made a promise that if she had children she would follow Christ. While praying she felt assurance in her heart that she would become pregnant, and she felt like Christ had entered her heart. Since then she has had Christ in her life, even though for years she did not tell anyone. She did not immediately conceive, but was confident that she would someday. It was almost ten more years before she finally became pregnant. Eventually, Um-Hassan and her husband moved to another religiously mixed neighborhood, and again they lived right next to a church. She had a Christian neighbor

This is the first time she has had anyone with whom to share her faith, after about twenty-five years.

that she shared with some, but the Christians in that neighborhood were never very supportive. Now she lives in a Muslim-majority neighborhood, but an Arab Christian family who desires to witness to Muslims, but not through a church, recently moved into her building. This is the first time she has had anyone with whom to share her faith, after about twenty-five years.

4. Quickly develops a network of believing friends

Mohammad came across a chat room on the Internet that focused on religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and he became very involved in the debate. After defending Islam for a time, he became interested in the evangelistic message of the Christians. He says:

After a while, I stopped debating, and just listened. I stopped spending so much time in the debate chat rooms and started visiting

Christian rooms and visiting websites ... After a while, I had gleaned all the knowledge from these rooms that I could, so I closed them and started reading books. So I went to a big book fair to look for Christian books, and found a Christian book stand. There was [an Arab] evangelist [there] and I started asking him lots of questions and we got to talking. He gave me his phone number and I gave him mine, and so I met with him again soon after that, and we talked some more, and I was convinced some more. He's my 'spiritual father.' For a long time he was discipling me and answering my questions, for about three months. Then, through him, I joined a discipleship group. In that group I met a friend, who is now a close friend of mine, and now he is my leader. I have contact with Christians every day – I have many Christian friends, talk to them on the phone, go to church, we hang out. On Mondays I go to a prayer meeting at church. The people at church know my background. Since my name is very Muslim sounding, I use a different name at church. My closest friends do know about my background, but most people don't.

As these stories illustrate, the path that one takes to faith affects an MBB's long-term sense of community, identity development, and relationship to other believers. Mohammad's story illustrates a relatively smooth path that led to close relationships both with other MBBs and with the wider church community. He is always aware of his background, but can interact comfortably with other believers of any background, selectively choosing how to present himself. Um-Hassan, at the other extreme, does not even think of herself as a Christian, though she prays to Jesus and feels a close connection with Christians. She has learned to live her faith in private and sees contact with other believers as an occasional bonus.

Many Muslims associate Christianity with the West, and therefore a number of MBBs expect that their new faith will be most successfully developed with the help of Western Christians. Having grown up surrounded by missionaries, Ali is especially inclined to seek to live out his faith in such a setting. Finally, Jamal's story is of an entrepreneurial faith in which he and a friend had a belief change. Not sure exactly how and where to live it out, they brought friends and family members into the MBB fold and together formed a community of believers who could forge their new identity together.

After deciding to adopt a Christian faith, the most important decision for MBBs is how they choose to become known. Most experienced MBBs, as well as missionaries, advise that it is usually wise not to "come out of the closet" immediately,⁴ but instead to take time to develop doctrinally

4 For a discussion of the factors involved in deciding to publicly declare that one has a "stigma" such as homosexuality, past criminal conviction, or religious conversion, see Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (London: Penguin Books, 1963); Joanne DiPlacido, "Minority Stress Among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals," in *Stigma and Sexual Orientation*, ed. Gregory M. Herek (London: Sage Publications, 1998); and Elizabeth A. Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).



and be sure of what one believes, as well as to develop a sense of what being an MBB means.

For most Muslims, leaving Islam cannot even be conceived of as a possibility. While choosing to follow Christ involves consciously rejecting the Muslim creed, most MBBs do not want this to entail rejecting their strong cultural heritage, which is identified as Islamic. The biggest challenge they face in developing a new identity is determining how to continue to be culturally Muslim while following a Christian faith. There is a long history of conflict between their Muslim forefathers and Christians,⁵ so many MBBs are eager to affiliate with Christianity as a faith but not with Christianity as a historic religion.

The biggest challenge they face in developing a new identity is determining how to continue to be culturally Muslim while following a Christian faith.

Since they have no example to follow, people like Jamal have complete freedom in choosing how to identify themselves. Jamal's first step was to approach the pastor of a church. Most people who have limited or no contact with more experienced MBBs, nor with missionaries who have thought through these issues, will try first to develop a connection with institutional Christianity.

There are also an unknown number of people like Um-Hassan, whose relationship with Jesus is highly personal but who know little about religion and doctrine. She has not yet come across a conflict between her identity as a Muslim, experienced as a cultural heritage with strong moral values, and her relationship with Jesus. Perhaps, as she learns more doctrine through her new Christian friends, she will face an identity crisis, or perhaps she has discovered that for her, there is no inherent contradiction between her public identity and her faith.

Many MBBs find that a nuanced identity, which at first seems to be contradictory, eventually proves an effective means of balancing potentially conflicting forces in their lives. This involves emphasizing different aspects of their identities in different situations, depending on their audience. Erving Goffman speaks of "managing information," a skill developed by people with a stigma such as faith change in a highly cohesive Muslim society.⁶ MBBs who learn to carefully manage information approach their identity change in a way that makes it possible to continue to relate to the people they love in a way that is well-received.

This means that many MBBs never formally declare their new faith, but convey their change in belief to loved ones by other means. As they read

5 Daniel J. Sahas, "The Seventh Century in Byzantine-Muslim Relations: Characteristics and Forces," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2 (1991), 4–17; Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34; and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Symbolizing Distance: Conversion to Islam in Germany and the United States," in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), 74.

6 Goffman, 57.

the *Injil* (New Testament) and spend time with other followers of Christ, many MBBs find that their language and behavior naturally change to adjust to these new influences in their lives. One woman explained that she never actually told her family that she chose to believe in Christ and now calls herself a Christian, but her siblings have nonetheless shown an interest in her new faith. She explains:

In our family, if most of us became Christian, would we be more open about it? It's not a minority feeling that keeps us quiet, it's respect for [my parents'] feelings. It's a great shock for them to know [that we changed], and out of respect we don't make a big noise about it ... I do talk openly with them, actually ... Neither we nor they are arguing about religion, but I feel my mother is asking me because I know it all, she thinks I have the answers.

Specific Life Issues

As MBBs continue to live with their changed identity and values, they find that each decision is an unprecedented challenge. One of the most important issues for MBBs is starting their own families. Most Muslims decide to follow Christ in their late teens or twenties, so they work out how to live their faith in a culturally acceptable way and share that faith with others while they are still single. Then they work through the enormous challenges of finding a spouse; most MBBs dream of finding a spouse who shares both their heritage and their faith. Due to Islamic law restrictions, MBB men may also consider marrying an Arab Christian or foreign woman, but most female believers who cannot marry an MBB man must choose between becoming celibate or marrying a Muslim man.

Although the transition from single to family life tends to be relatively smooth for those who marry another MBB, the issues faced in child rearing are similar for all. Even if a couple continued as productive members of their home community before having children, they may feel the need to move to a different neighborhood or city, if not country, when they have children. This is due to a variety of factors.

Most MBBs want their children to grow up with the freedom to make choices. As people who struggled to forge a new identity in a society which did not accept any deviation from the norm, they want their children to know how to decide for themselves and to grow up in a setting where they feel free to make their own decisions. At the same time, first-generation believers usually have a very strong faith for which they have sacrificed greatly, and they want their children to share their faith and would be devastated if they returned to Islam.

Therefore, many MBBs prefer for their children to have a Christian edu-

As people who struggled to forge a new identity in a society which did not accept any deviation from the norm, they want their children to know how to decide for themselves.



cation. It seems most natural to simply raise them as Christians – until the Muslim grandparents start teaching them about Islam. Many MBBs then question the wisdom of living near family. In many countries, Muslim children (which is what the children legally are, regardless of their parents' choices) are required to attend Islam lessons as a part of the general school curriculum. These children may be confused because what they are learning at home is different from what they are learning at school, and many children face derision at school for not knowing things that all children raised in Muslim homes are expected to know. Very few children of known MBBs have reached adulthood in the Arab world, so no model has been developed for how to effectively raise children of MBBs in an Arab context.

MBBs face difficulties outside their immediate families as well, including harassment by neighbors or the government. According to Islamic law, the *murtad*, or apostate, should be put to death.⁷ Though this is extremely

Many MBBs express a need to guarantee that their new faith does not equate an affiliation with Western institutions.

rare in recent history, apostasy is still something that tarnishes the honor of Islam and by extension a Muslim community. Throughout the Muslim world there has been a sense in recent years that the honor of Islam is under attack, especially by dominant Western powers that show virtually no respect for the Muslim world.⁸ Because of this, many MBBs

express a need to guarantee that their new faith does not equate an affiliation with Western institutions; even those such as Ali who desire a connection with Western Christians separate their love for Christianity as a Western religion from their support of American politics.

Because of these issues, if a person's abandonment of the Muslim creed becomes known, there will be at least pressure to reconsider. One woman's family sent her chocolates, flowers, and other gifts to try to lure her back to Islam, while a man tells of how he was tied up in an abandoned building and beaten for over two months by his uncles, and Islamic leaders were brought in to try to convince him to choose Islam over Christianity.

Sometimes, the family reaches a point of accepting what their son/daughter has decided, but others in the community see them as a threat. One man's family accepted his decision after a relatively short period of time, but he still had to stay away from his neighborhood because of threats from members of an Islamic group with which he had previously been connected.

Often, MBBs live relatively peacefully until they take on leadership positions in a church or MBB community, or start preaching openly. At that point, they begin to face police harassment. A variety of factors operate

7 Abu Ala Mawdudi, *The Punishment of the Apostate According to Islamic Law*, trans. Syed Silas Husain and Ernest Hahn (1994), n.p. [cited 30 March 2007]. Online: <http://answering-islam.org.uk/Hahn/Mawdudi/>.

8 Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003), 63–82.

in an individual's life which affect where threats may come from and to what extent. Developing a community-sensitive identity is an important factor, but regardless of how MBBs perceive and present themselves, those with whom they interact in the community, both before and after the decision, may feel a certain threat and act upon it.

Women face a unique set of challenges above and beyond those faced by men. In Arab Muslim tradition, because women are charged with preserving the honor of a family, they are responsible not only for moral purity but also for protecting the community from cultural corruption.⁹ Because of this pressure, a family's strength and sense of honor are often wrapped up in the image presented by the women in the family. Many MBB women have chosen to keep their faith quiet for years, or even decades, out of fear for the reaction of their families. Unlike men, who are free to spend time with friends and go out alone, women who choose to continue living according to their families' expectations may have no contact with other believers.

Women also face the headscarf as a visual symbol of identity. Most Muslim families expect women to wear a scarf, but MBB women have a sense that they are free in Christ. They may choose to continue wearing the *hijab* (Muslim headscarf) out of respect for their families. However, Christians are highly suspicious of Muslim infiltration, and so *muha-jibba* (head-covered) women are rarely welcomed into fellowship with Christians or even many MBBs. One woman was an open believer for years, then married a Muslim man who asked her to start covering her head again. Since then, she has not been able to meet with other believers except for very rare occasions.

Finally, MBBs become outsiders in their own society, neither integrated in the Muslim community nor welcomed as equals among Christians. This has important ramifications for issues such as education, employment, and residence. For example, many people have lost their jobs following their decisions. No longer under the protection of a strongly cohesive Muslim community, the MBBs have no help finding a new job or recovering the old one. At the same time, Christians are afraid to hire them, for fear of harassment by the authorities or trouble with the community. Such issues are faced by MBBs to different degrees, depending on their individual circumstances. However, all MBBs live with an awareness that such issues may come up and that they are no longer average members of a large community; they are now on their own in society.

MBBs become outsiders in their own society, neither integrated in the Muslim community nor welcomed as equals among Christians.

9 Lisa Taraki, "Islam is the Solution: Jordanian Islamists and the Dilemma of the 'Modern Woman,'" *The British Journal of Sociology* 46 (1995), 643–661; and Suzanne Ruggi, "Commodifying Honor in Female Sexuality," *Middle East Report*, no. 206: "Power and Sexuality in the Middle East" (1998), 12–15.



Comfort from Afar

As followers of the Christian faith from a Muslim background seek to redefine their lives in their Arab communities, they face stress, rejection, fear, and risk. Nonetheless, the challenges are offset by a strong sense that they have found the truth and that God is on their side. They are greatly encouraged by the realization that they are not alone, and many MBBs report that they are encouraged by reminders that there are other people who share their faith all over the world, care about them, and are praying for them.

In Israel, Messianic Jews and MBBs have found that they have much in common. The two groups have been unable to openly interact or help each other much because of political and societal constraints. Much like many MBBs, Messianic Jews have managed to keep their standing within the Jewish community by maintaining a Jewish and Israeli identity. A close association would increase the risk to both groups of being expelled from their communities and losing their heritage. Nonetheless, the two groups continue to find comfort in each other, recognizing that they face similar challenges.

Recently, on a trip to Israel, an MBB from another country visited a Messianic community and shared with them stories of MBBs across the Arab world. When he was done, they laid hands on him, and prayed for him and other MBBs. Encounters like this are especially meaningful to MBBs, as they are strengthened by the realization that their new faith crosses ethnic, racial, and even religious boundaries. Though they may be abandoned by their communities, they are not alone in their new faith.

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*Conversion and Negotiation of
Religious Identity Among*

Muslim Background Converts

by **Jonas Adelin Jørgensen**



This article describes and analyzes conversion stories and construction of religious identity among Muslim background believers in Christ in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The aim is to offer a detailed portrait of the strategies utilized by the believers themselves in conversion and construction of a hybrid religious identity.

Conversion, Religious Identity, and Inter-Religious Hermeneutics

The “data” for this study consists of interviews and participant observation among groups of believers in Dhaka.¹ A large amount of the material consists of conversion stories, and this fact has led me to focus on these stories. I take “conversion” to mean acceptance of a new reference point for religious and personal identity.² “Identity” – and subsequently “religious identity” – I take to mean the outcome of the process through which a reference point for identity, a social group, and a cultural context form an individual’s understanding of himself or herself.³ By the term “inter-religious hermeneutics,” I mean the strategies exercised by individual believers and groups of believers, who undergo the process of negotiation of religious identities in order to facilitate incorporation of elements from one religious system into another.⁴ I find the term “inter-religious hermeneutics” helpful as it identifies the process of interpretation and translation of identities between two different religious universes as a

1 The fieldwork was carried out in October–November 2002 and January–May 2004. The first part of the fieldwork was made financially possible by the Areopagos Foundation and the second part by a grant from the Danish National Council for Humanities, Julie von Müllens Foundation, and Sigurd Andersen and Wife’s Foundation.

2 Robert W. Hefner, “Introduction: World Building and the Rationality of Conversion,” in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 3–44.

3 George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 209–214.

4 Andreas Grünschloss, *Der eigene und der fremde Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 44–84.

hermeneutical process, and consequently identifies the strategies in the process as hermeneutical in nature. In what follows, I will therefore briefly introduce the conversion stories, then in detail describe the resulting inter-religious strategies among the believers.

Conversion Stories

Īsā-imandars,⁵ or “those faithful to Jesus,” was a common self-description among groups of believers which I followed during my fieldwork in Dhaka. Their faithfulness toward Jesus had its background in their conversion. All the informants had experienced a conversion from a more or less orthodox Sunni Islam to a faith relationship with Jesus Christ. Their conversion stories made a natural point of departure for many of our conversations and for my more formal interviews.⁶

The self-description of the believers as “those faithful to Jesus” disassociated them from the Christian minority associated with officially recognized missionary churches, as well as from the Muslim majority comprising Sunni Islam mixed with Sufi-inspired popular religiosity. Thus “those faithful to Jesus” disassociated themselves not only from common Islam, but

also from “crypto-Hindu” Christianity.⁷

According to the informants themselves, the concept denotes a personal faith relationship between the individual believer and Jesus Christ, but at the same time identification with the surrounding Muslim society and – to a certain degree – with the Islamic theological universe. In accordance with this line of reasoning,

The self-description of the believers as “those faithful to Jesus” disassociated them from the Christian minority associated with officially recognized missionary churches.

the *imandars* do not attend the officially recognized missionary churches but have their own fellowships – *jama'ats* – where they gather on Fridays to pray, read and recite the Bible, and discuss spiritual matters.

Although details and particular events vary infinitely in the individual stories, a number of theoretically important concepts and themes surfaced in most of them. Significantly, the conversion stories included reports about (1) initial crises; (2) reading and recitation of *kitab*s – books; (3) most include a meeting with an advocate for faithfulness toward Jesus: either a friend, a Christian pastor, or a *bideshi* – a foreigner; (4) visions, auditions, and dreams, which serve as a transcendent confirmation

5 *Īsā* is the Arabic and Urdu name for Jesus. *Imandar* is etymologically related to *iman*, the Arabic and Urdu word for “faithful,” and maybe also to *amin*, “truth.” To become an *imandar* is thus not only a question of “believing” this or that, but is viewed as a personal and existential question of becoming faithful and true to someone.

6 I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 43 persons – 8 women and 35 men – during my fieldwork.

7 “Crypto-Hindu,” as the popular Muslim rhetoric has it, refers to the fact that Christians in the established churches for the most part stem from humble tribal or Hindu origins. “Hindu” here denotes an idolatrous, polytheistic faith, with religious practice involving devotion to human-made idols.

of conversion; (5) a number of reported theological and moral changes; and often (6) a ritual confirmation of acceptance of Jesus, as a reference point for religious identity.

Who, then, is the Jesus to whom the *imandars* become faithful? Is it the Jesus Christ of the Christian tradition or another Jesus? I don't have space to elaborate on the Christology of the *imandars*, so it will have to suffice to note that they view Jesus as not only an example, but as a Savior in his embodiment of sinlessness, spiritual power, and sacrificial suffering for the *imandar*. In other words, their Christology shares a clear family resemblance with the larger Christian theological tradition, and through their conversion Jesus has become a new reference point for religious identity.

Reactions to Conversion

The believers' faithfulness to Jesus as prophet and Savior has caused a number of reactions from family and society at large, and these reactions play a central role in many of the conversion stories. The reported reactions span from mistrust to direct rejection, accusations of insanity, and physical punishment. Some of the converts report social "lock-outs," during which they have been prohibited from using public roads, markets, and tea stalls. They have been accused of faithlessness by the Islamic society at large. Moreover, the converts have been met with suspicion not only by Muslims, but also by the officially recognized missionary churches.

In relation to Islamic society, the believers' deviant Christology is the main source of conflict. However, theological deviance is somewhat tolerated if ritual orthodoxy is maintained, that is, if the *imandars* continue to participate in common prayers in the local mosque and in popular Islamic holidays such as *Eid ul-Fitr* and *Eid Qurbani*. In relation to the registered missionary churches, it is the believers' insistence on maintaining social obligations and family bonds which are reported to be the main reason for mistrust. Despite their almost identical Christology, the *imandars* and the Christians are often at odds when it comes to interpretation of Islam and participation in Muslim religious and social life. To sum up, there is a marked contrast between the *imandars'* view of conversion as a purifying and reviving process with ethical and theological implications, and the Muslim society's and recognized missionary churches' view of the *imandars'* conversion as unfaithfulness and theological ruin. The converts leave behind structured Islamic religious life and ritual duties in order to engage more freely and existentially with their prophet and Savior, *Īsā Masīh*, in their *jama'ats*.

The converts leave behind structured Islamic religious life and ritual duties in order to engage more freely and existentially with their prophet and Savior.

What, then, is the result of this reinterpretation of themselves and of their Muslim background? How do the *imandars* position themselves in relation to Muslims and Christians as they turn toward a personal and interior faithfulness to God through Jesus? I would like to sketch out an



answer to this question through a description of the believers' inter-religious hermeneutics in the following paragraphs.

“Religious” or “Spiritual”

Real as well as imagined changes at the time of conversion tell a great deal about how a genuine and authentic conversion is conceptualized. There can be no doubt concerning the radical changes in the lives of the *imandars*; in their conversion stories they use phrases such as “new creation” and “new life” to describe these changes. Concluding his conversion story, a young man named Aziz told me about his realization that any organized and structured religion is ultimately not helpful unless it is based on a “personal faithfulness towards God”:

There are many pastors you know, there are many religious, they fast and [perform] rituals but I think Christ in his total behavior he tried to say about the uselessness of rituals and the [need of] personal purification, personal commitment towards God. But in our present life you will not find that it is very common. Even the pastors, even the chief pastors, they are religious and at the same time not spiritual. (Aziz §72)

Aziz introduces an interesting distinction between “religious” and “spiritual.” On the one hand there are the “religious” people, that is, those who attend structured religious services in churches or mosques. On the other

He explained that religious persons – Christians as well as Muslims – tend to follow a certain “religion,” whereas spiritual persons – the *imandars* – tend to be faithful to God and to listen when he calls.

hand one finds the “spiritual” people, who through a “personal purification” and “personal commitment” have entered into a relationship with God. Later in the same interview, Aziz developed his thinking on the fundamental difference between being “religious” and being “spiritual.” He explained that religious persons – Christians as well as Muslims – tend to follow a certain “re-

ligion,” whereas spiritual persons – the *imandars* – tend to be faithful to God and to listen when he calls and speaks to the individual believer. This distinction between “religious” and “spiritual,” the external and the internal, works itself out through a number of “hermeneutical strategies” applied by the believers and to which I will now turn.

“Jesus Was a Muslim”: Negotiation of Socio-Religious Identity

The question of whether the *imandar* is still a Muslim is frequently discussed. Roughly half the informants would not identify themselves as Muslims anymore, whereas the other half accepts “Muslim” as an ade-



quate self-description.⁸ Out of the half who termed themselves “Muslims,” most agreed that a newly converted *Īsā imandar* could continue to participate in the local mosque. However, only four informants argued that long-term, continued participation in structured Islamic religious life was compatible with faith in Jesus. Two informants, Mehrab and Belim, expressed their views on this at length.

Mehrab, the middle-aged leader of one of the *jama'at* which I frequented during my visit, was born in the southern part of Bangladesh to an influential Muslim family. One day, when we were drinking tea and eating biscuits after a Friday afternoon meeting in the *jama'at*, I asked him how he would present his new religious faith to others:

- If you were going with the bus and one person in the bus asks you “what religion do you have?” what will you say then? [...]
- It is very difficult [...] that time I tell very easy that my religion is *Īsā'e* if he is a Muslim. And if he asks “what does *Īsā'e* mean?” “*Īsā'e* means follower of *Īsā*.” And following *Īsā* ... oh, he is a Christian. Yes, people often use the “Christian”; but I am a Muslim, *Musalman*. *Īsā navi* [prophet Jesus] was not a Christian – who was Jesus? Jesus was Muslim. And that is true: Jesus was a Muslim – it means surrender to God; and Romans [chapter] 2 says that he surrendered his life and so according to Romans chapter 12 verse 2, I am also a Muslim. The meaning – what meaning? So I say “yes, my lord, the Jesus, is the Muslim.” That is why I am a Muslim and I am a follower of *Īsā* – not of Muhammad. And then people sometimes they don't say anything, their [not understandable] understand “what is the difference between you and the Protestant?” and I say “we are *Īsāe*, they are Protestant, they are Catholics” like this. (Mehrab §72–73)

Significantly, Mehrab underscores that he is first and foremost a *Muslim*. This argument takes some textual and historical exegesis: if Jesus truly submitted himself to the will of God, Jesus can be said to be a Muslim. Mehrab refers to a verse in Romans where the apostle Paul argues that inner transformation and regeneration of the believer is needed in order

8 There are a number of instances in which the *imandars* describe themselves as Muslims: Monjorol, a middle-aged clerk, explains that he is not a Christian but an “*Īsā imandar*” and an “*Īsā Muslim*” (Monjorol §110–114). Abdul, a young mechanic, concludes that even if one is an *imandar* of *Īsā*, it is more correct to say that you are a “Muslim” than that you are a “Christian” (Abdul §71–85). Rafiuddin, a polemical and talkative student, terms himself an “original Muslim” in the sense that true faith and submission to God can only take place through acceptance of *Īsā* as Savior: “... it is told in the Koran that the Christians are Muslims who follow *Īsā*, he is a Muslim. As I follow *Īsā* so I am a Muslim” (Rafiuddin §79–82). The same argument is used by Khaled, who says that “to be a Muslim means to practice *Īsā Masih*” (Khaled §59). Together with Aziz, these *imandars* hold family values and the “honor” of Bangladeshi Islamic culture in high esteem (Aziz §133), and they want to continue to be “Muslims.”

to do God's will.⁹ In this way, Mehrab argues for the possibility that the *imandar* is a Muslim through personal and inward faithfulness toward Jesus rather than toward Muhammad. Again, it is noteworthy that according to Mehrab, genuine faith is interpreted as *faithfulness toward a spiritual authority*. In conclusion, Mehrab identifies himself as a *transformed and regenerated Muslim* located outside the officially recognized missionary churches.

Observance of Islamic Religious Duties and Participation in Muslim Festivals

Even if the self-description "Muslim" is accepted by the *imandars* as an adequate theological description, can they meaningfully be identified as Muslims? Mehrab argues that they can because the Islamic ritual religious duties also apply to *imandars*:

We have the *namaz* – means prayer – and the weekly, every Friday gathering all people and usually morning and evening we try to do [prayer] in our *jama'at* and we see that for prayer comes Muslim, lots of people, but usually in other places and other times are few people. Same [by] us; every day morning and evening worship we pray and Friday only all gather and specially say the *ummah* and we have the *honim* [?] ... our *zakat* is not like yours, our *zakat* is daily base [...] Daily base means that Islamic *zakat* is 2½ percent [per year] ... but for us we explain that even for a rickshaw *wallah* you earn twenty taka in the [day] you give your *zakat*. It is not a question of balance or anything; it is ten percent. Our fasting is different: we are fasting for special reasons not for special occasions. We fast for special reason and for that reasons I will decide how many days I will fast, how many hours I will fast, like that. (Mehrab §75–79)

Interestingly, Mehrab reinterprets the ritual religious Islamic duties and argues that *namaz*,¹⁰ *zakat*,¹¹ and *ramadan* (fasting) have a different meaning for the *imandar*. In other words, he maintains the style of prayers, alms, and fasting, but at the same time offers his own interpretation of the meaning of this "Islamic" form. In this way, it seems that Mehrab argues for recognition of the *imandar* as part of the broader Islamic re-

9 "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

10 *Namaz* is the Urdu word for the Arabic *Salah*, or "prayer." Consisting of specific statements and ritualized bodily actions (being oriented toward the Kiblah, making the *ruku*), it begins with pronouncing the greatness of Allah and concludes with the salutation of peace. Typically, *thana* – the praise of Allah – is followed by *Surah al-Fatihah* and other *Surahs*. The *namaz* differs if it is done privately or in a ritual fellowship.

11 The Urdu word *zakat* comes from the Arabic *al Zakat*. This is one of the five pillars of Islam: the obligatory tax of all Muslims that is used to provide for the poor.



ligious culture, although with a slightly deviant meaning. The conscious application of an “Islamic” style of ritual religious duties such as *namaz*, *zakat*, and (occasional) fasting naturally leads to the question of whether participation in Muslim festivals is permissible for an *imandar*.

According to the *imandars'* theological understanding, the sacrificial significance of Jesus' death is crucial: Jesus is not only a sinless prophet, but his vicarious death for those who are faithful to him is first and foremost a sacrificial death for the individual *imandar*, and each *imandar* partakes in Jesus' sacrificial death through faithfulness to Jesus. Interestingly, this understanding of Jesus as a perfect sacrifice also influences the *imandars'* interpretation of and participation in the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice, *Eid Qurbani* (also known as *Eid ul-Azha*). As the annual *Eid Qurbani* took place during my fieldwork, I had the chance to discuss informants' participation in the festival. Whereas roughly half the informants reported that they would not participate in the festival for theological reasons, the other half reported that they would participate for social reasons. Four informants, however, reported that they celebrated *Eid Qurbani* on equal footing with the rest of their family, among them Ali.

Ali told me that his sister had bought a cow and invited him for the last *Eid*. It seems to be part of popular Islamic culture in Bangladesh that those who sponsor the sheep or cow which is slaughtered have the right to have their names mentioned during the sacrifice. The sacrifice is said to expiate the sins of those whose names are mentioned. Ali's sister had consequently asked him for whom the sacrifice should be brought:

So she asked me: “[for] whose name should [it] be sacrificed, this cow, this part?” and I said “I don't know.” “Why? You should give your name”; and I said: “I don't need to cut a cow for my *ki* ... salvation” that I said. “*Īsā Masīh* is my salvation, he [is] crucified for me, he did *qurbani* for me,” “Aha.” But I get too good meat, I hope I can distribute the meat to the poor people so they gave me a part [...] You should be a witness in the situation, wise with wisdom. I think in the future [during] the *qurbani* time, Muslim background believers can come together and arrange a cow and cut it and they can have the meat or they can distribute the meat – what is the problem? You can distribute not only one but the whole part [...] Jesus is quite fair. Fair means his burden is not heavy. (Ali §120)

Ali has participated in the *Eid Qurbani*, and he has even contributed financially to the family's sacrificial animal, a cow. Ali objects to his sister's question and makes a theological point, namely that he does not need to sacrifice any cows for his salvation. Interestingly, Ali argues that Jesus did *qurbani* for him, that is, that Jesus sacrificed himself for Ali. When Ali now participates in the *Eid*, it is not to expiate for his sins

When Ali now participates in the *Eid*, it is not to expiate for his sins through a sacrifice, but to get his share of the good meat.

through a sacrifice, but to get his share of the good meat from the cow and to distribute his part among the poor.¹²

***Jama'at* and Mosque**

Insofar as the *imandars* participate in Islamic festivals and consciously adopt an "Islamic" style of worship and religious fellowship, the relationship between the *jama'at* fellowship of believers and the common mosque prayers is an important issue. Some *imandars* reported that they participated in the *namaz* prayers occasionally or at the time of festivals. In contrast to these "cultural Muslims," Belim – who was leader of one of the *jama'ats* which I frequented during my fieldwork – told me that he regularly participated in the local mosque:

- And then you said you went to the mosque as well?
- Yeah, not regularly; regularly is five times. But occasionally or some times every week two or three times. Yesterday I went in the prayer time.
- What do you do in the prayer time? Will you follow the *namaz*?
- Yeah, same way and go to the floor and all same as *namaz*.
- And the same creed as well?
- Yeah most of the same but sometimes when everybody is quiet just one *imam* he is telling and other people are quiet then in my mind I also pray or sometimes memorize something.
- What would you be saying? What did you say yesterday?
- Same as like when we pray whatever we say; understanding or memorizing or ...
- In Bangla or in Arabic?
- In Bangla, because when everybody [is] listening quietly that one man [the *imam*] is praying, so in the mind; we can not say loudly. And you know there is one book for *namaz*, *Namaz Sika*, maybe some people pray from that book. We sometimes use that book but we don't follow that book. (Belim §101–108)

When everybody is quiet and only the imam is praying aloud, Belim prays with his own words "in his mind." Furthermore, he says that he is "using the book for *namaz*" but "not following it." It seems that the distinction between "believing" and "following" describes the *imandars'* strategy as far as participation in the *namaz* prayers is concerned. Belim partakes in

¹² Several of the other *imandars* follow the same "strategy." Some tell how they actively participate in the *Eid* but do not consider the slaughter to be a real sacrifice. Belim tells how the sacrifice traditionally took place under the recitation of the *shahada*, but that he now alters the ritual and leaves out the last part of the creed which mentions Muhammad. According to Belim, the meaning of the sacrifice is thus simply to state the obvious, namely that Allah is the only God. According to other *imandars*, *Eid* is now celebrated as "a memory of *Īsā Masīh*" by the *imandars*, and they argue that *namaz* prayers at the *Eid* should be "prayed in the name of Jesus" (Kabir §83).



structured religious life but prays his own prayers “in his mind.” Belim’s understanding thus seems to presuppose a division between the outward form and the inward commitment. It seems that a similar understanding underlies the other *imandars’* participation in the ritual religious duties of Islam: washing, sitting down on the floor in the mosque, and praying *namaz* (Somer §148; Kabir §92–98). All seem to be bodily and outward expressions, thus they only hold relative value. On the other hand, the *imandars’* genuine prayers are characterized by their personal nature (Mazhar §67); the *imandars* “surrender their lives,” “give thanks for God’s love,” “cry for Allah’s help” (Mazhar §73), and “just pray to God only and not read *namaz*” (Saiyeda §19).

A crucial point in which religious ritual, the mosque liturgy, and Islamic social identity come together is the *shahada*, the Islamic creed, which implies a ritual recognition of Muhammad as the prophet of God. Belim explained that “in his heart” he simply stops after the first half of the creed, which affirms the sovereign status of God.¹³ Instead of adding “Muhammad is the prophet of God,” he silently and inwardly adds that “Jesus is the spirit of God” or “Jesus is the word of God.” The theological content and perspective of these statements is discussed elsewhere;¹⁴ the focus here is on whether the other members in the mosque congregation accept Belim’s participation:

- What about the other people in the mosque: do they know that you are Muslim in another way than they are?
- Only few know.
- What do they say?
- Yeah, first sometimes I was arguing with them and they were many time later saying many things.
- Did they accept it you mean?
- Yeah, they accept it but in their mind maybe they don’t accept. But that is what I say and they say.
- What did they say when you argued with them?
- Then sometimes they accepted something and other they did not accept.
- What happened; what did you talk about?
- About Muslim, about [whether] I am in Islam. And they said “no,” I am not truly or fully Muslim or I am not 100% in Islam. “Yeah,” I said, “you can say that things but I think I am a Muslim or I am in Islam.” (Belim §177–186)

13 The *shahada*, the confession itself, is that “*la ilah illa’llah*” – “there is no God but Allah,” and “*Muhammad rasul’llah*” – “Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.”

14 Namely in the fourth chapter of my dissertation, “Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas. A Qualitative and Theological Study of Syncretism and Identity in Global Christianity” (Ph.D. diss., University of Copenhagen, 2006).

Belim does admit that he is not sure whether the other members of the mosque accept his identity as a Muslim. The few persons with whom he has discussed his understanding seem to be critical; nevertheless, they have tolerated his continued participation in the *namaz* prayers. Belim compares his situation with other marginal and doctrinally deviant groups in Islam (Belim §188–200). Belim's story shows that the *imandars'* interpretation of what it "really" means to be a Muslim is not always accepted by more ritually orthodox Muslims. It seems justified to say that participation in *namaz* prayers by *Īsā imandars* is tolerated, rather than welcomed, by other Muslims.

Theological Views on Islam

Finally, I would like to turn to the more general view of Islam expressed by the *imandars*. I asked Mehrab what his overall view of Islam was, and he gave the following theological interpretation of Islam from his new point of reference:

- What do you think about Islam?
- Islam is good. If you through work are able to make God happy then it is good.
- Please explain more about that: "If you are able to make God happy through your work" – what does that mean?
- Activities. Islam has many rules. They have the same as Jews, you have to do that sacrifice, you have to give this sacrifice, you have to give this offering, you have to follow this rule, you have to follow that rule, you have to follow ... then you will get some benefit and then it will make balance in your life and you will see good work is high and God will help you to go to heaven, these things. And [Islam] also have so many religious activities. Islam itself is not bad but it is same as Jews that through law you can go to heaven. And Christianity is through the grace of God, through the sacrifice of Jesus we are going to the ... get the salvation. So this is the difference on that problem." (Mehrab §89–92)

To follow the rules of Islam stipulating religious rites, offerings, and sacrifices to balance one's life is, according to Mehrab, basically a good thing. However, these activities do not always produce the desired effect for the believer. In the Christian theological universe, salvation depends upon grace, which according to Mehrab is directly opposite to the law of Islam. At the same time, it seems that Mehrab is hinting at an understanding of the *imandars'* practice as a fulfillment of the divine law. In turn this might be said to imply an inclusive understanding of the relationship between Islam and faith in Christ.

Analytical Perspective: The Believers' Inter-Religious Hermeneutics and Religious Identity

Ultimately, the structured religious life of Islam, as well as that of the officially recognized missionary churches, does not succeed in a genuine inward transformation. From a theological perspective, this is due to the fact that Islam is based on law, whereas Jesus' sacrificial death has the character of grace. Interestingly, it seems that the critiques of the established Christian churches and of the structured religious life of Islam merge in the *imandars'* critique of "outward-ness" and superficiality. In contrast to both the officially recognized churches and the structured religious life of the mosques, the *imandars* therefore prefer their own *jama'at* fellowships. Arguably, this is because *jama'at* fellowships facilitate an interiorized and spiritual relation with Jesus. Using a term inspired by the anthropologist Victor Turner, I would call the *jama'ats* "anti-structural religious *communitas*," that is, existential fellowships outside of the structured social life in which new templates for life might be adopted.¹⁵ Outside the structured life of society, the conversion process leads to a reinterpretation of oneself and the construction of a new religious identity.

The reinterpretation of ritual religious duties such as prayers, fasting, and alms, as well as the participation in popular Muslim festivals, is important because these areas are indicative of the conflict between the individual and society. The *imandars* argue that the ritual duties apply to them, but in a reinterpreted form: the sacrificial animal is not a real sacrifice for the *imandars*, as Jesus himself is their sacrifice. Participation in the mosque prayers might be said to be the ultimate test of the *imandars'* inter-religious hermeneutics, because this is the place where Islamic ritual religious duties are reinterpreted in the light of their new faith in Jesus. The very possibility of continued participation highlights the distinction between public ritual and the prayers of the individual, a distinction between "believing" and "following." Whereas everyone "believes" God, only the *imandars* "follow" Jesus, their prophet and Savior. Everyone performs the external and ritualized bodily movements and prays according to the rule for *namaz* prayer, but only the *imandar* prays internally and personally in Bangla to God. This prayer is located "in the heart" rather than in geographical space, and the *imandar* furthermore feels free to alter the Islamic confession according to his or her relationship to Jesus. In other words, a new or deepened sense of interiority allows the believers to distinguish between religious and spiri-

The *imandars* argue that the ritual duties apply to them, but in a reinterpreted form: the sacrificial animal is not a real sacrifice for the *imandars*, as Jesus himself is their sacrifice.

15 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 201.



tual, outward and inward, exteriority and interiority, and to emphasize interiority over exteriority.

These analytical observations lead back to the overarching theoretical question concerning inter-religious hermeneutics. It seems that the converts utilize a common religious style or discourse, but with an altered content. Their discourses are shared with the larger Bengali Muslim religious culture, and when the believers utilize these discourses, they function as contextual “tools” for authorization of conversion and socio-religious identity. At the same time, these tools clearly serve a goal other than to reinforce traditional Bengali Muslim culture: namely, they authorize acceptance of Jesus as prophet and Savior. This authorization and acceptance of a new reference point for religious identity influences the *imandars*’ behavior and seems to allow them to distinguish between exteriority and interiority to a degree previously not possible. This distinction manifests itself especially when it comes to participation in ritual religious duties, festivals, and mosque prayers: only what has an interior quality is ultimately real. Rather than leaving behind Islam socially, as well as religiously, they feel free to engage in extensive reinterpretation of Islamic ritual religious duties and in theological reflection. Whether the actual outcome of the strategies applied by the *imandars* really is compatible with a commitment to Jesus Christ must be evaluated in more detail. However, the theological reflection underlying the *imandars*’ understanding seems to be quite clear: an understanding of Jesus not as the destroyer of Islam, but as the fulfiller of the deepest wishes of Muslims, namely interior surrender and faithfulness to God.

Christian Theological Perspective: Is the *Imandars*’ Inter-Religious Hermeneutics Christian?

How shall the *imandars*’ inter-religious hermeneutics be evaluated from a Christian theological perspective? In order to answer this important question, an initial distinction must be made between the process of inter-religious hermeneutics and the various strategies on the one hand, and the outcome of the interpretation on the other. Whereas the process and the strategies themselves must be viewed as neutral, the outcome of the process and strategies is not neutral but specific, contextual, and historic. The correct question, then, is whether the inter-religious hermeneutics and strategies applied by the *imandars* provide a viable Christian answer to the perennial question of the relationship between culture, society, and Christian faith.

On a fundamental level, I find their theological understanding of the relationship between Islam and Jesus to be guided by the New Testament pattern for the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. According to Paul, both Jews and others have knowledge of God, either indirectly through nature or directly through the law (Rom 1–2). However, this knowledge is in itself not salvific, because salvation is possible only through Christ. The reason is that a true relation to and knowledge of



God is possible only in the crucified Christ. Christ is therefore the fulfillment of the explicit covenant, the Torah, as well as of the implicit, cosmic covenant. From this perspective, Jesus might be viewed as the fulfiller rather than destroyer of the earlier covenants.

Concerning the actual outcome of the various strategies applied, I remain more skeptical. The fundamental distinction between interiority and exteriority works itself out in a distinction between what is mere "religion" and what is "spirituality." Furthermore, the distinction allows the *imandars* to participate in festivals and ritual prayers. Whereas the festivals have a more popular than religious character, the common prayers in the local mosque have an explicit theological and ritual character. The *imandars* break away from the traditional religious hierarchy and engage in an existential relationship to their prophet and Savior, Jesus Christ. They disentangle themselves from the bonds of tradition and "outward" religious life through a turn toward interiority. However, if the distinction between interiority and exteriority is stressed to the degree that only what is interior is considered real, the believers stand in danger of slipping into a metaphysical self-conception which would imply that only subjectivity is reality. Let me explain this in more detail.

The distinction between a metaphysical and a Christian self-conception is a philosophically and theologically delicate matter, but also a necessity in the case of the *imandars*. Whereas a metaphysical self-conception relates the interior and exterior aspects of the human person through *autonomy* (as also modernity has it), the Christian self-conception relates these aspects through *faith*. Whereas the metaphysical person is seen as being engaged in a continual regaining of the unity of personhood through domination of the sensual nature, the Christian concept claims that the person is constituted by faith in God through both subjective relationship and objective worship. A metaphysical view of the person thus ends in ultimate duality, viewing only subjectivity as reality: rituals which earlier served to regulate and define the subject now come under the mastery of the believers. In contrast to this view, the Christian view maintains that while the Christian is free in his or her individual, God-given interiority, he or she is at the same time bound in social exteriority. The Christian belongs to God through faith and to others in Christ-like love. The interior relation to God constitutes the Christian person, but at the same time works itself out externally. The Christian view of the person thus emphasizes both subjective interiority and social exteriority, and maintains a link between them which is manifest in worship.

If the distinction between interiority and exteriority is stressed to the degree that only what is interior is considered real, the believers stand in danger of slipping into a metaphysical self-conception.

Conclusion

It is characteristic that the *imandars* accept Jesus as prophet and Savior, an acceptance which has a number of fundamental implications for their personal and spiritual lives. At the same time, it is also characteristic that the acceptance of Jesus is authorized through a number of contextual tools, and that the *imandars* consciously apply a number of hermeneutical strategies in

relation to Islam. The believers must not only legitimize conversion to and acceptance of Jesus as prophet and Savior, but conversion also necessitates a reinterpretation of their socio-religious identity as not simply Christians or Muslims, but as *Īsā-imandars*. That they view themselves as a third alternative becomes clear when they argue for continued participation in – as well as reinterpretation of – popular Muslim festivals and mosque prayers. On this background, it seems justified to conclude that the *imandars'* religious identity is not Muslim, nor is it simply Christian.

They are living out a synthesis of their faith relation to Jesus within Bengali Muslim culture and religious life, a synthesis which results in their hybrid identity as *Īsā-imandars*.

Christian tradition, with emphasis on a personal and interior relationship with Jesus. They even make a valuable contribution to the wider Christian community by underscoring that a relationship to God implies personal and interior faithfulness. However, they also stand in danger of slipping into a metaphysical self-conception which holds that only subjectivity is reality. Their religious practice and religious identity are the result of a process through which a number of cultural and religious traits from Bengali Islam are incorporated into a Christian theological universe. Their conversion and religious identification thus take place in a continued hermeneutical process which involves interpretation of the larger Christian tradition and their own religious and cultural background, and the result of this process is their hybrid religious identity as *Īsā-imandars*.

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Rather, they are living out a synthesis of their faith relation to Jesus within Bengali Muslim culture and religious life, a synthesis which results in their hybrid identity as *Īsā-imandars*.

From a Christian theological perspective, it seems that their christological understanding has a clear family resemblance to the larger (Protestant)

A Reflection Upon Our Witness in the Muslim World



by **Judith Mendelsohn Rood**

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”

Over the years, as I have matured as a disciple of Yeshua, I have come to understand the beauty of culturally distinctive and authentic worship and service within the global church. Being a Jewish believer has set me on a quest for the vindication of the Hebraic heritage of the body and bride of our Messiah. Messianic Judaism is an important branch of the vine planted in the Word of God. However, that branch will wither if it does not remain rooted in the living God, and if we do not interact with other branches.

Yeshua reiterated the two greatest commandments: to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. For me, this has always been the beginning point of my relationships with others – reminding myself to ask: who is my neighbor? As his followers, we have learned that this means all men and women, from every people, tribe, and nation. In the parable of the good Samaritan, our Lord taught us that our neighbors are not just our own kinsmen, our own *ethnos*, our own people, but even our enemies. And the apostle Paul taught that we are to share the good news with everyone in gentleness and respect, but also circumspectly – we are not to be naïve, but fully aware of all that is around us. Thus, our relationship with Arabs and Muslims is truly a test of our hearts. Can we, as neighbors who are followers of the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world, be transformed in a way that will make a difference in a hurting world? This essay is my reflection on that question.

My Story

Before I became a believer, I had a desire (which I now understand was planted in me by God) to understand other cultures, particularly Islam. In college I read a great deal about Islam, written by those I considered my intellectual forbears – German Jews who wrote about a great civilization that they believed had treated our people better than did those in Christendom. In fact, on a certain level, it seemed that Islam was a victori-

ous version of Judaism, a faith that believed in the one God and governed according to divine law, a faith that in the past had been concerned with good works and obedience, ethics and morality.

I was responding to the deep connections between Islam and Judaism forged by their joint rejection of Christianity and their desire for fidelity to the God of Abraham. Indeed, Arab Christians call God “Allah,” and that is his name in Arabic translations of the Bible.¹ At the same time, I was beginning to question the authority of religious leaders, rather than simply dismissing them from a secular perspective. As the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, I was intellectually opposed to the entire “Christian” world, but, as a Jew, I was also deeply alienated from the synagogue and secular society. I was drawn to the academic study of the history of the Middle East and Islam in Eretz Yisrael, so that I could try to understand what it meant for people to live in societies constructed by their faith in God. I specialized in Islam because I was particularly interested in the reasons for Arab and Muslim hatred of Israel, so much at odds with my reading of Islamic history and the historic tradition of hospitality among the sons of Ishmael.

Trained in the secular world, I did not know how to integrate my faith with my work as a historian and student of Middle Eastern international relations. When I began teaching in the Christian colleges and universities movement, I discovered an entirely new world of scholarship, a world infused with faith in the God of Israel and biblical knowledge. The first revolutionary concept that transformed my thinking as a new believer was that God had not abandoned us. The second revolutionary concept was that we may still evaluate societies and governments using the standards of justice proclaimed in the prophetic words of the Bible.² Though injustice reigns, as believers we are called upon to strive for justice, assured that God is still actively engaged in history. This means that we cannot repair the world by our own efforts and that only God can redeem his creation. Yet, as new creatures transformed by the Holy Spirit, we are able to bear fruit that will allow his kingdom to penetrate into the darkness and illuminate it, bringing not only justice, but also mercy, to those who are trapped by principalities and powers ruled by the adversary of our God and his creatures. I found that I now belonged to the “cloud of witnesses” – Jewish and Gentile – who embodied Christ as the church – a new people through whom Christ continually works, despite our human failings and the best efforts of the adversary to thwart his purposes.

Part of my work since accepting Yeshua as my Messiah in 1983 has been to unravel the suppressed history of Jewish believers in the church. God has never abandoned the Jewish people. In the mystery of the relationship of the Jewish people and the church, he has preserved a faithful remnant, preserving the Jewish people through the *Tanakh*, the living

1 When talking about God to Muslims, Arab Christians may choose to refer to him as *Rab*, or “Lord,” to emphasize the Christian understanding of his nature.

2 Gary Haugen, *The Good News About Injustice* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1999).

vine that is rooted in him, even when anti-Semitism threatened to annihilate us.

As a new believer, I found myself at the interstices between cultures and differing political agendas. I found that while many evangelical Christians (following in the Anabaptist, pacifist tradition, and in some cases the teachings of liberation theology), have focused upon the sufferings of the Palestinians, many other evangelicals have focused upon the rebirth of Israel as proof that God is still working in history. My response to all anti-Israel and anti-Arab/Muslim polemic is to pray for compassion for one another.

After all, if we love Israel, as followers of Yeshua, we must also love Israel's neighbors – the Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, and the other Arab nations. As I began teaching world history to Christian students, I realized that I had to study the history of the church in the Middle East and the impact of Christianity upon the Arab-Israeli conflict. In valuing the history and distinctives of these ancient churches, I rediscovered my appreciation of the contribution of the Jewish people to the church, and I began to recognize the role that God has assigned Israel as the bride of Christ within it over the centuries.

There is probably no more complex historical relationship than that of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.³ As a historian, my approach to this question is different from that of evangelists or theologians, because I emphasize the historical development of religious institutions and the experiences of the faithful over the centuries. Historians are trained to be empathetic when doing research about any subject, to study it on its own terms, to give it its due, and then to analyze and evaluate what they have learned. My training thus has allowed me to develop my ability to not make judgments based upon assumptions, but instead to take every assumption and examine it, turning it inside out and looking at what I have learned from every angle. This has enabled me to see the good and the bad, to detect what has been right and what has been wrong, so long as I keep a biblical standard of justice as my measuring rod. This does not mean that I can proffer solutions to political, social, and economic tragedies, but I can help people to understand their causes and to attempt to mitigate the evil that has engulfed us.

In our fallen state, religious institutions and authorities have often failed to restrain the evil impulses of mankind. We have to take into account the harm – and the good – that have been done in God's name.

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³ For an excellent, up-to-date book on the history of the motivations and approaches of Western scholarship on Islam and the Arabs, as well as the controversies around that scholarship, see Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2006). Many of the scholars Irwin includes in his survey are Christians who sought to understand Islam for missionary and apologetic purposes. For those interested in this subject, Irwin's book is good place to begin.



Thus, we must always take a humble and sacrificial posture toward those who do not agree with us theologically or culturally. We are all too aware of the many differences and controversies in church history that have led to suffering and torment. The power of religious authorities and institutions is inseparable from faith, as believers know only too well. The politicization of religion has been increasing as secular ideologies have failed throughout the world, and, from a long historical perspective, one can clearly see that the struggle for political power is often fought in the language of faith. This is the political and religious context within which we find ourselves as we seek to improve our relationships with the Muslim world.

Therefore it is crucial to bear in mind the outstretched arms of Christ crucified, who offered forgiveness so that we may be conformed to his likeness in order to serve his kingdom.

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is fraught with dangers; only properly edified by doctrine, relating to others with compassion strengthened by a clear awareness of the differences between faith and ideology, can we be equipped to be in relationship with the other, even in so simple and transparent a matter as sharing our faith.⁴

A Believer Among the Muslims

When I was doing my dissertation research in the Islamic court in the mid-1980s, I worked closely with a Muslim judge, a *qadi*, from the same family as the infamous *Mufti* of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni.⁵ When the judge, whom we called Shaykh As'ad, asked, I told him that I was a Jewish follower of *Yesu'a al-Masih*. He smiled and invited me to become a Muslim, his eyes twinkling. I returned his smile, thanked him for caring, and told him that I had "surrendered" (a play on the word "Muslim") my life to Yeshua. We became very close, knowing that each of us had to answer only to God and that we were in one another's prayers. Once, when I was in the Islamic court reading archived documents, one of the fellows who worked there stated that the Holocaust had never happened. Before I could reply, my friend rebuked him, asking where all the Jews who disappeared during the war had gone. The court employees were startled by his passion and sat chastened for their ignorance.

Shaykh As'ad told me that as a baby, he shared a wet nurse with a

4 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

5 Under the British Mandate, the office of the Grand Mufti was created to give the Muslims a representative on par with the office of the Chief Rabbi in Palestine. The Grand Mufti, using the fascist Muslim Brotherhood to organize resistance to political Zionism, repudiated the Sunni legal tradition of tolerance toward the Jews and Christians, declaring jihad and allying his cause with the Nazis during the Second World War.

Jewish infant. Since the same woman nursed them, under Islamic law they were considered siblings, and they enjoyed a lifelong friendship. His sympathy for the Jewish people surprised me no less than his devotion to his wife and daughters, and to the girls he taught at a nearby school. He wanted them to know their rights and duties under Islamic law. Despite the maelstrom of politics he'd lived through, he'd developed a respect for Jewish history, taking pride in being the guardian of the ruins of a Byzantine synagogue on his lands outside of Jericho. During the al-Aqsa Intifada, the structure protecting the mosaic floor was burned. Had he been alive, he would have been appalled. Our love of history and mutual respect bore fruit in our friendship. Without his guidance, I would never have been able to decipher the documents that I used to write my dissertation and my book, *Sacred Law in the Holy City*.⁶

I believe it was the respect that I showed for his dignity, language, culture, and traditions that enabled us to be friends. We were transparent about our beliefs, and this, I believe, was the way that Yeshua wanted us to be, and why our friendship was a blessing. Our obligation to share our faith with one another was accomplished, and we trusted God to lead the other to him. While I am certain that I am forgiven, and that my redeemer lives, my friend, like his prophet, knew only that at the end of time Jesus will judge the nations and each one of us, and that no mere man, not even Muhammad, could be sure that he would be admitted into heaven.

Every believer knows that only God knows the heart of each person, and trusts him to be both merciful and just. Perhaps this is not a satisfactory posture for evangelism, but it is honest – and biblical. The most that we can do is to testify to our faith, and recognize that it is God who changes hearts. This should be the premise of our relationships with all people. So the question for me, as a professor of history, is, *How do I equip believers to develop genuine respect for others, an authentic respect for them and their beliefs, histories, cultures, and customs, that will enable them to build authentic relationships with them, and perhaps, if God permits them an opportunity, to share the reasons for our faith?*

Living Stones: Arab Christianity's Witness

Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 60 (LOP 60) asserts that there are “many parallels and similarities” between the experiences of those engaged in Jewish-Christian and Muslim-Christian dialogue.⁷ Just as today Christians believe that Jews do not need to know their Savior because of their past suffering at the hands of anti-Semites, and because they are the chosen people, Christians believe that Muslims don't need Christ. LOP 60 notes that the biggest challenge to evangelism among Muslims in the West is

6 Judith Mendelsohn Rood, *Sacred Law in the Holy City: The Khedival Challenge to the Ottomans as Seen from Jerusalem, 1829–1841* (Leiden: Brill Academic Press, 2004).

7 Tuvya Zaretsky, ed., *Jewish Evangelism: A Call to the Church, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 60* (Pattaya: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, 2004), 50.



the perception that “Islamic faith in the one God and Muslim identity as descendants of Abraham” precludes any need for their salvation in *Yesu’a al-Masih*.⁸ Therefore many Christians believe that there is no reason to share their faith with them.

Moreover, the paper notes that Muslim background believers, like Jewish believers, are often ostracized by their tightly-knit communities. Even worse, in Islamic countries they may face exile or death for their apostasy under regimes that allow the persecution of Christians. The indigenous churches are ill-equipped to respond to the needs of new believers. Thus the paper rightly calls for us to advocate religious freedom to protect the freedom of conscience in Muslim countries. Organizations like the Institute for Global Engagement and the International Justice Mission, inspired by the biblical call for justice, are actively involved at the highest governmental levels in protecting religious minorities and the dispossessed throughout the world. On a political level, believers ought to support the work of these and similar organizations that focus upon universal, biblically inspired human rights.

More problematically, however, the paper calls upon us to “encourage contextualized expressions of ... Arab Christian identity,” and to “develop appropriate cultural identities and practices” to support them.⁹ It is not unusual for evangelical Christians to overlook the ancient churches throughout the Muslim world. These churches and their congregations consider themselves “living stones” who, through their perseverance and suffering under Islam, have remained a continual witness to the resurrected Christ. Since Pentecost, these ancient churches have been actively engaged in the Arab world, though often under precarious conditions. Indeed, some have likened Islam to amber, which preserved the ancient churches even as it conquered their historic homelands and severely limited evangelism. This oversight is not surprising, since most evangelical Christians don’t know much about church history, let alone the history of Islam, and they, like many Muslims, are put off by the icons and sacraments of the ancient churches, dismissing the mainline Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches as spiritually dead and doctrinally in error.

Because of its antiquity, the church under Islam has a complex spiritual and political legacy. Each of the indigenous churches has its own language and liturgy, all of which they trace to the Jewish temple and Jewish practices embraced by the Jewish Messiah, his Jewish disciples, and the apostolic church, which numbered among its adherents many Jewish believers. The use of incense, lavers, bells, priestly garments, phylacteries among the Greek Orthodox Armenians and Syrian Orthodox,

8 Ibid. I believe it is important to refer to Yeshua in Arabic as *Yesu’a*, rather than *Isa*, because the former preserves the etymology of the Hebrew. Missiologists differ on this, some arguing for building bridges to Muslims through the language of the Qur’an. As long as this is done initially, but later explained, I think that this approach to Muslims is justified because of their positive associations with that name. However, Christian teachings about him must make clear the differences in the understandings of the Messiah in the two faiths.

9 Ibid.

Sabbath and modified *kashrut* among the Copts, and the preservation of the Aramaic language spoken during the Second Temple period as Syriac and Chaldean, are all but examples of the close biblical associations these living stones preserve between the church and Second Temple Judaism.

American evangelicals in particular often do not recognize Orthodox Christians and Catholics as believers, reflecting the theological disputes that have arisen over the centuries, disputes that have often led to suffering and death. This prejudice has especially complicated the relationship of Western Christians to their Eastern brothers and sisters since the time of the Crusades, when the Franks attacked Jews and Eastern Christians, along with Muslims, as infidels. The alliances of the crusaders with some Christians in the Middle East have embittered their relations with Muslims ever since. Muslims, like Jews, view the excesses and brutality of the Crusades as part and parcel of Christianity. The threats of jihad and echoes of the Crusades are still heard, as indigenous Christians try delicately to straddle both worlds in order to be able to remain in their ancient lands. The very real fear of Islamic retribution explains the failure of the indigenous churches to respond to the Muslim seekers who come to them for answers. The danger is great, and it is the responsibility of all Christians to fight for the religious freedom of believers and seekers.

We must support the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox churches – the Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Antiochian, and Ethiopian – as well as the Assyrian Church of the East (Nestorian), those in communion with the Roman Catholic Church – Chaldeans, Maronites, and Jacobites – and the Greek Orthodox churches. We must understand and respect their legacies, their past relationships, both good and bad, with Protestants, and the challenges that they all face today. These churches are dying out in the East under the pressures of secular nationalism and Islamism, political conflict and economic stagnation, which have led to the homogenization of society at the expense of the religious diversity that persisted in the East until the nineteenth century.

In the past, patronizing American Protestant attitudes toward Orthodox Arab believers angered them – especially the assertions that they were not born again Christian believers and that their traditions, beliefs, and sacraments were in error. Orthodox leaders were not recognized or invited to participate in the leadership of new evangelical organizations, and the poverty of their communities was exploited for fundraising purposes. Bickering among Christians harmed the church; some indigenous Christians converted to Islam, which seemed to them to be more spiritual and closer to biblical teachings than either Eastern or Western forms of Christianity.¹⁰ Many simply lost their faith and became secular modernists.

10 Sylvia G. Chaim, *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 59.



The Arab Church

The inauguration of the Arab church began at Pentecost, when Arabic was among the multitude of languages spoken by those present. The apostle Paul began his ministry in Arabia. For five centuries before the rise of Islam, Arab Christianity flourished. The involvement of both Jewish and Arab Christians in the apostolic church, and even in the Greek Orthodox church, has been suppressed by the dominant reading of church and Jewish history. There developed a complex body of pre-Islamic proto-Arabic literature, inspired through the translation of Greek literature along with the Bible, that was eventually transmitted through the Islamic world to Andalusia, and from there into the heart of Europe. Georgetown University Emeritus Professor of Arabic, Irfan Shahid, believes that there was once an Arabic translation of at least parts of the New Testament, based upon epigraphical evidence in Iraq.¹¹ The great European medieval universities based their curriculum, customs, and architecture upon the great Islamic universities, acknowledging the contributions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims living under Islamic rule in the fields of philosophy, literature, technology, and science. Before the devastation of the Crusades, the Mongol conquests, the rise of puritanical Islamic movements in Arabia and North Africa, the *Reconquista*, and the Inquisition in Spain, Islamic culture was far more tolerant toward religious minorities than Christendom.

The Ottoman Empire achieved a sort of multiethnic religious pluralism. There, self-governing religious communities called "millets" participated in its vibrant economic and cultural life. Sephardic Jews (*Sephardim*), expelled from Spain in 1492, found refuge there. It is no longer widely known that in 1453, after conquering Constantinople, Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror (1451–81) invited Jews to settle in his domains, saying,

Who among you of all my people that is with me, may his God be with him, let him ascend to Constantinople the site of my royal throne. Let him dwell in the best of the land, each beneath his vine and beneath his fig tree, with silver and with gold, with wealth and with cattle. Let him dwell in the land, trade in it and take possession of it.¹²

More famously, Bayezid II (1481–1512) invited those then fleeing the Inquisition to settle in Ottoman Syria and Egypt. Tradition has it that he asked Ferdinand, the Spanish king who expelled the Jews and Muslims from Andalusia, whether a ruler who weakened his own country by expelling its most productive subjects, thereby enriching another kingdom, could be considered wise. These Ottoman invitations led to a Jewish re-

11 Irfan Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984).

12 *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (CD-ROM Edition, 2001).

vival in Safed in the Galilee, in Jerusalem, and in Anatolia and the Balkans, where the traumatized refugees from Spain began to rebuild their shattered lives. Among those exiled were *Marranos* and *Mozarabs*, Jewish and Muslim *conversos* who were despised by both Roman Catholics and Jews. Some of these may have apostatized and returned to Judaism or Islam, but many probably blended in with Christian communities in the Middle East and in the New World, where they found refuge. Thus, under Islamic rule, Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisted – not as equals, but, so long as there were responsible and just governing officials, as subjects of the Sultan.

Christian Arabism, Christian Zionism

Evangelical Arab Christians and Americans have a complex relationship due to the question of political Zionism. Many evangelicals are Christian Zionists who support Israel, while many Arab Christians are Arabists who support the Arabs and Palestinians. Both are one-sided, reflecting opinions in the secular world. In the past decade, evangelical critics of Christian Zionism have focused their attention on Christian support of Israel. Donald E. Wagner, in his influential book *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians*, reviewed the role of Christian Zionism in the creation of the State of Israel and called attention to the political plight of the Palestinians and the accelerating disappearance of Christians from the Holy Land.¹³ These books prompted the anti-Israel divestment policy in the Presbyterian Church and articulate the anti-Zionism of many left-leaning evangelicals in the U.S. and Europe, as well as many Arab Christians in the Middle East.

There is as yet no sustained study of what may be called Christian Arabism to balance Wagner's work and others in the same vein. Starting with George Antonius' classic, *The Arab Awakening*, and including Kenneth Cragg's *The Arab Christian*, there has been some work done on the history of Arab Christianity, but the very nature of secular scholarship on the conflict discourages differentiating Christian from Muslim in the context of Arab nationalism.¹⁴ Indeed, Charles Sennott writes in his book *The Body and the Blood* that he was unable to get Palestinian Christians to differentiate themselves from their Muslim compatriots: such an admission would destroy the entire premise of Arab nationalism, which joins Muslims and Christians together in the Arab nationalist cause.¹⁵ This modernizing project, which resulted in the elevation of Modern Standard

13 Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995). See also Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2004).

14 George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965; originally published in 1946), and Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

15 Charles Sennott, *The Body and the Blood* (Cambridge, MA: PublicAffairs/Perseus Books, 2001).



Arabic over Qur'anic Arabic as the language of the Arab Nation, was designed in part to prevent a return to the state of "dhimmitude" suffered by the subjugated Christians in the Islamic world, especially in the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Their fear of reverting back to second-class status in the twenty-first century explains the determination of Arab Christians to remain committed to Arab and Palestinian nationalism in the face of radical Islam. For these reasons, Palestinian Christians have fought alongside their Muslim neighbors for the right to return following their dispossession from their properties in the wake of the 1948 and 1967 wars.

Yet the day may have come when Arab Christians have to think through the consequences of this position: while secularized Christian Arabs have founded, joined, and indeed led Palestinian militant groups since the 1960s, it gives one pause to read that Christian Arabs have joined the "Islamic" al-Aqsa Brigade in response to the failure of the Oslo Peace Process to end the occupation of the future Palestinian state.¹⁷ By weakening Palestinian Christians, the policies of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have driven them away in search of safety and a future – and radicalized those who stay. And now, with Hamas in power in Gaza, rape, murder, and persecution of Christians there have become increasingly undeniable, even among the staunchest Christian Arab nationalists.

One of the most difficult problems that Palestinian Christians have with American evangelicals is premillennial dispensationalism, the eschatological doctrine that the unfulfilled prophecies relating to the re-establishment of Israel as a priestly kingdom ministering to the nations will be fulfilled in the millennium by ethnic Israel, not the church.¹⁸ The Hebrew Scriptures are thus problematic for Palestinian Christians, who adhere to the idea that the church has superseded Israel as the beneficiary of these promises, justifying their anti-Zionist position, preserving the teaching of contempt, and fueling resurgent anti-Semitism, despite Vatican II's condemnation of that teaching in 1965. Christian Arabism and Christian Zionism thus divide the body and inflame the political conflict, at the same time that Islamist preachers deliver sermons featuring the ugliest expressions of anti-Semitism since the *Shoah*. The result has been that the Christians of the Middle East are leaving by the hundreds and thousands.

Christian Arab condemnation of Christian Zionism is disingenuous, as it ignores the serious injustices permitted by Arab governments. It is true that many Christian Zionists have an extremely negative view of the

16 Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

17 Laura King, "On Christmas Eve, Palestinian Revisits Siege Site," *Los Angeles Times* (December 25, 2002), A1, A5. For more on my perspective on this, see Rood, "The Palestinian Culture of Death: *Shari'ah* and *Siyasah* – Justice, Political Power, and Capital Punishment in the Palestinian National Authority," in *The Cultural Lives of Capital Punishment*, ed. Austin Sarat (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 231–248.

18 On eschatology, see Darrel Bock, ed., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

Arabs, and that this has led to widespread hostility and anger toward all Arabs, not just the jihadists, among Americans and Europeans. It is difficult to convince American evangelicals to be concerned about Arabs and Muslims because of their perception of the latter's unrelenting hatred of Israel. Thoughtful Christians have become circumspect, recognizing, on the Arab side, the terrors of the Holocaust and the right of Israel to exist, and, on the Jewish side, that Israel today is unredeemed as the Jewish people have returned to Israel in unbelief. No thoughtful Jew or Christian can imagine that the current state is biblical, but there are plenty of apologists for Israel who will justify her policies in order to give her support. By the same logic, no Palestinian can imagine that the Palestinian government – under the Palestinian National Authority/PLO or Hamas – is just. In defending the failings of Israel and Palestine, we do no one any favors. It is critically important that we bring these issues to the forefront, so that with prayer and intercession we can find effective ways to fight the rabid anti-Semitic images and rhetoric disseminated throughout the world by the Islamist media, and seek justice for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Ishmael and the Bible

The fear of Islamic retribution against a robust form of Arab Christianity explains the failure of the Orthodox churches to participate in the Great Commission. Supersessionism, politics, and war have all stymied the relationships of Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs. Nevertheless, those who love Israel must care about her neighbors. Messianic Jews and Arab Christians should share a deep concern for both the Jews and the Gentiles living in Israel and Palestine, in the Middle East, and throughout the world. The long and tortured history of Jews and Christians requires that great attention must be paid to the relationship of the church to Israel.¹⁹ Palestinian Christians Elias Chacour, Naim Ateek, and Mitri Raheb, among others, have written compassionately about how that relationship is tied to the current Palestinian-Israeli tragedy.²⁰ Of all these meditations, Tony Maalouf's book *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel* is the most important. Maalouf shows Christian Zionists that their interpretation of Ishmael has

19 Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (expanded version of Ph.D. dissertation, New York University; Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1989).

20 Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1984); Mitri Raheb, *I Am A Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); and Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). See also the extremely anti-Israel books by Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003); Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002); and Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004). These Western Christians have set Christian Zionists up as the real culprits responsible for U.S. pro-Israel policies. Philip Johnston and Peter Walker, eds., *The Land of Promise: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2000) is an anthology bringing together the views of Christian Arabs, Christian Arabists, and Christian Zionists in one volume. This bibliography does not include the plethora of books written from Christian Zionist perspectives.



misled them in understanding the relationship of the Arabs to Israel. He brilliantly exegetes Genesis 16:1–16; 17; 21:1–21; and Galatians 4:21–31, to show that God intentionally and redemptively used the weaknesses of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar to establish the lines of both Ishmael and Isaac. The older son's mission is to receive the message of God's sovereignty revealed through the younger son.²¹ He also shows the ways God has blessed the Arabs materially, and the connections between the blessings and curses experienced by the two peoples during periods of Israel's obedience or rebellion. The good news that Maalouf has delivered is that God forever tied the Arabs to Christ's incarnation, bringing the wise men of the East as witnesses to his birth so that they could bear the good news eastward.

Throughout the book, Maalouf emphasizes Muslim identity with Ishmael, and thus links Muslims to biblical history. His approach to Islam is wise, because he focuses upon *biblical* teachings relating to Ishmael. As we know, not all Muslims are Arabs, and Maalouf's insight is that nevertheless, all Muslims consider themselves Ishmaelites. Since Muslims do not read the Bible, they are not aware of the promises and role of the Arabs that it teaches; by learning of this, Muslims may develop a feeling of connection to the Holy Scriptures. If they see themselves in those writings, the power of the Word of God will be undeniable. For Arab Christians, Maalouf's book is a tremendous encouragement, as it stresses God's faithfulness; for Western Christians, it is indispensable because of his stirring affirmation of the Christian belief that the redemption of the whole world is in God's loving hands, and therefore, we have reason to hope.

The Failures of Secularization and Jihad

The failures of secular Arab nationalism in the decades since the Israeli victory in 1967, and the inability of the Arab states and the Palestinian national movement to regain conquered Arab territories ever since, have led to Muslim alienation from secularism in preference for Islamism. Islamism is the preferred term for the modern political movement known by Muslims as *salafism*, so called after their ancestors, the first four rightly-guided caliphs who ruled during the Golden Age of Islam, glorifying the first political community of Muslims in Medina and Mecca. Funded and supported by the Saudis and other Islamists, like the Muslim Brotherhood, this form of Islam dates back to the time of the Crusades, when Ibn Taymiyyah, a Muslim of the Hanbali rite, developed a political philosophy to deal with apostates and heretics within Islam, as well as infidels – non-Muslims, for the first time including the People of the Book – who threatened the lands of Islam. Today's radical Islamism began in the wake of the dissolution of the Islamic Caliphate in the late nine-

21 Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003).

teenth and early twentieth centuries, but this ideology has become the dominant political expression of Islam, fueled by the oil wealth which has enabled Wahhabi and revolutionary Shi'ite Islam to spread their teachings throughout Eurasia only since the 1980s. Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban are its direct successors.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is not the cause of these developments, but it is a regional symptom of the radical changes in the international order in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, because the conflict is so enmeshed in global geopolitics, it has become a symbol of the failures of the Muslim world to integrate into the international system. The indigenous Arab Christians of the East, viewed as a potential fifth column of the West, labored for a century to be accepted as Arabs, always with the catastrophe of the Turkish Armenians and Syrian Orthodox, who were slaughtered at the turn of the twentieth century, in the back of their minds. Religion, since the Enlightenment viewed by modern men as atavistic, dangerous, and silly, was eschewed for secular ideologies instead. Indeed, Christian Arabs helped to develop the idea of Arab Nationalism, forming socialist parties like the Ba'ath parties in Syria and Iraq. Many indigenous Christians supported these secular parties and enjoyed their protection, which provided a bulwark against political Islam. Yet now, with the failure of Arab Nationalism, the pendulum has swung, and, in response to Islamist proselytizing (*da'wa*), some indigenous Christians have been emboldened, and there has been a Christian revival throughout the Islamic world, a revival that we must understand and support.

Revival and the Good News

The Christian message in the Middle East and Asia has been dampened by long centuries of political and economic instability, warfare, and repression. Recently, however, indigenous Christians, particularly those who have been living under the threat and violence of jihad in places like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Sudan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, have begun to openly engage their Muslim neighbors with the gospel. These evangelicals come primarily from the ancient churches in Egypt and the Sudan, where they have been subjected to persecution, humiliation, and danger for many, many years, and for that reason have nothing left to fear. Yet the rise of Islamist violence over the course of the twentieth century, and especially the Islamist culture of death that has rationalized suicide bombings and the mass murder of innocents, has led many Muslims, too, to heed their consciences and to reject the evil message of the jihadists.

And so "religion," for the first time since the Enlightenment, has been reactivated worldwide as the trope for political rhetoric. There has been a revival of apocalyptic thinking among some traditional Jews as well, who consider this time to be the dispensation of the Ishmaelite Exile, the worst period of the *Galut* prophesied in the *Tanakh*. Ahmadinejad's apocalyptic rhetoric has fed their belief that that era will culminate in the War of Gog



and Magog.²² Christian and Shi'ite apocalypticism have contributed to Jewish interest in a topic long submerged in Judaism. Even one of the best known rabbinical scholars of our day, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, has warned that the final redemption may not be gradual, accomplished gradually through *tikkun ha-olam* (repairing the world) by the "altogether righteous," but rather instantaneous, with God bringing about the final judgment of an "altogether wicked" generation in "blood and fire and pillars of smoke." In his *midrash* of the Passover Haggadah, Rabbi Steinsaltz recognized that "[t]he Exodus, then, is a comma in the manuscript of world history, whereas the Final Redemption is a full stop."²³

In some recent books about this topic, rabbis write about Ishmael and his legacy. They emphasize Ishmael's hospitality, which is a mark, according to Jewish tradition, of Muslims. This is expressed in a *midrash* that tells the story of Abraham's encounter with Ishmael's first wife. Abraham came to their tent unannounced, and Ishmael's new wife failed to invite him in for refreshment, and Abraham told his son to divorce her and seek a better wife. Ishmael obeyed his father, and this time, when Abraham came to visit again, the new wife served him lavishly. Ever since, the descendants of Ishmael have been renowned for their hospitality to strangers.

When Islam first arose, local Christians thought that Muhammad was a Christian heretic. The religion of Islam was born in a context of competing Christian and Jewish teachings. Islamic civilization synthesized many aspects of the cultures and civilizations that preceded it. Thus the Muslim world is complex, diverse, and currently in a period of great change and internal conflict. The influence of the People of the Book on the devel-

Despite a long history of Qur'anic studies in the West, we are just beginning to analyze the biblical material embedded in it now that the blinders of Christian anti-Semitism have been removed.

opment of Islam has been profound, although Muslims have been taught to reject that idea, as they view the Qur'an as created *ex nihilo* by God. Muslim amnesia about the historical achievements of Jews, Christians, and Muslims before and under Islamic rule must be remedied. The modern Islamist rejection of the legitimacy of the multiethnic Islamic societies must be challenged,

and the contributions of Christians and Jews to Islamic history must be reaffirmed in order to reconnect Muslims with their biblical inheritance. Despite a long history of Qur'anic studies in the West, we are just beginning to analyze the biblical material embedded in it now that the blind-

22 Herschel Brand, *On Eagles' Wings: Moshiach, Redemption, and the World to Come* (Southfield, MI: Targum, 2002); Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum, *Redemption Unfolding: The Last Exile of Israel, Chevei Mashiah, the War of Gog and Magog and the Final Redemption* (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 2005); Rabbi Yechiel Weitzman, *The Ishmaelite Exile* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publications, 2006).

23 Adin Steinsaltz, "Completing the Exodus" [on-line]; available from www.jpost.com; accessed 1 April 2007.

ers of Christian anti-Semitism have been removed. And a new translation of the Bible, based upon research in the Arabic of the Qur'an, Syriac, and Hebrew, rather than upon English Bibles based primarily on Greek and Latin, will serve the Arabic speaking churches better in their mission.

Just as is the case for those interested in Jewish ministry, the first priority for those interested in evangelism in the Muslim world is to learn the Arabic language and Islamic culture and history, not simply their theology. Christian students need to learn about the ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East as well. All Middle Easterners will benefit from the work of Christian seminaries and churches if human rights are defended in their countries. The suffering and persecution in the Middle East, and today's apocalypticism, have emboldened Christians in their witness and have stimulated the interest of Muslim reformers in the merits of faith-based civic education. A message of forgiveness, love, mercy, and reconciliation, based upon good biblical scholarship and an appreciation of the biblical aspects of Islamic teachings, is essential. Equally important is speaking out against the injustices of Islamic regimes and telling the truth about the failings of the Arab states to promote the welfare of their citizens. Just as we work to vindicate the history and contribution of Jews to the church throughout history, so must we vindicate the biblical truths buried in Islam and Arab culture. We must also challenge the pernicious Muslim teaching that Muslims must not read the Bible, just as we must challenge the rabbinical position that the New Testament is taboo for Jews. This too is a matter of religious liberty and individual conscience.

In the past, knowledge and faith have always been supported by reliable, inspired texts. To strengthen Christian witness in the Muslim world, we must reach out in unity, knowledge, and wisdom, taking care to share our faith in a way that will bring honor and glory to our Lord. We must respect and honor the ancient churches in the East, help to strengthen them, and in so doing strengthen our own congregations. Together, we ought to aspire to embody the love and unity that the Lord asked us to show those outside our faith: we are a peculiar people, made up of Jews and Gentiles from every tongue, people, tribe, and nation who, until he returns and establishes his kingdom, represent him in this age.²⁴

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²⁴ For those who desire to learn more about Arab Christians, a good starting point would be Betty Jane and J. J. Bailey's book, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). While not written from an evangelical perspective, this ecumenical survey aims to inform Western Christians about the churches of the Middle East. Another wonderful read is William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).





Messianic Jews and Muslim Evangelism

by **David Zeidan**

Introduction

With the turning of so many Jews to Jesus as their Messiah in recent decades, it is time for a wave of Jewish believers to reach out to the non-Jewish world, as the early Jewish believers did in the book of Acts. Because of the many similarities between Judaism and Islam, Jewish believers should be especially good at understanding Muslims and the problems of evangelism among them.

Western studies into the sources of Islam were initiated by Abraham Geiger (1810–74), in his 1833 book *Judaism and Islam*.¹ It is a fact of history that some of the best academic scholars of Islam have been Jews (especially of Orthodox background), such as Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921) and Gustav Weil (1808–89), who because of their Jewish background and the similarities between Islamic *sharia* and Jewish *halacha* were better able to understand Islam than gentile scholars of their time. They developed a more objective and positive evaluation of Islamic civilization than that prevalent in contemporary Christian scholarship. Their hope was that a Europe respectful of Islam would be more likely to show respect for Judaism and Jews. The current doyen of Western Islamic scholarship is the well-known Jewish scholar Bernard Lewis (1916–), one of the most prolific and widely-read scholars of Islam and the Middle East.²

In this article, we will take note of some similarities and differences in theology, history, and culture between Islam and Judaism, as well as similarities and differences between Jewish and Muslim evangelism in approaches, attitudes, obstacles to the gospel, and methods of outreach and church planting.

Not all Muslims are the same; there is a great diversity within Islam. I will be dealing with mainline Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, which is followed by some 80% of all Muslims. Mainline Twelver Imami Shi'ism is similar to Sunni Islam in its attitudes to law and ritual. There are, however, oth-

1 See Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F. M. Young (Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1896). In the original German it was titled *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judentume aufgenommen?* (Bonn, 1833).

2 See Martin Kramer, ed., *The Jewish Discovery of Islam* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, 1999).

er significant minorities such as the Isma'ilis, Alevis, Alawis, and Druze, whose attitudes are very different and who might need a specific evangelistic approach tailored to their beliefs.

Islam categorically denies the deity, incarnation, crucifixion, atoning sacrifice, and resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah. Islam thus denies the very heart of the biblical faith. It also accuses Christians and Jews of tampering with the original scriptures given to them, thus denying that the Bible is trustworthy. As Islam is held to have superseded Christianity, Muhammad is the final authority and the Qur'an the only scripture valid for today. From the Muslim point of view, non-Muslims who accept Muhammad's prophethood and the Qur'an as revelation have actually become Muslims.

Similarities Between Rabbinic Judaism and Islam

Many similarities are based on the fact that rabbinic Judaism strongly influenced the early development of Islam.³ This happened not just through borrowing, but also through the impact of scholarly Jews converted to early Islam. As Rosenthal notes:

What Jews would never have achieved through proselytism, apostates managed to do by the imposition on Islam of a number of important Jewish ideas and institutions.⁴

Later, as Islam developed, it influenced further developments within Judaism. This was especially true in Abbasid Iraq and in Muslim Spain. Sa'adia Gaon (892–942) drew on the early Islamic philosophers (the *mutakallimun*) in his works. He was especially influenced by the Mu'tazilites, and like them wanted to get rid of anthropomorphisms in scriptural exegesis. Other Jewish scholars impacted by Muslim philosophy, exegesis, grammar, Sufism, and poetry include Dunash ibn Lubrat, Bachya ibn Pakuda, Ibn Da'ud, Judah Halevi, and the Rambam (Maimonides), who all wrote in Judeo-Arabic in addition to Hebrew. After Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198), the philosophical era of Islam came to an end, as the orthodox Muslim establishment unleashed an all-out attack on philosophy. Islamic philosophy then found a refuge among Jewish scholars, who transmitted it by translation to the Christian world. Many Arabic philosophical works were translated into Hebrew with added commentary.⁵

Rabbinic Judaism and Islam agree that culture and society are subsumed within religion, that there is no distinction between the religious and the

3 See Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Judaism and Islam* (London and New York: Thomas Yoseloff [for the World Jewish Congress], 1961); W. St. Clair-Tisdall, *The Sources of the Qur'an*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.); Geiger; Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions Through Law: Judaism and Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

4 Rosenthal, 9.

5 Ibid.



secular. Both stress a community that conforms to God's will as expressed in a wide-ranging sacred legal system (law) that controls all of life.⁶

Islam is similar to Judaism in its fundamental religious outlook, structure, jurisprudence, and practice. The Qur'an has much Jewish material within it taken from the Bible, *halacha*, *agadah*, *midrash*, Mishnah, Talmud, and Targum. There are many traditions (*hadith*) in Islam originating from Jewish sources – either biblical or post-biblical – known as the *Isra'iliyat*. Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) draws heavily on the *Isra'iliyat*.

The "Jewishness" of Islam is revealed in many religious and cultural aspects. The centrality of law and ritual, the importance of orthopraxy as against orthodoxy, a holy geographical center, a founding prophet, a founding Exodus (*hijra*) paradigm, the claim of Abrahamic descent, the notion of the "chosen people," the Semitic cultural background, and the obsession with ritual purity and defilement (*tohorah* – *tahara*).

Judaism and Islam are both radically monotheistic (*tawhid* – *yihud*), advocating a monolithic unity of God. There can be no variety in the godhead. Anything else is heresy and paganism (*kufir*, *shirk* – *avoda zara*, *minut*). In Islam the greatest sin is that of associating partners with the one God (*shirk*).

Jewish Statements: The Shema

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One (Deut 6:4).

Also the following from the popular liturgical hymn (*piyyut*) "Adon Olam," recited daily:

Vehu echad v'ein sheni, lhamshil lo, lehahbira. (He is One and there is no other to compare or associate with him.)

Muslim Statements: The Shahada (Creed)

There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God.

Also: *Kul: huwa allahu ahad, allahu al-samad, lam yalida wa lam yulad, walam yakun lahu kufwan ahad.* (Say: He is Allah the One and Only; Allah the Eternal Absolute; He begetteth not nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him.) (Qur'an, Sura 112:1–4)

Other Similarities

1. Strict unitarian monotheism. An indivisible, monolithic unity of the godhead. God can have no partners.
2. Religion as Law. Both religions are composed of an elaborate legal system which minutely prescribes every area of life – ritual, purity, customs, family, community, economics, and politics – and is seen as the very essence of the religion. Islam is *sharia*, Judaism is *halacha*.

⁶ Joshua Massey, "Islam, Once a Hopeless Frontier, Now?, Part II: Living like Jesus, a Torah-Observant Jew: Delighting in God's Law for Incarnational Witness to Muslims," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21 (April 2004), 54–71.

3. Strict ritual purity and defilement laws and dietary rules (*kashrut* – *halal*).
4. No separation between religion and politics. Religion is a total system that encompasses all areas of life, nothing is outside its sphere. Religion is a communal, not just private, matter and must have a dominant place in the public square. Both aim at the ideal of a religious state under religious law.
5. One great prophet who brought God's revelation and law: Moses (Torah) or Muhammad (Qur'an).
6. Religion is important for identity. Even for secular and liberal people, religion remains the main cultural and ethnic identity marker. Religion, ethnicity, culture, and nationality are deeply intertwined.
7. Community is prioritized over the individual and his free choice. Loyalty to the community takes precedence over all other considerations (*am Yisrael, klal Yisrael* – the Muslim *umma*).
8. In both religions, those who leave the traditional faith for another are considered traitors, betrayers, renegades, and apostates (*murtad* – *mumar*). They are worse than infidels and deserve the death penalty. They bring the greatest possible shame on their families, communities, and societies. The apostate is counted as dead. Great efforts are made to cause them to return and repent. They face great anger, threats of violence and assassination, and experience harassment, disgrace, rejection, and isolation.
9. Both religions developed in a historic framework of hostility to Christianity. Rabbinic Judaism is extremely hostile to the person of Jesus, while Islam accepts Jesus as a prophet, but is hostile to Christianity as a religion.
10. Mystical movements developed, such as Sufism in Islam and Kabbalah and Hasidism in Judaism. These include doctrines of emanation from the godhead, religious ecstasy aimed at unity with the divine, and annihilation of self. Love and joy are central. Saints are venerated (*tsadikim* – *awliya'*).
11. Folk Islam and folk Judaism include saints, mediators, intercessors, occultism, magic, astrology, evil eye, etc.
12. Both religions scoff at the deity of Christ, the trinity, and Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. These are seen as evidence of idolatry in Christianity.
13. View of man and sin. Man is not born a sinner; he is good but weak; he has two natures. Man can merit his own salvation, so there is no need for divine intervention and redemption.
14. Perceptions of the Crusades as a terrible historic calamity are still relevant today.

Similarities in Culture

1. There is an attitude of victimhood among both Jews and Muslims: All *goyim* hate us. All *kuffar* are one nation and against Islam. The whole



- world is against us. There is nothing wrong with Judaism or Islam, it is the *goyim* or the *kafirs* that are to blame for all our troubles.
2. A person's religion is inherited and fixed – no individual freedom to leave it for another.
 3. Religion is central to identity. Religion, culture, community, and country are all closely interlinked.
 4. Preference of community over individualism.
 5. The Crusades are seen as an unmitigated evil revealing the eternal enmity at the heart of Christianity for Jews and Muslims.
 6. Wrong concepts of the gospel are inherent in Judaism and Islam. Wild beliefs about missionaries and their motives and methods are accepted as factual truth. Missionaries offer bribes and material benefits, kidnap children, are spies for Western governments, etc. Both religions see Christian missionary activity as an aggressive hostile activity, unethical, subversive, and aimed at the destruction of Judaism or Islam. Yet both actively promote their own mission.
 7. Objection to the cross as the symbol of Christian arrogance, persecution, and theological error. This has a spiritual dimension, as the cross is the center of the gospel. The humiliation of a dying savior is unacceptable. A savior sent by God must be triumphant, victorious, and successful, conquering his enemies and setting up God's kingdom on earth. The cross denies all this.
 8. Family, extended family, and family bonds are important.
 9. Honor and shame are stronger in Islam, where it is the main cultural attribute, but present especially in Sephardic and Oriental Jewish communities. Sullied honor demands vengeance.
 10. Hospitality and generosity are very important, going back to the Abrahamic example.
 11. From the Christian side, the Holocaust is used as an excuse for not evangelizing Jews, while imperialism and colonialism are used as excuses for not evangelizing Muslims.

Differences Between Rabbinic Judaism and Islam

1. While for Jews both Yeshua and Christianity (the church) are the enemy, Muslims greatly respect Isa (Jesus) as a prophet while viewing Christianity as their main enemy.
2. Judaism sees itself as the first revealed monotheist, covenant religion, original, authentic, and valid for all times for the Jewish people. Islam sees itself as the last revealed monotheist religion, superseding all previous religions, and the only valid universal religion for all people and all times.
3. Muslim modern anti-Semitism. In addition to traditional anti-Jewish attitudes embedded in the Qur'an and Hadith, the incorporation of Western racial anti-Semitism has produced a virulent form of modern Islamic anti-Semitism.
4. Muslims deny God's eternal covenant through Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, substituting a covenant with Ishmael and his descendants in its place.

5. Islam universalizes what is specific in Judaism. There is not one specific chosen people inheriting a small specific promised land, but a universal chosen people inheriting the whole world.

Cultural Advice for Workers Among Muslims

- *Realize cultural differences*
Different does not mean better. Sin appears in every culture but in different forms. Acknowledge and judge evil in your own culture. Respect their ways. Find the good in their culture. Compliment them on the good you find. Dress modestly and treat the opposite sex with reserve and dignity. Don't eat pork, don't drink alcohol. When visiting, give a gift.
- *Know Muslim stereotypes of Christians*
Christians worship three gods, deify a mere man. They have a Crusader mentality – they hate Muslims and Islam. Missions is an arm of Western Christian imperialism.
- *Build relationships and friendships*
Show an interest in them and their problems. Give them of your precious time. Clarify your position as a believer – not a secularist, atheist, or immoral Westerner. Exhibit piety and fear of God. Be an honorable man. Mention God and prayer in your everyday conversation.
- *How to witness to Muslim friends*
 - Know and respect their Muslim culture and customs.
 - Show respect to your Bible – never place it on the ground. Keep it in a prominent place on your desk.
 - Remember reciprocity in hospitality.
 - Be generous, be loyal, be a friend.
 - Define your identity as a true believer in one God, a follower of Jesus.
 - Present yourself as a God-fearing, pious, praying, and Bible-loving person.
 - Ask questions about their religion, then feel free to share about yours when asked.
 - Never denigrate Islam, the Qur'an, or Muhammad. Elevate Jesus.
- *Don't be confrontational*
Don't argue, but firmly express your own faith and convictions. Don't joke about religion. Raise up Yeshua as God's answer to man's problem.
- *Address their felt needs*
Fear of unknown evil spiritual forces (*jinn*, fate, evil eye) and of an uncertain future. Need for assurance of salvation; for a personal relation-



ship with God; for a mediator and an intercessor; for protection, healing, deliverance, guidance, help, and blessing (*baraka*).

- *Use biblical symbolism, parables, and stories*
Sin and sacrifice; God as loving father; Yeshua removes shame of sin and guilt; the good shepherd; the prodigal son, etc.

Difficulties Muslims Face in Turning to Jesus

(Gleaned from personal biographies)

1. Contempt for Christians is endemic (*dhimmis*, impure, infidels, eaters of pig, drinkers of wine, immoral).
2. Misconceptions and prejudice about Christians and Christianity abound: they worship three Gods; are idolaters who bow to images, icons, and the cross; are impure eaters of pork and drinkers of wine; are ancient enemies of Islam. In some countries, most Christians are from animist pagan backgrounds and retain pagan cultural practices and even rituals that are abhorrent to Muslims.
3. Islam gives stability and a sense of belonging – it is difficult to leave.
4. Islamic religious rituals and regulations become an ingrained habit – it is difficult to shake them off and to handle new freedoms in Jesus.
5. Duty of obedience to family: parents, father, older brother. Family pressure, guilt, shame, manipulation, family honor. Mother and father often threaten, “If you become a Christian you are no longer our child, you are dead to us.” Guilt at bringing shame on their family.
6. Those who turn to Christ often lose their kinship group, extended family, and friends. They are stripped of their social context: house, property, business, and job. They might lose their wife and children. They face charges of apostasy and the death penalty. They also face shame, alienation, ostracism, disinheritance, discrimination, and expulsion from their family and clan, their social group. They will most likely lose their employment and face persecution, imprisonment on false charges, and constant harassment instigated by family, religious authorities, religious organizations, and possibly the state.
7. Points that galvanize hostility and persecution: baptism, changing one’s name, erecting a church-like building, maligning the Qur’an or Muhammad.
8. “Love your enemies” is a big stumbling block.
9. The person of Muhammad and his veneration as a Christ-like figure. Muslims mention and bless Muhammad hundreds of times a day; this is difficult to shake off.
10. The Old Testament, Israel, and the promises to Israel. The Bible is full of Israel and Jews, but it is difficult to accept them as God’s chosen people. Converts need to overcome inbred hatred.
11. The problem of the West’s support for Israel. The West is seen as the great enemy of Islam, and Christianity as a Western religion.

12. Western mission expectations that Muslim converts leave their Muslim culture and identify cross-culturally with Western Christian culture and ritual can be a stumbling block.
13. Some Christian terminology is unsuited to Muslim culture.
14. Many new believers from Islam fall back within the first two years.⁷

Factors that Help Muslims Come to Faith

(Gleaned from personal testimonies)

1. No assurance of salvation in Islam. Fear of hell fire. God is arbitrary – no matter how good you try to be, he can cast you into hell if he so wills.
2. Muslims experience God as a hard taskmaster and search for a better way.
3. Many links in the chain: foreign believers, local believers, Bible courses, scriptures, leaflets, Christian radio, TV, videos, etc.
4. Impact of friendly and loving believers – different lifestyles and characters.
5. Attraction of impromptu, informal prayers.
6. Revulsion at excesses of Islamist regimes and movements: civil war, terrorism, murder, brutality, torture, repression, etc.
7. Dreams and visions.
8. Turning point in search: accept Jesus rather than Muhammad, Bible rather than Qur'an and Hadith.

What Muslim Background Believers Need

1. Integration into a new community to replace the loss of their extended family and religious group.
2. Acceptance, nurture, friendship, help, encouragement, and emotional support.
3. Integrated discipleship programs, mentoring, and counseling.
4. Contextualized theology and ritual.
5. Marriage arrangements.

Conclusion

Based on the many similarities between Judaism and Islam, it is not difficult to sense that in God's plan the growing numbers of Messianic Jews will positively impact Muslim evangelism. It is to be hoped that in spite of the hatred of Jews being promoted by radical Islam, many Jewish believers in Yeshua will find ways to present the Messiah to Muslims around the world in a culturally sensitive and loving way.

Today we are witnessing a sea change in Muslim evangelism as many

⁷ Ziya Meral, "Conversion and Apostasy: A Sociological Perspective," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 42 (October 2006), p. 508-513.



thousands are turning to Christ in various parts of the Muslim world. This is primarily a sovereign move of God and his Spirit, but is also a result of the revulsion felt by many at the brutality, hypocrisy, and corruption of the Islamist regimes and Islamist terrorism. We could say that Muslim background believers (MBBs) today are where Messianic Jews were in the 1960s and 70s, facing unprecedented, accelerated growth. In this situation Messianic Jews can offer much counseling, advice, and comfort to new MBBs suffering from extreme forms of rejection from their families, friends, societies, religious establishments, and governments. There are many similarities between the discourse on contextualization in Muslim evangelism and that in Jewish evangelism. The problem of contextualization within Muslim culture is a contentious question, as it is for Jewish evangelism.

Muslim background believers must be centered on Jesus as Lord and Savior, must be Bible centered and cross centered, if they are to remain part of the universal body of Christ. The same holds true for Jewish believers in the Messiah. There is a danger that Jewishness or “Muslimness” might become alternate centers that gradually replace these biblical foci.

It would be good to see meetings organized for Messianic Jewish and MBB leaders where they could get to know each other as brothers in Christ. Messianic believers could share their own struggles and development, their own efforts at retaining a Jewish identity and remaining part of their national and religious culture. There is much that MBBs could learn from the Messianic Jewish process of congregation founding, institution building, and organizational efforts, as well as contextualized evangelistic outreach.

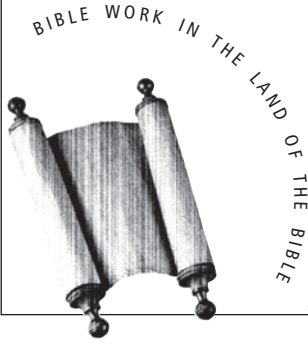
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Reading List

- Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, *Judaism and Islam* (London and New York: Thomas Yoseloff [for the World Jewish Congress], 1961). Rosenthal looks at elements in Islam that have equivalents in Judaism, and at how Jewish society was molded by its long contact with Islam.
- Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F. M. Young (Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1896). Geiger finds Jewish sources for the Qur'an, especially in Jewish *Agadot*, including *midrashim*. He notes stylistic similarities between *midrashim* and Qur'an.
- Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions Through Law: Judaism and Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). The authors note the common Jewish and Islamic view of law as defining theology, morality, and the social order. Religious law encompasses all of life.
- David Zeidan, *The Fifth Pillar* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2000). The true story of a religious Muslim who found Christ. Relates the difficulties he faced in understanding the Bible and the problems he experienced after coming to faith.
- Joshua Massey, "Islam, once a Hopeless Frontier, Now?, Part II: Living like Jesus, a Torah-Observant Jew: Delighting in God's Law for Incarnational Witness to Muslims," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21 (April 2004), 54–71. Massey explores the possibilities for evangelism inherent in Muslim respect for the Mosaic law, and what aspects of biblical law can be contextualized among MBBs.





First “Organized” Bible-work in 19th Century Jerusalem

Part VI: Wolff, Fisk and King in Jerusalem (1823)

by Kai Kjær-Hansen

In the spring of 1822 Joseph Wolff, the first Bible-man of Jewish extraction, had spent approximately three months in Jerusalem. Here he had many debates with Jews about Jesus and Christianity, and he had also distributed Scriptures, though a large part of the distributed Hebrew Bibles and New Testaments had been burnt. The most surprising thing was, however, that at the end of his visit he agreed with leading Jews that he would no longer distribute the New Testament.¹

At the end of April 1823, Wolff was back in Jerusalem together with the American missionaries Pliny Fisk and Jonas King.

This article will show, among other things, how Wolff and the Americans divided the work among themselves; it will also assess their “success” in terms of distribution of Scriptures. Of particular interest is the question of how Wolff, in 1823, acted on his 1822 agreement with the Jews of Jerusalem.

From Malta with a Large Supply of Scriptures

Joseph Wolff concluded his first visit to Jerusalem as a Bible-man at the end of May 1822. He returned to Malta on November 28 via Aleppo, Beirut, Antioch, Cyprus, and Alexandria.² Here he met the American missionaries Pliny Fisk³ Jonas King.⁴

Wolff had really intended to proceed from Malta to England; but a let-

1 See *Mishkan*, no. 49 (2006), 42–58.

2 Cf. *Missionary Journal and Memoir of the Rev. Joseph Wolf* [sic]. *Missionary to the Jews. Written by Himself*. Revised and Edited by John Bayford, Esq. F. S. A. (London: James Duncan, 1824), 316–360.

3 Pliny Fisk, born June 24, 1792. Cf. Alvand Bond, *Memoir of the Rev. Pliny Fisk, A.M. – Late Missionary to Palestine, From the American Board of Missions* (Edinburgh: Waugh & Innes, 1829), 1. Fisk came to the Levant in January 1820 together with his missionary colleague Levi Parsons; the latter visited Jerusalem in the spring of 1821; see *Mishkan*, no. 48 (2006), 77–82. Both were on their way to Jerusalem in the beginning of 1822, but Parsons died in Alexandria on February 10, 1822, whereupon Fisk returned to Malta. About Parsons’ death, and Fisk’s in 1825 in Beirut, see *Mishkan*, no. 52 (2007), 11–23.

4 Jonas King, born 1792, studied in Paris, but at Fisk’s request, and after Parsons’ death, he had agreed to be employed as a missionary to the Levant for a three-year period; cf. *Missionary Herald* (1822), 353–354; (1827), 344–345.

ter from one of his patrons in England, Henry Drummond, and the fact that the two Americans were about to leave for Jerusalem, made him change his plans.⁵

After Wolff ended his quarantine in Malta, the three Bible-men left the island on January 3, and arrived at Alexandria on January 10, 1823. Their plans were to be in Jerusalem for Easter of 1823. After three months of missionary work in Egypt, they set out on their journey through the desert to Palestine on April 7.⁶

Large Supplies of Scriptures at the Departure from Malta

The trio left Malta with a large supply of Scriptures. The question to be answered here is to what extent they were able to deliver them when they came to Jerusalem.

Fisk writes, in connection with their departure from Malta, "We carry with us about 2,000 copies of the Bible, or parts of it, and 4,000 tracts. I have, also, at Cairo 3,000 tracts, and three boxes of Bibles, which I left there last spring."⁷

Cleardo Naudi gives, on behalf of the Malta Bible Society, exact information about the number of *Hebrew* Scriptures which he had given the three missionaries from the London Jews Society's (LJS) depot, namely "five boxes, made in a size to be carried by the mules as usual in Palestine. These boxes contain 312 Hebrew Testaments, 29 books of the Prophets, 10 German Hebrew New Testaments, 20 of the Gospel, 800 Tracts, and 2000 Cards."⁸ It should be noted that the supply did not comprise Bibles in the sense of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanach*).

In about three months' work in Egypt, the inventory says, "they distributed, or gave away for distribution, 3,700 tracts. They also gave away 256 copies of the Bible or parts of it, and sold 644 (in all 900) for 2378 piastres or 183 dollars."⁹

On their departure from Cairo for Palestine, Fisk and King write on April 7, 1823:

"We had engaged 13 [camels], and were to pay six dollars and a half for each, for the journey from Cairo to Jaffa. Four were for ourselves and servant, one for our guide Mustapha, one for water, one for provisions, four for our trunks of books and clothes, and two for the books of the Bible Society and the Jews' Society. We had purchased four goat skins and four leather bottles, in which to carry our water."¹⁰

5 *Jewish Expositor* (1823), 158.

6 *Missionary Herald* (1823), 343–344, 378.

7 *I*, 212.

8 *Jewish Expositor* (1823), 158.

9 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 34.

10 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 34.



Camels and Scriptures – again! Thankfully the words are so clear that it is impossible to create a myth on their basis – that they came to Palestine with 13 camels “loaded with Bibles,” like the myth about Wolff, who supposedly came to Palestine in 1821 with “20 camels loaded with Bibles.”¹¹ While it is not possible to state the exact number of Hebrew Scriptures brought along, it will now be shown that Fisk and King came to Jerusalem with a limited number of non-Hebrew Scriptures for distribution. Fewer than 150! Add to that, however, an extra 50 copies transported through the desert on the camels, and sold in Gaza and on the journey up to Jerusalem.¹²

The Trio’s Arrival in Jerusalem – and Their Cooperation

The three missionaries arrived in Jerusalem on April 25, just one week before the Passover as kept by the oriental Christians.¹³ The Americans left on June 27, Wolff a little later, namely on July 17, 1823.

On their arrival they went their separate ways. Wolff chose living quarters in the Jewish quarter – with the difficulties and advantages connected with that (see below). The Americans rented two separate rooms in the Greek Convent of St. Michael the Archangel or Mar Michael.¹⁴

But even though Wolff and the Americans were staying in different lodgings, they were in close contact with each other through this whole period. They saw themselves as one team with different tasks. In Wolff’s words: “They [Fisk and King] went to the uncircumcision, and I to the circumcision.”¹⁵ This does not mean that Wolff could not help the Americans with their distribution of Scriptures; nor does it mean that the Americans had no contact with Jews.

Fisk’s and King’s Distribution of Scriptures in Jerusalem

It is very surprising to see how little was published in the *Missionary Herald* about the primary reason that Fisk and King were in Jerusalem, namely to distribute Bibles.¹⁶ But from the scattered bits of information it is, nevertheless, possible to present a clear picture of this and of the number of Scriptures brought along for distribution.

On April 28, three days after their arrival, Fisk writes in his first letter from Jerusalem, “The first evening my spirits were depressed and desponding. But I now feel much encouraged. We have already sold about 70 Testaments and Psalters, and have distributed more than 300 Tracts,

11 About this persistent myth, see *Mishkan* 49 (2006), 43–45.

12 Cf. *Missionary Herald* (1824), 38.

13 *Missionary Herald* (1823), 378.

14 In 1821 Levi Parsons stayed here, and Mar Michael was to become *the* place to stay not only for Bible-men; it was also the place where the first Bible Society Room was set up (see next article in this series).

15 *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 64.

16 The published material consists mainly of lengthy descriptions of Jerusalem’s demography and the Christian sanctuaries, which the missionaries visited, and of their trips to places in the vicinity, e.g. Bethlehem, the Dead Sea, etc.

and Mr. Wolff is engaged day and night in preaching to the Jews and disputing with their Rabbies [*sic*]."¹⁷

Thanks to Cleardo Naudi in Malta, we are in possession of a description of the missionaries' activities on April 29. He sent extracts of the Americans' journal to LJS in London, which subsequently published them in the *Jewish Expositor*.

April 29, 1823. Early in the morning an Armenian priest called and bought a Testament in the Turkish language, printed with Armenian letters; we gave him a second as a present. After this we¹⁸ took five such Testaments, and went to the Armenian convent, and sold them all at the door. Others were wanted. One man paid in advance, to be sure of getting one. We returned to our rooms and took ten more, but before we arrived at the convent, we sold them all to Armenians in the street. We had only five more such Testaments. We came again to our lodgings, and took these five, and sold them immediately at the convent door. More were wanted. One man followed us half way to our lodging, and begged us, for the love of God, to let him have one. We gave to a Greek from Angora [= Ankara], seventy-five tracts for distribution there. A Syrian pilgrim called and purchased five Syriac Psalters. The Roman Catholics continued to throw obstacles in the way, but these, through constant and repeated exertion, and I trust, through fervent prayers that the holy writ may find its way, and be circulate among all nations, we observe abating from day to day.¹⁹

On May 10, King writes: "Since our arrival, we have sold about seventy, and given away about forty, New Testaments, besides between five and six hundred tracts. The greater part of these were distributed within four or five days after our arrival." King's inventory has fewer details than the one in the missionaries' journal of April 29. But this is not important for the objective we are pursuing. Within two weeks after their arrival, they were running out of Scriptures, which emerges from the continuation of King's letter: "We have sometimes had thirty call upon us in a day, to purchase the Holy Scriptures, with which we were unable to supply them, on account of our boxes of Bibles, which were sent from Alexandria to Bairoat [*sic*] three months ago, not having arrived."²⁰

These boxes do not seem to have reached Jerusalem *while* Fisk and King were in town, which can be concluded from the precise inventory they drew up on June 26, the day before they left Jerusalem: "During two months that we have been here, we have sold eighty-four copies of

17 Bond, 209.

18 Who does this "we" include? Under April 30, but about the same incident, Wolff writes: "Mr. Fisk and myself went to the Armenian convent, and sold five Armenian Testaments in a few minutes; and Mr. Fisk afterwards sold fifteen more." *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 106.

19 *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 73.

20 *Missionary Herald* (1823), 378.



the Scriptures and given away fifty-two, and 770 tracts. Brother Wolff remains to labor a little longer among the Jews, and after that he proposes to rejoin us on mount Lebanon."²¹

In other words, during the last six weeks, approximately, of an eight-week stay in Jerusalem, King and Fisk only managed to distribute 25 copies of the Scriptures – to Christians and pilgrims in Jerusalem. When they left Jerusalem, they had used up their supply.²²

In Levi Parsons' own view in 1821, his "success" was not directly proportional to the number of distributed Scriptures. Reading the Scripture and talking with Christian pilgrims were in themselves worthwhile activities.²³ The same can be said about Fisk and King in 1823. The editor of the *Missionary Herald* commented on this when mentioning the missionaries' time in Jerusalem:

During the two or three succeeding weeks, they were diligently engaged in such missionary labors as their circumstances would permit. With the Jews, Turks, and Catholic and Greek Christians, they had frequent opportunities of free conversations, and of reading and expounding the Scriptures.²⁴

For the editor of the *Missionary Herald*, it was important to emphasize that Fisk and King had *also* had contact with Jews in Jerusalem. And certainly, this cannot be questioned. But Fisk and King were here very much dependent on Wolff. They needed him as their interpreter, as they had no common language with the Jews of Jerusalem. It seems that they expressed their appreciation of Wolff in the original journals, but the American editor of the published journals has, to a large extent, removed this information.²⁵

The Americans left Jerusalem empty-handed, i.e. without Scriptures. What became of Wolff – or "Rabbi Joseph" which, according to him, was what the Jews of Jerusalem called him?²⁶

Wolff's Arrival in Jerusalem in 1823

The way Wolff himself saw it, his first visit to Jerusalem in 1822 had been a great success. In the last article in this series we challenged this view. From Alexandria, on his way to Malta, he wrote in the autumn of 1822 about his first visit: "No personal insult took place against me in Jerusalem; except

21 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 100.

22 During their journey back to Beirut, they met the newly arrived LJS missionary William Bucknor Lewis in Sidon on July 5; from him they received a new supply of Scriptures. See next article in this series.

23 Cf. *Mishkan* 48 (2006), 81–82.

24 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 70.

25 This can be deduced from Wolff's journals and scattered fragments of the Americans' journals which were not published in the *Missionary Herald*, but elsewhere. See below in connection with the mentioned cases.

26 *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 104, 107.

that the Catholics publicly preached against me ..." And he continues: "Jews wrote to me after my departure, that I should return to Jerusalem. Greeks and Armenians, and even many Catholics, walked upon Sion, and in the valley of Jehoshaphat, and read the Gospel, and exclaimed; 'Truth! wonderful!' But you will have received my Journals by this time."²⁷

This is Wolff in a nutshell! His short-term memory leaves a good deal to be desired. Or perhaps more accurately, he writes in "the present." He "forgets" his troubles in 1822 and is focused on his hope and vision that Jews – now in 1823 – may receive Jesus as Messiah. Forgotten is the fact that Jews in Jerusalem did not only burn the Hebrew New Testament, but also the Hebrew Bibles which he distributed in 1822. Kept in his memory are the many conversations he had – also with leading Jews. He did not doubt that the contacts established in 1822 would be intact in 1823. In this he was not disappointed. One of the first things he wrote in his journal on his arrival in Jerusalem in 1823 is:

On the first moment of our arrival I called on Rabbi Mendel, and then upon Rabbi Solomon Sapira. They welcome me very cordially; and I was immediately surrounded by a great many Jews, who shook hands with me. Abraham Shlifro, who last year professed his conviction in Christ, in the evening joined me in prayer. Rabbi Mendel desired one of the Jews to give me a room, until he could procure me a better one, after the sabbath day was over ... [99]

Lodgings Among the Jews

The three Bible-men arrived in Jerusalem on April 25 "about four o'clock."²⁸ As to lodgings they needed to act quickly, as the Jewish Sabbath would begin a few hours later. As already hinted, this was when the chief rabbi of the Polish Jews residing in Jerusalem, Mendel Ben Baruch (Menahem Mendel), came to Wolff's help. The fact that Wolff was living among Jews upset the leaders of the Spanish community, among them Rabbi Zusi (Shlomo Moishe Suzin), the newly appointed chief rabbi of the Sephardic Jews, who had played an active role in 1822 in connection with the burning of Hebrew Scriptures. On April 29, Wolff was informed that they planned to send a complaint to the Pasha of Damascus about this matter. To Wolff's question, "Why will you not permit me to live in the Jewish quarter?" three arguments were given: 1) It is against the Jews' "constitution and custom" that an unmarried man should live among married people; 2) The Muslim authorities may be led to believe that the Jews of Jerusalem plan to become independent of them with the Europeans' help; and 3) This arrangement will make it easier for Wolff to

²⁷ Wolf, 331–332. Wolff's journals were published in the *Jewish Expositor* in 1824; the last part was published first. In order to avoid a large number of notes, I have inserted page references to the *Jewish Expositor* 1824 in square brackets in the text.

²⁸ *Missionary Herald* (1824), 39.



draw Jews to Christianity. “We cannot turn you out by force, but we shall send immediately to the Pasha of Damascus” [101–102].

Probably the complaint was never sent. Rabbi Mendel intervened and found a compromise: “He procured me a house in the Jewish quarter, which belongs to a Turk [Muslim]; I hired it for a whole year. This house stands upon Mount Zion” [102].

In characteristic Wolff language it is said under May 12:

My house where I lodge, and which stands on mount Zion, is close to a house of a Spanish Jew, named Isaac, so that we can converse with each other from the terrace. I tell him every evening; – Isaac, I love Jesus my Lord. How much I feel his love in me! He is the very Lion of the tribe of Judah! [145]

Wolff’s Contact with Jews

Apart from a number of unnamed Jews, Wolff’s published journal mentions approximately twenty-five Jews with whom he conversed in 1823. Of those mentioned by name, approximately ten are individuals encountered in 1822. One of the most frequently mentioned names is Rabbi Mendel. Of the first nine days, Wolff had contact with Rabbi Mendel on at least seven! On April 28, Wolff introduced Fisk and King to Mendel and acted as their interpreter.²⁹ Wolff continued to be in contact with Rabbi Solomon Sapira in 1823, and in 1823 Rabbi Joseph Marcowitz appears for the first time. And then there is, of course, Abraham Ben David Shlifro, who in 1822 was already called “the convert” (see below).

But even if contact was maintained with a number of Jews – in addition to some new contacts – one should not be deceived. The kindness and hospitality Wolff received from Rabbi Mendel and others should not be construed to mean that the latter was “open” to the gospel. Just as Wolff wished to convert Jews to faith in Jesus, there were Jews in Jerusalem who still hoped to win Wolff back to Judaism. Wolff had no doubt as to what Mendel thought of him. Already on Wolff’s first evening in Jerusalem, a Jew accused him of having embraced Christianity for the sake of personal interests. Mendel intervened with the words: “We must be just, and confess, that Mr. Wolf [*sic*] did not profess his faith in Jesus of Nazareth, on account of money. Mr. Wolf is sincere; he has been led astray in his early years by reading the New Testament, and for this reason I am very much grieved, to see him so firm” [99].

Rabbi Solomon Sapira went even further in his efforts to win Wolff back to Judaism. Under May 7, Wolff writes:

Rabbi Solomon Sapira called on me and said. “I beg one thing of you: believe in the Talmud; for even if you believe in Christ, and trans-

29 Cf. Wolff’s description [100]. This is not mentioned in the *Missionary Herald*. In the Americans’ original journal, it is said: “Went with Mr. Wolf [*sic*] to call on Rabbi Mendel” [71].

gress the whole law of Moses, still if you believe in the Gemarah, you will finally be saved." [142]

Solomon Sapira's "offer" made no impression on Wolff. But then Wolff's "offer" of salvation in Jesus did not make any great impression on the Jews of Jerusalem, either.

Some of the leading personalities from the Spanish/Sephardic community pursued a different tactic and attempted to keep Wolff at a distance through bans. They were, for example, very annoyed that Wolff was able to study Jewish writings, borrowed from Jewish people, in his efforts to win Jews for his cause. Under May 27, Wolff writes:

Ye cannot imagine the stir which was produced among the Spanish Jews, as soon as they observed that I was reading their books, and trying to shew that they are in error out of their own books. Several excommunications were proclaimed in the synagogue against those who lend me their books; but none of them regarded the excommunication. Rabbi Isaac Abulafia, the most respectable Jew among the Spanish Jews in Palestine, even made me a present of some treatises on the Talmud. Rabem Zuzi [Suzin], the high-priest of The Spanish Jews, observed, that it never was seen at Jerusalem, that a Jew should come there for the purpose of persuading them that Jesus is the Messiah." [268]

It appears from Wolff's journals that a number of Spanish Jews visited him and that he also read the New Testament with them.

Wolff's strategy

With Mendel's help Wolff succeeded in finding a place to stay *among* the Jews of Jerusalem. Wolff is able to report about almost daily conversations and debates with Jews who came to see him. In several cases he studied the New Testament with them. Once he went to see some Sephardic Jews in a Turkish coffee house [267], but as a rule they came to him and his house.

He was, however, happy to accept invitations to eat in their homes. This implies that he had to make up his mind about how to act in a Talmudic-Jewish table fellowship.

Food and Table Fellowship

Two days after his arrival Wolff wrote: "I have adopted the Jewish fashion of eating, to satisfy the Jews more fully, that neither meat nor drink, has induced me to embrace Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour" [100]. While enjoying table fellowship with leading Jews – and although he was their guest – Wolff set boundaries on which Jewish rituals he was prepared to follow. The following are two examples.

On May 3, in Mendel's house, Mendel asked him to wash his "hands



before dinner, and to say the Talmudical prayer." Wolff refused both, adding, "but I said most readily some other prayers, which they are accustomed to say." This made Mrs. Mendel angry, but the meal could now begin. Wolff continues: "The conversation was about Jesus Christ during the whole dinner" [106].

On May 9, the mother of Rabbi Isaac Ben Shloma offered "to give me board at a very cheap rate, on condition that I would accommodate myself to the Jews, in asking the blessing." What is he to do? "As most of their prayers are quite innocent, I really would do it, if they would dispense with my washing the hands before eating, which is a Talmudical ceremony; for great advantage would arise from sitting at table with Jews, and I might always converse with six or seven rabbies, who dine there." But he stuck to his principles, as explained in a letter to Isaac Ben Shloma:

My dear Rabbi Isaac,
I have considered the matter, and I believe that my conscience will not permit me to wash the hands before eating, for I find in this law something against the Gospel, and I shall always be ready to lay down my life for the Gospel, which is the power of God. I beg you therefore to send the victual to my room. Neither can I ask the blessing after the dinner, which the Jewish liturgy prescribes.

Your true friend, JOSEPH WOLFF.

May 9, 1823 [142]

Wolff, the Talmud, and Mission

Wolff had no high opinion of the Talmud. At most, he conceded that the "Tanaim, *i.e.* the compilers of the Talmud, sometimes speak the truth involuntarily, and through ignorance" [142]. On May 9, he and Rabbi Mendel were engaged in a discussion about the Talmud. Wolff expressed his view in the following words: "The Gemarah cannot be believed by a conscientious man, for it is in open contradiction to the law of Moses and the prophets; the Old Testament, for instance, says that David sinned; and the Talmud says 'If any one body should say that David had sinned, he would be in a great mistake.'"

Rabbi Mendel defended the Talmud, and David, whereupon Wolff ended with this volley: "You have confirmed me by your answer, that the whole Talmud is nothing but nonsense. In spite of your Talmud Jesus Christ is the Son of God"³⁰ [144].

Still, Wolff used the Talmud quite a lot in his efforts to convince Jews that Jesus is the Messiah.

30 I will refrain from comment on and criticism of Wolff's language here and elsewhere. An examination of the language of Wolff and other contemporary missionaries would doubtless call forth contradiction – also from people involved in Jewish evangelism today.

Talmud for the Sake of the Jews

Wolff's strategy for how the Talmud can be used is expressed in these lines:

Although the arguments out of the Talmud have no weight with me, they have weight with the Jews, and for this reason I shall make use of the Talmud for some months, until I have shewn them the folly of believing in it, and shall have given my friends in England a little picture of the spirit which prevails among the Jews at Jerusalem, to shew future missionaries how one may get access to the Jews at Jerusalem, which is really not so easy. It gives, at the same time, a good insight into the root of their errors. I hope, after some time to adopt the method of speaking simply with them about the love of Christ, and to translate Baxter's *Saints' Rest* for the Jews at Jerusalem, into the Hebrew and Jewish-German. [268]

Such words caused William Jowett to note, with satisfaction, that Wolff "latterly has grown ... disinclined to argue with them from the Talmud."³¹ This refers to Wolff's visit in 1823, but it does not reflect how Wolff then worked in Jerusalem. Throughout this period he argued from the Talmud in his debates with the Jews.

One rabbi even helped him to find good arguments.

Wolff Receives Help from Rabbi Joseph Marcowitz

Joseph Marcowitz, an 80-year-old Polish rabbi, was not among the Jews Wolff met in 1822. On May 1, 1823, Marcowitz and the 19-year-old Rabbi Isaac Ben Shloma "called on us," as it is said in the *Missionary Herald*, which gives a summary of their conversation on the coming of the Messiah and the understanding of "Shiloh" in Gen 49:10.³²

First: Who were "us"? For readers of the *Missionary Herald*, the obvious conclusion was "our" American missionaries! But a comment from Fisk, recorded in a different context, says that "Mr. Wolf was present, and acted as interpreter."³³

Next: In the *Jewish Expositor*, it was said that Marcowitz "was many years ago convinced of the truth of Christianity, but never making any public profession of it" [102].

However that may be (see below), Marcowitz made his rabbinical expertise available for Wolff and his cause and even challenged Wolff with the following words: "You ought to argue with Jews from the Talmud, and there are many things in the Talmud which favour the system laid down in the New Testament." (One example: When the Messiah comes,

31 William Jowett, *Christian Researches in Syria and the Holy Land* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1825), 231.

32 *Missionary Herald* (1824), 67-68. With a few editorial changes, also printed in the *Jewish Expositor* (1824), 72.

33 Isaac Bird, *Bible Work in Bible Lands* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1872), 57.



the law will be abolished and the eating of pork will be permitted.) Wolff also wanted to become acquainted with passages from the Talmud which can vindicate the truth of what the Letter to the Hebrews says about Jesus' sacrifice, etc. [102–103].

Wolff and Marcowitz spent days and nights together studying the Talmud. This caused both King and Mrs. Marcowitz to worry – although for different reasons. King feared that “it must soon injure his health materially, and if persisted in, deprive the Christian world of one of its ablest missionaries to the long-lost and despised people of the seed of Abraham.”³⁴ Mrs. Marcowitz was worried because she feared that “the whole congregation of Israel ... may talk about it” – a worry that Marcowitz did not share: “one word of mine will surely silence the whole congregation of Israel; go home, my love, and sleep very sweetly.”

After this “good night” to his wife, Marcowitz, who had a reputation for being able to cure by means of Shem HaMeforash, acquainted Wolff with the mystery of the ineffable name [104–105]. Marcowitz, on a later occasion, told Fisk “that faith is not a matter of the head, but of the heart” [222].

According to Wolff, Marcowitz had watched “my conduct, and observed that it is the conduct of a true Jew, unblameable and pure.” Wolff was aware that this smacked of self-praise, and added: “But with all this I feel that I am a sinner, and can only be saved by Christ” [145].

Whether Wolff had characterized Marcowitz to LJS as “a secret believer in Christianity” cannot be decided. This is how he is described at the LJS Annual Meeting in London in 1824.³⁵ But the following episode calls such an opinion into question.

Under May 16, Wolff writes:

After these rabbinical discussions, I asked the old Rabbi Marcowitz whether he had often thought of dying? Rabbi Joseph Marcowitz shrunk back when I mentioned death; but I continued to say to him, “You must die,” and if the door-post of your soul is not sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ, you will not enter the heavenly Canaan, whether you be buried at Jerusalem or at Safet. I preach to you forgiveness of sins by Jesus Christ; by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses. [223]

It is difficult to imagine that Wolff would be talking in this way to a “convert” – or to a “secret believer in Christianity.”

But Marcowitz was not the only one to help Wolff gather arguments from the Talmud for his cause. Others lent him books (see above).

And now: How, and in what numbers, did Wolff lend or distribute Hebrew New Testaments in 1823?

³⁴ Cf. LJS *Sixteenth Report of the London Society*, (1824), 33.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Hebrew New Testaments in Jerusalem, 1823

Quite a few of the Hebrew Scriptures that Wolff had distributed in 1822 had gone up in flames. On paper he had given his word of honor “not to make presents of them [the New Testament] or of the tracts, among the Jews in Jerusalem, any more, when I perceived that they were determined to burn every copy.” Yet with the following addition: “But this does not prevent me lending copies of the New Testament to those who, I am sure, will not burn them.”³⁶

In 1823, were any of the New Testaments which Wolff had distributed in 1822 left?

At least three prominent Jews had kept the New Testaments they received in 1822.

Rabbi Salomon Sapira. On August 1, 1822, after his first visit, Wolff writes from Aleppo: “The great Solomon Sapira, who is considered as the greatest Hebrew critical scholar at Jerusalem, has written a criticism upon the Hebrew New Testament and the Hebrew Bible I gave to him.” Wolff was told about this in a letter he received in Jaffa; Sapira wanted Wolff to return to Jerusalem “for he does not dare to trust the letter to any one else,” says Wolff.³⁷ However, Wolff did not then return to Jerusalem.

In 1823, Wolff said about Rabbi Solomon Sapira that “he had read the New Testament I gave him, but found no wisdom in it.” But it is typical of Wolff that he did not give up, which becomes clear from the following words: “We therefore read together again 1 Cor. i.ii” [142].

Rabbi Menahem Mendel. Mendel had also looked at the Testament he received from Wolff in 1822. Under May 3, 1823, Wolff writes: “Rabbi Mendel to-day shewed me the words of Jesus Christ, ‘I came not to abolish the law;’ cited in the Talmud, Treatise Sabbath, chapter xvi. page 116” [107].

Isaac Abulafia. After the 1822 agreement, the rich Jew Isaac Abulafia had asked Wolff to *lend* him a New Testament and promised that he would not burn it. In 1823 he told Wolff that he had read seven of the twelve folios of Talmud. “Men must read Talmud! Talmud! Talmud! ... I find delight, in my old age, in reading the Talmud. But I have read, however, thrice, the New Testament you gave me” [223].

The number of other Hebrew Testaments that were not burnt in 1822 cannot be determined. Of course Abraham Ben David Shlifro kept his; see below.

Especially interesting is the position Wolff, in 1823, took on his 1822 agreement.

36 See *Mishkan* 49 (2006), 57.

37 Wolf, 318.



Wolff's Distribution of Hebrew New Testaments

A number of Jews actually had Hebrew New Testaments and studied them in Wolff's house. But few brought them home. From the following it appears that there had not been an active "distribution."

April 29: "Rabbi J--- M--- [Joseph Marcowitz], the next morning, took the New Testament home with him to mark those passages, which correspond with parts of the Talmud" [106].

May 3: "When I went to my room, two very fine young Jews, of the Spanish community, called. I shewed them Isaiah liii. They said, that they did not understand it, and they desired me to expound the chapter to them. I expounded the chapter for more than an hour; they promised to read it over, and to tell me the next day the result of their enquiry. They desired me to give them a New Testament, saying: 'We swear by our head, to read it, but we beg you not to tell our rabbies of it.' I gave the Testament to both" [107].

May 9: "Papás Seraphim, a monk of mount Sinai, whom I saw when I was there, called me. I gave him a Hebrew New Testament for the library of the convent upon mount Sinai" [143].

May 12: "Three Jews called on me; I read to them Acts vii. and ix; they listened with great attention. I besought them farther, not to turn away from the tender mercies of Christ, which are set forth in the gospel, for he is able and gracious to perform his promises. They earnestly desired the New Testament, which I gave to them" [145].

May 30: "A Jew of the Spanish community called on me ... He immediately brought forth the New Testament which he has received from me ..."³⁸ [291].

July 2: "I lent two Hebrew New Testaments to two Spanish Jews, Rabbies, at their own request, and several Hebrew tracts, in order that they might read them, and write down on paper their objections" [65].

July 4: "A Jew from Damascus called on me, and requested a Hebrew New Testament, which I gave to him, with some tracts" [66].

Even on the assumption that something has been missed and that not everything was included in the published journals, the picture seems clear. Wolff was not actively engaged in distributing Scriptures in the streets of Jerusalem. He could not offer people Hebrew Bibles (*Tanach*). He lent and gave Hebrew New Testaments to the very few people who came to him and expressed an honest desire to receive a copy. By doing this he consid-

38 A droll story is connected with this. The Jew in question wanted to borrow 60 piastres from Wolff, and with the newly received New Testament in his hand he referred to "Matthew v. 42: 'From him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away.'" Wolff then writes: "I told him that this verse does not shew that we are to do things which it is not in our power to do. Go on, however, I said, in reading the New Testament, and if you find any inconsistency between my conduct and the profession I make, tell me of it; I shall be most ready to hear your admonition, but I would, however, advise you, not to read the New Testament for the purpose of imposing me about money, but rather that you may be taught that you are a sinner, and need to be saved by the blood of Jesus Christ" [291-292].

ered the agreement from 1822 respected. There are no hints in the material of books being burnt. The distribution was done rather secretly. In Jerusalem of 1823, the Bible-man Wolff behaved rather more cautiously than when he worked outside Jerusalem.

Wolff and Abraham Ben David Shlifro

In 1822, Wolff left a 17-year-old “convert” in Jerusalem.³⁹ On August 1, 1822, he writes from Aleppo: “I hasten to give you the following accounts: – Rabbi Abraham Ben David Shleifer has professed his faith in Christ, at Jerusalem.”⁴⁰ This manner of writing is typical of Wolff. It is up to the reader to guess whether Abraham Ben David had professed his faith *openly* to Jews or “only” to Wolff. The latter seems to be the case.

On the very evening of Wolff’s arrival, Abraham “joined me in prayer” [99].

On the first Sunday, April 27, Wolff and Abraham went together to the Americans’ lodgings. Wolff writes: “... we read the Scriptures and prayed. I read and prayed in Jewish German, in order that Abraham might understand it. Abraham told me afterwards, that he was very much edified by our prayer”⁴¹ [100].

On April 29, Abraham said that the Spanish Jews would send a complaint to the Pascha; see above [101].

Under May 10 it says: “Abraham’s wife has desired regular instruction from me in Christianity. In the evening I prayed with Abraham Shlifro” [144].

On May 14, Abraham and Isaac (presumably Ben Shloma) showed Wolff around Jerusalem “to take a view of the Jewish antiquities” [220–222].

On June 27, Abraham and Isaac accompanied the Americans, King and Fisk, when they left Jerusalem [65].

Under April 27, the Americans wrote that Abraham “seems to have been converted to the truth of Christianity by Mr. Wolf’s labours last year” [71]. That this did not imply a *public* profession seems to emerge from the following words, which are the editor’s summary:

On the 8th day of June Mr. Fisk had a conversation with Abraham Shlifro, in which Shlifro assented to all leading truths of Christianity, and said that he did not tell his countrymen his belief, but should do it if they asked him. In reply to the inquiry what he supposed the Jews would do to him if he should do this, he said, “Reproach and persecution I think I could bear; but I fear they would secretly take my life.”⁴²

39 Wolf, 262.

40 Ibid., 318. In the sources his last name is also rendered Shliffro and Stifro.

41 This meeting is reported in the *Missionary Herald* (1824), 65, but the report does not say that Wolff was the active party during the devotion.

42 Ibid., 99.



So what became of Abraham Ben David? It is an open question. At a meeting in Norwich in 1827, Wolff was asked about the number of conversions during his stay in Jerusalem in 1823. To this he answered: "I know of no conversion except of Abraham. He continues to proclaim the gospel, and does not leave Jerusalem because of his wife and children."⁴³ Until other sources emerge, it is legitimate to retain a certain skepticism about the information that Abraham Ben David "continues to proclaim the gospel" in Jerusalem.

Wolff's Last Three Weeks in Jerusalem

Under June 27, the day Fisk and King left Jerusalem, Wolff writes: "I judged it best to remain myself at Jerusalem, as I had still something to do here" [65]. He continued conversing with Mendel and other rabbis, and on July 3 he paid a sick call to Mendel, where they discussed whether or not there is a connection between sickness and demons. Wolff himself fell ill on July 5, "so that I was obliged to keep the bed; a great weakness of the nerves overpowered me, so that I was frequently unable to speak from weakness" [66]. From the learned Greek monk Papas Ysa (Isa) he received an Arabic translation of one of LJS's tracts (no. 29)⁴⁴ [67]. Some weeks before he had received a translation of tract no. 8, Dibrei Nizahon; in Papas Ysa's words: "In order that every Christian in this country may become a Missionary to the Jews, and be able to converse with them about the great topics of Christianity" [64–65].

Still weakened by sickness, Wolff left Jerusalem on July 17, together with a distinguished English traveler. They arrived at Sidon on July 23, 1823, via Nablus and Nazareth [69].

Concluding Remarks

Wolff, Fisk, and King agreed that Jerusalem needed Scriptures. As to the *selling* of Scriptures, the Americans set certain bounds. On Sundays one could not sell Scriptures, as is said in the Americans' journal under April 27: "A number of persons came in the morning, to purchase the Scriptures; – but were refused, because it was the Lord's day."⁴⁵

While Fisk and King soon distributed their Scriptures to Christians, very few Hebrew New Testaments were distributed by Wolff to Jews. Wolff read the New Testament with quite a few Jews, and he gathered ammunition from the Talmud in an attempt to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah – but he failed. Similarly, Rabbi Menahem Mendel and others failed to bring Wolff back to Judaism.

⁴³ *Sketch of the Life and Journal of the Rev. J. Wolff. Missionary to Palestine and Persia* (Norwich: Jarrold and Son, 1827), 111.

⁴⁴ Ysa had acted as a teacher of Arabic for Fisk. *Missionary Herald* (1824), 71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

In a letter from June 21, Wolff interpreted the many conversations he had in the following way:

There is now at Jerusalem, by God's grace, a feeling and a spirit of enquiry excited among the Jews, even according to the confession of the Rabbies, which never existed among them before. But there is still much to be done ... [64]

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At the LJS Anniversary Meeting on May 7, 1824, in London, Wolff's optimistic interpretation of the situation in Jerusalem was accepted. Here it was said, among other things, that Wolff furnished "New Testaments and Tracts to all who desired them."⁴⁶ This is not untrue, yet it must be stamped as mission rhetoric, for it creates the impression that Wolff distributed many copies of the New Testament, which was not the case. But it must also be added that for Wolff – as for Parsons, Fisk, and King – "success" cannot be measured in numbers of distributed Scriptures; conversations and testimonies also count.

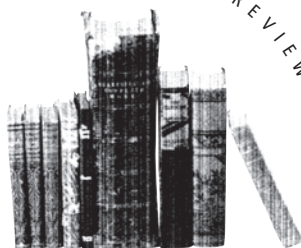
Still, it must be said that Wolff's views are subjective, and give too optimistic a picture of the Jews' "openness" to the gospel in Jerusalem in 1823. But no one can dispute the zeal Wolff displayed in his efforts for the Jews' salvation. The missiological question that can be raised is whether this zeal did not sometimes lack enlightenment.

Not until 1829 did Wolff return to Jerusalem, with his Lady Georgiana, a journey we will look at in another article. Pliny Fisk, however, was back in Jerusalem five months later, in November 1823; we will cover that in the next article in this series.



46 LJS *Sixteenth Report of the London Society* (1824), 33.

BOOK REVIEWS



Recent Books Relevant for Jewish Mission

by Rich Robinson

God's Land on Loan: Israel, Palestine, and the World

March is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. This modest volume has a double goal: "to enable readers, especially North American Christians, to become better informed about the history and significance of modern Israel"; and "a wider objective, namely to further an understanding and appreciation of God's claim on all land" (p. ix). The book was previously published in 1994 as *Israel and the Politics of the Land*, but this newer version has been updated at least in the chapter on history. It is aimed at a lay audience, and includes study questions and resources for further reading in each chapter. The main thesis is that land – all land, not just Israel – is a divine loan; Scripture is much more concerned with land *responsibilities* than land *rights*. Chapters include a survey of various "voices" in Israel, on all sides, regarding the land; a history of Israel/Palestine in which the author is clearly striving to give a balanced picture; and theological reflections.

On the history and current position of Israel and Palestine, March is remarkably balanced. On the theology of land, his thesis that responsibilities trump rights in God's concerns is well-taken and a stimulus to discussion. He takes issue with both dis-

pensionalists and supersessionists; those who come from a premillennial or dispensationalist viewpoint will find his views less than satisfying on the election of Israel and on the continuities of modern and Old Testament Israel. Nor does he handle the theology of covenants in any detail. And search results for his name on the Internet suggest that he takes very "inclusive" views of salvation. His study questions, though, encourage free thinking on the issues, even if someone should end up disagreeing with his own views.

What comes through is a concern for the viability of Israel alongside justice for Palestinians, and March's stress on land as God's loan is a welcome contrast to any who might be tempted to say that God gave the land to Israel, and the consequences to others be damned. March's judicious tone and striving for balance is something that many North American evangelicals on all sides would do well to emulate.

W. Eugene March,
*God's Land on Loan:
Israel, Palestine, and the World.*
Louisville, KY: Westminster John
Knox, 2007. 131 pp.

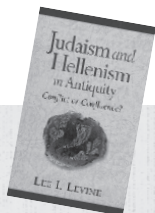


Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?

Levine is professor of Jewish History and Archaeology at Hebrew University. This ten-year-old book provides a readable and concise summary of the influence of Hellenistic culture on the Jewish people, that is, the culture of the Greek and Roman periods from Alexander the Great through the early centuries CE. (The relevance of reviewing a decade-old book will appear below.) He begins with a summary chapter chronicling the history of Jewish research in this area, noting the “maximizers” who found Hellenism in everything and the “minimizers” who found it in very little. Depending on what one means by “Hellenization,” one’s conclusions can too quickly be determined by one’s definition. Levine offers a judicious and balanced overview of Hellenistic/Greek/Roman influence in art, architecture, and – this is quite important – religious institutions and behavior.

Those who know something about this history will recognize the vast number of influences that have been traced to Hellenism, ranging from zodiac signs in synagogue architecture to the origin of rabbinic hermeneutics to the form of the Passover Seder. This book can now be the starting point for getting a grasp on the whole issue.

Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998. 227 pp.



An Appraisal of N. Wieder’s *Islamic Influences on Jewish Worship*

Of related interest is this article, reflecting on a book published in 1947 that has only been available in its original Hebrew. Goldman (of Emory University) gives a brief but positive appraisal. At one time scholarly consensus postulated Jewish (and Christian) influence on Islam; in recent times the influence has been seen to go in the other direction as well. Wieder’s discussion has to do with nine rituals surrounding prayer, such as ablutions before prayer, the direction the congregation must face, etc. While Maimonides recommended changes in liturgy in reaction against Islam, his son Abraham found value in adopting certain Islamic practices. It is too bad that Wieder has not been translated into English.

Shalom Goldman, “An Appraisal of Naphtali Wieder’s *Islamic Influences on Jewish Worship* on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Its Publication,” *Medieval Encounters* 5 (1999), 11–16.

One significance of these books and articles to the Messianic movement is that they show that there has been no one “authentic” or pure Judaism that we should be trying to integrate into Yeshua-faith. The Judaism of Jesus was full of admixtures of Greek and Roman elements, as later Judaism was of Byzantine Christian influence, and still later of Islamic. Later still we can speak of Aristotelian influence on medieval Jewish philosophy, which helped to shape Jewish attitudes toward God’s being (including, among other things, excluding the possibility of a triune God). We could continue by looking at Gnostic

and Sufi influences on mystical Judaism and the Kabbalah. Israel Yuval, an Israeli scholar, has written lately on the influences of medieval Christianity on Judaism, as well as vice-versa. Judaism has never been hermetically sealed nor monolithic. More than that, it has never existed in isolation from outside influences.

Nor, as we consider these influences, is it always the case that the preservation of the Jewish people has come about through Torah-observance. Adaptability has also been a huge factor in that preservation, and adaptability has often meant more than just applying Torah or Talmud to new situations. The modern project of the Haskalah movement was an attempt, among other things, to preserve the Jews through assimilation. Less radically, we can say that Judaism has worn any number of faces, both in matters of ritual and practice and in theology; speaking sociologically, this has helped to foster Jewish survival.

Purpose-Directed Theology

This book stems from a paper that Bock, Professor of New Testament and of Spiritual Development at Dallas Theological Seminary, gave to the Evangelical Theological Society in 2001. At that time the "open theism" controversy was coming onto the agenda, one question being whether proponents of that theology should remain in the ETS. Bock's concern in this volume, through the ETS as a case study, is to help us in the *how* of dealing with controversy, rather than the specifics of the *what*.

Key to the book is chapter three on the need for different kinds of organizations. "My thesis," writes Bock, "is that not all evangelical institutions are created for equal ends. Knowing what type of organization you belong to and in which you are operating is essential. Evangelicalism needs confessing institutions to represent its various strands and less bounded

places where those strands can meet and interact." Further, "[the latter] are locations where discussion and interaction takes place, while other institutions are contexts where decisions are made and boundaries are more carefully defined" (p. 54). In other words, what is the purpose of each sort of theological group?

Bock serves on the board of a Jewish mission, and this past year attended both LCJE International and the Borough Park Symposium in New York City. He has taught several who are now active in Jewish ministry. He has acquaintance, then, with some of the controversies within the Messianic movement. It would be helpful for him to comment himself on the relevance of his book to Messianic Jewish societies. However, we can ask whether a group such as LCJE should be considered a "bounded" or "confessional" group, or a more public-square institution allowing for free interaction among Jewish believers of various theological streams. And can we learn from our history here? In Bock's terms, how would we describe the nature of early Jewish-believing fellowship associations such as the early Hebrew Christian Alliance of America? What was their purpose? And how did they handle theological differences in the context of their purpose? Is there a point where boundary-drawing stifles theological inquiry and our witness to the world?

I don't know if Bock's experience with ETS will translate over into the controversies among Jewish believers, but it is worth it to pick up his book and see for yourself.

Darrell L. Bock, *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies*.

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002. 115 pp.

