

The Biblical Heritage Center's
DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

Following the journey of the memes of the Bible from their original cultural & historical origins to their influence in our world today.

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From The Jewish Jesus to the Roman Church

By Jim Myers

The events that took place in the first four centuries of Christian history are virtually unknown to many Christians. A great deal has been written and produced about the Jewish Jesus and the origin of his movement, as well as how Christianity emerged decades after Jesus was crucified by the Roman army. People know that Jesus was a Jew, but they don't really think about what that means. Dr. Bart Ehrman, in his book Lost Christianities, sums up the Jewishness of Jesus very well.

Jesus was Jewish, and any evaluation of his words, deeds, and fate needs to keep that constantly in mind. Of course, determining what *kind* of Jew he was is another matter. . . He was raised in a Jewish household in the Jewish hamlet of Nazareth. He was brought up in a Jewish culture, accepted Jewish ways, learned the Jewish tradition, and kept the Jewish Law. He was circumcised, he kept Shabbat and the periodic feasts, and he probably ate kosher. As an adult he began an itinerant preaching ministry in rural Galilee, gathering around himself a number of disciples, all of whom were Jewish. He taught them his understanding of the Jewish Law and of the God who called the Jews to be his people.

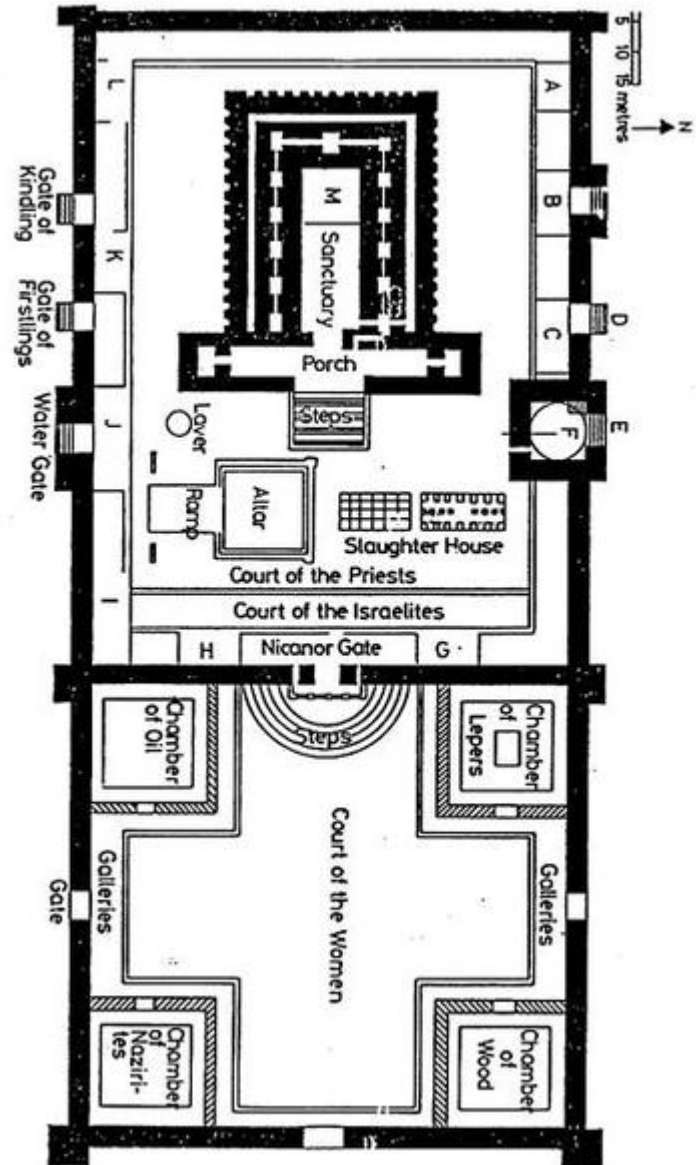
The Jewish Jesus didn't go to the Gentiles or invite them to become part of his movement. His message was delivered to Jews in the marketplace, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, in Jerusalem, and most importantly, at the Temple.

What would the Jews of that period been doing in the normal course of life? This is a question that very few Christians today consider, but its answer helps to fill in the gaps and create a more accurate picture of the events in his lifetime. As Dr. Ehrman pointed out, Jesus kept **Shabbat**, **Pesach** (Passover), **Shavu'ot** (Pentecost), **Rosh Hashanah**, **Yom Kippur**, **Sukkot** and **Hanukkah**. There is no doubt that many of his followers were by his side and were very interested in what he said about and during each sacred events.

The Temple played a very important role in the above events and many required Jewish males, and sometimes females, to appear at its courts.

The Bible History website provides the following information. "There were **eight gates** leading into the temple. There were the two **Huldah Gates** or "mole" Gates from the south, which passed underneath the Royal Porch. To the east was the **Gate of Susa**, still visible as the **Golden Gate** which was walled up by the Byzantines. In the western wall was the main gate named the **Gate of Coponius** after the first procurator; it was decorated with the golden eagle as a sign that the Temple had been placed under the protection of Rome.

"Anyone was allowed to enter the outer area, which was therefore called the Court of the Gentiles. The actual Temple was enclosed by a balustrade, and at the entrances to it were warning notices, one of them is now in a museum in Istanbul. It says that foreigners have freedom of access provided they do not go beyond the balustrade which went all around the central edifice and which no uncircumcised could cross without incurring the death penalty.



Floor plan of Herod's Second Temple. *Original source unknown.*
<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/jerusalem-temple-mount>

"Fourteen steps led through the **Beautiful Gate** to the Court of the women where the poor boxes were, into one of which the poor widow cast her two mites (Luke 21:1-4). Another fifteen steps led up to the famous **Gate of Nicanor**, to which Mary had brought the child at the time of his presentation; this led through the Court of the Men to that of the priests, which had in its center the altar for the burnt offerings and to the left of it a large basin called the Brazen Sea resting upon twelve bulls cast in bronze. Further steps led up to the actual temple, a comparatively small building. A priceless curtain, embroidered with a map of the

known world, concealed from view what lay beyond, and none except the priest on duty was allowed to go farther.

“It contained the golden altar at which incense was offered and next to it the seven-branched candelabrum and the table with the twelve loaves of shewbread, which were replaced by fresh ones every Shabbat. Beyond it, behind another large curtain, lay the Holy of Holies, which none except the high priest was allowed to enter, and he only on the Day of Atonement. A stone designated the place where once the Ark of the Covenant had stood.”¹

The Temple was the center of religious activities for the Jewish people and the role it played in the lives of the members of the Jesus was significant. Consider the words of Jesus and their implications in regard to the Temple:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Amen! I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, not the smallest decorative stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Torah until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commandments and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commandments will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”²

Many of those laws were related to the Temple and its operations, including who was to appear at the Temple and when – as well as the duties of the priests. Contrary to what many modern Christians have been taught, the above words of Jesus indicate that he expected his followers to be actively involved in keeping all laws of the Torah, which would include those related to the Temple.

Another common belief among many Christians today is that Paul was taught his followers just the opposite. Many of the verses that have been used to support the doctrines that “Christians are no longer under the Law” are found in the Epistles of Paul. However, few seem to realize **that Paul also kept the Law and continued to participate in sacrificial rites at the Temple after he became a follower of Jesus**:

There are four men with us who have made a vow. (Paul) take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then **everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you (Paul), but that you yourself (Paul) are living in obedience to the Law**.³

Clearly, the four men mentioned in the above verse were also Jews; otherwise they would not have been allowed to enter the required areas in the Temple with Paul. Did you notice why Paul was told to do this? It was so that everyone would know that the reports they had heard about Paul wasn't true. What were those false reports? They had heard that Paul didn't live in obedience to the Law. *Interestingly, that is exactly what I was taught in of my church!*

It is very clear that the author of the book of Acts wanted people to know that Paul was a Law keeping Jew. Why? There are many questions concerning the agenda of the author. It should be noted that Acts was written between thirty and forty years after the events recorded in it took place. More importantly, it was written at least a decade after the Temple had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. At the time of its writing, the transition of the Jesus Movement from a Jewish movement to a Gentile religion was just beginning. *The major issue that was emerging at that time was concerned the role of Gentiles.*

It is necessary to know what was taking place at that point in time in order to understand the information presented in the book of Acts and the dynamics that were at play between the Jewish members of Jesus' group. As Dr. Ehrman stated above, "Jesus was Jewish, and any evaluation of his words, deeds, and fate needs to keep that constantly in mind. Of course, determining **what kind of Jew he was is another matter.**"⁴ Acts gives us an important clue about this:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the **Hellenist Jews** among them complained against the **Hebraic Jews** because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.⁵

The above conflict was between Jews who belonged to the Jesus Movement – **Hellenist Jews** and **Hebraic Jews.** **The important thing to understand is that both were still Jews and followers of Jesus.** Members of the movement did not call themselves "Christians," then. It wouldn't be until later that members in Antioch would first be called "Christians."⁶ We don't know who called them by that name, but it appears to be outsiders. **"Christianity" was not the name chosen by the group's original leader, Jesus, or later by his apostles.**

The conflict between Hellenist and Hebraic Jewish followers of Jesus is the first schism to be recorded. The conflict is over the feeding of one group's widows by the other. If we consider the central role of almsgiving in the teachings of Jesus, it is easy to understand why this became such an important issue. The importance of this issue can be seen by the fact that the Twelve themselves, the apostles and leaders of the movement, convened to resolve the problem. They appointed seven men to take over the task, so that all widows would receive their food.⁷ One of the men the apostles appointed to handle food distribution was

Stephen, who would later be stoned to death. The witnesses involved in the stoning laid their coats at the feet of Saul.⁸

Saul, of course, was the Paul mentioned above. **Until the time of Stephen's stoning there had been no mention of any apostles taking their message to outside of Jerusalem, much less to Gentiles.** It would be after the stoning of Stephen that the Jewish followers of Jesus left Jerusalem.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and **all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.**⁹

The first to take the message out of Jerusalem to areas with Gentiles was Philip, and he went to **Samaria.**¹⁰ He also met a eunuch from Ethiopia, the treasurer of the Ethiopians, sitting in his chariot on the **road to Gaza** reading the scroll of Isaiah.¹¹ Two things really stand out in this account. First, **the Ethiopian could read Hebrew,** which indicates he was an educated person. He may have had to learn Hebrew to handle banking transactions with the Temple. The second is **he possessed a scroll of Isaiah.** Not only would the scroll have been very expensive to buy, the number of scrolls available to purchase would have been very limited. Philip answered the man's questions and then baptized him. After leaving him Philip next traveled to **Azotus** and **other towns on his way to Caesarea.**

The scattering of the members from Jerusalem appears to be the reason that the apostles began to travel to other areas to minister to their followers and introduce nonmembers to the teachings of Jesus. In response to the increased apostolic activities, according to Acts, the Temple priests organize their forces to put a halt to them. Saul is clearly a key Temple player charged with that mission, specifically with the activities in Syria. Saul's journey to Syria would lead to one of the most well-known events in the book of Acts. **The amazing thing about that event is that Paul didn't write anything about it in his epistles.**

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that **the gospel I preached is not of human origin.** I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, **I received it by revelation** from Jesus Christ. . . . But when **God, who set me apart from my mother's womb** and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, **my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles** before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. **I saw none of the other apostles**—only James, the Lord's brother. (Galatians 1:11-12; 15-19)

Nothing is said by Paul about the Damascus Road experience found in Acts. Apparently the author of Acts didn't know Paul was set apart from birth to preach the Gospel and reveal God's Son to the Gentiles. Paul also made it very clear that he did not go to Jerusalem and that he had no interaction with the apostles, especially Peter (Cephas) and James. The Paul of the epistles was not under their authority and he goes out of his way to make that point clear. There was also a difference between his Gospel and their Gospel. He commanded his followers to have nothing to do with Peter's teachings in particular.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.¹²

When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned¹³.

The issue that created the problem between Paul and the leaders of the Jewish Jesus Movement was the requirement of circumcision for Gentile males. Paul clearly identified Peter and James as the one who required circumcision.

For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to **the circumcision group.**¹⁴

Paul wrote Galatians around 52 CE; it was one of the first books of the New Testament to be written. There is no mention of a compromise between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders of the Jesus Movement in his writings. **Luke tells a very different version in the book of Acts,** which was written over thirty years later, and, after the Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. Luke also has two accounts¹⁵ of the Damascus Road experience, and they contain important differences. In addition, **Acts says that after Paul had the experience he quickly traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles. In Galatians, Paul immediately traveled in the opposite direction from Jerusalem and stayed away for over three years.** Galatians presents Paul and the Jerusalem apostles in complete opposition, while Acts presents them as being in agreement.

The most significant omission of Paul or insertion by Luke, depending upon which way you look at it, is the **Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.** Traditionally it is believed that it was held around 50 CE, *which means the council met before any of Paul's epistles were written.* The council brought all of the leaders of the Jesus Movement together to resolve the primary issue concerning Gentile membership in their movement – circumcision. This wasn't a new issue among Jewish groups.

During the Babylonian exile the **Shabbat and circumcision became the characteristic symbols of Judaism**. . . Thence forward circumcision was the mark of Jewish loyalty. The Book of Jubilees (15:26-27), written in the time of John Hyrcanus, has the following: "*Whosoever is uncircumcised belongs to 'the sons of Belial,' to 'the children of doom and eternal perdition'* . . . The problem of proselytism, indeed, had stirred Judaism to its very depths, and had almost separated Hellenistic from Judean Judaism. The former would admit Gentiles after having undergone the rite of baptism (without circumcision) . . . Unlike Christian baptism, circumcision, however important it may be, is not a sacrament which gives the Jew his religious character as a Jew. *An uncircumcised Jew is a full Jew by birth (but an uncircumcised Gentile is not a Jew)*.¹⁶

The purpose for the circumcision of a Gentile was conversion to Judaism. *Keep in mind that "Judaism" was not simply a religion; it was also citizenship in a nation.* It was also the only way that a Gentile male could gain access to many areas in the Temple. The fact that it took a special council of all the apostles and elders to deal with this question **makes it very clear that Jesus had not previously provided instructions about it.** This was a new question that originated outside the circle of the original followers of Jesus, according to Luke. The Apostolic Council met and the decision of the apostles and elders was this:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, **to the Gentile believers** in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends **Barnabas** and **Paul** — men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending **Judas** and **Silas** to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

It seemed good to the **Holy Spirit** and to us **not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:** You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.¹⁷

When was the last time you heard the above requirements for the membership of a Gentile in your church? **If this was the official ruling of the apostles, how is it possible for churches, which use the doctrine of apostolic succession as proof of their divine authority, not to follow it today? Even Paul was shown to be in full agreement and was one of the men chosen to deliver**

it to the Gentiles believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. It was because of Paul's activity in their borders that raised the question in the first place. Luke also provides an account about the thought process that led up to the decision for the specific requirements given in the decree. This really helps us understand what the apostles were expecting from their new Gentile members.

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. **For the Law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Shabbat.**"¹⁸

These are the words attributed to Jacob (James) by Luke. The key is the word translated "**for**" at the end of the list of prohibitions. It is the Greek word **GAR**, which *indicates that what follows is a continuation and further explanation of what preceded it*. In other words, the prohibitions were the minimum requirements, **because the new members would be learning more about the "Law of Moses" in their synagogues every Shabbat. The apostles also required the new Gentile members to regularly attend a synagogue along with their fellow Jewish members every Saturday.**

Don't forget, **Paul was the one delivering this message.** Since he is the one that is quoted as teaching "you aren't under the Law anymore," this raises the questions of how and when did things change? **The teachings and lifestyle of the Jewish Jesus supports the Council's position that he intended for his followers to practice and teach the Law, as well as be in the synagogues.**

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Amen! I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, not the smallest decorative stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Torah until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commandments and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, **but whoever practices and teaches these commandments** will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."¹⁹

The ruling of the Council, however, didn't resolve the issue. The question of whether members of the Jesus Movement should follow the Torah Laws would continue to divide it. *When the Jewish people no longer had a homeland or Temple to serve as their anchor, many were set adrift among a sea of Gentile cultures and beliefs.* For the next century the issue would continue to polarize Christianity and created two groups at the extremes, with the majority falling

somewhere between them. By the middle of the second century the two extremist positions would be those of the **Ebionites** and **Marcionites**.

Ebionites	Marcionites
Jews who insisted that being Jewish was fundamental to a right standing before God.	Gentiles who insisted that Jewish practice was fundamentally detrimental for a right standing before God.
Followed the Jewish Scriptures.	Rejected the Jewish Scriptures.
Gospel of the Ebionites	Marcion's New Scriptures
There was only one God as taught by the Jewish Scriptures.	There were two Gods: the God of the Jews, and the God of Jesus.
Rejected Paul's writings.	Ten of Paul's letters were in Marcion's New Scriptures.
The God of the Jews called the Jews to be his people.	The God of Jesus did not consider the Jews to be his people.
The God of the Jews insisted that people keep his Laws and penalized them when they failed.	The God of Jesus came into the world to save people from the vengeful God of the Jews.
Many prophecies of the Jewish Bible referred to Jesus.	The prophecies of the Jewish Bible did not refer to Jesus.
Jesus was completely human and not divine.	Jesus was completely divine and not human.
Paul was not an apostle. The apostles that Jesus called before the crucifixion were the authentic ones and they best understood his message.	Jesus' disciples were Jews, followers of the Jewish God, readers of the Jewish Scriptures. They never correctly understood Jesus. Paul understood the truth and he alone knew it.

There will be more to come on this transition in future issues.

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¹ <http://www.bible-history.com/jewishtemple/>

² Matthew 5:17-19

³ Acts 21:23-24

⁴ Lost Christianities by Bart Ehrman, p. 95.

⁵ Acts 6:1

⁶ Acts 11:26

⁷ Acts 6:3

⁸ Acts 7:58

⁹ Acts 8:1

¹⁰ Acts 8:48-

¹¹ Acts 8:26-39

¹² Galatians 1:6-7

¹³ Galatians 2:11

¹⁴ Galatians 2:12

¹⁵ Acts 9:1-9; 22:3-11

¹⁶ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=514&letter=C&search=circumcision>

¹⁷ Acts 15:23-29

¹⁸ Acts 15:19-21

¹⁹ Matthew 5:17-19

February Memorials

In Their Remembrance

In Loving Memory

**PHYLLIS
WYRE**

d. February 8, 1998

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**ALBERTA
HARLESS
MYERS**

b. August 18, 1887
d. February 5, 1979

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**GLORY ANN
HODGES
ROSS**

b. January 25, 1975
d. February 29, 2008

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The
Prayer Book Press)

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them by the **BHC Memorial Garden and Memorials**. The Memorial Garden is on the website at <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit it the next time you are on the Internet. If you would like to add your loved one to this section, send their information to us. There is no charge, but donations are accepted. Remember those who have meant so much to you in the BHC Memorial Garden.

In Loving Memory

**MARIA
ESTELLA
RUIZ**

February 22, 1996

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**JAMES
HENRY
MYERS**

b. September 6, 1881
d. February 13, 1953

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



SHALOM

*Totality, Wholeness &
Peace.*