

Who is a Jew?

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Some Answers

Some Jews - within the Orthodox group - do not recognize other Jews as genuine Jews. Other Jews recognize all offspring of Jewish mothers as Jews. All Jews believe themselves to be the chosen of God. Most Jews are still awaiting the coming of the promised Messiah. Fundamentalist Christians believe that all Jews are the Chosen of the Lord. They eagerly await the mass conversion of all Jews at the visible coming of the Lord. Whether or not that conversion will be retroactive so as to include all Jews is a matter of speculation. Other Christians believe that the identifying factors of a "Jew" have changed over the centuries from spiritual/racial to completely and purely spiritual.

Is this what really happened? A walk as a Jew down through the centuries as recorded in the Sacred Scriptures will provide light.

From One to a Nation

The "One" was Abraham, the "father" of all Jews. To Abram the LORD God said, ***"I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"*** (Genesis 12:2-3). Notice the spiritual factor of the first Jew! From his seed would come the Savior of the world!

It took the miraculous birth of Isaac from aged Sarah to produce but one offspring, much less a nation. But that nation would come from Isaac, not from Ishmael who was cast out (Genesis 21:8-13) nor from the sons of Abraham's concubines who were sent away with gifts (Genesis 25:1-6). These descendants of Abraham were not Jews, although some may well have become "spiritual Jews" by clinging in faith to the promise of a Savior to come through the seed of Isaac. Isaac had two sons, but again one, Esau, was rejected. Jacob had been chosen (Genesis 25:21-23) to carry the promise and to become a great nation. As he was about to enter Egypt, the LORD reassured him with these words, ***"I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there"*** (Genesis

46:3). Some three and a half centuries later Moses could report that the Children of Israel had been fruitful and had increased abundantly, had multiplied and had grown exceedingly mighty, so that the land of Egypt was filled with them (Exodus 1:7). The LORD God claimed them as His own - ***"My people,"*** (Exodus 5:1). He delivered His people from the Egyptian bondage, led them to Mt. Sinai, and made a covenant with them.

A Nation Within a Nation

Israel was an ethnic, racial, political, spiritual group of people. The distinguishing feature, was the spiritual factor. The LORD had made a covenant with Israel. That covenant verbalized a spiritual relationship between the LORD and His people. When Israel broke the covenant by worshiping the golden calf, the LORD threatened to destroy His people. He said to Moses, ***"I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation"*** (Exodus 32:9-10). Moses knew the people had forfeited their status as the "LORD's People." Yet he interceded for them and prevailed. It became more and more evident that there was a smaller group within the nation that remained faithful to the covenant that the LORD had made with them. They became a "nation" of covenant believers within the visible nation of Israel.

The Remnant

So it continued down through the centuries - the mass of the nation forfeiting their status as "the People of the LORD" through unbelief, while a small minority remained "the People of the LORD" through faith in the God of the covenant. The prophet Isaiah identified this minority as "the remnant." After describing the nation of Israel as a ***"sinful nation, A people laden with iniquity, A brood of evildoers, Children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the LORD, They have provoked to anger The Holy One of Israel, They have turned away backward,"*** (Isaiah 1:4), Isaiah continued by revealing a miracle of the LORD's grace - the preserving of a remnant in the midst of the sinful nation. ***"Unless the LORD of hosts Had left to us a very small remnant, We would have become like Sodom, We would have been made like Gomorrah"*** (Isaiah 1:9).

Judgment would fall upon the sinful nation. The remnant would

not escape. They also would experience deportation and scattering among the heathen nations, but the LORD would not forget His people. Jeremiah, who announced the imminent destruction and deportation of the nation, also proclaimed the promise of the LORD, ***“But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase” (Jeremiah 23:3).*** So also Joel 2:32. Isaiah’s rhetorical questions, ***“Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once?” (Isaiah 66:8),*** were answered by the creation of the new ***“Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16),*** on the Day of Pentecost and continuing down through the New Testament Age.

John the Baptist and Jesus

John’s call for the leaders of the nation, the Pharisees and Sadducees, to ***“bear fruits worthy of repentance”*** was met with spiritual pride, ***“We have Abraham as our Father.”*** They had lost the very spiritual characteristic that had distinguished Abraham as father of the LORD’s chosen people. John pricked the balloon of their spiritual pride by declaring that ***“God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (Matthew 3:8-9).***

Our Lord Jesus, from the very beginning of His ministry, warned the Jews that ethnic, racial, and political characteristics without the spiritual element could not make anyone a member of the “nation” within the nation, the remnant. Jesus marveled at the faith of the Gentile centurion. He then spoke a word of prophecy, followed by a word of judgment: ***“Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:10-12).***

As His ministry drew to a close, our Lord’s warnings of judgment upon those who trusted natural descent from Abraham instead of faith in the God of Abraham grew sharper and more pointed. In the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers, our Lord traced the history of His people’s rebellion that would culminate in the murder of Him - the landowner’s Son. Judgment would fall on Israel. Matthew recorded

those words of judgment upon the Nation of Israel: ***“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43).*** What was threatened has become history. Faith in the promise given to Abraham and fulfilled by our Lord makes a person a “Jew.”

The Apostle Paul

Paul was an ethnic, racial, and political Jew. Before his conversion he gloried in His heritage (Philippians 3:3-6). But after his conversion he realized that one characteristic and one only made a person a Jew in the sight of the LORD. That characteristic is spiritual! To the Romans Paul wrote, ***“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (Romans 2:28-29).***

In contending that Abraham was justified before the LORD and that God gave him circumcision as the seal of the covenant so that salvation is by grace through faith, Paul wrote these words concerning the identification of a person as a Jew: ***“Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Romans 4:16).*** Sharing the faith of Abraham, not sharing his ethnic or racial or political qualities, make an individual a son or daughter of Abraham.

In chapters 9, 10, and 11 of his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul reviewed the history of his people. Why had they, who had been given such great advantages over all other nations, rejected the Messiah promised to them and given to them? Was the Word of God unable to overcome the rebelliousness of his people? No, for ***“it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’ That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed,” (Romans 9:6-8).***

Who is a Jew? Jews or Gentiles who share the faith of Father Abraham - in Jesus as Savior!