



Jewish Mission History

By Steve Cohen

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A History of Jewish Missions

Jewish evangelism, the work of bringing the good news that Jesus is the Messiah to Jewish people, is not just a 20th Century phenomenon. In fact, it goes back through recorded human history. Galatians 3:6 reads, *“Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”*

People of faith are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, *“In you shall all the nations be blessed.”* So then, those who are men of faith are blessed through Abraham, who had faith.

According to the Scriptures, Paul indicates that the Lord Himself was the first evangelist to the Jewish people, bringing the good news that salvation had come by faith, and faith alone, to Abraham. Abraham passed his faith down to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, Jacob down through David, who found the culmination of their faith in the Messiah.

The word evangelist can be found three times in the New Testament, referring a person, a work and a calling:

1. Acts 21:8

Phillip is typical and identified as “the evangelist” in Acts 21:8: *“Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.”*

In Acts 8:4-40, we read an overview of Phillip’s work as he brought the good news, or evangelized, people he came into contact with. Acts 8:4-6 reads, *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said.”*

Acts 8:9-13:

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, 10 and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” 11 They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. 12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. 13 Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

We recall the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:29-40:

The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked. ‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of



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Scripture: 'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.' The eunuch asked Philip, 'Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?' Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' -- And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Phillip was one of the first deacons elected by the church to serve the widows and elders. He was neither an apostle nor an ordained minister, but an evangelist. He preached the Good News about the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ.

2. 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Paul, speaking to Timothy, says:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

The primary work of an evangelist is to proclaim good tidings in new areas. Evangelism is the vanguard, or the leading edge, of Christianity, announcing the good news of the kingdom and of Christ where it has not been heard before. Paul, like Phillip, did this kind of work, as did Timothy and other traveling Christians. They planted Christianity, helping congregations to gather. Then they moved on.

An evangelist's work is different from the work of a pastor, the shepherd of a flock. The pastor and teacher were to watch over and teach the flock, while the evangelist was charged with the responsibility of going place to place, seeking new believers. We find in later times that the authors of the four gospels were called evangelists, because they were the first to proclaim the good news through writing.

3. Ephesians 4:11-16

In Ephesians 4:1, we find Paul speaking to the church at Ephesus:



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I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. A life with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love. Eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us, according to the measure of Christ's gift.

In Ephesians 4:11-16 he says:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be like children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the cunning of men, and by their craftiness and deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, for whom the whole body, joined and knit together in every joint, with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and it upbuilds itself in love.

In short, the body of believers today, the church, is one living organism, called to grow and to mature. Within that organism, individuals are given gifts by God to carry forth certain vocations, or callings, to help build up the body. One gift is being an evangelist, a bearer of the Good News.

Special talents or gifts are needed for the pioneering and proclaiming of the Gospel, central to the work of evangelism. The need for founding new mission centers and building up new congregations is evident today where but 20% of the world's population is Christian. The evangelist is given appropriate spiritual gifts to unlock the doors of the hearts of pagans, heathens and sinners, so that Christ might enter into their lives.

The First Jewish Evangelist: Jesus

The first Jewish evangelist was Jesus. He sent out 12 disciples to do the work of evangelism. We read in Matthew 10:

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: "The kingdom of heaven is near."'

Jesus sent his disciples only to the Jewish people at this time. They were not to go to the Samaritans, or the gentiles, or anybody else other than "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Matthew 15:21-28 recounts:



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Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Here we find affirmation of Jesus' calling and mystery during His short, three-year ministry on this earth. It was the heart and desire of God that the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that is, the Jewish people, would turn back from sin to God.

Since 1976, I have worked as an evangelist. During that time, many people have said to me, "I did not know that there were Jewish people who believed in Jesus. I thought all Jewish people rejected Jesus and His teachings when He came."

We need to ask these questions: Who rejected Jesus and His teachings? Did all of Israel as a nation reject Jesus? Did a handful? What happened? How did Jewish people in the first century really see Jesus? Investigating the writing of that time will provide answers. The best evidence, of course, is found in the New Testament. But other rabbinic sources are available, as well as writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus.

Luke 4:42-44, says:

At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.' And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

Luke 5 adds:

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding around him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

Again, in Luke 12:1, we read: "Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." The multitudes who gathered to hear Jesus were Jewish!

Jesus taught in a Jewish teaching style, not unlike that of rabbis or other leaders. The difference was His authority. Jesus' teachings astounded many because he did not have a traditional basis of authority



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derived from Jewish “case law.” Matthew 7:28-29, says: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

So it seems that the people of the street, who were known as Am Ha Eretz, earth people, had the opportunity to hear Jesus. They were far from being turned off by His message – they were amazed and challenged by it.

The Gospel impacted not only ordinary people, but also many religious groups and leaders. The Pharisees, contrary to most opinions, was a sect of Judaism that was quite varied. One group of Pharisees followed the house of Shammai (a contemporary of Jesus), a rabbi who had great leanings toward a more strict interpretation of the Torah. Others, of the house of Hillel, were more lenient in their understanding of Torah. Others held mystical leanings.

The New Testament accounts deal mainly with the house of Shammai in talking about the Pharisees. But certainly the New Testament reflects the many varieties of Pharisees. One outstanding Pharisee mentioned in the New Testament is shown in a positive relationship with Jesus. Nicodemus was described as a man of the Pharisees, a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, and Israel’s teacher.

The story of his initial visit with Jesus is recorded in John 3. Nicodemus recognized Jesus as one who was sent from God. As he was challenged by the comments Jesus made concerning being born again, he searched his heart and came to the point where he willingly, openly took up the cause of Jesus before his colleagues. We seem to find proof that Nicodemus took the claims of Jesus to heart, for he and Joseph of Arimathea were present at the preparation of Jesus’ body for burial.

Gamaliel is the name and title of six sages, descendants of Hillel, who filled the office of nasi in Erez Israel. Rabban Gamaliel Ha-Zaken (“the elder”), a grandson of Hillel, lived in the first half of the first century. As president of the Sanhedrin he maintained close contact not only with the Jews of Erez Israel, but also with those in the Diaspora, the dispersion.

In Acts 5:38-39 is his recorded warning to the Sanhedrin that the work of the Apostles perhaps could be the work of God. Interfering with the work of God could be construed as going against the work of God. “Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” History points out that the Sanhedrin accepted Gamaliel’s counsel.

The Jewish people who came in from the diaspora were gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival Shavuot. In Acts 2:41, we read how 3,000 Jewish people were added to the number of believers in one day!! These 3,000 represented Jews who spoke different tongues and dialects, and yet each one heard the Good News in his own tongue from the evangelists. They responded with hearts of joy. Shortly after that, an additional 2,000 people responded to the Messiahship of Jesus.

Acts 6:7 tells us, “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” These priests belonged to the Sadducees, a



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sect of the latter half of the Second Temple period, formed about 200 B.C.E. Active in political and economic life, the Sadducean party was composed largely of the wealthier elements of the population—priests, merchants and aristocrats. They dominated the Temple worship and its rites and many were members of the Sanhedrin.

The Jewish Christian historian, Neander, who lived in the 19th century, indicated that, at the time of the destruction of the temple in the year 70, more than one million Jewish people in the land of Israel were following Messiah. So the message was not totally rejected by all people.

On the other hand, the Gospel did not find total acceptance, either. Jesus Himself set forth the strategy for Jewish evangelism. He commissioned His followers to GO and bring the Good News.

In Luke 24:44-47, it reads:

He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'

Acts 1:1-8 says:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: 'Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

The Early Evangelists

The early evangelists were to follow Jesus' commission to first bring the message of Messiah to Jewish people. Why? Because they had as the warp and woof of their life and culture Moses, the Law, the Prophets, the Land of Israel, the priests, the sacrifices, the festivals and the hope that Messiah would come — the Jewish Messiah! In that day the gentiles were pagan heathens for the most part who were far from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Consistently we read how Paul went into new communities and first visited the synagogues, where he would stay and preach the Gospel until the message was no longer received.



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Romans 10 expresses Paul's heart for the salvation of the Jewish people, too:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Now after posing Christ as the answer, he asks the question, in Romans 10:14- 21:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, 'I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.' And Isaiah boldly says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.' But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people. And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings and good news." 'So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ. But I say, 'Surely, they have never heard, have they?' For indeed they have. Their voice has gone out into all the earth, and the words to the ends of the world. But I say, 'Surely Israel did not know, did they?' At the first, Moses says, 'I will make you jealous, by that which is not a nation, by a nation without understanding will I anger you. Isaiah is very bold when he says, 'I was found by those who sought me not. I became manifest to those who did not ask for me.' But as for Israel, he says, 'All the day long, I have stretched out my hand, to a disobedient and an obstinate people.'

Paul continues in Romans 11:

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah — how he appealed to God against Israel: 'Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?' And what was God's answer to him? 'I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.' And David says: 'May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.' Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come



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to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.' Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.'

God's plan to bring salvation to the world meant the temporary rejection by a part of Israel, the Jewish people. Their hearts would be hardened and their eyes blinded for a time. But the rejection by some Jewish people has led to the spreading of the Gospel around the world. God obviously is concerned with all people, not just Israel! In turn, and this is important, it is God's plan that the gentiles who come to faith would provoke Jewish people to reconsider the claims of Jesus. In that way, some would be won back.

Today, Jewish people often react in this way toward any of their friends or family turning toward Jesus: "Whoever heard of such a thing? Jewish people believing in Jesus! It is crazy." It sounds crazy because the majority of people who believe in Jesus today are gentiles, not Jewish. But that was not always the case. In fact, the early history of evangelism was almost solely Jewish people telling other Jewish people about the Messiah. The early church said something just the opposite: "Whoever heard of such a thing? Gentiles believing in Jesus!"

In Acts 10:9-16:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' 'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.' The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.



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At verse 34 we read, “Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.’”

Verse 44 continues:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Conclusion

Evangelism was not to be limited to Jewish people, but to all nations of the world. The setting of the early worship services in the Jewish congregations was quite Jewish in flavor, custom, traditions, liturgy and music. But as more and more Gentiles followed Jesus, we increasingly find that the influence upon the leadership, customs, traditions and liturgy within the early church began to lean away from its roots and heritage.



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