

The Myth of Jewish Rejection of Jesus

by Paul Sumner

"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover **many** believed in his name...
many of the multitude believed in him...
many came to believe in him...
many of the Samaritans believed in him...
a **great many** of the priests became obedient."
(John 2:23; 7:31; 8:30; 4:39; Acts 6:7)

"You see, brother, how many **tens of thousands** there are among the Jews
of those who have believed,
and they are **all zealous** for the Torah."
(Acts 21:20)

IT'S A COMMON TEACHING that the Jews of the first century rejected Jesus as the Messiah and that every Jewish generation has done so ever since.

As with many teachings passed down from our elders and through urban legends, it's not exactly what happened – at least according to the New Testament. The NT portrays the Jewish people as being of **divided** opinion about him, not a unified, complete, hostile rejection. And it has also been the Jewish response over the centuries.

Countless Jews have believed in and followed Jesus, both in his own day and throughout history. Thousands of "Yeshua-believing" Jews are living in Israel today and throughout the earth.

But their stories have largely been discounted or suppressed by the Jewish community as aberrations and acts of apostasy.

Ironically, the Gentile Church over time also hushed up stories about Orthodox Jews who followed Jesus yet remained practicing, observant Jews. In the eyes of the Church, these "believers" were heretical: an embarrassing repudiation of universal, catholic (non-Jewish) Christianity.

So the Synagogue and Church have inadvertently conspired for most of history to conceal the truth: **Not all Jews rejected Jesus.**

[For some of their stories: Jakob Jocz, [The Jewish People and Jesus Christ After Auschwitz](#) (1981), Pinchas Lapide, [Israelis, Jews and Jesus](#) (1979), and Oskar Skarsaune, [Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries](#) (2007)]

Now Is Not Then

Part of the problem with this topic is the habit of reading history by what we know today. Today's urban legend says no Jewish person believes in Jesus.

A "Jew" may be a Marxist Socialist Social-Justice-Warrior atheist, or a Freudian Reconstructionist New Ager, or a Hasid who believes Rabbi Schneerson of Brooklyn will rise from the grave and become the Moshiach. A Jewess may be one who consults the Mazzalot (the stars), eats at a Subway deli, then goes wild at Taylor Swift concerts.

Each of these Jews can still define themselves as being a descendant of Abraham. But officially a "Jew" can't believe in Jesus and retain his or her ethnic identity or membership in the community.

Even though thousands of Jews right now believe that Jesus was (and is) the Messiah, the larger Jewish community has determined they are no longer – by definition – **Jews**. It's almost Websterian:

Jew: (noun) someone of the blood line of Abraham who doesn't believe in Jesus the Jew.

[\[Top\]](#)

Another challenge to unravelling the urban myth is that **many Jews think of Jesus and Christianity as synonymous**.

When they look at the thousands of denominations and sects under the label "Christianity" and see a largely non-Jewish – and at times anti-Jewish – religion confronting them, they have reason not to be drawn to the "Jesus" they see.

Yet most of them choose not to see the often radical differences between these Christianities and Jesus himself.

Out of self-protection, some Jews comb the body of rabbinic tradition for reasons (justifications) why Jews can't believe in Jesus. As expected, they find what they're looking for. A person always does.

But those who feel comfortably fortified with reasons-for-rejection don't realize that the rabbis – who lived and taught centuries after Jesus – were ignorant of the real story and merely passed on second-hand polemical comments about him and his disciples.

For example, the Babylonian Talmud contains many factual errors about Jesus and his disciples ([Sanhedrin 43a](#)) and is historically unuseful for gaining an **objective** hearing. Yet the Talmud stands as ultimate authority for many (Orthodox) Jews.

[\[Top\]](#)

Burn the Land Tactics

Another development has been the "scorched earth policy" within

Judaism. That means that what Christians believe, Jews must abandon, even if Jews once believed those ideas from Scripture – not merely abandon but **repudiate** as alien doctrine.

One example. I once overheard a woman in a synagogue bold announce that "Jews don't believe in resurrection." But resurrection from the dead was (and still is) a central tenet of Orthodox Judaism, dating from biblical times. It is one of Maimonides' [13 Principles of the Faith](#) that all Jews should uphold.

"I believe with perfect faith that there will be revival of the dead [*techiyat hameitim*] at the time when it shall please the Creator." [No. 13]

To say resurrection is a non-Jewish concept is unhistorical. It's meant as a polemic dig at Christianity.

Tragically, in burning bridges with the past – with motives of protecting their people from Jesus – some Jewish leaders have revised their own history and obliterated sources of hope their ancestors once held.

[For a study of the biblical basis of resurrection, please consider [The Third Day: Resurrection Patterns](#).]

But why are the Talmudic sources unreliable when reporting on Jesus and his teaching? Because the **rabbinic opinions about him were colored by at least two agendas**.

[\[Top\]](#)

First Agenda

The first agenda was the need to defend the reputation of previous rabbis who rejected Jesus, going all the way back to the first century.

Later rabbis had to defend the (originally **non-unanimous**) vote of the first century Sanhedrin which tried and convicted Jesus of apostasy, heresy and fraud. Why?

It was inconceivable that the Elders of Israel would make such a colossal mistake as repudiating God's Mashiach and turning him over to Goyim to be executed.

Without questioning, without opening the documents of the case, later rabbis accepted what their teachers – and their teachers and their teachers – believed to be a right legal decision regarding the young rabbi from Nazareth. They repeated and thus validated the original ruling as the authoritative Jewish position for all time.

[\[Top\]](#)

Second Agenda

Another influence on rabbinic views about Jesus is that the Christianity the medieval rabbis were rejecting was Roman Catholicism, not the

Judaic faith of the New Testament.

When **Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius** in AD 380, it was by then largely non-Jewish and hostile to Jews and Judaism – hostile even to Jewish believers in Jesus. The new religion had little outward Jewishness about it.

Emperor **Constantine** had seen to that earlier at the Council of **Nicea in 325** when he warned church bishops that they should have nothing to do with the practices of the "**odious Jews.**"

Then, as the philosophically-trained theologians of the Church evolved their abstract doctrines about God and distilled them into a series of creedal formulas, the rabbis discerned no connection with Israel's scriptures or faith. So they rejected Christianity – and Jesus – as a package.

But Jesus and Christianity aren't always synonymous. The Church, in its actions and teachings, does not always represent the faith and doctrines depicted in the New Testament.

The NT is not anti-Judaism. It is against hypocrisy and unbelief and phoney religion.

Jesus' first disciples continued living as practicing Jews. And nowhere does the NT incite contempt or hatred for the Jewish people as a whole because some of their members rejected Jesus. When he was hanging on the tree, he asked God: "Forgive them, Father, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Sadly, many Greek NT manuscripts do not contain this prayer. Some later Christian scribes didn't like the idea of Jesus seeking forgiveness for his **Jewish** enemies, so they took the prayer out of their copies.

[For more on this please consider the articles [Yeshua Did Not Hate Jews](#) and [God Did Not Reject His People](#)]

Gradually, the Myth set in. A corollary of it is that after the Jews repudiated him, Jesus' disciples decided to preach his gospel of the Messianic Kingdom to the non-Jews, the Gentiles, who then open-heartedly accepted him and founded "Christianity."

Let's examine these two truisms to see if they *are* true.

[[Top](#)]

First Error

According to the Hebrew Bible, God created all human beings in his image. Non-Jews or Goyim (Hebrew, "the Nations"), were not inferior, factory-discard images of the Creator. No one was treif. Even Abraham and his children are called a **goy** (Genesis 12:2; 18:18). So is the people of Israel (Exodus 19:6). Goy Israel is simply one of the goyim.

When our common parents (Adam and Eve) sinned and were sent into exile from Gan Eden, their children descended into futility and death. They became "goyish" in their corruption. But God immediately moved to rescue the human family (us) – because he loved them (us).

Early on, he formed a people named Israel to be the channel of redemptive revelation to the human race. Regathering his exiled creation to himself became a central task. Reaching *all* the Goyim (nations) was the plan from the start.

Genesis 12:3c: In you [Avram] all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Isaiah 49:6: I will also make you a light of the Goyim so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Zechariah 2:11a: Many Goyim will join themselves to the LORD in that day and will become my people.

Psalms 117:1: Praise the LORD all you Goyim and let all the peoples praise Him.

The New Testament inherits these biblical mandates and assumes nothing changed with the coming of Jesus. God's Plan had simply entered its final stages. He was still intent on reaching and delivering the Goyim out of their darkness.

[Top]

Misreading Paul?

In spite of this obvious repeated teaching in the Hebrew Bible, many Christians have believed God decided to offer messianic salvation to the Gentiles only **after** the Jews had refused the Messiah Jesus. As [Joseph Shulam](#) of Jerusalem has said, it's like the Goyim get rejected table scraps: a savior the Jews didn't want.

The idea is based, in part, on a misreading of Romans 11:11-12.

There, Paul says, God exploited the rejection of Jesus by the majority of Jewish leaders and the reception of Jesus by many non-Jews to His advance His purposes – His original, eternal Purpose. The way Paul saw the events of history unfolding, it appeared as though the Gentiles got the good food because Jews said no to it. But that wasn't the truth.

In reality, the NT shows it was because Jews **did** believe in Jesus of Nazareth that the message went out to Gentiles.

His apostles (agents, **shlichim**) who gave the gospel to the world were all Jews. They were as much "Israel" as anyone else. Time after time, they tried to recruit fellow Jews to join the messianic campaign (Acts 28:23-29), and frequently gained volunteers in Jerusalem and throughout the Diaspora.

All Are Summoned, Many Say Yes

No, not all of Israel accepted Jesus. But Paul said even the unbelief of what he describes as "some" fellow Jews did not nullify God's original purpose to bless the world through Israel and her Messiah (Romans 3:3;

11:2).

The Plan went on, even though many refused to join the Jewish disciples in being messengers of redemption. Those who rejected their national calling were left behind, and strangers gratefully entered (Acts 13:26, 46-48).

But (again) Jewish rebellion and lack of concern for the Goyim didn't thwart God's Plan for Gentiles or for Israel herself. He didn't lose heart when some of His people rejected His will.

Jewish disinterest in reaching Goyim today with the truth of the Bible and the good news of the biblical God isn't stopping the God of Abraham from redeeming countless millions of them – through His Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth.

[\[Top\]](#)

Second Error

We can't say the Jews "rejected" Jesus anymore than we can say the Gentiles "accepted" him – if we mean **all** of them. Because in the New Testament era **most non-Jews did not accept** him, while thousands of Jews did.

Goyim For Jesus

When the gospel message of the Messiah and the God of Israel was preached to "pure" Gentiles (that is, raw pagans with no acquaintance with Judaism), few conversions are reported (Acts 16: 11-39, Philippi; 17:34, Athens; 19:23-29, Ephesus).

But when it is preached in synagogues where there are many Gentile proselytes or "God-fearers" already associated with Israel, the gospel ignites a brush fire. For example, Acts 10 (the centurion Cornelius); 13:43, 48-49 (in Antioch); 14:1 (in Iconium); 17:4 (in Thessalonica); 19:17 (in Ephesus).

The Gentiles who lived within the light of "Judaism" of the time and knew the Hebrew Scriptures were **the most responsive to Jesus**. Those who were ignorant of the Bible generally chose to remain so.

So the blackwash that only pure pagans – devoid of Jewish teaching – could swallow the Gospel has no historical basis. This is just polemical propaganda.

The reception of Jesus by Gentiles was actually a fulfillment of an 800-year-old prophecy.

It will come about in that day
that the Nations [Heb. goyim] will resort to the Root of Jesse . . .
and he will lift up a standard for the Goyim. (Isaiah 11:10, 12)

Jesse was the father of David; David was the "grandfather" of Jesus, who was a "root" from Jesse. There is no question that Jesus has fulfilled this prophecy.

And Among Jews?

The coming of Jesus was characterized by one pious elderly Jew: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and the rise of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34). He saw that Jews would indeed fall away from God over the messianic child – but many would also rise: by accepting God's messianic redemption for themselves.

This mixed reaction to Jesus is exactly what we find in the NT.

[\[Top\]](#)

What the Gospels Report

(Contrary to Later Church Teachings)

In his gospel record, John uses an important adjective: "many."

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover **many** believed in his name; **many** of the multitude believed in him; **many** came to believe in him. [Even] "**many** of the Samaritans [bitter enemies of Jews] believed in him." (John 2:23; 7:31; 8:30; 4:39)

Many believed; it does **not** say, "Everyone rejected."

Am Ha'Aretz

Even though a mindless, manipulatable rabble called for Jesus' crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, the Jewish verdict wasn't unanimous. On his way to Skull Hill, dragging his cross, "there were following him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting him" (Luke 23:27).

The Elders

Throughout his mission, Jesus was accepted not only by these common people.

Some of "**the Jews**" also believed in him (John 11:45). Especially in John's gospel this term apparently designates the "Judeans" or Jerusalem spiritual leaders – the Temple Establishment, the Jewish Vatican – and their supporters, *not* ordinary Jewish citizens of Israel. John says "many **rulers** believed in him" (John 12:42). This term [Grk, *archontes*] often denotes leaders of the Sanhedrin, the national religious court.

Thus, educated and patriotic Jewish leaders saw no reason to reject Jesus, even though the majority eventually did. That these men were willing to stand their ground in an avalanche suggests they weren't in it for prestige or advantage. No one was buying them off to be "Yeshuahnich."

Yes, there is another side to the story.

[\[Top\]](#)

Disciples Deserted Him

Though many believed in Jesus, saying "He is a good man," others replied, "No, he deceives the people" (John 7:12). Even "*many of his disciples withdrew, and were not walking with him any more*" (John 6:60, 66). By the end, Jesus was left to face Roman execution alone. "All

the disciples deserted him and fled" (Matt 26:56) – but only for a time, for many returned.

And though it seems unbelievable, even when he appeared to many after his resurrection, the text says "some doubted" (Matt 28:17).

The NT doesn't gloss the picture of what happened. If it wanted to convince later readers that "all the Jews" either rejected Jesus or totally accepted him, this mixed-reaction report isn't the best way to do that. You'd want to color your stories. That's just why these reports ring true to history.

To press the point: the gospels portray an Israel of **divided**, not one-sided, **opinion**. Many leaders and many ordinary people stood on opposite sides regarding Jesus. [\[Note 1\]](#)

[\[Top\]](#)

What the Book of Acts Reports

In the book of Acts (which covers events after the resurrection of Jesus), the picture is the same. "Multitudes" of Jews believe what they hear the disciples preach about the Nazarene.

Many of those who had heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousand. (Acts 4:4)

And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. (Acts 5:14; also 9:42; 17:12)

Special mention is also made of Jewish leaders and hasidim, both within Israel and in the Diaspora.

A great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7)

There was a certain disciple in Damascus, named Ananias . . . a man who was devout by the standard of the Torah, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there. (Acts 9:10; 22:12)

Certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees . . . had believed. (Acts 15:5)

Crispus, the leader of the synagogue [in Corinth, Greece], believed in the Lord [Yeshua], with all his household. (Acts 18:8)

You see brother how many tens of thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealots for the Torah. (Acts 21:20)

[\[Top\]](#)

A Remnant of All

Here again we read of temple priests, Pharisees, synagogue officials, and Torah zealots all saying Yes to Jesus, Yeshua of Nazareth. These were orthodox – not gentitized, assimilated – Jews. They were "hasidic" (covenant loyal), Scripture-centered people. Such also comprised the inner circle of Jesus' childhood, as portrayed in Luke 1-2.

(See the details in [The Tzaddikim Who Raised Yeshua](#), and [As Was Their Custom: The Disciples in Light of Scripture](#).)

In Acts the nation continues to be divided on the issue of Jesus.

Those who believed in his messiahship were a minority of the nation, but that was nothing new. Only "some" ever obeyed God in Israel's history. There was always just a remnant, an inner core of faithful. Elijah led such a group in his day (1 Kings 19). Isaiah led a remnant (Isaiah 8). Ezra and Nehemiah led a small contingent of believing exiles back from Babylon to rebuild the temple.

In the case of the Messiah Jesus Movement, the remnant was a sizable one ("tens of thousands," Acts 21:20). But the size of a remnant is irrelevant. That it simply existed (and now exists within the Jewish community) is the point.

[\[Top\]](#)

Toppling the Myth's Icon

It's an injustice to the Jewish followers of Jesus to perpetuate the Myth of Jewish Rejection. The faith of thousands, then and today, cannot be written off as though nothing.

At what point should we admit that the Messiah Jesus Movement was credible or authentically Jewish – when **every** Jew believed in and obeyed him? By that measure the Moses Movement cannot be deemed credible or authentic, because never in Jewish history has **every** Jew followed Moses or obeyed God. So the Jews rejected Moses too?

The authenticity of a work of God needs no validation by majority vote.

And let's be historically accurate about the Gentiles. The majority of them mentioned in Acts who heard the Good News about Jesus **declined** to accept it. Should we also say the "non-Jews rejected Jesus," ignoring those many who did not? What about the Gentile Remnant then and now? (Some of you are part of it yourselves.)

Polishers of the Icon

Paradoxically, the Myth is promoted by two groups: (1) Christians with anti-Jewish sentiment and (2) Jews with anti-Christian sentiment.

Both groups use identical logic: "Since Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah from the beginning – and always have and always will – there's absolutely no point in discussing him. Drop it. Jews and Jesus are incompatible."

This thinking, of course, relieves social tensions between Christians and Jews. It promotes pluralism and tolerance. It pays homage to the great idol to which Western civilization now bows down: "There is no truth and all gods are the same. You have yours; I have mine. (And I don't want yours.)"

But this idol denies the unique validity of the Hebrew Scriptures upon

which Jewish identity depends. If the Bible isn't true, Jewish claims of self-identity and national purpose are meaningless. Obeying the idol also leads to denying Jews the God-given right to hear the facts of the original case about Jesus to make decisions about him – free of bias.

For those who dwell under the deluding cloud of the Myth of Rejection, the New Testament itself is the best tool for evaporating it and exposing the Issue again to those of our generation.

[\[Top\]](#)

The Walls of Walls Protecting the Icon

Over the centuries Jews have rejected several messianic pretenders.

But their self-defining corporate rejection of Jesus and the New Testament is different. They can't leave him in the past as they did, say, Shabbetai Zvi. Their response is partly due to Christianity itself: (1) to what the Roman Catholic Church has done to them in Jesus' name, and (2) to the deJudaizing and paganizing forces within all branches of Christianity – which exist to this day.

No one can rewrite the terrible volume of Christianity's history. That wall will always remain; though it's not impenetrable (as many Jews can attest). But the Paganization Barrier could come down immediately if Christians decided to demolish it and return to authentic New Testament "Olive Tree" faith (Romans 11).

We're All Alike

Historical justifications aside, Jewish rejection of Jesus may have nothing to do with history or religious conviction. It may be due to a common and shared human response to God's Plan in every age by not a few people: "Leave me alone! Don't interfere with my life! I am all the God I need and want, thank you."

But since this sounds so brash and childish – so filled with hubris – most of us find other reasonable reasons for keeping God, Jesus, and a contrite spirit at bay.

In the end, only the individual standing alone without his tribe – like an Abraham, Moses, David or Job – can say to God, "Here am I. I repent in dust and ashes."

• Paul Sumner

¹ Thanks to the helpful work of Jacob Jervell, "The Divided People of God," in [Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts](#) (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing, 1972). [\[Return to text\]](#)

[\[Top\]](#)

Note on Two Fulfilled Prophecies

(1) The prophecy in Isaiah 11:10 was mentioned earlier. This says "the nations [**goyim**] will resort [**darash**] to the Root of Jesse, who will stand as a banner [**nes**] for the peoples."

Whether one admits Jesus is the foretold root of Jesse or not, Jesus has fulfilled this prophecy. No other Jew in history has been sought after as he has been and still is. The Goyim have gathered around no other flag raised on Zion's soil as they have his.

There is another prophecy Jesus fulfills, also related to our study.

(2) Isaiah 49 describes God's missionary **Eved**, his Servant, who is both "Israel" (v. 3) and distinct from Israel. It is his calling to "bring Jacob back to [God] . . . that Israel might be gathered to Him" (v. 5), to "raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel" – and to be "a light to the Goyim" (v. 6).

The Eved thus has a dual assignment. According to Isa 11:10, he will be successful among many of the Gentiles. But amazingly to Jacob/Israel he is "the Despised One, the One Abhorred by the nation" (v. 7).

Why would a prophet of Israel foretell such a thing? Wouldn't that undermine the credibility of God's Servant and thoroughly invalidate his calling if his own people from whom he arose despised him?

[On this please consult the article: [Eved Adonai: The Two Servants in Isaiah.](#)]

[[Top](#)]

[Directory](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Explanation](#) | [Monotheism](#) | [Judaism](#)
[Yeshua Did Not Hate Jews](#)

hebrew-streams.org